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Now they see us:

Communities responding to COVID-19

Report from the second research phase, July 2021

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Local Trust

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

In the context of COVID-19, Local Trust commissioned *Communities responding to COVID-19*, a study of how communities react to, cope with and recover from major crises. The study began in April 2020, with the first two phases concluding in April 2021, and will continue into a third phase up to March 2022. This research presents a unique opportunity to gain insight into community responses to crises as they unfold.

The study is based on primary data collection from 26 communities across England and a literature review. Over 500 learning conversations have taken place with members of the community, activists and workers, alongside interviews with Big Local reps (individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and share successes, challenges and news with the organisation)[1] and local authority staff. Building on the first-phase report, *Stronger than anyone thought*, published in September 2020, *Now they see us* draws on findings from the second phase of the research (October 2020 to April 2021).

Three sets of findings emerge from the second phase of the research:

1

Needs are changing, and so are community responses. While many of the challenges that communities currently face are not new, they have been amplified by the pandemic. In particular:

a. **An escalation of poverty**, including food, financial, digital and environmental poverty. Hunger is an ongoing concern for many community groups and some have developed more sustainable and equitable responses. They have also ramped up initiatives such as developing partnerships with welfare rights and money advice agencies in response to increased financial poverty. They have widened access to digital technology and taken steps to improve the built environment and open spaces for the community.

b. **A growing mental health crisis** associated with social isolation and loneliness. At the start of the pandemic, community groups worried about residents' mental health developed a range of small-scale responses. Over time, these concerns have intensified and residents have looked to do more, while recognising that factors such as rising levels of unemployment and extreme mental distress are beyond the reach of communities alone to solve.

c. **Increasing inequality** in health and wellbeing, with the effects of the pandemic disproportionately felt by groups such as Black and minority ethnic communities, young people, women and disabled people. Groups have reached out and engaged with potentially excluded individuals through targeted outreach activities, building connections and developing partnerships.

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[1] For a full description of the terms used in this report see appendix 3.

2

Sustaining community action becomes more challenging as the pandemic continues. After the intense activity of the early days of the crisis, energies have waned and volunteers risk burnout, particularly in areas where people are returning to work or have become exhausted. Sustaining engagement online has also proved particularly challenging for some volunteers. Nonetheless, lessons have been learned about building and sustaining community action through maintaining community spaces and developing effective relationships between communities and local authorities.

3

While they have many characteristics in common, communities have responded differently to the crisis and require different support to recover. This complex and evolving picture does not correlate neatly with types of communities and funding programmes. In part, this is due to scale. For example, some of the 26 communities in this study sit within areas identified by Local Trust and OCSI (2019) in their own research as being 'left behind'; however, these individual hyper-local communities may not necessarily reflect those wider characteristics. Perhaps more significantly, there are differences between areas with and without a history of community action, those with and without established community-led infrastructure (CLI)[2] and resources, and those more or less deprived. These differences need further exploration.

If a quick and flexible reaction characterised the initial community response to COVID-19, over time, the scale of the challenge has grown and energies have waned. But communities in our study have not only sustained their activities but adapted accordingly. Through nurturing rich connections between individuals, groups and agencies in their respective communities, their responses to the pandemic, even at the height of lockdown, have extended far beyond crisis provision. Looking forward, these connections within and between communities, strong strategic relationships and secure local funding will be vital as communities move on and face the longer-term impact of the crisis.

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[2] Community-led infrastructure (CLI) refers to networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money within a community. It was explored in depth in Briefing 7 and Briefing 8.

Introduction

Now they see us is the second research report from Communities responding to COVID-19, a major study commissioned by Local Trust on how communities respond to crisis.

Over the course of the last year, our research has sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do communities react to, cope with and recover from major crises?

2. What have communities done in reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak and how does this compare with community reactions to other crises?

3. What support do communities need to make an effective response to COVID-19?

4. What support do communities need to recover effectively from the impact of COVID-19?

5. How do Big Local communities differ from non-Big Local communities in their response to COVID-19, their recovery from it and their support needs?

6. How do communities in 'left behind' areas differ from the other communities in the sample in their response to COVID-19, their recovery from it and their support needs?[3]

The study's aims are to:

- examine the extent to which Big Local and other groups are supporting community resilience in the face of the pandemic, the differences in response between communities and the reasons for these

- explore the value of action taken by communities in response to COVID-19, and the extent to which they have taken control, remained resilient and developed practice

- identify how communities recover and sustain the momentum built before and during the crisis and the support they need to move on.

A further aim is to identify examples of how local authorities and other key agencies have facilitated a community-based response to COVID-19. The findings of this research are available in Briefing 9 and Briefing 10.

Research background

This second research report follows the same 26 communities from October 2020 to March 2021 through what became an evolving crisis rather than the recovery envisaged in the first report. Of the 26 areas, 21 are involved in the Big Local programme, five in the Creative Civic Change programme (CCC), and four are involved in both. Two areas are not involved in Big Local or CCC. Eight communities are in 'left behind' areas according to Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI)/Local Trust research (2019).

The 26 areas are diverse:

- They are from all 10 regions of England.

- Their populations range from 2,955 to 22,455 (18 have populations of under 10,000).

- They include industrial heartlands, rural peripheral estates, inner city neighbourhoods, high-density areas and coastal towns (OCSI, 2019).

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[3] 'Left behind' neighbourhoods are 225 wards across England that were identified through research conducted by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) for Local Trust in 2019. More detail on the study and these areas can be found in the glossary on p. 46.

In addition:

- Of the 26 areas, 23 have above-average levels of poverty for their region.

- Eight areas have above average numbers of people in full-time employment for their region. The remaining 18 have levels of employment between two and 16 points below the regional average.

More detail on our research methodology is available in [Researching community responses to COVID-19: a methodological note](#).

About Big Local

Funded by the largest single endowment ever made by the National Lottery Community Fund, Big Local is a £200m programme that puts communities in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods. In terms of scale, time horizon and ethos, nothing like it has ever existed. Designed from the outset to be radically different from other funding programmes, at the heart of Big Local is a vision of empowered, resilient, dynamic, asset-rich communities making their own decisions on what is best for their area.

Local Trust works nationally with a range of partners to deliver the Big Local programme, providing at least £1m to each of 150 communities in England. The areas were selected in 2010-12 on the basis that they suffered from higher than average levels of deprivation, and had previously missed out on lottery or other public funding – often because of low levels of pre-existing social infrastructure and civic activity.

In contrast to conventional top-down, time-limited, project-led funding, the funding awarded to each Big Local area was provided on the basis that it can be spent over 10 to 15 years at the communities' own pace, and on their own plans and priorities.

Research: Phase 1

The first report from the study, *Stronger than anyone thought*, published in September 2020, followed 26 communities across England, and looked at how they reacted to the initial lockdown in March 2020 and how their responses evolved with the easing of restrictions over that spring and summer.

Based on 317 learning conversations with local activists, workers and stakeholders, the first report concluded:

- **Community responses to the immediate crisis varied significantly**, ranging from intense activity around providing food aid to playing a more strategic, co-ordinating role building on existing group activities.

- **As lockdown restrictions eased, most communities moved on** to plan longer-term responses. These varied from short- and medium-term plans, such as reopening community hubs and supporting isolated residents, to broader aspirations for the community beyond the pandemic.

- **A rich and established community-led infrastructure** (CLI) seemed to underpin an effective community response. Interventions had greater depth and breadth where there were strong and varied community-wide networks, a credible resident-led structure, and trusting relationships at community level (see Briefing 8).

Stronger than anyone thought was characterised by a degree of cautious optimism. The worst was over and communities were looking forward to some form of new or adapted normality. They were beginning to think about 'building back better'. However, in the words of a local resident, COVID-19 had "gone on longer than anyone thought" and the ending of the first lockdown proved to be a "false dawn", quickly followed by the introduction of tiered restrictions and two further lockdowns.

