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hands

Research Institute Report No. 28

Navigating uncertainty and remaining resilient

The experience of community businesses during Covid-19

December 2020

Eve Avdoulos, Zoë Wilkins and Victoria Boelman



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About this paper

This report shares the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on community businesses across the UK during the months of June, July and August 2020. The research used in this report was conducted by The Young Foundation on behalf of Power to Change Research Institute.

The report has been researched and written independently. The study aimed to understand how community businesses were fairing as the pandemic swept the UK and as guidelines and rules changed. The findings reflect the experiences of community business participants within this context during the summer of 2020.

About the author



The Young Foundation's mission is to develop better connected and stronger communities across the UK. We research in and with communities to increase the understanding of community life today. We offer different methods and approaches to involve communities and grow their capacity to own and lead change. We provide tools and resources to support innovation to tackle the issues people and communities care about. We're a UKRI accredited research organisation, social investor and community practitioner.

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Executive summary

Community businesses across the country have been affected in numerous ways as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research explores the impacts of Covid-19 on community businesses in England, and the ways they have adapted to respond. Using an online digital platform to capture the experiences of community businesses over a 12-week period from June to August 2020, this report highlights the experiences of 27 community businesses from multiple sectors.

Into lockdown

The announcement of lockdown marked an abrupt challenge for community businesses. It was a time of high anxiety and stress which, as the initial weeks unfolded, led to growing frustration and exhaustion as leaders, staff and volunteers put in extraordinary efforts to ensure the future of their organisations, and to support their local communities. All the while, people also had their own challenges, from health worries to home-schooling, which needed to be managed alongside the business.

One of the biggest challenges was facing an immediate loss of income. This was particularly acute for those businesses that rely heavily on income generated by use of their physical assets – which were forced to close. At the same time, the level of resource available also shifted dramatically, with three-quarters of community businesses having to furlough at least some staff, and two-thirds with at least some staff needing to shield.

Some support was available but, during that early period, the amount of information could be overwhelming, particularly as the situation was so uncertain and rapidly changing. Others found that they fell through the cracks between support programmes, being eligible for neither business nor charity schemes, or not having been in operation for long enough to qualify.

Adjusting, diversifying and adapting

As the lockdown lengthened and it became evident that the pandemic would not be short-lived, community businesses rapidly sought to adapt and diversify to remain afloat, reopen and continue to support local people.

Indeed, this willingness to adapt became a key feature underpinning the survival of community businesses, with teams continuously reviewing and revising their operations as the situation evolved. Almost half of community business leaders reported feeling innovative, embracing the opportunity to do something new. Further, half have already concluded that some of the changes made have had long-term benefits for their business and will be sustained beyond Covid-19 – although for many it is still too early to tell.

A shift to digital is one of the main ways in which businesses adapted, and where longer-term benefits are seen. There was a rapid pivot to communicating and engaging through digital channels, as well as some adoption of online retail or service delivery, depending on the business sector. For many, however, this shift did highlight local issues around digital exclusion. Lower-income and older residents in particular were often identified as being unable to access online services or information, and so community businesses also adopted other models. Support services were delivered by phone, for example, and food deliveries came with doorstep chats.

The other most notable change was in terms of the relationships between community businesses and other local organisations. Experiences of engaging with local authorities were – as before the pandemic – mixed. While some reported an increased recognition from their local council, others felt undervalued. More uniformly positive, however, was the way in which relationships with other local businesses and charities were strengthened. The ability to respond in a more nimble and collaborative way is felt to have paid dividends, both in terms of supporting local people during the pandemic and in terms of the future prospects for the local economy and community.

Unsurprisingly, adapting to the situation was easier for those businesses which already had more diversified income streams and/or good digital capabilities and capacity. For all, however, the support of local residents was the most valued source of support during this time. The true nature of the word ‘community’ was reflected in the support these community businesses received from local residents as well as the businesses themselves finding ways to continue to support their community – by diverting volunteers, donating space for food banks and collaborating with others.

Opening up

The news that non-essential businesses could reopen was welcome but required caution, planning and investment. As a result, most community businesses were adopting a phased approach to reopening.

Becoming ‘Covid-secure’ represented a significant challenge, with its associated costs for equipment and the reorganising of physical space. Those businesses reliant on bringing the public in – such as sports centres or arts and community hubs – also face substantial ongoing costs associated with increased levels of cleaning. Continuing to support vulnerable staff, volunteers and residents also represents an ongoing challenge – with the need to protect individuals affecting delivery capacity and operations.

Glimmers of hope

As their stories illustrate, it becomes clear that the resilience of community businesses is not determined by their ability to pull on financial capital, but rather determined by the strength of their social capital – their professional networks, community support, cooperative ways of working and reciprocity with others.

The majority of community businesses are looking to identify the positive opportunities from an unprecedented situation – taking the time to refocus and reflect on both their strategic goals and operational model. There remain challenges ahead and there is strong demand for more support, particularly with adapting to digital ways of working, financial support for IT investment and the costs of remaining Covid-secure. Some are also seeking capital investment to enable a more significant and permanent reconfiguration of their premises.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the unique experience of community businesses in contrast with other sectors. Not only have these organisations needed to identify and prioritise the specific needs of the communities they serve and adapt in ways to focus on these needs, but they have remained both resilient and accountable to their local constituents while doing so.

1. Introduction

In the neighbourhoods, towns and villages they serve, community businesses are at the heart of everyday life. They are run by and for local people, usually relying on a mix of dedicated staff and volunteers to provide services valued across the community. Like all businesses they are shaped by wider economic and social forces, but they are also businesses with people at their heart. As the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the country, community businesses faced the same disruption and uncertainty as other small enterprises but their unique mission meant that many also felt an additional sense of commitment to their local community which influenced their response in this unprecedented time.

Their dedication to responding to the needs of their communities means community businesses have worked to find ways to adapt, manage and innovate during this time. While this has been immensely difficult for many, community businesses have proven to be unusually resilient, particularly given the precarious situations and total loss of income many have faced. While community businesses have been significantly impacted as a result of the pandemic, the Covid-19 crisis has also reinforced how important community businesses are to the lives of local people – from providing essential supplies and services, to supporting the vulnerable and isolated.

For a business, resilience is usually underpinned by its financial capital. However, although grant and government funding has helped carry community businesses through the first months of the pandemic, it merely allows them to survive, and many have also needed to utilise their limited reserves. It has become clear through following the journeys of these community businesses that it is not their ability to pull on financial capital that has carried them through, but rather their social capital – their professional networks, community support, cooperative ways of working and reciprocity with others. This report explores the impacts of Covid-19 on community businesses in England, and the ways community businesses have adapted to respond.

The data was collected between June and August 2020, as the UK exited a full universal lockdown and moved into a new phase of gradual reopening and local variation in controls. The stories captured through this research paint a picture of the experiences of community businesses during lockdown as the pandemic unfolded; revealing stories of innovation and community solidarity, financial struggle and uncertainty, anxiety and resilience. As the situation develops and businesses continue to adapt, the long-term effects of this pandemic remain unknown.

2. Methodology

Between May and June 2020, Power to Change and The Young Foundation used their networks to recruit participants for this study. Power to Change took the lead on recruitment, publicising the study on its social media channels and in Mutual Aid Group communications. A total of 48 businesses completed the registration questionnaire and 27 actively participated in at least one of the weekly activities. You can find a breakdown of these businesses in Section 3.

Tasked with documenting and recording their experiences during this period, participating community businesses were asked to complete specific activities on a regular basis in order to gather insights on different issues they experienced during the lockdown, as well as capturing real time insights as the situation evolved. The tasks were hosted on a dedicated online qualitative research platform, Recollective, which allowed participants to share written responses to weekly questions and polls, as well as upload photos and videos that reflected their experiences. In addition to serving as a data gathering platform, Recollective also allows participants to see one another's responses and engage with each other through comments and discussion boards, similar to a social media platform.

Questions were designed around a new theme each week. Initial themes were determined through conversations between The Young Foundation and Power to Change, evolved over time based on external factors (e.g. support schemes being introduced and new guidelines), and built upon the insights collected from the first weeks. The questions were discussed amongst the two organisations and decided through an iterative process. You can find the questions we used in the appendix.

Overall, this innovative method allowed the stories and experiences of the community businesses to be captured over time and provided rich qualitative insights to complement quantitative data that was being produced in other studies – including Power to Change's 2020 Community Business Market Survey. The method was also well received by participants, with many of them expressing interest in being able to respond with greater depth and enjoying the social aspect of the platform. Though some participants did comment that at times the questions felt repetitive, the overall experience was regarded as being positive.

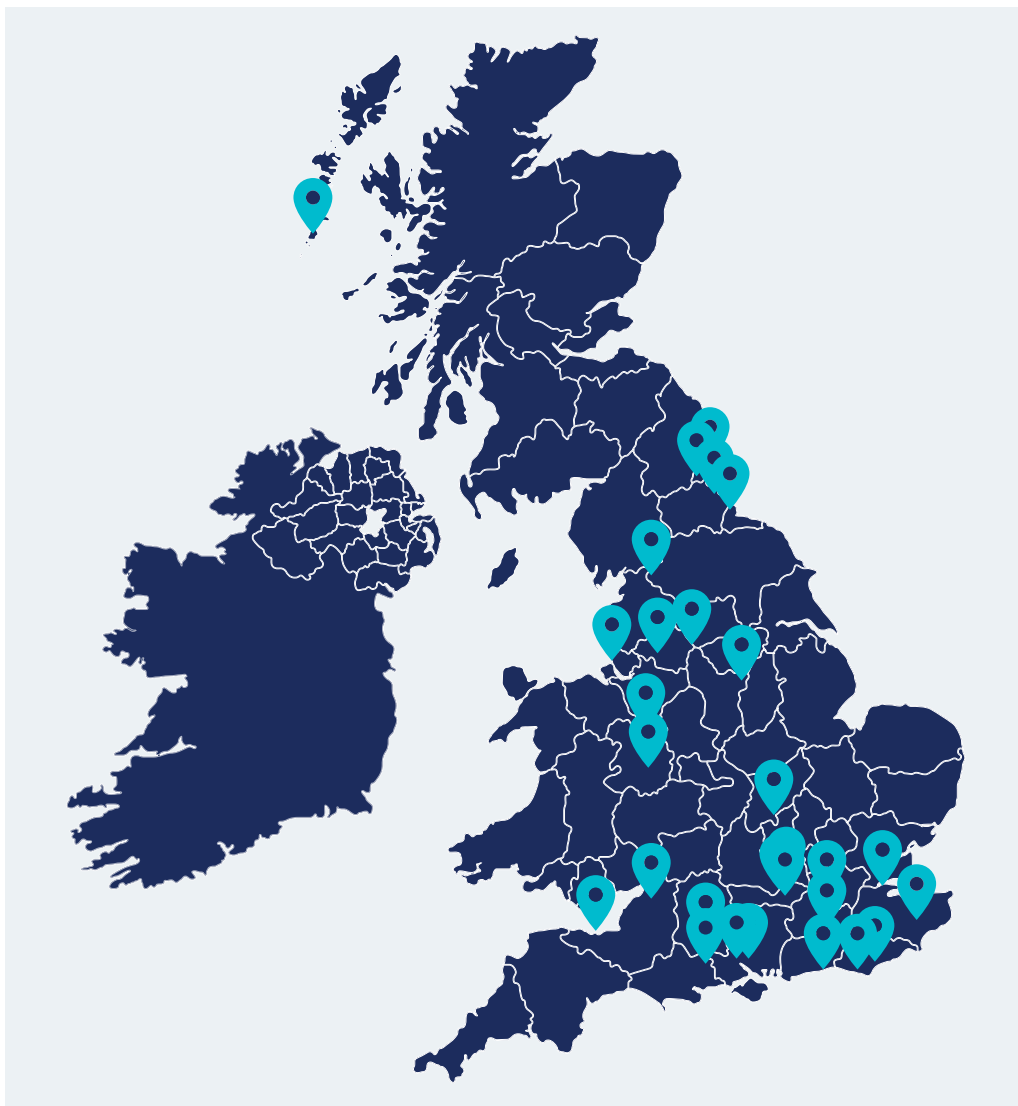
3. Who's who: breakdown of participants

A total of 27 community businesses were active¹ on the platform over the duration of the study. Three additional community businesses² were interviewed about their experiences over the phone.

