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Report #1 Lessons from lockdown

mobilising volunteers effectively

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Executive Summary

The MoVE project is a collaboration between the Universities of Sheffield, Hull and Leeds. Over the course of 18 months, the research examines how to understand, scale and maximise the effectiveness of volunteer responses to COVID-19. This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19.

This report presents the first set of findings from 49 semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders from England, Scotland and Wales, about their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It presents findings on the lessons learned from the successes and challenges experienced by those involved in coordinating community-facing responses. It is the first of three reports out of this first stage of research. The lessons presented here revolve around 5 key themes.

1. The value of local responses

    - Local level measures and not national volunteering platforms have proved vital to responding to community needs during the pandemic.
    - Responses have accelerated existing models of community engagement and built stronger community relations.
    - Existing local infrastructure and community support networks have underpinned successful community responses.
    - Key to these successes are "freeing communities" to respond to local need, and their resourcefulness during the pandemic.

2. Harnessing the energy of volunteers

    - The pandemic highlights the need to rethink volunteering so that more informal volunteering and "good neighbourliness" momentum can be harnessed.
    - This is a complex ask if we are to avoid reverting to type and seeking to formalise this swell of community action.

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- Suggestions emerging around training, passports and paid work are arguably the very mechanisms that discouraged community action pre-COVID, and that actually what is needed is an entirely new approach.
- Foremost, local authorities (LAs) "who get it" are engaging with communities by respecting their autonomy and seeking to support rather than institutionalise.
- Mutual aid group[1] perspectives reflect the centrality of relationships and relational working within informal personal spaces. Others reflect the need for this engagement to be supported and not seen as a quick or free fix for gaps left by services.

3. The role of the VCS sector

- The voluntary and community sector (VCS) has been vital to mobilising volunteers and meeting needs during the pandemic and has proved its worth ten-fold.
- VCS participants talked widely about their newfound respect and voice in decision-making achieved through their emergency response role and that the challenge now was how to build upon this and make sure systems don't retrench back to type as the pandemic eases.

4. Resisting the bureaucratic creep

- One of the great leaps forward from coordinating community responses has been the breaking down of systemic bureaucratic barriers to working collaboratively. Including reducing risk averseness, flexibility in finance/funding and sharing data.
- The key challenges facing us all now is how to embed these gains to resist the bureaucratic creep and retain these great leaps forward.

5. Pending crises

- The pending cliff edge and the likely "tsunami of demand" were central concerns; in particular, the impending funding crisis facing LAs, VCS and communities.
- At the same time, optimism exists about the opportunity COVID-19 presented to change what many felt were essentially broken systems.
- Recovery must not therefore be simply a return to "business as usual" and as we seek to capitalise on the energy of volunteers, we mustn't simply "offload" responsibility and accountability onto communities themselves.

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[1] The language of mutual aid is not universal in our data. In Scotland, for example, grassroots groups were often referred to as community resilience groups or teams. Some interviewees spoke of "informal groups", "community groups" or "neighbour groups." In this report, we use the term mutual aid group to describe informal, grassroots groups that arose in response to the pandemic.

Methodology

This report is based on the analysis of data gathered through 49 semi-structured interviews, carried out in June, July and August of 2020, with a range of stakeholders from the UK. In addition, we have analysed the data of three webinars, focussed on community responses to the pandemic.

Organisation type	Number of interviewees	Number of webinar participants
Local authorities (LA)	20	3
Voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and local infrastructure organisations (LIO)	18	1
National membership LA organisations (MLA)	2	1
National membership VCS organisations (MVCS)	5	1
Mutual aid groups (MA)	4	0
Total	**49**	**6**

Interviews were drawn from existing contacts from the team's previous Enabling Social Action (ESA) programme, combined with snowballing to identify a purposive sample of key organisations across England, Scotland and Wales. The sample is deliberately targeted towards organisations and individuals active in the mobilisation and coordination of volunteer strategies in order to respond to community needs during the pandemic. Thus, the findings should be understood in this context.

All interviews utilised a common set of themes and questions to enable comparison and thematic analysis. However, the interview style was participative and open so that interviewees could raise the issues of importance to them and to tell the story of their experiences. As well as interviews, the project conducted online searches to map the terrain of volunteer responses to community needs during the pandemic and we participated in a range of webinars facilitated by other organisations around these issues. The research team also draw upon their prior work on the ESA programme, funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) with 1,200 LAs and VCS organisations in England. These resources foregrounded the MoVE research in this first stage and the findings discussed here reflect this range of data.

Discussion of findings on the learning and challenges emerging from responses to the pandemic

It's no longer pink and fluffy - this vision that a few of us have had for far too long, and COVID has just proved it. But the counter argument to that, is without that driver, which is COVID and the emergency, I think that's the other side to the argument (LA22)

All interviewees discussed how the pandemic presented new challenges and created valuable learning to take forward into the future. The following sub-themes emerged as central and the findings are organised as follows: 1) enhanced community relations; 2) retaining new volunteers, mutual aid groups and "good neighbourliness"; 3) relationships with the VCS and sector sustainability/survival; 4) retaining the "defrosted tundra" of middle management and resisting the bureaucratic creep; and 5) pending crises and strategies for recovery.

1. Enhanced community relations

A large majority of participants discussed how embedded working with local communities alongside the support and resources offered by these communities was vital to responding to COVID-19. Of particular significance is firstly, how responses had both enhanced community relations and strengthened pre-existing models, and secondly, how important it is to retain these advances and new volunteer resources.

Enhancing a vision: strengthening and speeding up pre-existing models of community engagement

Participants discussed the importance of local systems as opposed to nationally imposed ones. The key enabler for success is building on existing local infrastructure and community support networks. LAs referred to the great leaps and advances in community engagement achieved under COVID, allowing them to speed up their community engagement and capacity building work. These include programmes of "community empowerment" in Scotland (linked to Asset Based Community Development), Local Area Coordination (LAC) in England and Wales, community organising, and other bottom-up, community engagement models across the UK. Fundamentally, responding to the pandemic has forged valuable new relationships across sectors, across services and with (and within) communities. Interviewees stressed that these relationships need harnessing longer-term.