Research: Phase 2

The findings in this second report are based on an ongoing literature review and 235 learning conversations with local activists and workers conducted between October 2020 and March 2021. These included both one-to-one and small-group interviews. A total of 552 learning conversations have taken place over the whole research period.

Learning conversations were supplemented by in-depth interviews with 19 local government staff in five authorities (see Briefing 9 and Briefing 10) and with 15 Big Local reps covering 46 more Big Local areas beyond the 26 study areas.

Stronger than anyone thought and *Now they see us* are supplemented by a series of briefing papers exploring in more detail issues raised by the pandemic and the community response. These cover:

• the role of formality and informality in community and voluntary action

• resourcefulness and resilience

• the role of volunteers in the face of the crisis

• community power and CLI

• local authorities and communities.

These are all available on the Local Trust website, while a series of short films on community responses can be found on YouTube.

Sustaining a community response to COVID-19 over the past six months has been particularly challenging. It is a tribute to all those involved in our research – and to communities more widely – that, despite everything, they are, as one Big Local rep put it, "still there and keep on going".

How this report is structured

Key findings from the second phase of the research are presented through the following cross-cutting themes:

• research and policy relating to communities and COVID-19 (section 2)

• how the 26 communities have adapted to changing circumstances (section 3)

• how community-based actions and engagement have been sustained over the period (section 4)

• the differences between the 26 areas in terms of their response to COVID-19 and factors influencing their capacity to react and adapt and sustain action (section 5)

• looking to the future (section 6).

Communities responding to COVID-19:
Following the story

The Communities responding to COVID-19 study involved an ongoing review of the literature as the pandemic unfolded, reported thematically in a series of regular briefing papers. Here we provide a brief summary of the overarching themes in the literature.

COVID-19 has been accompanied by a remarkable flow of research and commentary on its impact – on households, communities, society, the economy and politics (Parker, 2020; Calvert and Arbuthnot, 2021; British Academy, 2021). The first six months of the crisis, from spring to autumn 2020, where we had a belated lockdown followed by gradual easing of restrictions, primarily involved efforts to document and make sense of the immediate impact of the virus and initial responses, including at community level (Dibb et al., 2020; Locality, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020).

Much of the literature on community and voluntary sector responses to COVID-19 involves two or three common touchstones. First, the practical work co-ordinated by voluntary, civil society, CLI and anchor organisations, community businesses and informal mutual-aid groups has been celebrated as an extraordinary response to the crisis, and evidence of a surge in community spirit (Alakeson and Brett, 2020; Royal Society for Public Health, 2021) and the power of civil society in action (Kaye and Morgan, 2021). The second theme emphasises the struggles of civil society organisations and community organisations to meet unprecedented levels of need under tight restrictions and with very limited resources. The prospect of a financial cliff edge and voluntary organisations stretched far beyond capacity is often noted in the literature (Kenley and Whittaker, 2020; see also the Voluntary Sector Impact Barometer in *Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19* and regular research blogs from NCVO). Third, some of the literature observes how fundamental roles and relationships have been recast and existing rules and norms suspended, and looks towards embedding positive changes beyond the pandemic (Robinson, 2020). Some of this writing feeds into a nascent and multifaced movement for greater community power (Pollard et al., 2021).

From autumn 2020, research and commentary continue along these lines. Dayson and Woodward (2021, pp. 5-10), for example, suggest that the response to the pandemic demonstrates the voluntary sector's absorptive capacity (providing immediate support during lockdown) and its adaptive capacity (innovating to meet new needs). Research on community businesses highlights the resilience they gain from their accountability to communities and their embedded networks with others (Avdoulos et al., 2020, pp. 42-3), while a study of small local charities emphasises how they "showed up, stuck around and worked quickly and flexibly" (Dayson et al., 2021, pp. 11-12).

Gradually, though, a greater sense of disillusion descends in the literature as pandemic weariness grows and we have the second and third lockdowns (Royal Society for Public Health, 2021). Although there are hopeful articulations of better prospects for post-pandemic futures, emphasising new opportunities to rebalance power locally and to address underlying inequalities (Tibballs, 2020; Coutts, 2020), these tend to be crowded out. A deepening concern about intensifying needs and exacerbated inequalities (Morrison et al, 2021), and the fear that community (and voluntary sector) responses may buckle under ongoing strain and an uncertain financial future, continues to dominate research (Avdoulos, et al., 2020; Martin, 2021; Wood, 2021).

Changing circumstances require changing responses

Key findings

Needs are changing, and so are community responses

An escalation of poverty, including food, financial, digital and environmental poverty. Hunger has been an ongoing concern for community groups. Many have also ramped up efforts to address other forms of poverty, developing partnerships with welfare rights and money advice agencies, improving access to digital technology and data, and helping improve the quality of the environment.

A growing mental health crisis, associated with social isolation, loneliness and fear. Concerns about mental health have intensified and community groups are looking to do more to respond, while recognising that these complex issues are beyond the reach of communities alone to solve.

Increasing inequalities in health and wellbeing, with the effects of the pandemic disproportionately felt by certain groups. Community groups have developed a range of mechanisms to engage potentially excluded individuals, including through targeted outreach activities, building connections and developing partnerships.

A huge effort by community members and workers to meet basic needs characterised initial community responses to COVID-19. In the summer of 2020, respondents were optimistic that community projects would soon be back to some form of normal, community hubs would reopen and activities resume. The feeling was that financial deficits caused by closure of hubs between March and June 2020 would be corrected as long as everything was running again by September.

Following this sense of optimism over the summer, spirits took a downturn as the UK entered tiered restrictions, the winter months and second and third lockdowns. Community members and workers described feeling exhausted and increasingly uncertain about the future. As one resident noted: "You don't know what's going to happen tomorrow." In November, one centre manager, who had restarted young people's health and wellbeing

sessions between the first and second lockdowns albeit with reduced numbers, reported:

Yesterday was in floods of tears letting families know we are closing, letting the kids down. Had 58 children signed up that we have had to let down. Other staff very low as used to keeping going. Feel like [we have] gone back to March again."

Nevertheless, there is evidence of ongoing community responses in all 26 study areas. Some continued activities they had started in the first lockdown, such as food distribution. Others adapted, drawing on early learning to become more organised as time went on, using IT more effectively to streamline referrals and match volunteers, for example.

As the crisis has evolved, existing needs within communities have been amplified and new needs have emerged. There has been a growing awareness of the scale of the challenge and evidence of a more focused approach to meeting residents' needs. Community responses have adapted accordingly. In the remainder of this section we focus on three broad sets of issues faced by communities over recent months – poverty, mental health and inequalities – and what they have done in response.

Poverty

Poverty is evident in a range of guises, which highlight underlying structural issues predating the pandemic. Indeed, one community worker thought that needs were "the same as in Victorian times". However, this is an emerging and changing picture (Local Trust, 2021).

Food poverty has been a constant in many communities throughout the pandemic. One project leader, reflecting on the queues at food banks, said they were like something from the Depression.

A faith leader in another area reported that the handful of food parcels being delivered at the end of the first lockdown doubled in January 2021 (see also: Weakes et al., 2020)[5] A community fridge project that started with five or six attendees per session saw its numbers rise to 79 during one day in spring 2021.

While volunteers have identified need through talking to people at foodbanks and community fridges, or on the doorstep when delivering food, they have also noted the psychological impact on those, often middle-class, families asking for food for the first time. There is greater awareness of people who are under the radar, with high levels of financial precarity due to their reliance on the gig economy or seasonal jobs (OCSI, 2021, p. 1). A volunteer described how people who were already close to the financial edge had been pushed into deeper poverty: "They haven't been able to pay rent; they were treading water before and the current got quicker." There is also awareness of people who are struggling but not coming forward, particularly in some rural areas and in minority ethnic communities where stigma is attached to using a foodbank.

Photographer: Zute Lightfoot

Volunteers from Elthorne Pride distribute complimentary store cupboard basics to members of the community at St Johns Community Centre on the Elthorne Estate in N19, London.