3.1 Geographic location

Participants are primarily from businesses across England, with one participant from Scotland, as shown on the map.

Map of community businesses



¹ An active participant has been engaged in actively completing the weekly tasks. A total of 31 businesses signed up to the platform but only 27 of these completed the activities.

² These were two sports and leisure facilities and one community hub.

Figure 1: Location of community businesses

Location	Proportion (n=27)
Urban	37%
Rural	63%

3.2 Sector

Figure 2: Main business activity reported by community businesses

Main business activity	Proportion (n=27)
Community hub	30%
Café	16%
Arts centre	13%
Community shop	11%
Youth services	11%
Business centre	7%
Environmental organisation	7%
Financial advice centre	3%
Pub	2%

Figure 3: Number of business activities reported by community businesses

Number of business activities	Proportion (n=27)
Single	78%
Multiple	22%

3.3 When they were established

Figure 4: Length of time the community business has been operational

Established	Proportion (n=27)
Before 2000	22%
2000–2007	15%
2008–2013	22%
2014 or after	41%

3.4 Operational status

Figure 5: Operational status of community business from April 2020

Operational status	Proportion (n=27)
Closed permanently	0%
Fully operational	8%
Closed temporarily	22%
Operating with adapted services	70%

All of the community businesses that closed temporarily during lockdown are community hubs running a variety of activities including youth services, arts, cafés and sports facilities. The community businesses that remained open with adapted and reduced activity range across the spectrum of sectors and only two, both shops in rural areas, have continued to be fully operational.

4. Shifting into lockdown

When it was announced that the UK would enter a period of lockdown on 23 March 2020, many businesses faced unprecedented uncertainty. The potential for closures, newly imposed safety and health restrictions, strained cashflow and an ambiguous timeline of when a return to (semi-)normality could be expected, made the process of making informed yet rapid decisions very difficult. It was hard to know whether it was right for the community business to close, whether it could adapt to serve the needs of their community, in what ways it would impact sources of income, and what it would mean for the future of the business.

It became very clear very quickly that things would need to change. The CEO of a community-run business centre explains, “The current situation has made our business model unworkable as the costs of opening are greater than the income we can generate and, in a climate where the government is telling people not to have face to face meetings and events, running a meeting/events venue is not an option”.

Participants recalled their initial feelings of concern, frustration and exhaustion as they were questioning whether their businesses would survive and having urgent conversations to decide how to move forward. In this moment of uncertainty, businesses were forced to make rapid decisions with little information available. The initial weeks were difficult for some. The manager of an arts centre and café explained, “The first few weeks were hard. Having spent nearly ten years building this project up it looked suddenly as though it might end in 2020”, and another in financial services described how “in late March we felt a little panic[ked]: daily calls between staff at home, concerns about how to sustain our income and our ability to reach clients”.

The shift into lockdown brought with it a series of abrupt challenges for many, including facing an immediate loss of income, staff changes and trying to make sense of the multiple forms of support being made available, all while balancing the needs of their community businesses with ever-changing personal lives. The immediate loss of income presented a particularly pressing challenge as it meant they were faced with a total closure if they could not find ways to financially sustain their physical spaces, and pay bills that come with them.

4.1 Facing an immediate loss of income

As a result of the way they operate, with a constant tension between the need to balance financial stability and the fulfilment of their locally-focused social purpose (Perry et al., 2020), community businesses have been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic ‘approximately 40 per cent of community businesses were not contributing to their reserves in any given year. Added to this, the average community business generates 58 per cent of their income from one source’ (Miller, 2020). This means that even before the pandemic, several community businesses would struggle if faced with the loss of their main customer base or income stream. Moreover, community businesses on average receive 70 per cent of their income from trading (Perry et al., 2020).

Generating income from trading ‘is easier for community businesses who have tangible assets (a building and related spaces such as a café or shop, a collection of physical objects, e.g. sports equipment)’ (Perry et al., 2020). However, as Covid-19 has primarily impacted people’s ability to gather in physical spaces and socialise, many businesses relying on trading income generated from the use of tangible assets have felt the impact of the pandemic, experiencing a dramatic decrease in their regular income streams.

Community hubs, cafés, leisure centres and other businesses that rely on people using their physical spaces to generate income were particularly affected. A manager of a community hub explains, “Since the start of the coronavirus outbreak (and subsequent ‘lockdown’) we have suffered an almost complete loss of our regular trading income. All of our tenants are working from home, so we are no longer receiving rental income, and we are no longer generating income from room hires, events and activities. The building has been closed to the public since mid-March.” This was echoed by others, including a social media manager at a sports and leisure centre who “lost an anticipated third of our traded income this year as a result of Covid-19. This is due to our sessions being put on hold, meaning we were struggling to gain much traded income at all.”

Many of those businesses that completely closed their doors during this time have also been those which rely on generating income from the use of their physical spaces. Of the community businesses participating, an arts centre and two sports and leisure centres had to close their doors completely during lockdown and either furlough staff or make staff redundant. Each of these businesses was able to secure some funding to keep them afloat, mainly grants from Power to Change and The National Lottery, and they have all recently re-opened or are in the process of re-opening.

While those businesses which have needed to continue to operate in physical spaces –community/village halls, shops, arts centres and cafés for example – have been more significantly impacted by the restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19, nearly all of the community businesses participating in this study struggled with their financial resilience during this time. Those who have been unable to operate in physical spaces have also been pushed to change their delivery models and business plans more quickly.

Some businesses found a way to offset the initial loss of income, mainly by furloughing staff and applying for unrestricted grants, but many highlighted that they remained in a precarious financial position.

“We are losing £15k per week in trading income. This has been partially offset by furloughing staff (saving circa £20k pcm) and unrestricted grants of £18k to date. We have also received £27k in restricted grants for IT to support Covid-19 related costs associated with remote working and digital service delivery. We have more or less abandoned our pre-Covid-19 fundraising strategy as funders have diverted their giving to pandemic related activities. We have £107k of crisis funding applications pending.”

CEO, arts centre

Given the already precarious financial situation many were in, the loss of income was a huge hit. This was especially the case for those dependent on funding. Due to restrictions on funding eligibility, some community businesses had very limited options that would enable them to maintain sufficient funds to sustain their businesses.

4.2 Eligibility for funding

While some businesses used grants to help offset their loss of income, eligibility requirements were noted as a concern. This became a particular issue for those businesses who own the physical spaces in which they operate where eligibility related to the rateable value of their buildings. In order to help businesses survive the pandemic, the government issued a relief package aimed at small businesses with terms specifically for charitable businesses. However, a few of those businesses who would have benefitted from this funding did not qualify. A trustee at a business support centre explains how “we fall through the cracks of the business support grants as we have a rateable value of £24,000 [above the government limit of £12,000] and are eligible for 80 per cent charitable rate relief and not small business rate relief”. A manager of a sports and leisure centre identified the same challenge as a result of its £15,000 rateable value. Both these businesses have been trying to work with their local councils to appeal the decisions but, as of August 2020, have yet to resolve the issue.

Newly established businesses also reported struggling with eligibility for funding. The chief operating officer of a digital services business explains “As we did not have a premises and had only registered as a business in January, we were not eligible for any central support funding”. Similarly, the CEO of a sports and leisure service explains that as a new organisation it was unable to access any government support because it “hadn’t started trading and hadn’t been paying a proper wage to me as the founder” which has made it “heart-breaking seeing each new announcement of support and then realising that we don’t qualify, for one reason or another”. Both were disadvantaged because they were still in the process of establishing themselves, and therefore not able to meet every criteria for funding, even though new community businesses are often the ones who most need support.

Other eligibility issues – including limitations on the type of venue, banking arrangements and the estimated value of the business – illustrate that, whatever the support packages available, not all businesses are able to benefit. One business centre CEO explains that “as the government left venues like ours out of their guidance, we have also not been eligible for the types of grants other micro-businesses have benefited from”. Finally, a director of a community hub found that “we are often not eligible. We couldn’t apply for CBILS [Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme] because we bank with Unity and they weren’t offering it and other banks wanted you to be an existing customer”. The variety of requirements has made it difficult for many community businesses to access the support they need.

While substantial financial support was available for community businesses, especially at the beginning of lockdown, eligibility requirements often added hurdles or barriers and a lack of information made it additionally difficult for businesses to understand what financial support they were entitled to. In some instances, community businesses pursued avenues for funding only to realise they were not eligible or, despite researching opportunities, missed out on funding that could have helped because information was not clearly communicated.

4.3 Receiving information

When lockdown began, information intended to help community businesses – especially about the different funding schemes available – was being published at a rapid pace. Central government, local councils and third sector organisations, including Power to Change, were sharing a plethora of information about new funding schemes, training, webinars and community support groups that could help community businesses adjust.

While this provided businesses with valuable resources, some felt overwhelmed by how much information was available and were often left confused and frustrated by the volume. Some businesses commented that despite the far-reaching support available, it was difficult to understand what schemes they qualified for. At an already chaotic time, confusion was exacerbated as businesses found themselves managing considerable change while having to furlough or lose integral staff members.