The lockdown has made it about place and not about sector, and actually there's a magic recipe in that because people often talk about place-based work and locality work, but it's quite often contrived, it's about how people fit into a geography. This has been inverted and actually it's been about the geography as the starting point… The line between the communities we serve and ourselves, has blurred so much, and that's what we always dreamed of. (LA17)

A key point of learning from the pharmacies, has been around them saying to us "well, we don't want to lose this", reflecting the relationship that's now been built with [local charity], so we're working with [them], to pivot their model to continue to focus on this. (LA3)

Just recognising the amount of strength, the number of strengths that there are in the community, and really having that hands-off, facilitating approach to - and recognising that the communities do have the gift and the skills and the experiences to solve some of their own problems, through local solutions, and support each other locally, without access to services. (LA15)

In particular, Local Area Coordination (LAC) authorities discussed how LAC had filtered into the system-level responses, in that LAC's strengths-based approach underpinned the strategic response of the LA more broadly. The extension of LAC city-wide during the pandemic was another key impact and this is being retained in some locations as a longer-term strategy. There was a strong sense from LAC authorities that LAC had proved its worth during the crisis, and that it should become more embedded in the future.

Through the crisis, I think we've shown that [LAC is] invaluable. (LA15)

However, the financial challenges that LAs face, discussed in more detail in section 5, threaten their ability to maintain these asset-based models.

The currency of LAC has never been higher in the councils where it exists, but conversely as well, the impact financially on LAs as well, will put them in more of a position of stress. (MLA2)

The value of localised responses

Beyond the strategic emergency response of LAs, the speed and efficiency with which communities themselves mobilised, well in advance of the VCS or the public sector was widely recognised. The important role played by communities themselves was highlighted, with some participants emphasising the value gained by "freeing communities" to respond to local need, and the "resilience" of communities during the pandemic.

That sense of community, that sense of neighbourhood, in the 20 odd years I've worked in communities, I've never quite seen it like that, there was a genuine pride in terms of communities… if you look at our levels of deprivation and our levels of death, it should have been worse… we think that's because of community resilience. (LA17)

Those relationships that sustain remote rural communities in times like this, I think sheer survival instinct will ensure that they will sustain, and that people will find ways of strengthening those bonds and connections … frankly a lot of it without council or other agency help - they might need some funding help - but it's been a great example of how communities get on with things, if they need to, so sometimes we need to get out of the way. (LIO10)

That's how communities work, I think, and the reason we haven't seen it before, is because we hadn't allowed it to happen, because of the way that we work, and the service delivery model, and the way that everything with the local authority and the control that we have over communities doesn't let these things... the crisis has shown that when the local authority steps back from that, because it has to deal with a crisis, I don't think this community response has suddenly happened because of the crisis, I think that the desire and the energy and the community spirit has always been there. (LA15)

The new resources emerging from community responses have been particularly important in responding to the pandemic. While the relationships differed across locations, there was a uniform commitment to trying to maintain and engage these volunteers in building back post-COVID.

[We want to] hold on to the community animation... COVID has offered people the permission to ask for help and to help each other and they want it to continue (LA22)

A local authority is probably going to be smaller in size and therefore needs to be bigger in influence, and therefore the relationship that we develop with our residents over the coming weeks and months needs to look different and needs to sound different and the narrative needs to be different, so one of the things that I'm quite keen to do, is think about our relationship to this group of residents who've put their hands up to say "I want to make a difference"... how do we move forward, with those relationships, in a way that starts to inform the work of the local authority. (LA10)

This is community empowerment in action and we need to capitalise on that and not just go back. (MVCS1)

2. Harnessing the energy of volunteers

Across locations, the majority of our participants agreed that the rise of new volunteers and grassroots groups like mutual aid, has been a silver lining of the pandemic. There was a strong sense that harnessing this energy by retaining the new volunteers and community resources would be essential to moving forward and building back post-COVID. Importantly some participants recognised that this would require a different approach to volunteering, one that is less formal, more flexible and embedded in "good neighbourliness".

Rethinking volunteering to harness informal micro community-level responses

The pandemic has highlighted the need to rethink volunteering. Both formal and informal (micro-level) volunteering have been key features of the response, but they have operated very differently and played distinct roles during the pandemic. The quotes below reflect a range of approaches adopted by LAs.

I think we need a big conversation as a county about what volunteering really is, what it means, I've worked in volunteer management all my life, I volunteer, I'm also a citizen, a neighbour, all these things... that's the complexity of what that word means and what that term means, and whether it's a substitute for formal services, whether there's that aspect of exploitation about it... for us

fundamentally LAC has always viewed neighbourly support as being something that's natural and if we can create the circumstance and help create the spaces that foster that, by making introductions and creating safe places within the community for people to do that, and supporting that, that's what we think that's the best way. Not that there's not a role for formal volunteering, but it does come with a new layer of complexity. (MLA1)

We're wanting to make sure we don't lose the momentum with all these fabulous people who are good neighbours, but as normal, there's councils thinking about formal volunteering routes [...] it's just about being a nice friendly neighbour. (LA2)

The key learning is that no one person has a solution, and that we need to work together and that actually we need to recognise that volunteering, at all levels, doesn't just have to be at that really structured, national good SAM level, it doesn't have to be at, even the council's approach, and actually, how do we facilitate... on the whole, communities cope and have solutions and resilience. And how do we long-term promote that? Because actually the infrastructure and the statutory response will never reach everybody and not everybody wants it, and actually the local response in your cul-de-sac, or your street, or your local community, is probably valued and more important, rather than a transactional safety net delivered by a faceless organisation (LA11)

Strategies required to retain new volunteers and enhance good neighbourliness

Participants reflected a number of approaches to harnessing this volunteer momentum, which clustered into the following:

- Ensuring infrastructure resources connect to informal volunteering.