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[5] Trussell Trust reported a doubling in take-up of food parcels during 2020, with 39 per cent distributed to families who had not previously used foodbanks: www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/09/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-food-banks-report.pdf

As the pandemic has evolved, community groups have ramped up their focus on food, broadening their offer, reaching out beyond the regulars and connecting to new families. Many communities benefited from Christmas food hampers, takeaway food vouchers and hot food deliveries. Examples include sending a food truck to a school to serve 100 hot meals to children and families, pop-up food tables on streets and in gardens, distributing healthy eating growing packs, connecting commercial cafes with a local food network, and exploring, post-lockdown, pay-as-you-feel community cafes. For one community group, where eating well and reducing food waste has always been an additional driver, a community chef hosted live online cookery demonstrations.

There is also more intelligence and data about the appropriateness and potential misuse of free food provision. In one area it became apparent that food bags were being sold on. So, while at the start of the pandemic foodbank volunteers asked for evidence to substantiate need, by the third lockdown they were tracking repeat use to ensure the service was not misused.

Indeed, there is emerging evidence of a radical rethinking of traditional responses to food poverty (such as Sustainable Food Places). A number of community-based faith leaders involved in foodbank co-ordination noted that foodbanks were only ever intended as a short-term solution to an immediate crisis; they were simply not viable or desirable as a long-term solution. Based on the experience of last year, there is widespread interest in developing more sustainable approaches, including more strategic food projects, and breaking down the stigma of food poverty. Indeed, new approaches gained momentum during the third lockdown, with community fridges, pantries, co-ops and pop-ups offering access to a wider range of fresh produce at a more local level than centralised hubs, breaking down power relations between those providing and those needing food.

Firs & Bromford Big Local, Birmingham

Financial poverty has been exacerbated by rising levels of unemployment and under-employment, especially in areas where people are on casual or zero-hour contracts and working in sectors badly hit by the crisis such as travel, hospitality and other face-to-face services (OSCI, 2021, p. 2). All local authority areas witnessed rises of one-third in under- and unemployment, and 20 per cent of areas saw unemployment more than double (OCSI, 2021, p. 1). As one resident noted, this is likely to be a worsening situation:

> **Not a high-tech community… Majority of jobs manual, the warehouses have closed… people are off work at the moment and being paid… the true impact is not yet known."**

In one area, residents reported that youth unemployment had risen from 10 per cent in 2019 to almost 30 per cent by the end of 2020 in their small community, while unemployment rates in the wider local authority area almost doubled from 5.8 per cent to just over 11 per cent in early 2021. Where shops and businesses are primarily small and locally owned, they are also perceived to be vulnerable. Linked to job losses and a low-wage economy, there are concerns around unaffordable housing, inflated rents and, in both urban and seaside study areas, increasing numbers of houses in multiple occupation. Residents in several study areas have started calling for affordable housing to be a community priority.

Respondents considered that by January 2021 financial needs had increased and would continue to do so. Money problems had become more visible and widespread and the need to respond was more urgent (ONS, 2021, p. 1; Money Advice Trust, 2021). The extension of the furlough scheme and the temporary embargo on evictions for rent arrears may have masked the severity of the issue over summer 2020. As such policy initiatives wind down, it is clear that those surviving on meagre savings, now used up, or kept afloat by rent and mortgage holidays have built up unsustainable levels of debt (Step Change, 2020, 2021). With food distribution systems in place, community groups could now turn their attention to developing responses to financial insecurities.

In some study areas, the response of community groups has been to forge partnerships with welfare rights, money advice agencies and online services. Others have taken a more direct approach, administering local authority crisis grants or giving out cash support and fuel vouchers from their own resources. A community-led infrastructure (CLI) body in one area distributed £5 vouchers for a local shop, thus providing individual residents with help while also supporting the local trader who was facing challenging times. A family worker in another area described how a mother struggled to find £2 in small change to send her child to the youth club and how people were unable to buy their children clothes while charity shops were shut.

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5   For more details, see: https://ocsi.uk/2020/04/29/which-local-labour-markets-are-most-at-risk/

6   These figures represent unemployment rates that are over twice national averages: www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment

A faith-based project distributing donated items such as beds, televisions and vouchers for children's scooters found the demand alarming:

> **We had a donation of children's beds and we could have distributed them 10 times over – it's Dickensian the conditions some children are living in."**

Digital poverty has been prevalent, and a digital divide across the UK has become clear (UK Parliament, 2020). According to a Citizens Advice survey,[7] one in six households struggled to afford broadband during the third lockdown and #OperationWiFi, an alliance of organisations campaigning for affordable wifi, stresses: "Lockdown should not mean shutdown." In one study area, the pandemic demonstrated how few people had connectivity or IT equipment, with 78 per cent of adults classified as 'passive or uncommitted users of the internet', compared with a national average of 17 per cent.[8] Some online services require photographic ID, which many people don't have. One project leader was exasperated by what she saw:

> **What we're finding, it's just like it's the basics. You know, people don't have a phone necessarily or they don't have credit on a phone, they're the most vulnerable people in society and we're not looking after them. What does that say about our society? People are just falling through the net, and they're desperate, absolutely desperate."**

She went on to describe how lack of a phone or phone credit meant that people could not easily get a doctor's appointment:

> **We've had people running out of repeat prescriptions… she was on hold for 45 minutes and all her credit ran out."**

This digital divide has exacerbated the challenges already faced by parents struggling to deal with home schooling. As one faith leader said: "One mobile phone and five kids."

Community responses have primarily focused on giving out tablets, sometimes with free wifi and sometimes in collaboration with local schools. One community-based project distributed tablets and paid for Zoom licences for local groups to run online sessions. By the end of November 2020, the licences had been used to run 943 meetings and involved 4,819 participants.

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[7] January 2021: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/more-than-one-in-six-struggling-to-afford-broadband/

[8] Classification based on mapping produced using Consumer Data Research Centre tools and research: https://maps.cdrc.ac.uk/#/geodemographics/vulnerability/default/BTTTFFT/10/-0.1500/51.5200/

Environmental poverty has also been exposed as lockdowns have worn on, through the increasing emphasis on the importance of the quality of local environments, both built and open spaces. One community worker commented:

> 🔲 We always knew some of the housing round here was very poor, but until coronavirus… not how poor. Damp, disrepair, overcrowding and no gardens. The impact on families' health – and their relationships – well, it's been huge. So, just in terms of people's health, [housing] has come up the agenda."

In the same study area, poor housing conditions were at least partially compensated for by plentiful green space, although this was of the green desert variety surrounding maisonettes and tower blocks. In another study area, even those spaces were absent. One resident noted:

> 🔲 They say get out for a walk, get to the park, keep healthy. But it is two miles to the nearest park and [X area] has some of the highest pollution in this city. So how is that healthy?"

Conversely, for some, COVID-19 made residents realise:

> 🔲 …how lucky we are. We did not think about it really before. We took it for granted that we could go for a walk in the woods or the nearby hills… but now we realise what a blessing this has been."

Several of the 26 areas have taken small but important measures to improve their local environment. This has included upgrading and decorating street planters, providing bulbs and wildflower seeds for Britain in Bloom-style activity and 'seed-bombing' public parks. Between lockdowns, some have used green spaces for community wellbeing projects, including a teddy bear hunt in the park, celebrating Halloween, a treasure trail in a wood and socially distanced outdoor meetings. Others have accelerated previous longer-term plans for improving the community's green spaces.

Mental health

Mental ill health became a key concern across all 26 areas, particularly during the third lockdown. Communities were worried about people's mental health needs at the start of the pandemic, with early initiatives ranging from online knit and natter groups to counselling for young people. These have continued but the stresses caused by money worries, housing insecurity, home schooling, lack of emotional support and real and potential job losses have intensified the situation, particularly during the third lockdown and for young people (YoungMinds, 2021). One resident added that this was affecting the numbers of people available to help:

> 🔲 What we are finding is local people, as well as volunteers, are having breakdowns because life has got too much for them… there is definitely a need on this estate, there is an economic need, a mental health need… The hands that normally are there to help are not here."