“Away from the day to day of the project, the challenges I have faced as CEO have included understanding what government support we can and can’t access, applying for it, and then working out what help is appropriate to apply for from our funders. I have felt a bit bombarded with information (as well as feeling supported) by our sector, and have found that I need to pare it all back to what will help us, and what is a distraction at a time when I am trying to save the business.”
CEO, community hub

“There has been so much information, every newsletter included training and webinars or a survey. I don’t think that my opinion has ever been in such demand. What was difficult was to sort out what was useful. At the height of lockdown it was easy to get sucked into reading, viewing, following chains of information. It didn’t really help it just made me more anxious.”
CEO, youth services

4.4 Staff changes

The Covid-19 pandemic influenced staff structures for almost all community businesses. Of the 21 community businesses who responded to this activity, 16 reported needing to furlough their staff and most have experienced some changes to staff structures (e.g. reducing hours, reducing the number of volunteers).³

- Of the 21 community businesses who responded:
- 76% had to furlough some staff
- 67% had staff and/or volunteers who were shielding
- 38% had to ask staff to work additional hours
- 38% experienced a decrease in staff numbers
- 33% had to ask staff to reduce hours
- 10% had to make staff redundant
- 10% had to make pay cuts

Three community businesses hired new staff, although in each case this was arranged before lockdown. The process of changing staff structures was quite difficult as it was often being done under stressful circumstances in uncertain times. Trying to maintain relationships with furloughed staff was also noted by some as being particularly challenging. Explaining of the difficulties of staff changes and the furlough process, the manager of a community pub writes, “Managing stress, worry and strict protocols has had a toll as well as those who remain on furlough [have been] feeling disconnected.”

Uncertainty about how long restrictions will be in place has also meant that some businesses have put recruitment on hold indefinitely and face potential redundancies in future. This hold on planning for growth presents many difficulties, particularly for community businesses that were already facing financial uncertainty, and there remains the question of dealing with staff changes when things begin to open up again. The manager of a café explains that the process of coming out of lockdown and bringing staff out of furlough is in fact much more difficult than going into lockdown. They write, “Opening up and navigating not only the government guidance, but also what is right for us as an organisation has been far harder than the lockdown. Now decisions can cost a lot of money, as we navigate bringing staff out of furlough. However, we are making decisions daily and weekly and responding to the concerns of our staff, volunteers and community.” From the conversations with community businesses,

³ While the sample size is small, these findings are in line with the most recent market survey completed by Power to Change. ‘Community Business Market Survey 2020: Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic’ [online] https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CBM-Initial-Analysis_Final.pdf

how to handle the changing circumstances was an open and pertinent question; whether it was best to wait it out and hold on to what they had, or should they be moving forward in hopes that good things would come?

4.5 Embracing Change

During so much uncertainty and disruption, feeling a range of emotions is inevitable. When asked how they were feeling in mid-May, during the first week of the study, 44 per cent of participants reported feeling innovative, 37 per cent reported feeling frustrated, 33 per cent were exhausted, 26 per cent reported feeling positive and 22 per cent optimistic; this exemplifies the diverse emotions that community business leaders and teams were experiencing, especially at the height of lockdown. When describing the reasons, people highlighted everything from feeling “frustrated because of the lack of financial help for our small business”, anxious with “respect to how long the current circumstances may continue and the impact this is having on our income”, and tired as a result of balancing the “competing demands of family, home, elderly parents far away, children at home from school and DIY!” The range of emotions can be attributed not only to the normal challenges faced by the businesses, but also the unprecedented conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic for which nothing could have prepared them.

Community businesses faced numerous decisions when the lockdown started. The pressure to make choices at these key moments resulted in a variety of feelings for participants, which they represented via pictures. One staff member at a community shop chose a photo of multiple doors to describe how she was feeling, as it “signifies that it feels like there are many, many doors we could open ... but we don’t know which one!”. Similarly, the manager of a pub chose a photo of crossroads, describing that it “was chosen as we feel we are at a crossroads as an organisation and that we have many challenges ahead of us. Our future as a community business will depend on which road we take and the decisions we make.”

Navigating these uncertain circumstances undoubtedly create stress, but businesses have also noted this time as being one of critical self-reflection, innovation and adaptation. A CEO of a community hub reports “I have been anxious about the survival of the project, but it has also been an opportunity to be a bit innovative, and think outside of the box – something I am better at doing than just managing the project day-to-day”. The director of another community hub similarly shared that “this is a time to be creative but not in a panicky way. I’ve looked at our business from every angle and talked extensively to staff and stakeholders about how we move forward, maintaining the best of what we are and learning from new creative approaches we’ve taken during lockdown.”

Despite the myriad challenges, nearly all the participating community businesses described how they are comfortable with change and adaptation, prioritising innovation and exhibiting a strong sense of resilience. While businesses were facing barriers and abrupt changes to their ways of operating, participants noted feeling a sense of creativity and innovation, feeling confident in their business's ability to adapt and supported by their local communities. Many described the ways in which they have embraced the pandemic as an opportunity to drive change within their community business and think about new ways of working, both internally and in the way they provide their services to the community. Overall, the scale of change has profoundly affected community businesses as they work to deal with the personal impacts alongside the impacts to their business. Despite the range of emotion, frustration and exhaustion, community businesses still described how they embraced change and innovation, finding ways to adapt and diversify.

Community hub, East of England

For the founder and CEO of this community hub which launched just last year, it has been particularly challenging to sustain the community business throughout the last six months. The hub focuses on offering training, a community café and sports and leisure activities, although much of this was yet to start. As lockdown began, all of its operations ceased.

They work in a town within a larger urban area and, prior to Covid-19, had a business model that involved selling day passes, group classes, one-to-one training, as well as income from the shop and café. All of the staff were hired from the local community, and they were in the middle of developing a training programme for young people from the area, particularly those who are leaving care or prison.

They were about to sign a lease in March 2020 and little had formally started up by the time the lockdown happened. This has meant that they've been unable to access the available government support over the last six months. "It's been heartbreaking seeing each new announcement of support and then realising we don't qualify, for one reason or another", the CEO shared.

Looking forward, their goals are the same as before Covid-19: "to be part of the revitalisation and evolution of our high street; to provide employment and training opportunities for vulnerable young people from [our community]; to create a new space for the whole community which is based on wellness and sociability".

5. Adjusting during lockdown: diversifying and adapting

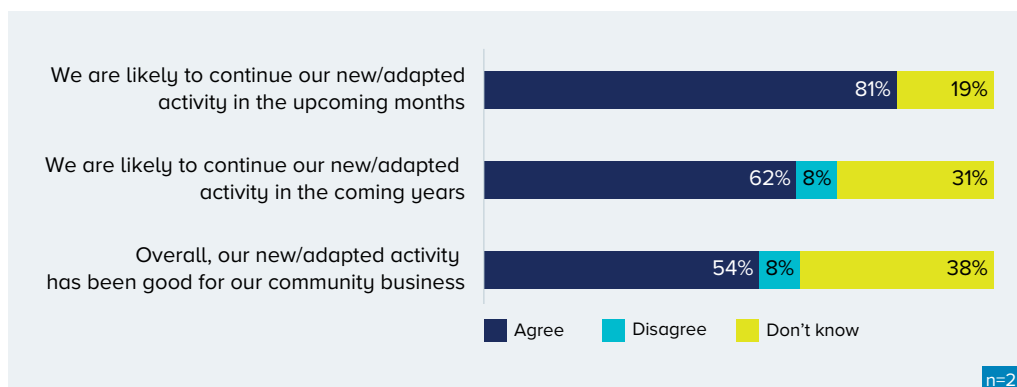
“The immediate impact for us was to make sense of what was happening and to respond in a safe but effective way to the needs of the families we serve.”

Director, education services

The initial shock of the pandemic forced immediate decisions about the future of community businesses but this was far from a one-time adjustment. Throughout lockdown, community businesses were continuously reviewing their operating models and ways of working, adapting and diversifying in order to remain afloat. “Since the pandemic started we had to completely rethink our approach especially in relation to supporting our community”, writes the manager of a community hub and café.

Although things remain uncertain, Figure 6 illustrates that many community businesses hoped to continue with their adapted activities in future.

Figure 6: Continuing adapted activity



However, for some businesses with models that rely heavily on social gathering – including community hubs, arts centres, cafés and shops – Covid-19 has already had a significant impact, making it extremely difficult or impossible to offer usual services, if any at all. Many have found ways to make rapid innovations to cope, including opening online shops, increasing digital communication, transitioning to provide emergency community support like meals, medications and wellbeing check-ins, and providing the physical space or general help for other organisations on the front line of emergency support. Perhaps the most noticeable adaptation has been in shifting to digital.



Use of the community business space to support the local community to organise donations

5.1 Shift to digital

“Digital communication has enhanced some of our collective internal communications (including team and trustee meetings). Digital service delivery has delivered some positive outcomes in terms of more flexible access, service innovations, and cost and staff time efficiencies – they also have the potential to extend our reach and access and enhance our consultation and engagement processes.”

CEO, arts centre

Community businesses consistently described how they have shifted to digital ways of working as a result of the pandemic. Whether at a community hub, arts centre or education provider, staff and volunteers have found ways to embrace an accelerated shift to digital ways of working and providing for their local areas.

Some business noticed substantive positive impacts as a result of shifting to digital ways of working. Participants have indicated that the use of digital tools for communication have been a much more efficient way of connecting internally with other staff members, trustees and governing bodies, while others have recognised how digital communication has allowed them to connect more frequently within their local areas and beyond – strengthening their connections with mutual aid groups and local councils for example. These changes are ones that community businesses plan to retain in the long term, as part of a ‘new normal’, especially as they have brought numerous benefits to their businesses.

“Some aspects of digital service delivery have unexpected positive benefits in terms of feedback from service users, potential increase in future service reach and in the long-term potential cost efficiencies. This is being analysed and incorporated into thinking about future strategy. Similarly, remote working has delivered some positive benefits in terms of staff welfare and potential cost efficiencies that we want to maximise in consultation with staff.”

CEO, arts centre

Despite these positive outcomes, the need for digital support remains both in terms of providing training as well as financial resource. While many businesses have quickly adapted to using digital tools for communication, their digital infrastructures still need development, especially if the shift is to be sustained. This may include help to develop and design digital interfaces for service delivery, as well as training employees in digital delivery once these are established. Additional financial support is also needed to enable investment in IT infrastructure, to provide equipment for staff and service users and ensure the ongoing maintenance of hardware and digital tools.

5.1.1 Staying in touch with the community

While the shift to digital working and delivery has been an overall positive experience for many of the businesses, there remain significant challenges in terms of achieving the social impact many are used to creating through face to face connection with the local community. Since the closure of many businesses in mid-March, maintaining some sense of normality and productivity has only been possible because of the networks of digital technologies that were already in place, and people’s ability to shift to these networks when needed. At the same time it has also accentuated the digital exclusion which has been a reality for nearly 22 per cent of the UK’s population who already lacked basic digital skills (Lloyds Bank, 2019). Although a few of the participating businesses describe how the transition to digital brought on by the pandemic has been simple for those who are online at home – with the necessary devices and skills to access the Internet, and the knowledge and skills for how to use these devices – the transition has been hard for those without similar access and skills.