There's a lot of talk about "harnessing" community action - there's something about making sure that the council links groups in with information and potentially with resources. (LA9a)

- Organising volunteering differently - around causes rather than projects or tasks.

If there's a cause, people will come. It's not a [national platform] site with a project on, it's a cause. (LIO1)

- Retaining unutilised volunteers for when need arises.

How are people keeping volunteers warm? In [location] we were looking at the volunteer passport thing, it's basically about giving volunteers some basic training and a kite mark that they've been through basic volunteer training, they've done safeguarding, or whatever else it is that we need, and they're able to be transferred between organisations, so they're not bound by a single organisation. (LA18)

- Transforming volunteer momentum into paid-work opportunities for continued engagement.

We are working with Adult Social Care at the minute, we have got a shortage of personal assistants and carers, and that sort of thing. So my rationale was that these individuals who have come forward have that kind of a caring nature... so actually let's market the jobs that are available to these people, if they are interested. (LA18)

Filtering the new volunteers into longer-term activity.

Stuff with COVID was short-term volunteering, people did a day, they did a week, that was it really. So, now we are more concerned about getting people onto a longer-term commitment to volunteering. (LIO4)

These suggestions are based on the good intentions of offering support to new and/or more informal forms of volunteering. However, there is a tendency in some of these ideas to revert to type for both LAs and VCS organisations, in that, suggestions often include formal responses like training, passports, paid work etc. These are arguably the very mechanisms that discouraged community action pre-COVID, and perhaps, what is actually needed is an entirely new approach. Since these new waves of community action and informal volunteering are likely to be fundamental to recovery, these issues are increasingly vital for LAs and the VCS to come to terms with. There are some lessons in the below section on mutual aid groups.

Repurposing mutual aid and micro-level responses

A key challenge raised by some participants is how to retain mutual aid groups and repurpose this swell of community engagement for new waves and "building back". We discussed these issues with mutual aid groups themselves as well as with LAs and VCS organisations seeking to support these groups and the perspectives offer some interesting learning.

LA approaches

One LA interviewee felt that the street-level community neighbourliness would last beyond the crisis. They were working actively to support that going forward into the recovery period, looking at the changing roles, for example, how volunteers who had previously done shopping for their neighbours, might be willing to help these same neighbours get to the community groups that they attended before COVID.

Because we've been focusing on hyper local, and neighbours helping neighbours, even when they go back to work, they'll still be living in the same street... It's mutually beneficial. (LA15)

A council officer who worked closely with mutual aid groups in a London borough stressed that thinking on the future of mutual aid groups had shifted, with an earlier focus on:

OK, what happens next? Do they become established voluntary sector organisations, do they liaise or work with an established voluntary and community sector organisation, or do they fold? (LA9a)

As the challenges facing communities are evolving and national support is being withdrawn, there was a realisation that this "before and after" binary is not helpful, and that the groups will adapt and evolve in line with community needs. Ultimately, it was felt that:

What the groups decide to do is a question for them, it's not a question for the council to decide. (LA9a)

VCS approaches

VCS organisations described ways in which the energy and goodwill could be harnessed to address broader societal challenges that we will face beyond the pandemic.

Part of what we've been trying to do now, is repurpose the Community Support Groups as wider community support, so not just for the pandemic but to be involved for other stuff. So, we've set up a system of street reps - which we've always wanted to have, we've never had the numbers of people to do it that easily… we've started going back to people who registered to volunteer, asking "why do you think this has happened? What else do you think is going to happen to the communities you're in? What do you think we could do together to address this?" (VCS2)

Do they want to become an incorporated charity? Is that really the right thing? Would they like to be more of an informal Good Neighbours group? Do they want to pick up a new purpose? Have they seen messages like more people moving into rural areas will push up prices, do they want to look at community-led housing as their purpose, building new houses for people locally, do they want to think about climate change more? Or do they want to do a parish plan or a community-led plan? There are all sorts of things that they - when people say "I've loved volunteering, we want to make our community better and keep going", it doesn't just have to be about COVID. (LIO8)

Mutual aid perspectives

Interviewees from informal groups were acutely aware that they would be needed to address the challenges facing communities post-COVID.

Going forward, we will see a shift in what mutual aid is… it will move away from the elderly… towards more families and single parents and individuals who have either been made redundant or lost their jobs, or just complete new set of economic circumstances where they need help. (MA1)

The immediacy of COVID will fade - the lockdown stuff will cease to be as big an issue, but the repercussions of all of this, we still haven't felt, to a substantial certain degree yet. There's going to probably be a wave of mass impoverishment that's going to be felt by everyone at a very similar time, stuff like rent strikes, long-term financial repercussions, and it'd be interesting to see whether the mutual aid communities come together to solve those problems too. I think, my hunch is that yes, these structures are there now, and they've always been there in a sense, but they'll become more specialised. (MA4)

They reflected on the complex balance required to support this community engagement while not institutionalising it; the emphasis was on retaining informal structures based upon relationships.

In my area, it just started up as a response to COVID, I initially really enjoyed it, and I really enjoyed it because I did think that we were helping people, and I think they do help people. My one reservation is the systemisation of helping people, so I joined because it's someone who has time and someone that needs something - that's the most simplest way, but when you start thinking about safeguarding and when it starts becoming an organisation in itself, it becomes removed from those human to human connections. So it isn't about someone wanting or needing, it's about two people being able to give something and you have to think about it like that... it's a very privileged space that invites people that already work in a particular way... What is the long term sustainable solution to this and it can't be mutual aid. It has to be neighbourliness, because if we have a system, that is created and responding to a person needing something and a person being able to, the need gets met, but the relationship isn't built and actually if you've got a good neighbour and you're able to connect, you wouldn't need to come onto mutual aid, and it's about long-term connections. (MA3)

One of the interviewees discussed the benefits of a more centralised/coordinated approach to managing mutual aid volunteers.