And a local trader confirmed:

> " This lockdown has really got me; here we go, not able to do anything. I feel helpless… I'm usually positive but it's hitting home, it's coming up to a year."

Interviewees talked about witnessing a growing number of people experiencing depression caused by lockdown (often referred to as being fed up, low or fatigued) and feeling anxious (often referred to as fear and worry, about leaving the house or catching COVID-19). One study area reported that levels of mental distress were having an effect on volunteers, with more time needed for volunteer support. A community worker from another area was concerned about lack of support post-COVID-19:

Photographer: Zute Lightfoot

Community health walk at Wormley and Turnford, Hertfordshire, June 2021.

> " I really worry about lack of support for people coming out the other side of this. The thresholds for getting a referral for counselling, for example, were already impossibly high; there is going to be another crisis, one of mental health."

These concerns reflect a national picture of an ensuing mental health crisis. Analysis by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2021) has expressed disquiet that services will be overrun, and found that children and young people are bearing the brunt of poor mental health as a consequence of the pandemic.

Loneliness and social isolation have also been revealed to be widespread. These concerns are, of course, not new and have already been identified for government action (Jo Cox Loneliness Commission, 2018; HM Government, 2018). But what has emerged during the pandemic is an awareness of the scale of the problem (ONS, 2021), with research by the Mental Health Foundation (2021) finding that loneliness had risen from 10 per cent of those surveyed in March 2020 to 26 per cent in February 2021.

There have also been shifts in perceptions of loneliness. During and coming out of the first lockdown, most of the 26 study areas focused on isolated elders. This ranged from helping older people become digitally connected to telephone support and ensuring that doorstep deliveries had an element of social connection and wellbeing checks. Moving into the third lockdown, greater attention was paid to social isolation in younger age groups, as their needs became more apparent. This has involved online support using creative activities, games and competitions. Indeed, young people's increased vulnerability caused by lack of access to friends, socialising and school was raised in many

interviews, as well as in national research (YoungMinds, 2021).[10] In a few areas, these vocalised concerns reflect an increase in drug use. One community volunteer commented:

> **Mental health, gang crime, knife crime, they're going to be hand in hand... seeing more and more kids mill about in pockets of their area, can see them dealing drugs. Are they being pushed into it because of their mental health? It's very complex."**

This volunteer, who had recently joined a local youth project's board of trustees, talked about the urgent need to support young people as the pandemic continued to impact families' incomes and young people's support and development. People in several areas said they noticed more young people hanging around with little to do and thought the dynamic of communities had changed. In one area, there were concerns about antisocial behaviour, slipping back to a time when estates were no-go areas for the police and residents felt unsafe; in another, there were worries over perceived rising crime during restrictions, with county lines drug gangs becoming more brazen; in a third, people saw existing problems exacerbated when young people dependent on drugs were no longer able to congregate with others and were isolated at home with their families.

Inequalities

Health and socio-economic inequalities have been highlighted and amplified by the pandemic, with the impact of COVID-19 disproportionally experienced by certain groups. Burbridge (2021) observes:

> **The pandemic has raised questions of justice and equity between different groups in society. The impact on health and wellbeing, the economic ramifications, and the other costs of isolating, have been distributed unevenly: across generational, regional and ethnic lines, the pandemic has had diverse effects."**

Lack of ethnic diversity: While the study has exposed inequalities along the lines of race, age, gender and (dis)ability, there has been a particular focus within the 26 communities on age (discussed above) and race. In particular, the study found a lack of ethnic diversity in those who have access to community support and have been made to feel welcome. In one area, those organising community responses were working to address issues of access and attempting to reach out to diverse community groups. The relief hub co-ordinator said: "We need to be proactive in finding them and understanding their needs." In another area, Black volunteers said they were not made to feel welcome, with a faith leader observing: "Black people are not free to ask and don't know what is available."

There is, however, evidence in some areas of a positive and targeted approach to reaching people who might otherwise fall below the radar. For example, one

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[10] YoungMinds has undertaken quarterly surveys of young people's mental health throughout the pandemic. The latest survey (January 2021) suggested a particularly severe impact during the third lockdown: https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/

Source: CELL Big Local, Northumberland

community has attempted to address inequalities in food provision along ethnic lines by finding alternative ways to distribute to those who do not go to foodbanks. To ensure food is shared effectively, co-ordinators have worked with local African, Asian and Caribbean communities so that they distribute the food.

In other areas, door-to-door consultations and outreach have broadened connections across diverse groups and ensured appropriate responses to the needs of minority communities. In one area, high levels of infection in Black and minority ethnic communities early in the pandemic prompted social enterprises to form a local consortium and bid for funds to address underlying health issues in the community. However, while all study areas recognise these growing inequalities, even at the hyperlocal level, some remain uncertain as to how to respond.

Community polarisation: In some areas, increasing inequality during the pandemic has been associated with growing tensions within communities. Jetten et al. (2020) highlight an increase in community polarisation in some areas, with tensions related to lockdown, adherence to restrictions and vaccination take-up. Several respondents pointed to the need to bring communities back together, to rebuild relationships that had suffered through a lack of face-to-face interaction,

to reconnect as humans. In several study areas, there were reports that social polarisation was related to class and who was or was not contributing to the response effort. All this is not new but has been exacerbated by COVID-19.

Summary

As reported in the first-phase report, *Stronger than anyone thought*, many pre-COVID-19 community activities were adapted and moved online alongside a whole range of new activities responding to new needs. The fact that the 26 study areas have sustained their responses to COVID-19 for over a year is impressive. Further, every area has adapted, and continues to adapt, its responses in the light of changing needs.

At the beginning of the crisis, communities had to make decisions very quickly, to get on with the task in hand, but there is evidence that they are now thinking more critically and being more reflective and strategic. As the crisis wore on, several areas developed responses using their experience of what had and hadn't worked, and through the creation of more sophisticated structures. As one community worker said:

> One of the things I hope we'll be able to say at the end of this, and by that I mean when all the restrictions on social distancing are lifted, is that even if we didn't engage with as many people as we would have liked during this, we'll at least have a story to tell people and to say, 'This is what we did do, by the way, during the lockdown, this is what we managed to achieve, and we touched X number of people, and we're still here and we'll be doing more now that everything is allowed to happened again.'"

The research shows how some initial responses to the crisis have continued, particularly in relation to food poverty, although there is evidence that the nature of services is shifting as more sustainable and equitable solutions are sought. Some activities, however, have been scaled back or stopped because they are less popular than they were. For example, a digital project is still operating because there is an ongoing demand for digital access but the reach of the project is no longer expanding as it did in the first phase. Likewise, some online youth activities have seen a drop-off in terms of participation.

Emerging needs such as mental ill health, unemployment and debt management are complex and likely to be long-term problems. They are not solvable by communities alone but some areas are planning to do what they can. Several groups in the study have already started expanding their mental health support. For example, a church is recruiting a trained counsellor and a community-led infrastructure (CLI) body is offering counselling on a pay-what-you-can model, walk-and-talk sessions and discussing incentivising people to engage through a 'talk for a tenner' idea.

What the pandemic has highlighted is the ingrained nature of structural inequalities and the complex interactions between various aspects of deprivation: from unemployment through to environmental poverty, from mental health and social isolation through to financial insecurity and digital exclusion (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). Responding to these underlying and emerging needs will take longer than anyone thought, and poverty in our communities will be with us for a long time to come.

Photographer: Michael Gant

Staff and volunteers help out with Halloween fun at the Wharton Annexe, Dyke House Big Local, Hartlepool, 2020

Sustaining engagement, relationships and action

Key findings

Sustaining community action becomes more challenging as the pandemic continues

After the intense activity of the early days of the crisis, **energies have waned and volunteers risk burnout**, particularly in areas where people are returning to work or have become exhausted.

The shift from regular face-to-face contact to online communication has been particularly challenging for some volunteers.