Those community businesses that work directly with communities where digital access and use is a challenge report how communicating and working with these communities has been a persistent issue during the pandemic. As the CEO of an arts centre describes, “The biggest challenge has been the lack of access to equipment for people in care homes and low-income families, and the need for service users with disabilities to be supported by carers during activities”. For another participant who runs a local community hub providing opportunities for employment, access to arts, local heritage and support services, the move to online communication has highlighted the issue of digital exclusion in their area. This was re-iterated across sectors and regions primarily England, and one community business in Scotland.

Some businesses have found ways to address these challenges. For example, the participant who runs the community hub above describes an ambition to transform their physical space into a destination for the community to access computers and the Internet. “We are now looking at how we can develop as an Online Centre, because the coronavirus outbreak highlighted the extent to which digital exclusion is an issue in our local area.” The manager of an organisation working to reduce child poverty – providing whole family support to those families with children living in disadvantaged communities who have a range of complex issues reducing their life chances – explains how “we have moved family support to phone support, online (where users have capacity/ access which is rare for our demographic group) and doorstep discussions during meal deliveries”. She goes on to describe how the Covid-19 pandemic has also forced them to supplement online delivery with phone calls and socially-distanced face to face delivery in order reach a wider population within their community – especially those who lack digital access.

The pandemic has highlighted the digital divide and prompted community business leaders to think about new ways of delivering services, to ensure not only that opportunities for local residents remain available but that the underlying challenge of exclusion is also addressed. As the pandemic continues, community businesses will need to continue to adapt.

5.2 Creating new connections within local systems

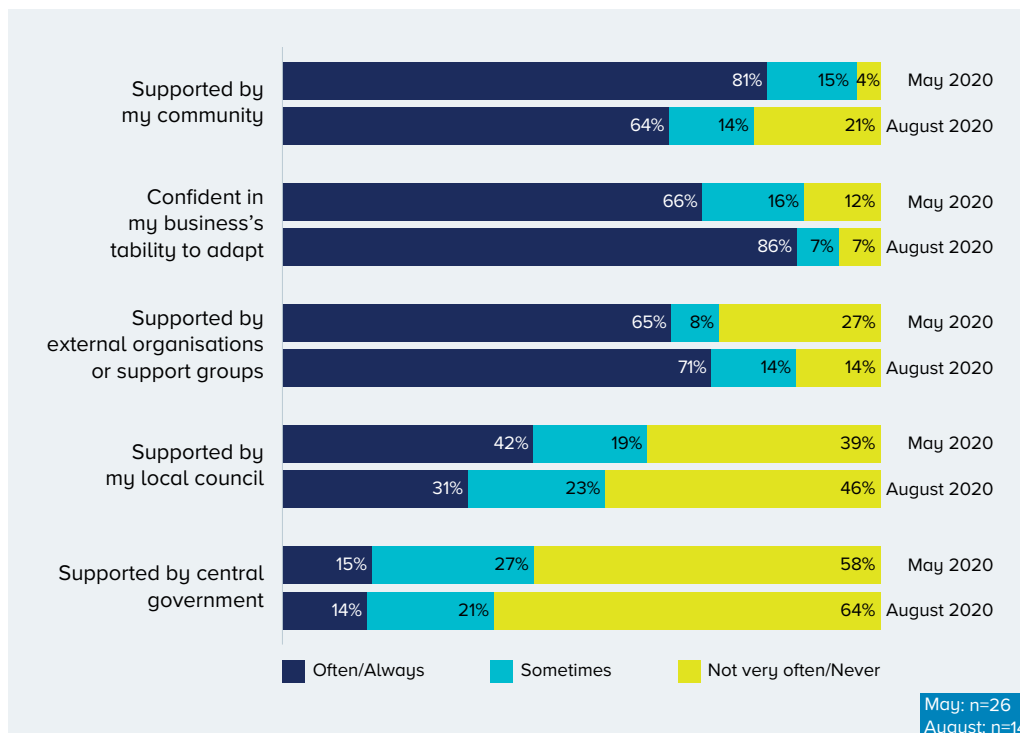
Relationships within and between businesses, local councils and the communities themselves have been imperative to the survival of community businesses throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. During the research, participants were asked to comment on how they feel their organisation’s relationships with the local community, other businesses and local councils have been affected by Covid-19, how interactions have changed, and how they have responded to local needs. While experiences differed, having the support of various partners within the local ‘system’ greatly helped increase the resilience of community businesses as well as their abilities to adapt.

In order to understand the extent of business’s feelings about local support, participants were asked at the beginning and end of the research (May and August) about how supported they felt by their local communities, external organisations or support groups, local councils and central government. They were also asked about their confidence in their business’s ability to adapt.

As Figure 7 illustrates, these feelings changed during the pandemic. At the beginning of the research (May 2020), while many were largely in lockdown, 81 per cent of participants indicated that they often or always felt supported by their community. This changed as the pandemic continued and, by August 2020, had dropped to 64 per cent. While experiences differed, this can perhaps be attributed to general changes in collective public behaviour as lockdown began to ease.

Another notable change was in how businesses feel about their ability to adapt. In May, around two-thirds (66 per cent) indicated they either often or always felt confident in their ability to adapt – the proportion had grown to 86 per cent by August 2020. The research has revealed that many businesses found solutions to the challenges they were facing, improving their working practices and adapting to the circumstances. As they generally became more comfortable with the situation, they became more confident in their ability to adapt.

Figure 7: Feelings of being supported



While businesses grew more confident in their abilities over the period, they felt less supported by their local council and central government. The following section provides greater detail about how this often stemmed from poor communication, a lack of funding and issues with eligibility for support.

5.2.1 Relationships with local authorities

Throughout the UK, local authorities have been key players in the response to Covid-19 because of their statutory responsibility for social care, but also because of their financial investment into community response. Councils that invest in community businesses help to provide public goods and help to achieve significant social, economic and environmental benefits for local communities (Pagura et al., 2018). During the Covid-19 pandemic, participants' experiences with their local authorities varied widely with some businesses describing relationships improving, others worsening and others staying the same.

Early in the pandemic, some local authorities were able to provide financial or general support to community businesses. This echoes the Community Business Market Survey, where 61 per cent of surveyed community businesses reported that their local authority provided them support in response to Covid-19 (Higton et al., 2020).

“We have always had a strong relationship with our local authority and this has strengthened over this period. Very early in the crisis we had discussions with the local authority about our plans and they have been very supportive. They designated the work we undertook as key to the support of our community and wider which has meant that we have created strong relationships with them which we are hopeful will continue as we come out of lockdown and start to reopen.”
Manager, community hub and café

Over the course of the pandemic, some participants noted that the value of community businesses also became more widely recognised by local authorities. A staff member of a local shop explains of their relationship with their local authority: “They support our work and are beginning to articulate the value of social enterprise in economic recovery. They understand and appreciate our nimble structure and speed of response to crisis, vs the bureaucracy that slows them down.” The nimble and agile nature of community businesses exemplifies how they are able to adapt more quickly than the local authority.

“Our relationship with [our council] has definitely strengthened over this time. That has partly been to do with the enormous amount of money coming out of government and the fact that we have the capacity to deliver and they don’t. But also, because the ... weekly Zoom meetings have created a strong sense of parity, mutual respect and care for one another that was never manifest in any face to face meetings in the past.”

Director, community hub

“We have given a tour to our local councillors, who (even after visiting the farm many times) still did not have a full grasp of all that we do and all we have achieved. They left feeling proud and protective over our place in the local community.”

Manager, environmental services and café

Not all community businesses feel that their local authority is able to recognise the extent to which they could have provided help, resulting in fractured relationships and the local authority not being fully engaged with the community business. A director of a community hub explains how “[the local authority] maybe doesn’t understand the importance of community businesses and how this sector could be essential to re-engagement with communities and restarting the local community development and interaction.” As a result, some felt undervalued and unrecognised by the local authority, despite being supported by community members. The CEO of a business centre highlights this as well, and felt particular frustrations about the local authority wanting their knowledge but not offering other support: “The relationship with the local authority has been difficult as they have actively pushed for our involvement in creating local solutions but have not been willing to extend us the financial support that we should have got”.

The manager of a community hub and café also reported a lack of communication between the local authority and the community business, which resulted in a duplication of efforts, adding tensions as resources were already stretched thin. Several other businesses also reported similar issues with a lack of communication; while some reported not understanding why this was the case, others felt that as their local authority was in emergency response mode it was understandable that they were less likely to respond to other concerns.

However, other community businesses explained that the lack of involvement from local authorities created potential opportunities for these businesses to establish and strengthen other networks of support. The publican who heard nothing from her local authority reflects that it “did force me to reach out to other charity leaders that I didn’t previously have a very close relationship with and we have worked jointly to support each other, share funding opportunities and now to collaborate to develop a new partnership approach to community work”.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted how community businesses are able to connect with and provide for their local communities in ways that local authorities may not. They are 'nimble', quicker to respond and sometimes better connected with other community groups. Their versatility and extended networks illustrate that there is potential for community businesses and local authorities to work more closely together in the future to build community strength and resilience.

5.2.2 Relationships with other community businesses and local organisations

While relationships with local authorities were mixed for businesses participating in this study, connections with other community businesses generally grew stronger during the pandemic. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of participants reported that relationships with other community businesses were important during the lockdown period. Although the ways data was measured differs, this is a greater proportion than reported in the Community Business Market Survey, where only 25 per cent reported being provided with support from other community businesses (Higton et al., 2020); this can perhaps be attributed to the sample size, types of businesses who participated and their individual networks. Those who felt supported by other community businesses noted the ways in which strengthened networks became an opportunity to collaborate, share resources and offer support and inspiration. "The [Community Business] Mutual Aid Network – aka the Patchwork Quilt Network – has been wonderful. Long may it continue. It's been the most genuine peer-to-peer experience I've had in many years", writes the CEO of a community hub.

Increased communication between community businesses also resulted in a greater sense of collaboration, with the overall aim of ensuring that the needs of local communities were being met. This research highlighted how additional relationships were created between community businesses and other for-profit businesses in order to reduce competition during this difficult time. For example, a CEO of a community hub writes, "In terms of other community businesses, there are very few genuine community businesses in this area, so we have focused on supporting the network of local (for-profit) businesses which are currently in our supply chain, to ensure that we haven't taken business away from them at this time." This increased awareness and support for the wider network of local businesses illustrates how local connections are strengthening and new forms of social capital are developing.

Moreover, heightened communication and additional support between different community businesses has created opportunities for future collaboration and increased local impact, which will be key to emerging from the situation and creating a stronger local economy. A manager of a community hub writes: “We haven’t had a lot of connections with other local community businesses but those we have had have been positive but these will need to be developed further as we move forward especially if we are going to take the opportunity to try and create a new economy that has community business at its heart.”