If we can easily match volunteers on the needs basis with residents, then we could do this remotely from anywhere in the UK, for any place in the UK, because all you have to be, is just available once a week to help a resident out, it's about connecting the needs of the resident with the availability of the volunteers through this platform. (MA1)

There are some fundamental lessons in these short extracts. Foremost, LAs "who get it" are engaging with communities by respecting their autonomy, seeking to support and not institutionalise. Similarly, some VCS organisations are working with informal groups to repurpose their energy into other forms of community-led support. Mutual aid group participants recognise they are still needed and are beginning to shift toward new focuses. Fundamentally mutual aid perspectives reflect the centrality of relationships and relational working within informal personal spaces. At the same time, other mutual aid participants have illuminated the need for this engagement to be supported and not seen as a quick or free fix for gaps left by services. Much more work is needed to share this learning more widely. These perspectives resonate with those of placed-based and asset-based social action.

3. The role of the VCS

The role that the VCS has played in the crisis and the challenges facing the sector was a theme discussed by the majority of participants. The findings discussed here cluster into two key areas: how do we value and support the VCS contribution and build this into the recovery; and how do we ensure that the VCS continues to survive post-COVID?

VCS sustainability

Participants illustrated the central role played by the VCS during the lockdown period, and the enriched collaborations within the sector and cross-sectorally that have been enabled by the pandemic.

The key successes to the COVID response was about the relationships between the different services and the voluntary sector as well, and the fact that they were on equal footing. (LA9)

We've started talking more about the kind of philosophical issues around what does this mean for the voluntary sector going forward, and how do us as local authorities and CCGs, how do we engage with the voluntary sector going forward, and ensure we capitalise on all the good stuff that's happened. A) we've got to capitalise on what's already happened, b) we need to ensure that the sector survives, and how do we ensure that happens and how do we support and facilitate that, and we need to understand a) what the sector can do for us, but also what we can do for them… we're starting that discussion now about what is the voluntary sector and what does it offer, it has obviously shown what it can offer and I think the dynamic you've got going on nationally is that local authorities have disinvested from the voluntary sector for years and years and years, and all of a sudden the voluntary sector has sprung up, and probably done what they've always done, with the same, or reduced amounts of funding, and shown what they're capable of. (LA8)

What we've seen through this process is bits of all public sector agencies, and councils aren't exempt from that, learning very rapidly about the third sector and its approaches and the types of areas you get into. So I think that's the weaker bit, and that's some learning for us, that there are bits of [location] city council, that operated in areas that were less relevant to the sector 6 months ago, and we didn't have the relationships that might have helped us at this time, so it is as ever, always about relationships. (LIO3)

There was a consensus that the sector is running on significantly limited resources and suffering from volunteer fatigue. There was also a general recognition that many groups would not be able to return to their activities for some time. The core areas of challenge for the sustainability and survival of the VCS clustered around resource depletion and burnout.

Resource Depletion

Most interviewees were concerned about VCS sustainability and the need to protect the sector. Some were already dealing with supporting the closures of charities and VCS organisations and predicted that this will continue.

Unless you prioritise the key infrastructure organisations in the sector, like CVS, you won't have a voluntary sector infrastructure because the cash flow is that bad, currently. Look at [location] CVS, they're a good example of a modern CVS, they only have a small grant from the council… they're largely self-financing through venue hire, they've not had that for 3 months… I do worry for the voluntary sector, I worry less about the community sector, because the community sector sorts itself out, mobilises, etc., self-organises, but there is a real issue of cash flow for the voluntary sector. (LA3)

Some LIOs felt they needed to help local organisations to survive:

Many of those community anchors are not long-term sustainable at the moment… they haven't got the cash flow to survive. Many are already eating into reserves, the county council can only give them so much funding… there isn't enough money in the system to pay for another layer of support for COVID… In terms of what we are seeing coming down the line from charities and community organisations, it's the managed closure work. So our message is if you come to see us early as possible, when you think you might have a problem, you have got more options, if you come to us at the last minute, all we can do is help you with managed closure. (LIO8)

Again, in [location] because we've got those strong partnerships, we're having that early dialogue about what the landscape of the voluntary sector landscape could be in the next six months' time and looking for some solutions now to that too. But again, government has been unhelpful with launching money that they have at a national level that doesn't come down to a local level. (LA14)

Volunteering isn't free and it needs an infrastructure to support it for it to be safe and effective. (LIO14)

Of significant concern is that the VCS in many areas is a central part of the track and trace responses and recovery. This funding crisis is likely to affect their capacity to fulfil this role. We had examples of where some LAs had recognised this and were channelling funds to the sector to support their role in track and trace and to try to ensure they can adapt to new needs and pay essential bills in the short-term.

In March, <u>NCVO projected that charities would be facing a £4 billion financial "black hole"</u> in the next financial quarter - a third of its usual income over a three-month period. Although it is too early to determine the full extent of the impact of the pandemic on the charity sector's finances, <u>NCVO predict the sector will shrink</u> as charities' incomes reduce (as a result of people's lower disposable incomes and social distancing restrictions) which will result in job losses, reduced services and the closure of some charities. These predictions have been reflected in localised studies. For example, analysis of the South Yorkshire Community Sector Resilience Survey highlighted that of the 163 organisations who responded to the survey, 55% reported that they were sustainable for six months or less.[2]

Strain and burnout

VCS resources have been stretched in trying to retain standard support and emergency responses to the extent that there are fears that:

The voluntary and community sector might reach burnout. (LA11)

We have a much bigger job as the voice of the voluntary sector. The challenge has been to be at all the right tables for the VCS without burning our organisation out. So if you think, we sit on the test and

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[2] Burchell and Deshpande (2020) Analysis of the South Yorkshire Community Resilience Survey, SYCF September 2020.

trace groups, we sit on the outbreak management board, we liaise with the local resilience forum, we are the liaison lead for the VCS emergency partnership nationally for [the region], there's a lot - it has doubled our workload overnight, COVID, because we're still trying to do our business as usual and we're having to pick up the COVID work, so it's been problematic in terms of resourcing, but we are muddling through. (LIO8)

Not all VCS organisations were able to access the emergency funds that became available.