Communities have learnt how to build and sustain community action during the crisis, exploiting community spaces and establishing effective relationships with other communities, agencies and local authorities.

The Royal Society for Public Health's report, *Socially distant* (2021, p. 9), found that, on the whole, community spirit, defined by the quality of relationships, cohesion, a sense of belonging and collective action, increased in the months after March 2020. Respondents in our research concur: "A good journey during a bad time" (community worker); "I am very proud to be the chair at the moment" (resident); "People will remember how terrible it was, but also how awesome it was" (resident). There is a strong sense that something unifying happened. On the other hand, as the same report makes clear, the upsurge in community spirit is not felt equally across all demographic groups and there is no guarantee that it will continue.

In this section we explore the different ways that communities have sought to sustain local engagement and volunteering, develop relationships and maintain their built and open spaces, while highlighting some of the challenges they have faced along the way.

Keeping going together

The response of some groups in our study to COVID-19 has been positive and energetic; for others, an enforced hibernation has enabled them to reflect, take stock and regroup. One resident commented:

It's given everybody a little bit of a breather. In the middle of this 10-year project we're on… to take stock, to clear a lot of the debris, catch up on a lot of things and smarten everything up; a lot of thinking time."

Others talked about the connections made through a collaborative response to the crisis, with more people engaging in community action and developing their confidence as a result. Indeed, the last year has seen a resurgence in outreach work on the streets and in public spaces, as community centres closed. Street champions and doorstep keep-fit

Tea & Tech project in SO18 Big Local, Southampton.

will continue way beyond the pandemic. Community organisations now have the self-assurance that they can change if they need to, buoyed up by feeling they are finally on the map, with agencies proactively seeking them out to make things happen.

There have, however, been many challenges and a noticeable difference in morale between the first phase of the research, April to September 2020, and the second, October 2020 to March 2021.

In the summer of 2020, there was a feeling that everyone was in it together and a hope that the crisis would soon be over. By the autumn, even those who had been passionate about doing more found their energies – if not their enthusiasm and commitment – wane. By the start of 2021, people were feeling frustrated and fatigued by COVID-19 and by lockdown. People described being 'scratchy', with one resident saying: "The shops and the streets can feel really edgy. Nothing much has actually happened but it feels like there is a lot more tension around." The relationships of trust that characterised initial responses gave way to suspicion of repeat users of foodbanks. One project worker described being uncomfortable deciding who got a fuel voucher: "I feel like I am playing God." Keeping things going was particularly hard for groups without secure funding. Some acknowledged the substantial growth in short-term funding as emergency COVID-19 grants rolled out, but felt this only increased uncertainty when planning for the longer term.

Digital engagement

There is a mixed picture of how far community groups and community-level bodies have sustained digital engagement. There are examples of ongoing access to devices and data alongside technical support, and there is evidence that online meetings are more structured than they were when face to face. In one area, residents are using a new app, To Fro, to manage volunteers which, despite early teething problems, is now working well. Use of social media, such as Facebook for information sharing and signposting, has continued and some groups have seen numbers of followers increase over the last year. This is, however, extremely variable and all social media platforms, including Twitter and WhatsApp, require detailed analysis. Usage has tended to focus on broadcasting and information sharing rather than consultation and opening up debate (McCabe and Harris, 2020).

Nevertheless, while online meetings have been embraced as a tool for continued communication and connection, the lack of face-to-face contact has taken its toll and the attraction of Zoom has waned. One interviewee spoke for many when he talked about feeling self-conscious and anxious seeing himself all the time in online meetings. In one area, where video conferencing had been central to maintaining a positive spirit and providing a weekly catch-up for active residents, participation dwindled as people returned to work or became disenchanted with the

format. While most groups have managed to retain existing members from before the pandemic, most have struggled to recruit new members, either for activities or to committees. One community worker noted that building a collective voice is much harder when not meeting face to face. Feedback has also indicated that virtual meetings can exacerbate issues between people, with some seen as being too frank, insensitive or unprofessional. One resident said: "You can't take people aside and have a cup of tea and calm things down on Zoom."

Volunteering

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on volunteering and the long haul of the crisis means that the need for volunteers has not abated. Rapid research Briefing 5 and Briefing 6 (TSRC, 2020) note that volunteering has been crucial to responses to COVID-19, with many people taking direct action within their own communities. Rarely labelling themselves volunteers, they just get on with what needs to be done. However, while many people started volunteering during the crisis, others had to stop, particularly older volunteers who had to shield. So are volunteers who responded to calls for help during the crisis still active? And are those who had to step away coming back?

National and local callouts for volunteers saw a great many step forward. People often had time on their hands while furloughed and the nature of volunteer activity was usually practical – food distribution, shopping and picking up prescriptions. But numbers of people volunteering are inconsistent. Across the 26 areas, there are stories of volunteers who became exhausted by their initial high-octane efforts and those disillusioned by the increasing numbers of people referred by agencies or self-referring. While there are examples of some groups deciding to take

a break for a week or so and then restart, some volunteers simply dropped out. There were also the people who got involved in the first lockdown and withdrew as they returned to work, and others who had to stop in order to home-school their children during the third lockdown.

Calls for new volunteers have continued and new people have come forward, perhaps for different reasons. In one community, someone still furloughed from work was excited that he "had a reason to get up in the morning", while in another the offer of an early vaccine for volunteers was considered to be a factor. One area that had benefited from new volunteers said they were all from outside the area, which had prompted residents to raise concerns about the lack of local volunteers.

Communities have learnt much in the last year about recruiting and supporting volunteers, including issues around co-ordination, support and safeguarding. In one area not currently involved in either a Big Local or a Creative Civic Change (CCC) programme, community leaders described a gradual journey of working with volunteers who had not done any community work before. Early on in the pandemic, core volunteers were working at unsustainable rates, equivalent to a full-time job for some, and there is now much greater recognition of the need for leadership and co-ordination of voluntary activity. A local activist said:

> One of the key changes is that a lot of the people who were involved [early on] as volunteers have now become more involved in the organisation side of things, and recruited more volunteers whose skill is delivery."

They went on to describe how their local food distribution network had become "not bureaucratic but better organised". The network uses Zoom and Teams, one volunteer has a spreadsheet and arranges on a Sunday who will do what in the week, lists are sent out via WhatsApp and times for pickups are negotiated. In other areas, e-referrals between agencies have speeded up access to services, reduced the administrative burden on volunteers and enabled community groups to match volunteers with local volunteering opportunities. Several groups reported becoming more efficient, streamlining their systems and putting support mechanisms in place so volunteers don't take on too much. A foodbank lead explained:

> **We have had to increase the support we offer for [foodbank] volunteers. At the start they came in and delivered food. As it has developed, we moved back to people collecting food. But the distress volunteers are seeing… they are not really equipped to deal with this… people who are crying… people who are angry… so now we spend time at the end of each session just checking that volunteers are okay."**

Whether levels of interest in volunteering in broader activities can be sustained will become clear over the next year. Many areas are planning thank you events for volunteers, which may be an opportunity to engage them in other activities. Just one area so far has reported volunteers joining other activities, such as becoming

a trustee or committee member, but there are signs from several areas that people's experience of community action during the pandemic has been positive. Many have become more confident, increased their knowledge of the local community, made new social connections and want to do more. One community worker said:

> **They have loved doing what they've done and the relationships they've made, and I think that's been the most positive."**

Community organisations involving volunteers now have databases of people they can go back to, and one area is building a resource bank of active groups and volunteers used during the pandemic so they can be reactivated in any future crises. However, it is important to remember those who have always been 'doers' and have felt helpless while forced to shield. These people may well need support to rebuild their confidence and to re-engage.

Food project in the Tang Hall area of York, North Yorkshire, August 2020.

Community spaces

The ownership or management of a community space has proved invaluable to many of the study areas. These have enabled areas to manage their own food distribution and occasionally to provide hot food. Without a physical space, it is arguable that many communities would have been reliant on food sources managed by organisations outside their area, and the personal touch of neighbours helping neighbours and local knowledge of those potentially in need would have been missing.