5.3 What helps businesses to adapt?

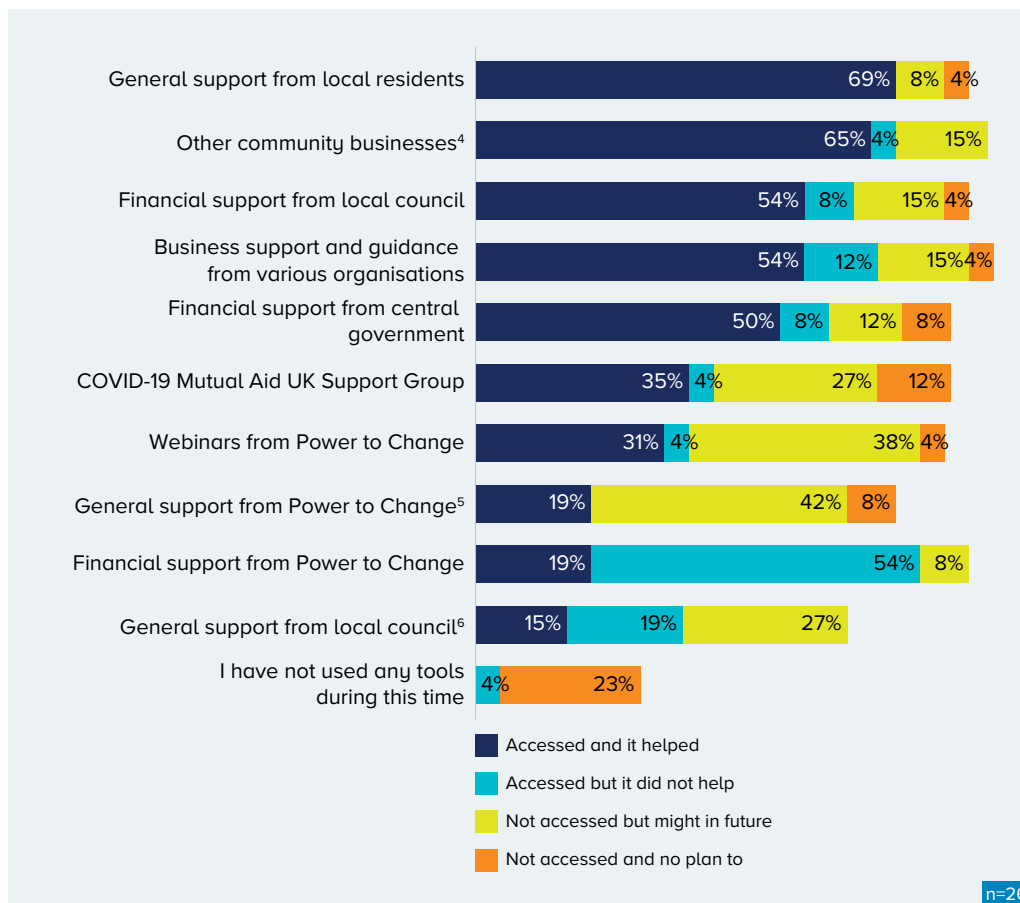
While some community businesses have been able to adapt quite well to the challenges brought on by Covid-19, others have struggled to do so. As we have seen, some businesses have had to close their doors completely, while others have been able to diversify their operations but still face financial challenges. Based on the community businesses in this study, this appears to be largely due to existing infrastructures and business models.

Those organisations which have diverse income streams, extensive local networks and existing resources (for example, digital tools which had already been integrated into programming and ways of working) have found it much easier to adapt. This has had a significant impact on the financial viability of businesses, as well as their ability to manage their operational responsibilities. Moreover, the existing ways of operating and the types of business models in place appear to influence their ability to connect to their local communities. Those organisations whose operations allow for flexibility and easy adaptation have found ways to remain connected to their communities, and especially the most vulnerable groups. For example one community business run mostly by parents/carers and young local volunteers, that delivers educational services to families who live in disadvantaged areas, was able to rely on its diverse services, extensive networks into the community, as well as its relationship with the council to provide immediate support: “We had to stay in communication, find out from the families we serve how they were affected learn quickly and react fast.”

On the other hand, those businesses whose operations or business models do not allow for as much flexibility have found it difficult to adapt. A community business that typically operates out of a physical shop, selling books and other goods to their community, found it difficult to adjust to a world that demanded social distancing and limited contact. “We haven’t had as much social connection with our members and volunteers as we normally do – many of whom are over 70.”

Since the beginning of the pandemic there have been numerous forms of support made available to help community businesses adapt. Figure 8 illustrates the support that community businesses have found to be the most useful (listed in order of usefulness as reported by responding businesses).

Figure 8: Adaptation support



While this research shows no significant differences by sector, due to the sample size, it is important to recognise that most participants who found financial support from central government to be the most useful were in the café and community hub sectors. What this figure also highlights is that while financial support from both local councils and central government were particularly helpful, general support from local residents and virtual social/networking/meet-ups with other businesses were also crucial and highly-valued.

⁴ Virtual social/ networking/meet-ups

⁵ Directory of resources, Twine Benchmark Tool

⁶ Resources, signposting etc.

Many of the participating businesses found various ways of adapting to keep their businesses afloat as well as continue servicing the needs of their communities. The ability of these businesses to respond to challenges faced by their local residents highlights both their resilience and their importance to their local areas. However, as their experiences illustrate, their ability to adapt was heavily dependent on a variety of financial, and more general, support from residents, other community businesses and local councils. This support has been instrumental to their survival during lockdown and will need to continue to help them sustain progress. As they continue to navigate uncertain circumstances while emerging from lockdown, these adaptations, alternative ways of working and new networks and relationships will be crucial.

Community hub, North West

This participant is the manager of a community hub that was opened within the last five years and which focuses on providing arts, leisure and training to the local community. Based outside a major urban centre in the north west of England, the hub was able to remain partially operational throughout the lockdown.

The hub is in a listed building which it took over in 2015 via a community asset transfer. Being able to reclaim this building for the community has felt important for the town's regeneration.

Prior to March 2020, it ran weekly health and wellbeing activities and operated the hall as a community venue, through which it connected to thousands of local residents each month. Since the start of the lockdown, it has lost almost all its regular trading income and has had to furlough most of its staff.

As a result, it has been working in partnership with the local authority and another community organisation to coordinate a Covid-19 response. It is supporting vulnerable members of the local community, particularly those who are at high risk from Covid-19 and those who have been self-isolating for any reason. This support has primarily been through a shopping service, foodbank parcel and prescription deliveries and coordinating the mutual aid network for emotional support. The hope for the future is "to continue to work closely with the local council, healthcare providers, local community groups and all the other organisations we have worked with closely over the past five months".

6. Re-opening: navigating uncertainties

Central government announced that non-essential shops and businesses across England were allowed to re-open their doors and welcome visitors from 4 July 2020. Though many of the participating businesses remained partially open throughout the lockdown period, they could now make strides to return to their normal operations, albeit with caution. Successful re-opening required many considerations, from introducing additional hygiene measures to thinking about how to remain financially viable. While businesses were taking slow steps to re-open their businesses, at the end of the fieldwork many still felt uncertain about how things will look in future.

Almost all community businesses reported carefully re-opening in stages, to consider how to minimise financial loss, accommodate additional health and safety precautions and ensure that the needs of their staff and local communities are being met. Businesses provided examples of what their processes would look like, including gradually re-opening on a reduced day or hourly basis, only offering limited services in the first instance and adding additional services as the lockdown restrictions loosened, and operating on a reduced staffing capacity. Some businesses highlighted that this process was made particularly difficult as a result of ever-changing government guidelines – especially for those businesses who relied on physical spaces for their trading income. Businesses needed to adapt quickly as new government guidance emerged.

6.1 Becoming ‘Covid-compliant’

One of the main concerns noted by participants from community hubs, cafés, shops and art centres in particular, has been the increased costs of ensuring that premises are Covid-compliant. “We’ve spent a lot of time becoming Covid-secure – working out one-way systems, extra cleaning regimes and making sure hirers have access to cleaning equipment and sanitisers”, explains the manager of a community hub. However, the considerations that businesses must take to re-open go far beyond ensuring one-way systems and stations for hand sanitising, as the description given by an arts centre highlights:

“Building cleaning costs have doubled to facilitate additional cleaning of public areas. At the moment we are scoping how to return the rest of the team given social distancing requires us to reduce workspace occupation by 50 per cent. Venue hire activities are not opening as social distancing and additional cleaning can’t be managed/afforded. The challenges are the type of space and reduced occupancy, the likelihood that tenants will reduce their space requirements given homeworking adaptations and potential to reduce rent costs, significant loss of income related to venue hires and some tenants losing all their own income and unable to pay rent.”

This is one of many examples of the reality that participants face – needing to take the time to understand what ‘re-opening’ will actually look like and what implications this will have for their businesses in the long term.

For those businesses who are more service based, the shift to Covid-19 compliance has become less of a concern, as moves towards digital ways of working and delivery have potentially become a permanent way forward. “I don’t think we can go ‘back to normal’ after what we have learned during lockdown. Instead we are focusing on blending digital and physical experiences, especially around community engagement” writes a community hub. They go on to explain that “the main problem is that our [building] is a multi-use space where there are lots of chance encounters leading to collaboration. Bumping into each other is part of our business model, and that suddenly seems undesirable.” While processes and pace of re-opening varies between businesses, it is clear that ‘normal’ will look very different from before the Covid-19 pandemic.



Covid guidance markings inside a community shop

6.2 Considering the needs of vulnerable staff members and local communities

Of the 17 businesses who responded, 11 reported having staff members or volunteers that fall within the ‘vulnerable’ category:

- 5 community hubs
- 2 cafés
- 1 arts centre
- 1 shop
- 1 employment training and business support centre
- 1 business support centre.

This inevitably had implications for the ways in which these businesses were adapting during lockdown, as well as how they were thinking about re-opening.

Maintaining communication with vulnerable staff members and vulnerable members of the community has been critical over the course of the pandemic. Community businesses developed different techniques for staying in contact with vulnerable groups, from utilising local networks, signposting other relevant organisations, and providing support via video calls. One staff member of a local shop explains how they kept in contact with their older volunteers: “We have a policy not to ask over-70s to volunteer with us in face to face roles and have engaged with many of our older members via Zoom (often giving them support and confidence to use this platform).” Supporting vulnerable members of the community was also a concern. “Mostly, we supported them via regular phone calls and doorstep talks. We signposted them to other organisations that could help with shopping and delivering things to the door, while they were self-isolating” writes the director of an employment and training service. Working together with local authorities has also ensured that communication with vulnerable groups could be maintained. For one café, “a key part of keeping in touch with the vulnerable members of our community was the links that already existed and then our partnership with the local authority’s emergency line. The close links we have with the local authority staff who work in our area meant that we could easily get to know who was most in need as well as the support they needed.”