We didn't furlough staff, we wanted to towards the end of the crisis because they were drained, but we couldn't because the day had gone by, the days had gone by, now we can't furlough anyway even though people who have furloughed can furlough until October. We've fallen through all the funding gaps because the government don't think the type of charity that we are is worth funding, and we haven't been eligible for anything. (LIO11)

A lot of grant funding that would have been rolled out over the next year for generic projects that organisations rely on to keep themselves going, has all been blown in the last three months on COVID stuff which is great if you're an organisation that could respond to COVID but what we did find early on, again, the organisations that we prioritized for our support, were the ones that through no fault of their own, the way that they worked, they couldn't respond to COVID, either because they had to close or because the work that they did just wasn't relevant to what was needed at the moment at the time, so they became locked out of all of the new and repurposed grant funds because they couldn't do anything COVID response related, but they are crucial to the recovery phase and there's going to be no money left for the recovery phase. (LIO7)

Harnessing VCS sector relationships to build back post-COVID

The newfound respect and voice that the VCS had achieved through its emergency response role was a feature of a majority of VCS interviews. Adding to this, many LAs emphasised enhanced relationships with their VCS and wanted to build upon these.

Our view on partnership has expanded… When you work with people on something really urgent and really important - it's so practical isn't it, there's no time to go "oh we must think of the governance of all of that", you know, you just have to kind of get on with it… we're pretty proud of our culture. (MVCS3)

For us as the [LIO], the challenge will be holding onto the respect and credibility that we've been afforded in the last four months, into the forums and policy developing forums that will be responsible for coordinating the recovery response, and how do we keep that voice, the credibility and the trust that we've gained? (LIO10)

I think that ability to put your turf to one side and work collectively together for an end, if we can hold onto that, that would be really good […] the relationship with local authorities, I think that has been good. (MVCS1)

A key finding from our engagement with local authorities over the last couple of months, is that old adage, "don't waste a crisis" - what opportunities there here to make sure that some of those culture shifts we've seen and some of those different ways of working that we've seen, because it's been an emergency and because it's been driven by responding to crisis, how can they be embedded into the future? (MVCS5)

Many VCS organisations had experienced an enhanced position of trust and commitment to community-led delivery alongside a revived importance of place. However, the challenge going forward is how to retain this position at the table so they can play a key role in building back. Depleted resources and growing financial crisis are likely to impede these processes and arguably there has never been a more important juncture to support the VCS sector, particularly those embedded in place-based working.

4. Resisting the bureaucratic creep

Our previous research on enabling social action showed how bureaucratic blockages around procurement, risk and coproduction posed significant barriers to working with communities and the VCS to grow social action. This new project has revealed how pandemic responses have broken down these systemic barriers. This section discusses key underlying processes: the removal of bureaucratic structures; the converse effects where bureaucracy was not removed; and how to embed these gains to resist the bureaucratic creep and retain the great leaps forward. This theme was discussed by just under half of our participants.

Great leaps forward

I think what's happened... like in other places, I think that COVID has probably moved us forward a year, to where we wanted to be anyway, around working in different ways, encouraging innovation, reduced bureaucracy, less risk, greater trust (LA3)

Because it was chaired by a Strategic Director, who was given permission to get on with it, it meant that a lot of the bureaucracy that traditionally had got in the way, moved out of the way, and we were given blue lights to move at pace. (LA10)

Key areas in which this had been vital were risk, data sharing and funding.

Risk and letting go

This was perceived as a positive change, enabling LAs and VCS organisations to develop and implement plans quickly, with less aversion to risk and more willingness to cede control.

The authority was just so relaxed about that, so we didn't have procurement crawling over us, we didn't have legal crawling over us, we were just allowed to crack on and do what was needed. (LA4)

The pandemic had been a powerful driving force for [VCS organisation] and given them license and freedom to experiment and do things quite differently... one of the main learnings... is that the pandemic has really pushed all of us to be brave, and to be bold, and to take bigger risks, it's been a very challenging 4 months and it will continue to be going forward as well, but it's exciting to see how organisations have really taken the plunge to experiment with new ideas. (MVCS4)

Some things which were thought to be absolutely vital to protect us from risk and all the rest of it, are now maybe not so vital, but that's probably because we have to take risks, because there's no risk greater than what we're faced with the pandemic. (MVCS1)

There was a sense of urgency and a collective sense of responsibility which... you don't often see with the local authority, we tend to drag our heels when it comes to making a decision but this has forced us to work in a way that we haven't had to. (LA8)

Many organisations had long been trying to work in a more trust-based, relational way but had struggled to overcome the traditional bureaucratic structures. For these organisations, COVID has been a unique opportunity to pursue different ways of working. Being less risk averse had been a positive experience and fundamental to the effectiveness and speed of their response.

Data sharing

Pre-COVID, data sharing protocols and regulations had blocked service providers from sharing data. As partnership working increased and the aversion to risk decreased, blockages to sharing data were removed allowed organisations to better understand needs and access the most vulnerable groups.

We'd had a year in [community development model] where we were saying, we all want to be able to work more closely together to sort out individual people's lives, and the answer was always "You can't, because of data". That was always a huge problem and all of a sudden, we found a way around it. So, it was almost like the crisis knocked what we were previously seeing as challenges out of the park. we set up a CRM system really quickly so that services could share information... for the ones of us that had been in that [community development model] space for a year, we did find it quite amusing, just how all of sudden how many walls fell down, that we'd previously been hitting our heads on. (LA9)

[Data governance] were fast, helpful, very pragmatic, and did a lot of the heavy lifting. Which meant we could get adequate privacy arrangements and data governance arrangements in place really quickly in terms of data sharing and so on. Normally, their approach is "you need a privacy notice, you need this, this and this". (LA4)

Flexibility around finance and funding

LAs, charitable trusts and other funders underwent radical changes, with flexibility and trust replacing regulation and rigid procurement rules. Many LAs described how procurement rules were bypassed and applications simplified in order to get funds quickly to those who needed it.