Nearly all the communities in the 26 areas have been restricted from using their buildings, other than for very specific purposes such as food distribution or virus testing. The toing and froing of policy directives on reopening centres has been described as frustrating, confusing and energy sapping. Despite this, one community centre manager felt that, even if their building was only open for three weeks before another shutdown, it was worth it – people popped in and there were tears of gratitude at the opportunity to connect with others and engage in activities. This illustrates how critical community hubs are, a point reinforced by Community Matters Yorkshire (2020, p. 10):

> **Some felt they were instrumental in addressing the issues of loneliness, catching people before they [got] to a point of needing support."**

One area managed to keep its community centre open during the third lockdown to provide activities combating social isolation. They were able to create COVID-safe spaces due to their size, and had the support of the local authority and health practitioners. A community worker noted:

> **For some people, the centre is a lifeline, part of their life. People have their own seats, feel very comfortable. A community feeling."**

This also proved to be a business opportunity because there is nowhere else in the area to hire.

For most centres that have not reopened there has been concern about finances. Community hubs were often already walking a financial tightrope, controlling costs "with an iron fist", "operating on tight margins" and "working with inadequate reserves" (Trup et al., 2019, pp. 5-6). As this report points out, while there are many benefits to asset ownership and management, the risks can be great. Several CLI organisations are supporting

local community centres that are now running at a loss; this includes those managed by local volunteers but owned by a local authority. There is a real fear in some areas that centres will struggle to stay afloat at the time they are needed most. This particularly applies to those lacking strong financial reserves (Trup et al., 2019, pp. 5-6) or who have been unsuccessful in securing emergency grants to cover lost revenue

For others finance has been less of an issue. Indeed, in some cases, income has been generated through fundraising on the back of the pandemic. One community centre manager described how COVID-19 had contributed to a growing profile for the organisation (evidenced by having 400 new followers on Facebook) and additional financial donations, which they had invested in building improvements: "People contacting us… hall hire, etc, raised [our] profile. Got the centre decorated whilst it was closed the first time."

Several CLI organisations in the study are developing new centres, some even starting building work, adapting their original plans to ensure they can be COVID-19 secure if needed. One such new initiative is a planned community hub on a local high street which will operate as a one-stop shop for people to access advice about services.

Community spaces are, of course, not just buildings, and there are many examples of the significance of open and green spaces – parks, allotments, even benches – where people have been able to meet in a socially distanced way. According to a recent RSA report, these are particularly valued by minority ethnic communities: when asked what might improve their local area, people from Black and minority ethnic groups were more likely than their White counterparts to prioritise access to green space and places to exercise (RSA, 2021). It is, however, important to note that

Source: Northfleet Big Local, Kent

access to quality green spaces is not equally distributed (BMJ, 2020) and improving public spaces post-COVID-19 has risen up the priorities in several high-density study areas (see sections 5 and 6), not just as an environmental issue but as critical in promoting physical and mental health.

Organisational development

Despite being in emergency response mode, the efforts of community groups to maintain and even develop their governance, structures and networks has been inspiring. There are a few groups that have struggled to meet frequently, and evidence of a greater reliance on paid workers where these were in place. However, in most areas, decision-making structures and processes have continued. There are examples of weekly online meetings attracting more people than pre-COVID-19, groups replacing the time they would have previously spent on practical activities with strategic planning, and a greater focus on reassessing priorities, policies and procedures. A member of a green space community group reported having "three meetings this week and

more next week" and being happy that the lockdown was ending as it would allow them to have a rest.

In the Big Local areas, the commitment to planning has endured, with systems put in place to identify future needs and how to meet them. Some haven't changed their priorities but are looking to work in different ways to engage more people and generate civic pride as people start to go out and about again. In CCC areas, new links and partnerships have been formed, while in one of the areas without a Local Trust programme (and the associated money and support), a new network of activists has developed which, it is hoped, will have a significant future role in the community.

Working with local authorities

Stronger than anyone thought noted missed opportunities for collaboration between councils and communities. There are some community bodies who like to do things themselves and don't really interact with the council, and there are some that have little regard for public agencies. On the other hand, there are examples of community groups and local authorities working together, with the community adding value to the council's response and vice versa.

One of the study areas was clear that they did not want to duplicate what the council was already doing but could dovetail with it. The consequences of joint actions have led, in some areas, to stronger and more respectful relationships. One CLI representative observed how the council was now listening and acting on what they said, suggesting it could learn from how communities organise and from their local links and intelligence. In another area, relationships with the council were deemed strong and much improved, as evidenced by the council funding a relief hub and supporting and facilitating neighbourhood-level action rather than leading it themselves.

These demonstrations of faith in communities are explored through the lens of five local authorities in Briefing 10 (TSRC, 2021) and illustrate the effectiveness of a trust-based approach. A high-trust relational approach to council-community engagement, as opposed to a low-trust, low-engagement transactional one, was found to be instrumental. A voluntary sector worker characterised the improved relationship:

> Now they see [they need] us because we've got the backing of our communities... they got their hands dirty and have worked alongside us... have to be the most efficient borough dealing with the pandemic. They stepped up and threw in the fuel [and recognised] the small organisations who have been on the edge for years."

For some local authorities and communities, however, trust-building and co-operative working have not really started – or efforts to build new relationships are only just getting under way. Briefing 10 noted that the ebb and flow of collaborative working can pass rapidly through repeated cycles of retreat and advance. The findings from the study areas show that responding to community needs has been a personal mission for some local residents and they seem keen to keep it as such. There are some with very little trust in their local authority, or who see them as being out of touch with grassroots activity. Others have very little knowledge of their council and how it works. Equally, some local authorities know very little about the community sector and what it offers.

Elsewhere there are indications that, where there has been joint action, the relationship is cooling now the local authority does not need to collaborate around food. One interviewee reported feeling neither party

had the impetus to work together once the immediate response was no longer needed. There is also a growing awareness that the community action observed over the last year should be more than 'just a way to fast-track voluntary-based services' and that the focus on service delivery should not detract from the core purpose of community engagement and the building of a collective voice.

Relationships between communities and councils are therefore complex, and it is these contextual intricacies that will need to be unravelled if the calls for a community power approach (Kaye and Morgan, 2021; Pollard et al., 2021) are to gain traction for both communities and councils. Only time will tell. The next 12 months will be crucial in assessing what is possible and the extent to which local authorities continue or come to see working with communities as being, in the words of one council officer, "the only show in town".

Building bridges

The connections and collaborations developed to respond to the crisis go beyond those between communities and public agencies. And different organisations working together does not just happen. Trust-building involves risk-taking and is often dependent on a few people pushing to change practice and mindsets. An arts project worker described how the crisis had strengthened relationships with other cultural organisations in their area:

> There is more appreciation of what everyone does, I've tacitly 'built a bridge' [with a project that there were tensions with previously]. We're not friends but support each other."

The sharing of resources and kudos has also been important. One community-based respondent talked about how important it was that the COVID-19 response was seen as a collaborative venture, not the preserve of one organisation: "COVID-19 coalesced the team, a united cause expedited it." Another talked about how funding for a holiday food project came from the council via the voluntary sector infrastructure body, which was significant in building new relationships. In another area, activists have connected under the orbit of a volunteer-led organisation and there is a sense that while previously everybody worked in their silos, competed for money and kept to themselves, communities and agencies have come together collectively. Networks of community activists have been formed, there is better organisation, and relationships across the public, voluntary and community sector are closer than they have been in years. People here described a sense of shared leadership across community groups and statutory organisations: "It's been a joint thing."

Summary

The capacity of community groups to adapt as COVID-19 has evolved, to sustain local organisations and networks, to develop new relationships and to adjust to changing needs has been impressive. As community hubs have been forced to close, there has been an increase in outreach work to meet people on their doorsteps and in public spaces. Long periods of restrictions have enabled groups to embed different ways of working but have also tested the initial enthusiasm to keep things going at all costs.