For those businesses working towards re-opening, the additional considerations for vulnerable staff members or volunteers means that it may take longer to re-open. For example, a manager of a community hub describes how “[as many volunteers fall within this vulnerable category] it may stop our charity shop opening or we may need to put the re-opening of this part of our business back.” Other participants whose staff and volunteers fall within the vulnerable category noted that working together as a team and maintaining a sense of community will be critical in ensuring that re-opening is done in the safest way possible.⁷

“Whilst I don’t fall into the vulnerable category I have a family member who is, so I think it affects us all. I do feel tentative about opening up and would rather err on the side of caution. We don’t have the financial resources to be fully open and paying staff if we do not have the footfall and custom in the shop. The staff team who have worked through the lockdown have all been involved in the set up for re-opening and we have taken every possible measure for us all to feel safe and for customers to feel comfortable. It has involved a lot of listening to each other’s worries and concerns and ensuring we have processes in place to mitigate risks.”

Staff member, local shop

⁷ At the time of writing, businesses were still in the process of re-opening and working out what provisions would need to be put in place to ensure the needs of vulnerable staff and volunteers were met. Follow-up research would help build an understanding of how community businesses accommodated these needs.

While some businesses have started to re-open in the safest way possible, many continue to face challenges and will require additional support, including additional staff, financial capital and training⁸ – especially those community businesses who operate in physical spaces.

“We are ‘knee-deep’ in working out how we can open the building safely, and deal with the concerns of some of our more vulnerable groups about coming back to the building. We are trying to balance the need to be Covid-19 secure with the desire to be welcoming and for people to feel comfortable again in the building. We are looking at seating options for the outside space, which may require some capital spend, and screens etc. for the café. The current small team are absorbing all the work and additional staffing capacity would be very welcome – if unlikely to happen!”

CEO, community hub

Staffing was a particular concern – reflecting a need for either additional capacity or replacement for staff and volunteers unable to work, but also for the finance to cover those additional costs. As a staff member of a local shop writes,

“To specifically support vulnerable members of our community we would need additional staffing to reach out to them specifically. As a business we rely on sales income so need to focus on this but know we could do more to support vulnerable community members if we had time. Many vulnerable community members use our shop as a safe space to come for a chat and some conversation and we really need additional people to help us cope with the increased need for someone to talk to that we have observed as we have re-opened.”

The CEO of an arts centre also describes their need for additional staff capacity:

“[There is a] balance of not putting our more vulnerable older volunteers at risk of catching Covid-19 whilst needing to open the museum to make money. It would be great to have an army of young volunteers willing to take on front of house roles for the summer. We can’t afford to pay anyone having lost so much income and the numbers of visitors we are likely to get will hardly justify the extra costs.”

Balancing the need to re-open while considering the needs of vulnerable groups is proving a challenge for many and support is hard to find and only likely to get harder as schemes like furlough start to wind down.

⁸ See Chapter 8 for more information on support needs.

Successfully re-opening businesses remains a challenge for many, especially as they navigate ever-changing guidelines and uncertainty around the status of the pandemic. Not only do they need to consider additional measures to make sure that their spaces and ways of operating are 'Covid-compliant', but these businesses must also think about the needs of vulnerable groups and their communities more widely. In these unprecedented times, the businesses will undoubtedly require continued support to emerge from lockdown and will need to remain resilient and nimble while navigating the changes.

Youth services, South West, Power to Change grantee

This community business focused on youth services has faced additional challenges that come with working alongside vulnerable groups. It has been operating for over 20 years in a main urban centre.

It had to close the café in the youth centre and furlough three members of staff. It also struggled to shift to digital as many other organisations were doing because it did not have the equipment, platforms or skills that were necessary. The CEO explained that it has also been difficult to work with the trustees as many of them are older and shielding without sufficient access to technology.

As a result of the lockdown, the number of young people they were able to work with dropped by over half to just four, while they had been working intensely with nine young people before the lockdown. However, they were eventually able to take on three new referrals over the lockdown period. During this time, the business worked with a pre-existing network of local organisations in the area, as well as with the local authority, to coordinate the local Covid-19 response.

The service has started re-opening by offering limited hours with extra protocols in place – such as storing all food donations for 72 hours before unpacking. While this has been working, the CEO also noted that there were some tensions between staff who were furloughed and those who weren't – with each group being envious of the other. This has presented challenges as they re-open and reintroduce staff.

They are thinking about how to be more sustainable in the future as they try to take forward their learnings. However, the CEO also noted that "I am not sure we were/are or ever will be a 'sustainable' organisation – but we haven't managed to solve that over the last 20 years."

7. Glimmers of hope and signs of strength in community: the positives that emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic

Despite facing numerous challenges throughout this period, participants heavily emphasised many positive outcomes that have emerged. Their focus on lessons learned, examples of adaptation and flexibility and stories of community strength, once again highlight the ways in which community businesses are particularly resilient. That being said, while at the end of the fieldwork 43 per cent still felt uncertain about how things will look moving forward, it was an improvement from the 50 per cent who felt uncertain in May. From taking the time to re-think the purpose of their business to creating new partnerships, businesses have found ways to embrace the positive outcomes during a very challenging time.

7.1 Opportunity to rethink the focus of the business

The stories shared by the participants as part of this research highlight how the period of lockdown provided an opportunity for some to rethink the focus of their work and the communities they serve. Not only did this theme emerge in participants' online diaries, it was also a topic of conversation for those businesses who participated in the group discussions. "The most positive outcome has been the opportunity to step back and reflect on the overall strategy for the business" writes a trustee of a business centre. As a result of having additional time to pause and reflect, community businesses have given thought to their ways of operating both now and in the future – they have, for example, recognised the need to revisit businesses plans, make more time for writing bids and grant applications, and prioritise visioning and innovation.

This opportunity for reflection not only extended to businesses thinking about the ways they operate internally, but also allowed them to reconsider the ways in which they are able to support the needs of the communities they serve. In some instances, they note how the pandemic has caused them to shift their focus towards addressing social exclusion and isolation, poverty and the digital divide that the pandemic has magnified. Others describe how this time has allowed them to really think about the focus of their business and understand what additional support they can provide to the community.

"We are developing a new strategy that includes: an increased focus on ways to promote the systems changes that the pandemic has highlighted the need for, i.e. to tackle social exclusion and isolation, entrenched poverty, access to justice and housing, digital approaches where our pandemic response has led to new ways of engaging the community, delivering services and thinking about workplace needs."

CEO, arts centre

“It has made us aware that we don’t have a specific focus regarding the community we serve and the social impact we offer. Over the 40 years that the business has been operating, the aims have changed and evolved ... and they are now not clear, particularly to a more general, non-activist community. If we do not know what our vision is, it is really difficult to measure how well we are doing in achieving that vision, so in consequence we don’t measure our social impact in any way. I personally am excited about the possibilities of re-imagining who we are and what we do. It feels as if we have spent the last couple of years re-thinking our physical space and now we need to have a dynamic and evolving vision to see us through the next 40 years. We are also looking at converting to a community benefit society which will cement our status as a community business. After 40 years we have grown up!”

Staff member, shop

7.2 Community strength

“On a personal and community business level, the pandemic has demonstrated the important of community, neighbours and friends and local businesses in a way that needed to happen and hasn’t happened for decades.”

CEO, community hub

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, local networks of community strength played a significant role in helping to sustain the participating businesses and those they usually serve. Over the duration of this research, participants consistently described the ways in which local communities and organisations reacted quickly and innovatively to the challenges created by the pandemic. This included stories of people shopping locally to support local businesses, donating to community businesses to keep them afloat, providing food and medicine for those who are isolating, or volunteering in their local areas. A manager of a community hub writes, “The village community and its response to the pandemic and lockdown has reflected wider society – mostly people have found ways to look out for each other, by shopping for food and medicine for those who were isolating. There is a stronger sense of togetherness and an appreciation of keyworkers. The village formed its own ‘COBRA’ group to co-ordinate where help and support was needed.”

The increased sense of solidarity and togetherness that this support generated has also empowered the community businesses. Reflecting on their relationship with their local community, a CEO from the employment training sector explains how “pulling together in time of need is very important, rewarding and reassuring. Knowing that you are not alone, being able to share fears, lows and highs together has kept us going.” A manager of a community pub describes “community is strength, we are stronger together and we will get through anything together”.

While responses have been largely positive about the strength of communities, some businesses are concerned about the sustainability of this support over time. “I hope it will be possible to translate this enthusiasm into community action ... I fear it won’t because of our government”, reflects a CEO of a community hub. Therefore, as we move away from the initial peak of the pandemic, it is imperative that the community businesses find ways to continue to build strength within their local communities. The support of the government and other organisations in helping to foster this strength will be instrumental in ensuring that these businesses continue to thrive.

“A huge positive for us has been the recognition of the strength and assets within our communities. I hope that this continues which will enable us to continue developing as time goes on. We have also been able to support a wider range of people and in some cases people that may not have been involved with us before who have now had the opportunity to gain support. We are confident that this will enable us to widen our reach and help our community to become stronger as we go through the recovery and hopefully onto a more stable future.”
Manager, community hub

7.3 Carrying lessons forward

According to the Community Business Market Survey, 73 per cent of community businesses surveyed were able to identify at least one opportunity provided by the pandemic (Higton et al., 2020) – a theme that was corroborated by this research. The participating businesses largely reported their desires to maintain some of the new activities that they have begun during the lockdown period, such as selling certain goods or offering new services. Many have commented on the ways they would like to continue to take forward digital ways of working, but the experiences of lockdown has brought other lessons and alternative ways of thinking that may benefit community businesses and the people they serve in the long term. For example, “... we have opened an online shop selling products to raise funds but also keep the project uppermost in the minds of local people. This is something we had not done before Covid-19, and has resulted in us thinking about setting up a permanent community-style shop in the building going forward” writes a CEO of a community hub.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also challenged organisations to reach out to their communities in different ways. For the director of an employment and training centre, engaging with service users during this pandemic was very important in helping to shape the ways in which her business delivered their services. “For us as a community business, we have developed some of our services online and have set up a parents forum, young people’s forum and volunteers’ forum to help us shape it and test it.” The CEO of a community hub shares how reaching out in new ways as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed the organisation to engage more people:

“I think the Covid crisis has made us reach out in a different way to our local community, which has meant that more people than would normally have got involved in activities taking place in the building have got involved with activities online. We are hoping that some of these people will get involved in our events and activities post lockdown.”