We very quickly as well put in place a delegated power where [manager] can sign off five grand a time, with a 1 page application, turns it around in a bank account in 24 hours to buy whatever they needed - we didn't care… so long as it wasn't a nuclear bomb, or any illicit drugs, it was whatever they needed, so it was resourcing them. (LA17)

Rather than having to go through these really long-winded processes like you normally do, there would be a trail of emails that would say "right, can you increase this person, this person and this person's card, to this much, this much and this much" and within an hour, it would be done. Everybody did everything they could to safely remove the barriers. (LA9)

The key was, we moved really quickly… we discovered that there is a secret fast track process that we never knew existed [..] there is a way we can fast-track payments, we used that particular technicality… Our finance team, they facilitated that process for us so people got paid very quickly, so that was the other thing, we managed to turn around the money very quickly, and normally it's a very bureaucratic process. (LA8)

Funders also adapted quickly to get support out, collaborating with other funders in order to distribute government funds quickly.

That's been a fund that's worked in a very trust-based way […] so it's worked through intermediaries and networks, of which we have effectively become one (MVCS3)

The funders identified "community anchor organisations" whom they've supported:

Supporting people to write down a plan, but not getting obsessed over exactly what is your plan. It's had some quite nice aspects to encourage organisations to apply as partnerships in a local area, so not to say "this is what we need as our organisation" but "this is what we think the community needs", and supporting some of the bigger anchor organisations to be a focal point for onward distribution within the community. (MVCS3)

Organisations were unanimously positive about this experience of relaxing funding regulations. This did not lead to people taking advantage:

Community groups haven't been greedy - they're taking what they think they need, and sometimes that's only 500 pounds they're asking for, sometimes it's the 1,000, but in general, actually, they know the resource is there and it's for everybody, they know they'll get the support, they're just taking what they think they need to get them through. (LA17)

Conversely, where bureaucracy was not lifted

The easing of bureaucratic barriers was not a universal experience. One national membership VCS organisation shared how:

Some of the frustrations we heard from… members about volunteering, for example, where some very clunky, from their perspective overly bureaucratic, approaches to volunteering actually resulted in

energy being a little bit sapped out of the potential of new volunteers because the local authority system in some areas… everything had to come through their system, which meant that they were required to refer volunteers into the local authority system, and of course that's for reasons around safeguarding and DBS checks and all those processes which are important, but it almost just zapped the energy out of any of the more, informal or volunteering that was already up and running and happening anyway. (MVCS5)

This was reflected by one of our LA participants, who felt that the persistence of command and control had blocked and slowed down responses.

Us in the communities team, were getting telephone calls and emails from our connections across the county whether it was local authorities or community groups or individuals we've worked with – saying "we've got this idea, we want to help, we want to get out there and do stuff"… the Local Resilience Forum were telling us to "just hang tight, don't do anything just yet, we've got it in hand, we're working with partners to do it right and do it once", so there was a bit of conflict between us wanting to set people free to get things set up and being held back. (LA2)

This same LA shared how the lack of flexibility resulted in blockages to data sharing, as well as inflexibility around funding and procurement and effectively slowed responses.

The eligibility criteria was a little bit too strict […] that ruled out a lot of those spontaneous community projects that sprung up. (LA2)

The sharing of NHS responder data was another key example of this, which blocked the utilisation of the NHS volunteers, as discussed in our upcoming report on the dynamics of supply of volunteers. Although we heard from some VCS organisations who were critical of LAs and larger VCS responses, largely, the persistence of clunky bureaucratic processes is limited to a handful of examples in our data, and the dominant narrative is one of increased trust, flexibility and willingness to take risks. In those few examples where this was not achieved, we heard how responses were delayed; this underlines the importance of retaining these changed ways of working going forward, in order to respond swiftly and effectively to any future social restrictions.

Embedding these gains to resist bureaucratic creep

Participants discussed above how responses to the pandemic had advanced community engagement and collaboration by 12 months, overnight. We heard how the "bureaucratic tundra" which had blocked community engagement and co-production for so long "had finally begun to defrost", and that many of the advances discussed in this section would be lost if organisational systems were allowed to revert back to type. There was a strong sense that the flexibility and trust that has underpinned pandemic working must be embedded.

There will be someone, somewhere, who's run away with a bit of money that they shouldn't have. But you can't build a whole system around one dodgy person. (MVCS1)

It's really interesting, because most LAs will have some kind of strategy around - well all of them - working with the community, having resilient communities that look out for each other, having the power of neighbours supporting each other, and then it's like, when it actually happens, you have to be prepared to go with it, do you know what I mean, there's something about this gap between rhetoric and how you actually behave in those situations… when exactly what you hoped would happen, happened, in that people stepped up to support people in their neighbourhoods - that might not always be a perfect process but you do have to recognise when it's happening. (LA9a)

However, some interviewees expressed doubts about the extent to which these changes would be sustained, with some noting that bureaucratic creep was already setting back in.

There's that real feeling of command and control, we need to put in these layers, we know best, these frameworks, and you're really saddened - did we learn nothing? (LA14)

I think we'll probably go back to being more risk-averse.(LA8)

A lot of the freedoms, and innovation and bureaucracy that went, is beginning to creep back in. (LA3)

Everyone works much better in a crisis… everyone's saving the people, but once the people are fine, you're going back to saving your own organisation. (MVCS1)

What you're going to have now, is the big accountability questions coming in: how much was spent? Who made that decision? Why are we in the situation? Who is going to recover? What needs to be cut to be able to pay for this going forward? That is going to breed a return to accountability, covering your back, writing everything down, risk assessment, decision making, etc. etc. so the freedom we had with lockdown… is going to retract, the more the financial impact comes in, and the more that accountability gets devolved back down to local councils from government, it's natural that it's not going to stay. (LA14)

There are significant insights in these discussions which illuminate potential learning for LAs and the VCS. The centrality of removing risk averseness as a barrier to working differently is foremost. Several participants talked of their intention to commission differently, with organisations undertaking reflective processes to embed these changes.