For the most part, digital communications have been embraced and played a crucial role in sustaining relationships between community leaders, group

members and other agencies. The downside is that relationships are qualitatively different and the human interaction of live get-togethers and informal chats in face-to-face meetings has been missed.

While some previously active residents have had to stand back due to isolating and shielding, the pandemic has encouraged other residents to step forward and become more involved in their communities. For some, this has been life-changing and they have developed a new confidence and skills as a result. Many will continue, although there is evidence of a drop-off in volunteering levels as people become tired, return to work or home-school their children. Some groups have learnt how to improve their support for volunteers, and in several areas robust procedures have ensured a smoother and more efficient service for both the volunteers and those they are seeking to support.

Community centres, along with public spaces, have proved their worth during the pandemic. Despite the frustrations generated by shutting down, reopening and closing again, many community-run spaces have been central to food distribution, with some also used as COVID-19 testing centres. The title of the Community Matters Yorkshire (2020) report, *How many of us had pandemic on our risk register?*, highlights the importance of community hubs, but also how disruptive social and physical distancing restrictions have been. There are implications around loss of income and financial sustainability, in addition to making hubs COVID-safe when they reopen. Despite this, some areas have forged ahead to develop new centres, complete with new safety

measures should they be needed in the future. The research has also shown how significant outdoor public spaces are to people's health and wellbeing and the disparities across areas regarding access to these.

Most areas have seen the emergence of new networks and connections, in some cases due to collaborations developed to provide an effective response and in others due to having time to reflect while not running day-to-day activities. There is evidence of more joint working with the public sector and a consequent shift in power dynamics. On the whole, community-led infrastructure (CLI) has felt more recognised and trusted by the powers that be, though the research observes that such relationships are complex and subject to swings. Perhaps more longstanding affiliations will endure through the community-based networks formed over the last year.

For all of the above, however, it is important to note that there are differences both within and between study areas, and these are explored in the following section.

Differences in response and recovery between 26 areas

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Key findings

Alongside similarities, there are differences in how communities have responded and the support they might need to recover

There are differences between areas with and without a history of community activism, those supported by Local Trust programmes and those that are not, those with and without strong leadership and resources (such as community buildings), and those more or less deprived. These differences need further exploration.

The research communities are typically small, with populations of less than 10,000, and are not necessarily characteristic of the larger areas (such as those identified as 'left behind') in which they are located.

This is a complex and evolving picture that cuts across study areas rather than sitting neatly with various categories of communities.

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As outlined in the introduction, the 26 communities comprise 21 Big Local areas and five Creative Civic Change (CCC) areas (with two involved in both), and two additional areas not involved in any Local Trust programme. The 26 areas include eight that are part of larger areas identified as 'left behind', and 14 have levels of vulnerability that are substantially higher than regional and national averages (OCSI, 2020). In other areas, poor connectivity/public transport is an important feature, particularly on peripheral estates and in rural study areas (OCSI, 2021, p. 3).

All 21 Big Local areas were selected for funding on the grounds of previous underinvestment in community infrastructure and activity. Additional interviews carried out with Big Local reps (mentioned in the introduction to this report) covered a further 46 areas, 17 of which are in areas classed as 'left behind'.

The first phase of the research found that there were differences in the scale of response to the immediate crisis across the 26 areas. These differences did not appear to be related to whether or not they were in 'left behind' areas, though Local Trust programme support in building community-led infrastructure (CLI) appeared to indicate a more coherent and resourceful approach. Are these differences between areas still apparent a year on?

Community responses

Commonalities: The vast majority of Big Local areas have responded positively to the crisis – through food support, activity packs, online activities and wellbeing calls to residents, for example – and there have been similar responses in the five areas not supported by the Big Local programme. The three Creative Civic Change (CCC) areas have all continued arts and crafts activities with other groups and organisations, and stepped up to provide food and other support. One of these areas has also developed a strong infrastructure and volunteer network. The two non-programme areas have offered community-led food, befriending and youth support; in one of these, the 20 local foodbanks identified in April 2020 remained active throughout the third lockdown.

There have also been common struggles across the 26 study areas. Most areas have found it harder to sustain energy and enthusiasm during the winter months and through the third lockdown. And most, but by no means all, have struggled to sustain broader community engagement as face-to-face conversations have been replaced for long periods by online forums. Key decisions have tended to be made by smaller groups of local activists or by workers. All communities have used their local knowledge to identify and respond to local needs to varying degrees.

Differences: Differences between communities do start to become apparent, however, when we look beyond first responses to pressing needs towards a wider focus on leadership, co-ordination, collaboration and capacity to identify needs and plan accordingly.

Incredible Edible MyClubmoor horticulture course, Liverpool, 2021.

Big Local areas

First, Big Local areas have access to financial resources and have been able to commission support from other groups and service providers. Not all have done so, but access to flexible funding has enabled some Big Local areas to proactively respond to changing needs by financing welfare rights advice, counselling or youth provision. Several Big Local areas put out a call along the lines of 'We have money – come to us if you have any ideas'. These small grants have had a positive effect in supporting existing and new community projects. Big Local areas also have access to additional resources that can come with funding such as paid workers, who help organise and co-ordinate responses, and community hubs, which have proved invaluable as storage and distribution centres.

Further, Big Local areas have been supported by Local Trust over the past eight years to develop decision-making processes and resident-led partnerships and to create community-based plans. The knowledge acquired paid off when faced with the pandemic. This research found evidence that areas that had previously identified community needs were able to be more responsive to changing needs. One resident noted:

> **We're in a prime position for this; we know the families that need support, we know the individuals that need the additional finances… And we literally sat and worked out what it is that we think people might need. And as the weeks have gone on, we've just adapted it each week to suit what everyone needs at the moment… Without [us] there would not have been a response, you would have got the odd person saying if you need anything I will get it for you. There wouldn't have been an action group. A good job we were around."**

Creative Civic Change (CCC) areas

There was also a proactive response by communities in the study not involved in Big Local. One of the CCC areas had an established alliance of residents and groups rooted in the community, which, although only a couple of years old, was well placed to provide a co-ordinated and wide-ranging response. Like many of the Big Local areas, it had local knowledge, workers, small grants and volunteer support in place prior to COVID-19 and was able to step up its activities very quickly. The other four CCC areas, while all different, are typified by a more fragmented response, focused on individual residents, faith-based and other local organisations working hard but not effectively connected with each other. In the absence of neighbourhood infrastructure and a strategic approach, responses have been more personality driven, with one resident describing challenges related to 'getting on the same page' with others.

However, in at least three of these CCC communities, previously weak networks are getting stronger, there is greater collaboration between local groups and with the local authority, and there is a commitment to continue to meet community needs as the impact of the pandemic becomes clearer. A resident in one area talked about community activists consolidating their connections, and in another, it was felt there was a sense of shared leadership across community groups and statutory organisations.

The key to sustaining responses has been the capacity to draw on resources beyond the financial – on broader structures and networks associated with CLI, which have been established long enough to build local intelligence and trust.

'Left behind' areas

Intuitively, at the outset of this research, it would have been possible to argue, or predict, that the eight 'left behind' areas in the study, and in particular those without direct access to flexible programme funding, would struggle more than the others the longer the pandemic continued. Six months on from *Stronger than anyone thought*, it might have been assumed that clear and divergent patterns of response to COVID-19 would have emerged. This is not yet the case. Perhaps this is less surprising when we consider that all 26 areas were selected because they had some community connections and networks, 24 were in ongoing community participation programmes and 21 had significant resources to strengthen local relations. It is also important to note that, while the concept of 'left behind' could be seen as a deficit model of community which focuses on the weaknesses of communities, there are common strengths across the 26 areas:

Communities that might be described as the most 'left behind' lack neither community spirit nor civic pride. Rather, they lack the resources and infrastructure that are vital for bringing people together, brokering solutions and targeting community need."
(Local Trust, 2021, p. 35)

It may be that levels of poverty will turn out to be the clearest differentiator of type of response. A Big Local rep commented that some 'left behind' areas are dealing with numerous complex issues: a high crime rate, county lines drugs, shootings, loan sharks. However, they also have strong informal social connections: "They are well connected, just very poor." In areas where levels of poverty and deprivation are the highest, there continues to be a central focus on the collection and distribution of food. Five areas in this study, three of which are classified as 'left behind', have reported an increase in serious antisocial behaviour, violent crime and/or drug use and county lines activity, illustrating not only the depth but also the range of challenges faced.