The pandemic also appears to have created an upsurge in self-help and mutual aid within communities throughout the UK. These networks have been used to provide resources as well as support and have been vital in offering support where other services may not be able to. One trustee of a business centre would like to capitalise on these local self-help networks moving forward, as “we’ve seen a higher level of community self-help interaction which is positive and is something we can build on. It’s good to see conversations on social media about sharing of resources and help for others, rather than diatribes about why the council won’t help. We can look at a tool lending system or similar when we are able.”

The stories provided by the participants highlight the positive outcomes that emerged from this situation, illustrate the immense resilience of these community businesses, and provide examples on how they have endured throughout the challenges. By thinking through the lessons learned as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, we can collectively begin to explore ways to sustain community strength and engagement outside times of crisis. It also provides further impetus to tackle some of the challenges faced by many community businesses before the pandemic – particularly how to build and improve an understanding of the sector and its potential at local authority level. However, it is important to recognise the glimmers of hope experienced by businesses during this time – whether by re-thinking the focus of their business, celebrating the ways in which communities have come together, or carrying forward adaptations and new ways of working.

Community hub, South East, Power to Change grantee

Located in a small village in a largely rural area, this community hub had to cease all operations as Covid-19 spread.

As well as having to close the centre, all staff had to be furloughed for it to continue being financially viable. Only the manager stayed on and worked tirelessly to prepare for a potential re-opening, which eventually happened in July. In normal times, the hub, which is run as a charity, sees about 1,000 people a week. It typically rents out big and small rooms to a variety of local organisations, alongside running a successful community garden, and had been in the process of setting up a community café.

Prior to Covid-19, the centre was totally self-funded with no funding from either the government or local authority. However, it has lost between 95 and 98 per cent of its income since the lockdown. As a result, the emergency funds from the government along with the furlough scheme were fundamental to surviving over the initial few months – but the manager shared that the future remains “very uncertain”, particularly because the biggest users of the community hub were older, more isolated residents.

At the same time, when thinking about the future, the manager of the community hub is eager and hopeful:

“I’m also curious about what the future may bring. I’ve seen some amazing acts of kindness and camaraderie during this time and I hope that something permanently changes so that this change in emphasis toward slower and more community-minded lives continues. I’ve spent a lot of time in Zoom meetings with other community businesses sharing stories and offering support, which has made a huge difference to me.”

8. Continued support needs

While the community businesses in this study have found ways to adapt, diversify and continue to serve the needs of their local areas, there remain additional forms of support that these businesses will need in the upcoming weeks and months. Some are eager for additional training on using digital tools and how to be Covid-compliant, while others have reported needing additional capital investment to support physical changes in their buildings in order to account for social distancing and increased hygiene measures. A few businesses have also highlighted the need for additional support staff to help ensure that their operations and physical spaces are 'Covid-friendly'.

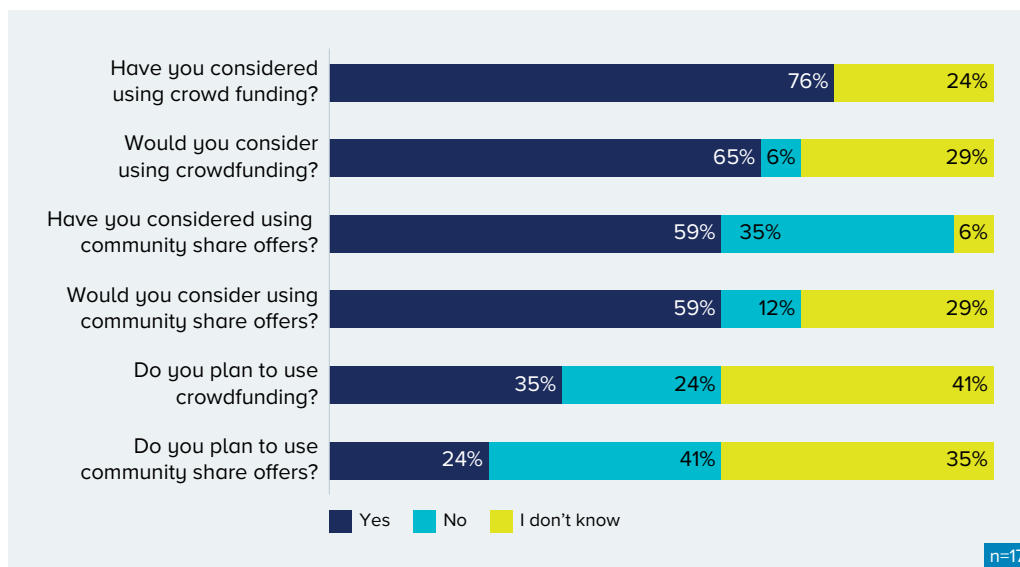


Socially-distanced outdoor event at a community business

Those businesses which operate out of a physical space including community hubs, cafés, shops and art centres have indicated that they would require additional financial support to ensure that their businesses meet government guidelines regarding opening up safely during a coronavirus pandemic (e.g. providing sanitising stations, PPE equipment for staff, appropriate signage). All businesses, regardless of sector, indicated that they would require additional training and financial capital to build their digital infrastructures – a theme that has emerged throughout this research.

Recognising that additional forms of financial support were needed, this study asked whether or not businesses have used or would consider using alternative forms of funding, such as match equity investment and crowdfunding. As illustrated in Figure 9, most participants have considered using these additional forms of support and, if they haven't considered using them, most indicated they would consider this as an option in the future. It is important to note, however, that many of those who would consider using these types of funding packages felt they would require additional information. A staff member of a shop explains, "This would be something we could consider but I don't have a good enough understanding about how this method of investment works it's difficult to know how well it would suit our organisation", highlighting the need for additional information and guidance about the opportunities.

Figure 9: Future funding options



In addition to describing the types of additional support that would be needed in the weeks and months to come, community businesses raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of the support provided during the initial months of the pandemic. Many recognised that the furlough scheme would not be a permanent fixture and the emergency grants available to help businesses would also not be a viable long-term option. The manager of an environmental services provider and a café describes their business's experience re-opening and the associated costs, and reflects on the long-term implications:

“Opening up has been expensive. Staff to customer ratio is higher, running costs are higher and income is lower as seating is limited. Our biggest concern is what happens after August and most importantly what will happen in the winter when the furlough scheme ends and chances of lockdown are higher.”

There is also a concern raised by some about the long-term sustainability of supporting vulnerable members of staff and the community. “We get a sense that some people have become dependent on the support they have received from us and it may be hard for them to accept that we may not always be in a position to carry on with the support”, explains the manager of one community hub and café.

While the long-term effects of the pandemic remain unknown, this research highlights that community businesses will need continuous support – whether through additional training, financial assistance or information and guidance – even as we move past the most severe period of the pandemic.

9. Conclusion: remaining resilient and accountable

Community businesses operate with the needs of the community at their core, and the Covid-19 pandemic only reinforced this. From the moment that lockdown was announced, community businesses found ways to adapt to serve the needs of their local communities. “Since the pandemic started, we had to completely rethink our approach, especially in relation to supporting our community” writes the manager of one community hub and café. “We looked at how we could successfully support our community, so immediately started to get a team of volunteers together and reviewed all the staff’s job roles.” Businesses reconsidered the ways in which they delivered their services and meet the needs of the most vulnerable, and worked to strengthen local connections. The experiences that the community businesses have shared highlight the ways in which they managed to continue serving their local areas while building community strength. The valuable lessons learned during this time can help improve the ways in which community businesses operate in an uncertain future.

There is also a very real and personal element to the stories shared as part of this study. Not only have the participants been working tirelessly to continue supporting their communities – finding ways to plan for an uncertain future and in many cases simply trying to stay afloat –but, like many people, they have also been facing numerous personal challenges throughout. For one participant, the Covid-19 pandemic not only interrupted her setting up a brand-new social enterprise, but it came in the middle of a pregnancy. For another, the pandemic happened during a time when a family member, a key employee at the community business, was very ill with cancer. She writes,

“We knew her condition was deteriorating but didn’t know how bad things were. I was visiting her every day and then those visits had to stop because she was so vulnerable ... My Covid time has been shaped by [her passing] as we couldn’t visit and could only have a small number of the family and her friends at the funeral which took a month to be arranged after her death.”

From coping with the death of a loved one and experiencing pregnancy and childbirth during a pandemic, to navigating new childcare needs as a result of schools being closed and adjusting to children at home, the participants shared their stories of how they found a way to continue supporting their communities while at the same time dealing with diverse personal changes.

“[We have been] strengthening networks and giving the town a sense of our own resilience – for which it is extremely proud.”
Manager, community hub

For as long as Covid-19 exists within our society, acting in the face of uncertainty will become necessary for businesses across all sectors. All businesses, whether in the private, public or third sector, will need to maintain a sense of direction while navigating significant disruption and change, often with little notice. This highlights the importance of investigating what has made community business experiences unique during this time, and in what ways have they been differentially affected as a result of Covid-19. Power to Change identified four factors that define community businesses: they are locally rooted, they trade for the benefit of the local community, they are accountable to the local community, and they have a broad community impact. Each of these defining characteristics revolves around remaining grounded in their local areas – even in the face of challenge and uncertainty.

In this sense, community businesses have not only had to accommodate to survive as a business during Covid-19 – as was the case with businesses across all sectors – but they have also needed to identify and prioritise the specific needs of the communities they serve, adapting in ways that focus on those needs. They have been listening and learning, embracing change, remaining innovative and supporting vulnerable members of their communities, while at the same time striving to remain open as a business. Whether it is working with local authorities to assist with emergency support, providing necessities to local households, or finding ways to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness, these community businesses have remained both resilient and accountable to their local constituents. It is this duality that makes the experience of community businesses unique during this time and illustrates their importance for the local communities in which they are embedded.

“But we are trying to do as much learning from this time as possible, and shouting about what our sector is capable of and why we matter – in times like these more than ever.

Manager, arts centre and community hub

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Appendix

This first section of this Appendix covers limitations of the study, and questions important to carry forwards for examining both the impacts of Covid-19 and the future for community businesses. The second section provides the breakdown of the weekly tasks participants completed in chronological order.

Limitations and future considerations

This study longitudinally captures the ways in which community businesses have been impacted by Covid-19 over an extended period, providing rich insights into how they have adapted to the pandemic and needs for the future. While this report can gather the experiences of many different types of community businesses, the sample size is limited. Future studies should aim to achieve a wider sample so that differences between sectors can be more visible, and their differing needs and opportunities highlighted.

Furthermore, this study took place during a moment of rapid change – the country began to emerge from lockdown halfway through, allowing many of the community businesses to re-open their doors and expand their operations. It would be worthwhile to conduct follow-up research to understand how these businesses have adapted since re-opening and potentially faced a second round of restrictions as a result of local lockdowns.