Going forward, that's something special that we've done, we've put a line around it saying this is special for COVID, but actually what we've learned is there's a way to make those kinds of money move in that way that might be a good in other situations as well, not just health crisis. (MVCS3)

Under financial strain, without deliberately building in these new ways of working and protecting them into the future, they may well be swept away.

5. Pending crises and strategies for recovery

Reflecting on the future, a large majority of interviewees expressed both concern about the pending cliff edge (impending funding crisis facing LAs, the VCS and communities), and optimism about the opportunity COVID presented to change what many felt was a broken system. Namely, to rebuild based on the values of social justice and equality, and/or to embed a more bottom-up, place-based approach.

Pending Cliff Edge

Interviewees talked of a pending cliff edge, as a consequence of several coalescent factors. These factors relate to central and particularly local government finance and policy; VCS sector resources and capacity (as discussed in section 3) and increasing demand on VCS/statutory services from communities.

LA participants described how the deficits that they had already been carrying had been exponentially extended as a result of the crisis. They expect knock-on consequences for commissioning, including cuts and redundancies going forward; it's likely they will be unable to sustain the levels of funding and support implemented during lockdown without additional resources from central government.

I heard our Chief Exec say, in a call the other day, that there would be no new project areas allowed for development, because of the budget shortfall. (LA3)

Importantly, the funding crisis facing LAs will compound the challenges facing the VCS sector, which depends heavily on LA funding.

Local government gets the vast majority of its funding from Scottish government, with a little bit of local revenue raising, and then, the VCS sector is not entirely, but quite a lot, dependent on local authority funding, and a bit of Scottish government funding - so if nobody has any money, that's a problem. (MVCS1)

These concerns have been shared by the English Local Government Association (LGA), who reported in July that between March and June, councils incurred £4.8 billion of extra cost pressures and income losses as a result of the pandemic. The Westminster Government has provided £3.2 billion of emergency funding to councils and CCGs have provided funding of £300 million which has helped meet some of the pressures so far - leaving councils facing a funding gap of £7.4 billion. The LGA estimate that the financial challenge for English councils as a result of the pandemic will reach £10.9 billion. They have warned that councils will have to take measures in anticipation of future funding shortfalls, which could mean in-year cuts to vital local services that are supporting communities through the crisis and that will be crucial to recovery. Voices from LAs in England have accused the

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government of reneging on their promises to do "whatever is necessary" to support LAs with the COVID bill. In Scotland, £330 million additional funding has been released by the Scottish government to deal with the crisis. The Welsh government has made £490 million extra funding available to Welsh authorities. Similar concerns have been expressed by the COSLA and the WLGA about the necessity of extra funding in order to avoid cuts to essential services.

In spite of the improved relationships between LAs and VCS organisations, and the strong feeling that the sector had stepped up and proved its value during this period, there is still doubt around whether LAs will be able to invest in the VCS, in light of the funding challenges that they themselves are facing.

The question now is whether LAs are willing to take that step further, and say OK, we need to have a realistic conversation with the voluntary sector, and understand what they're capable of doing, and then ultimately the conversation is about investment and do we have the resources to properly invest in the sector? and I wouldn't want to answer that question because when it comes to the crunch, this has cost LAs a hell of lot of money, and we've only been compensated by the government to a very small percentage, so are we going to have the resources to put into the sector, that's a big question mark. (LA8)

This poses a serious threat, particularly given the crises facing communities as we look to the future and the likely increased demand that statutory and VCS services will face. At the macro-level, nationally and globally, the pandemic is impacting economies and most major Western economies are heading for recession and increased unemployment. The withdrawal of emergency support, including the ending of the furlough scheme, the "All In" scheme and the subsidising of food purchasing, are anticipated to lead to increased demand on the VCS sector.

Interviewees reflected on the emergence of the "new" disadvantaged groups because of the crisis, primarily families whose parents have been furloughed or made redundant, with children at home to feed and support with their education.

[The pandemic] has redefined what vulnerability means… we've seen as an organisation, families who would never, ever need our support… there's lots of people who have never entered that realm [of services], whose names aren't on these vulnerability lists, who have been missed out, and these tend to be, from my experience anyway, families. That could be because they've got children that they're suddenly having to find food for every day and they can't afford their shopping, or they're on furlough and they're living off 80% of their income. (LIO1)

We've been looking at food insecurity very deeply, and we've also come across new vulnerability that wasn't there before, so for the people we didn't know, and also people have become very vulnerable that were really quite - they had good work to do before, but they no longer have good work. (LA17)

Furthermore, the social impact of the economic fallout is likely to be felt most keenly in poorer areas, where many of the VCS organisations operate and where existing challenges around poverty and inequality have already been exacerbated by COVID. In particular, the pandemic has drawn attention

to the inadequacies of Universal Credit and the overwhelming demand on food banks which pre-existed the pandemic.

The people who rely on [the food bank] will go back to relying on community-based foodbanks, which struggled to provide the services needed prior to COVID. (LIO4)

They've already raised Universal Credit, because it wasn't enough, and it was never enough to live on, but now enough people noticed that. (VCS2)

Interviewees worried about the plight of vulnerable groups such as the homeless and asylum seekers, women in domestic abuse situations, people living with disabilities, the elderly/shielding and people who are recovering from COVID. All of these increased needs within communities, will add additional strain on the resources of the VCS. The impending second wave of cases adds an extra element to this cocktail of challenges. A membership LA organisation summarised this picture:

It's an absolute tsunami that's coming in terms of demand, in terms of health and social care demand, and all the unmet need that happened during the crisis, and then all the protracted issues that will have developed for individuals and families during it, in terms of mental health, and then, on top of that, family breakdown as a result of job loss, financial insecurity, it's just a perfect storm. (MLA2)

Recovery Approaches

Interviewees shared ways in which they were planning for recovery, but this is challenged by the reality that many are still in the "response" phase and this has been increasingly the case with localised spikes and increased infections as we head into winter.