Weekly tasks

Week 1: 'My community business?' (27 participants)	
Journal activities	
Task 1	What's been happening? Please help us to get to know you and your business, and how the business has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic so far.
Task 2	How are you feeling? The last couple of months have brought up a lot of feelings for many. Thinking about the circumstance surrounding your community business, choose between one and three words or photos that describe how you have been feeling within the last week and drag them into the boxes below.
Task 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How are you feeling? [continued] – In the last month, I have been feeling ... (7-point scale, 6 items) – Overall, I am feeling ... [plain text] – I'm feeling this way because ...

Quick questions

Which of the following best describes your business right now?

[Poll option]

- Open with normal operations
- Open with reduced operations
- Open with diversified operations
- Closed
- Other, please specify
- None of the above

Week 2: 'Adaptation' (26 participants)

Journal activities

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Task 1 | How have you adapted? How have your community business activities |
| Task 2 | Adaptation tools. What tools have helped you to adapt during this time? |

Quick questions

- How, if at all, have your income streams changed as a result of Covid-19? [open text]
- What other support do you need during this time that you have been able to access? [open text]
- How likely or unlikely are you to continue the new/adapted activity after the Covid-19 crisis ends? [Likert scale]
- (Optional) If you have had to close, have you found other ways to engage with the community? [open text]

Week 3: 'The future' (25 participants)

Journal activities

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Task 1 | Positive outcomes. Thinking about your community business ... have there been any positive outcomes as a result of the current situation? What are they? What can help them remain? |
| Task 2 | Additional support. What support might your organisation need in the next six months? |

Task 3	Planning to re-open. As lockdown is lifted and businesses are slowly allowed to re-open, we want to understand how you are planning on moving forward. What does your planning process look like? Will you open in stages, or straight away?
Task 4	Community and the wider society. Thinking about your community and the wider society ... have there been any positive outcomes as a result of the current situation?

Quick questions

Hopes, fears and aspirations. With more and more businesses opening up as a result of the lifting of the lockdown restrictions, we want you to reflect on the following:

- Your hopes for the future
- Your fears for the future
- Your aspirations for the future

Week 4: 'Community relationships (22 participants)

Journal activities

Task 1	Relationship with your community. How do you feel your organisation's relationship with your local community has been impacted by the Covid-19 situation? Both in the way your community business interacts with your community and your community's response to your business. How has your community business responded to the needs of your local community?
Task 2	Importance of support. Which of the following relationships within your community have been the most important to your community business in the last month? – [Scale from 'Not at all important' → 'Extremely important'] – Local council – Local residents – Other community businesses – Funders – Support groups (e.g. mutual aid) – Other businesses – Suppliers – Social investors – Other

Task 3	<p>Community strength. It has been reported that there is a resurgence in community spirit as a result of COVID-19. Over 750,000 signed up to help out the health services. There are nearly 3,500 local mutual aid groups registered on the Covid-19 Mutual Aid website and around two million people have joined local support networks on Facebook.</p> <p>Reflecting on your local community, and what your business has experienced, what does this image mean to you? Do you agree or disagree with the message?</p>
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Week 5: 'Business relationships' (21 participants)

Journal activities

Task 1	Your business model. Describe your business model. Has the current situation caused you to reflect on this model as you move towards the future?
Task 2	Relationships with your local authority and other community businesses. Many of you have briefly talked about different relationships that you've developed, existing relationships you've strengthened, or relationships that you've found difficult during this period. How have your relationships with your local authority and other community businesses in your area been impacted in particular?
Task 3	<p>Staff and resource changes. Please respond to all that apply below. How many individuals worked for you in February 2020?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How many individuals work for you now? – Were asked to take a pay cut? – Were asked to reduce their hours? – Were asked to work additional hours? – Number of individuals furloughed? – Number of individuals made redundant? – Number of individuals who have had to shield during this time?
Task 4	Supply chain changes. Some of you have discussed the ways in which your supply chains have been influenced as a result of Covid-19. If your business relies on a supply chain, how has it been impacted by the current situation? Have you had to make new connections or changed your supply chain in any way?

Week 6: 'Reflecting' (21 participants)	
Journal activities	
Task 1	<p>Personal reflection. Power to Change is interested not only in providing money, advice and support to help community businesses, but also in the stories and people who are behind those businesses.</p> <p>We'd like to hear your story about how you've been experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic. How have you been personally coping during the lockdown period, and has that changed as things have started to open up? How has it been to manage your personal concerns alongside juggling the running of your business during a precarious time? And through all of this, what has been most helpful?</p>
Task 2	<p>What are you really thinking? We've encountered an unprecedented situation over these last few months and it's not always easy to express what is happening underneath. Whether it's fears you don't share to avoid worrying others, frustrations which feel somehow wrong or, in fact, small successes you don't feel you can celebrate. Now, as businesses are slowly emerging from lockdown and the world is starting to move towards some sort of functionality, we want to know ... what are you really thinking?</p>
Task 3	<p>Advice to past self. Time travel: Thinking about your community business, what top three pieces of advice or bits of knowledge would you give your pre-Covid-19 self, now knowing the challenges and obstacles that you'd be facing? Is there any other advice you would give?</p>
Task 4	<p>Community and the wider society. Thinking about your community and the wider society ... have there been any positive outcomes as a result of the current situation?</p>
Quick Question	
Task 1	<p>Community business adaptation. Many of you have been sharing images of the ways your community businesses have been adapting during this time. If you'd like, please share with us an image that you've captured during this period or another image that has stood out to you. Why have you chosen this image?</p>

Week 7: Sharing emerging insights (10 participants)

During Week 7, participants were invited to take part in an online discussion to reflect on the study so far, share additional insights, as well as take the opportunity to network with one another.

The group discussions focused on three key questions:

1	How have you found this experience so far?
2	Thinking about the emerging insights ... – What has stood out to you? – What have you found surprising? – Would you want to elaborate on any of these insights further?
3	What additional questions or topics do you think we should be exploring and sharing with Power to Change?

Week 8: Vulnerabilities (17 participants)

Journal activities

Task 1	Supporting vulnerable people. How has your community business been adapting to consider the needs of vulnerable members (understood to be older people and those with underlying medical conditions) of your community? How have vulnerable people been continuing to access your services? What challenges have you encountered? What successes have you achieved?
Task 2	Additional support. As businesses continue to open up, what additional considerations might your community business need to take into account to continue to support vulnerable members of your community? Will you require additional forms of support or capacity?
Task 3	Staff and volunteer impact. Does your community business have staff/volunteers who fall within the vulnerable category? If you answered yes: 1. Who within your business falls into this category? 2. How has this impacted your operations? 3. In what ways will this influence your re-opening? 4. How will you adapt to support their needs?

Task 4	Personal impact. If you yourself fall within the vulnerable category, how has this impacted or changed your own work with your community business? How do you feel about things opening up? What additional changes will need to be put in place for you to feel comfortable?
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Week 9: The future (17 participants)

Journal activities

Task 1	Support needs. What types of support are needed? (Immediate, over the next year, long term, ongoing, I don't know) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 1:1 mentoring support – Group settings – Through networks – Online webinars/seminars – Interactive peer-to-peer settings – Other:
Task 2	Match equity investment. Thinking about match equity investment ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Have you considered using community share offers? – Have you considered using crowdfunding? – Do you plan to use community share offers? – Do you plan to use crowdfunding? – Would you consider using community share offers? – Would you consider using crowdfunding? – If match funding were available, how likely would you be to consider match equity investment?
Task 3	Assets of community value. This research identifies an asset of community value as land, buildings or other large physical structures for which long-term ownership rights are in place – for instance, through a freehold or leasehold of 25 years or more – and where this is held by a community or voluntary organisation which operates for the benefit of local people. The decision-making body for the asset is controlled by local residents. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – If your community business has an asset of community value, please answer the questions below: – Is your building an asset of community value that is registered with the local authority? – What is your biggest concern about maintaining the operation of this asset?

Week 10: Opening-up and reflecting (15 participants)	
Task 1	<p>Have your operations changed? Since the government announcement allowing the opening up of shops, pubs and service industries on 4 July, have your business's operations changed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– If yes – In what ways have they changed? What types of successes have you experienced? What about some challenges?– If no – Why haven't they changed?
Task 2	<p>Returning to 'normal'. Some of you have been participating in this research for 10 weeks and a lot has changed during that time – masks have become mandatory, social distancing measures have been relaxed and more establishments have been re-opened. Recently plans for re-opening have been announced, and we are interested in how you feel about this. What are your thoughts on 'returning back to normal?' What does this mean for your business? Of the government requirements for re-opening, which have been the most difficult to follow?</p>
Task 3	<p>Support schemes. Various support schemes have been shared in the last few months. Of those listed below, what have you been able to access?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Local Authority Discretionary Grants Fund– Eat Out To Help Out– Fix Your Bike scheme– Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF)– Loneliness Covid-19 Grant Fund– Covid-19 Community-Led Organisations Recovery Scheme– NatWest Social and Community Capital– Co-op Community Dividend Fund– Social Enterprise Support Fund– Kickstart Scheme– Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme

Task 4	<p>How are you feeling? Reflecting on the last week, how have you been feeling? Pick up to three cards.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Worried – Frustrated – Positive – Optimistic – Innovative – Curious – Indifferent – Exhausted – Confident – Excited – Overwhelmed – Sympathetic – Helpless – Proud – Happy
Task 5	<p>How are you feeling? [continued] We want to know more about how you're feeling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In the last month I have been feeling _____. – Overall, I am feeling _____. – I'm feeling this way because _____.

Week 11: Wrapping up (15 participants)

Journal activities

Task 1	<p>Biggest learning. What has been your biggest learning over the course of the pandemic?</p>
Task 2	<p>Rethinking your business. Has Covid-19 changed the way that you think about the work that your community business does, or who you serve? If so, how do you feel about the process of re-thinking your organisation?</p>
Task 3	<p>Diversifying your volunteer base. Have you thought about diversifying your volunteer base as a result of Covid-19? In what ways might you do this? What support would you need to diversify your volunteer base?</p>

Task 4	Personal impact. If you yourself fall within the vulnerable category, how has this impacted or changed your own work with your community business? How do you feel about things opening up? What additional changes will need to be put in place for you to feel comfortable?
Quick Questions	
Task 1	One form of support. If you could receive one form of non-financial support right now, what would it be?
Task 2	Share your photos. Photos tell a unique visual story and offer a snapshot of a moment in time. Share with us a photo from before the pandemic, during the pandemic and now.

Final thoughts (14 participants)

Journal activities

Task 1	Final thoughts. As this is the final week of the study, we'd like to ask if there is anything that has changed over the course of the pandemic that you haven't had the opportunity to tell us about? We are specifically interested in use of and support around digitisation, new ways of working and connecting with others, and how you've managed reductions in staff if this is what your business has experienced.
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Power to Change

The Clarence Centre
6 St George's Circus
London SE1 6FE

020 3857 7270

info@powertochange.org.uk

powertochange.org.uk

 [@peoplesbiz](https://twitter.com/peoplesbiz)

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