It feels more unknown that at the beginning. (LA11)

We do have a COVID response plan and now a recovery plan, but we haven't had the leisure of thinking time. (LIO8)

In light of the challenges discussed, participants reflected that in many ways, recovery should not mean a complete return to "business as usual".

We need to take this moment to learn longer-term lessons, rather than kind of pat ourselves on the back, and say there was an emergency, we all responded, now let's move on. (MVCS3)

We're reinventing and not recovering post-COVID. (LA10)

There was a strong sense that communities and the VCS would have a role to play in dealing with some of these challenges. As discussed in sections 1 and 3, communities and the VCS have stepped up to feed, support and connect people together during a time of crisis. It is in those areas where

LAs and VCS organisations had pre-existing relationships with communities where community responses were most strong. Authorities who had invested time and resources in building community infrastructure, relationships and trust, cited their place-based community development models as key. The role of pre-existing models is discussed further in our upcoming second report from this phase of the MoVE research. These organisations are seeking to build on community resources going forward, working in partnership with the VCS and informal community groups.

It's not tendering to create the demand; it's finding the community solution. (LA17)

My hope is that this idea of community-led support will happen, and I think that authorities have a duty to support - because we can't manage and we can't direct, but we can definitely support - local networks, networks of networks and local support... my vision is that localism works, and this idea of little villages, and people who are active community connectors already, people who pull that stuff together... there's strength in that local knowledge. (LA12)

However, participants stressed that as we seek to capitalise on the energy of volunteers, we mustn't simply "offload" responsibility and accountability onto communities themselves.

The problem is...normalising that state of affairs, because that what it means in essence is it's OK for low-paid employers, it's OK for businesses to discharge themselves of their responsibilities for people who have got higher needs and stuff, because someone else is going to continue to pick up that tab, so I'm a bit concerned that we're changing the culture both for good, but for bad as well. (LIO5)

Referring out to mutual aid groups, and you know, it is absolutely not about a discharging of responsibility into the community sector. (LA9a)

There are lessons for national policy makers about social justice and equality and the need for broader systemic change.

In lots of ways COVID has actually shone a light on actually very deep, long standing problems that were already there...beyond the medium term into the long term, I suppose what the bigger challenge is - and the third sector will hopefully have a role to play in this - but how do we design systems of support, for what might be periods of constant change? [...] the case for things like universal basic income has been quite well made actually by some of the things that have been done, so some of those bigger structural questions I think are true. (MVCS3)

The NHS has been handing off patients directly onto mutual aid communities, pharmacies have been working directly with them, and it really should be subsidised by the government [...] the core point is that this is stuff that the government really should be handling themselves. (MA4)

These discussions highlight the difficult task that national governments, LAs, the VCS and communities have moving forward and importantly how they balance the kinds of support that need to be in place for recovery and who should be responsible for providing. Building on the community

cohesion that has been a key feature of the crisis must be a key part of local strategies for recovery but fostering community resourcefulness requires more than simply allowing communities to plug the gap left by services. The role of the LA as an enabler of social action – investing in community infrastructure and supporting relationships - will be ever more important as we look to the future:

The LA to move to being more of an enabler, a facilitator, as opposed to "you said it, we fixed it". (LA10)

It also shows that in terms of, if we want resilient communities going forward, we need to a) give community groups the freedom to do what they need to do, but we do need the right infrastructure in place, and whether that's a voluntary sector infrastructure organisation, or whether that's a LA providing it, actually being able to provide the right advice and guidance to community groups is really important, and network them to other organisations, and help build - it's almost the LA role, one of the things we're learning, is the role of the LA as a convener and enabler. (LA20)

Conclusions and next stages of the research

As we write these conclusions in September 2020, the UK is entering the second wave of COVID-19 infections. Localised lockdowns are being implemented both voluntarily, and under imposition from national governments, in areas across the UK that have experienced infections spikes in recent weeks. These findings, which are summarised more fully in the Executive Summary, offer a set of lessons which hold significant implications for national and local policymaking as we move forward into this second wave:

1) Existing local infrastructure and community support networks have underpinned successful community responses, which have been most effective at the very local level.
2) Harnessing the energy going forwards demands a rethink of volunteering approaches, with a focus on supporting "good neighbourliness" without over formalising or institutionalising.
3) The role of the VCS has been fundamental; the sector needs to retain its seat at the table, and it is vital this is properly resourced.
4) The pandemic has broken down systemic bureaucratic barriers to relational working and enabled genuine partnership, but these new ways of working are under threat and must be built into organisational cultures and structures.
5) Communities must be at the centre of social and economic recovery; LAs should play an enabling role in supporting communities to prepare for the "tsunami" of challenges ahead, neither offloading its responsibilities, nor seeking to control community responses.

These findings have been helping the research team to scope and define the next stage of our research (October – August 2021). In some ways, they throw out more questions than answers for LAs and VCS organisations:

- How can the momentum of community action be harnessed as we move into the second wave of cases and lockdowns, and beyond into recovery?
- How can VCS infrastructure be protected and strengthened to underpin social action, and continue to enable collaboration?
- Should there be a new approach to volunteering which understands that micro-level community volunteering is motivated by relationships of mutual support, moving away from outdated transactional approaches of matching tasks and formalising volunteers?
- Can changed ways of working be retained and embedded and the bureaucratic creep be resisted in the face of the momentous challenges ahead?

Over the next 11 months, we will work alongside a number of LAs and their VCS partners in order to explore these questions and challenges. Examining what a blended approach to volunteering - which recognises both the value of the grassroots *and* the need for established VCS infrastructure and support - will form the central focus of this next strand of work.

If you have been working on COVID-19 community responses and are interested in participating in the next phase of the research, or would like to know more about these and other findings from phase one, please contact Dr Harriet Thiery at h.thiery@sheffield.ac.uk

All three reports from phase one of MoVE, along with a series of blog posts on these findings, can be found on [our online ecosystem.](#) You can also follow us on twitter @Enabling_SA to keep up to date with the research.