The 'left behind' areas in the study have all remained active throughout the pandemic but may have struggled more than others to co-ordinate activity. Although there is some evidence that this has improved as the pandemic has evolved, there is limited evidence of successful collaboration. In one 'left behind' area, foodbanks have tried a united approach through joint leaflets. There has been some evidence of progress but also of a lack of trust and reciprocity, as they have found themselves in competition for funding and claims that some foodbanks were trying to make a name for themselves.

In a number of instances, bureaucracy has been a barrier to cross-sector working (McGregor-Paterson, 2021). Several areas have struggled to link up with strategic, local authority-wide responses to the pandemic and, indeed, some (with Big Local resources) have adopted a go-it-alone approach rather than making broader connections when responding to needs. In some cases, this is a capacity issue, with a reliance on a small number of active residents and/or charismatic individuals. There are also areas which have a history of conflict and competition through the pandemic in terms of access to funding. In others, their inward-looking approach is an inheritance from pre-COVID-19 attitudes and beliefs.

Moving on from lockdown: Ongoing responses

Just as responses to the immediate crisis differed across the 26 study areas, so a varied picture in terms of planning for recovery is emerging. What is consistent, however, is an ongoing conversation (see *Stronger than anyone thought*) about what kind of future it will be. There are those who want to return to normal, running events and opening community buildings. Equally, there are those who recognise that, for the foreseeable future, the community will inhabit an adapted reality of social distancing and other restrictions. There are also those who desire a more equitable society (Parker, 2020) as a basic principle of recovery, a new normal. These discussions are still being played out but, as lockdown eases, it is perhaps the shorter-term desire to return to any kind of normality, as basic as meeting people face to face again, that is winning out.

Irrespective of whether or not they are in 'left behind' areas, Big Local areas have a potential advantage. First, they have long-term secure funding; second, many have become experienced fundraisers; third, they have learned to plan and be visionary. Some Big Local areas have put strategic and coherent plans in place for the next two to three years, including practical approaches to meeting emerging needs, with or without other agencies. One such example is a Big Local partnership in a 'left behind' area where COVID-19 has exposed the scale of digital exclusion. It is considering a pop-up shop and internet cafe where residents would be supported to access online resources, including rent accounts and children's educational materials. They are also discussing involving a credit union, so people can buy tablets, and developing IT resources for digital consultations and voting on local priorities.

Four other Big Local areas have managed to attract substantial investment funds for the future and are thinking long term about community health and wellbeing facilities and access to affordable green energy. This reflects the value of long-term funding as a foundation on which additional resources can be secured, and where strategic links beyond the immediate community have been developed or strengthened over time.

The situation is slightly different in CCC areas because the funding available is shorter term and more focused (although it does provide energy and agency in the community).

While there is evidence of all types of areas securing successful COVID-19 emergency funding, this will be temporary for those that do not have longer-term funding in place. It is anticipated that absence of longer-term financial surety will make ongoing community responses more problematic and any concept of recovery alien when viewed through the lens of continuing poverty at local level.

There is no single approach to recovery but there is common thinking on what the critical issues are now and into the future. These are identified earlier in this report and reflect those raised by Community Organisers (2021) in *Roots to recovery: A roadmap for post-pandemic communities*. They include community access to funding and support, food equity, the importance of community hubs and green space, digital resources and support for young people (see also: Simpson, 2021). Inevitably, future plans are tinged with uncertainty about what the future holds. Research over the coming year will follow each area's plans and the extent to which collaboration with others becomes a driving force in tackling challenges at community level. This is likely to be particularly important if the British Academy's (2021) predictions of a decade of COVID in terms of recovery is right.

Ongoing community support needs

Several key themes emerge relating to community support across the 26 areas as we move towards longer-term recovery. There are differences between areas depending on starting points and local context, with practice implications at community and policy levels:

Harnessing community leadership and agency

If the pandemic has created anything positive, it is the realisation that people have the ability and the power to take meaningful action locally. In areas where there is no Big Local or equivalent CLI, the energy and agency we have seen over the last year needs cherishing. Individuals who have stepped up as community leaders want to continue to influence and improve the quality of life in their areas. Some have developed a greater awareness of how their communities work and gained more confidence to make changes. It is important that this is harnessed through opportunities to build community leadership, networking and collaboration, and resources to bring people together to create a vision and plans for their community.

Developing alliances and strategic connections

In all areas, there are concerns around mental ill health, children and young people, unemployment and debt. There is a pressing need to ensure communities, service providers and statutory bodies develop alliances and strategic connections. As *Stronger than anyone thought* and Briefing 10 note, while relations between communities and statutory agencies may have improved during the pandemic, opportunities for joint working have been missed. Agencies and local authorities need to make a critical shift – to understand and build relationships with their communities, to invest in community-led approaches, to welcome community influence, and to ensure their systems and ways of working are transparent, accountable and enabling. Joint approaches require residents to engage as confident and knowledgeable partners. Big Local areas have a head start here, with reps having encouraged discussion and collaboration around local data, strategy and influence for many years. Many Big Local partnerships already have strategic connections with local schools, councils, the NHS and the voluntary sector; they also have a track record in commissioning and delivering services. They are well placed to contribute to community-based strategies to tackle needs arising from the pandemic.

Digital inclusion

Digital inclusion has become critical during COVID-19. The support provided through loans of computers, databanks and Zoom training has been life-changing for some but much more free access and practical support is needed in the future if people are to be fully included.

Supporting community engagement

COVID-19 has exposed the challenge of retaining community leaders, especially in areas relying on older people who have had to shield, take on caring responsibilities or been ill during the year. These community groups often struggle to recruit new and younger members and develop creative approaches to broader engagement, and would benefit from external support to refresh community governance and thinking.

Financial planning assistance

Some community groups will require support with financial planning, in particular those with existing or planned community buildings. Before the pandemic, some areas (often those with larger buildings) ran successful income-generating hubs. Those with smaller buildings may have struggled – but by and large they got by. They applied the principles of *The community hub handbook* (Local Trust, 2020), diversifying usage, monitoring cash flow and planning for contingency. But what does a successful and viable community hub look like post-pandemic? While many of the principles of the handbook may still apply, they do so in a very different reality.

Strengthening community relationships

Some areas, whatever their status, may need support to manage and build community relations. While there are illustrations of communities coming together to respond to the crisis, there is also evidence of fracture and polarisation. Tensions both within and between some community groups have surfaced, particularly around competition for resources. Support is needed to help people listen to each other, to connect and form more trusting, or at least less hostile, relationships.

Summary

There are differences in how communities have responded to the crisis and the support they might need to recover. This is a complex and evolving picture that does not correlate neatly with types of communities and funding programmes.

Where CLI has been developed through the Big Local programme, many of the skills and resources required to support a community response are already in place. They are also present to a degree in the more recent CCC programme. The areas in the study not associated with Local Trust programmes have some local infrastructure but this is not formally resident-led, and they don't have flexible long-term funding, support or a central co-ordinating body.

Big Local provision has not only enabled groups to build trust and local knowledge that has facilitated a swift response to the pandemic, but it has also enabled groups to keep going and plan for the future. Further, the building of CLI – the rich connections and networks between people, groups and different agencies – has enabled responses that have been more comprehensive, better co-ordinated and, even at the height of crises and lockdowns, extended beyond crisis provision.

These findings, from 26 communities, point to the significance of ready and resourceful communities and the need to support the development of Big Local-type models in many more communities, especially the most economically challenged. This is corroborated by the broader research literature:

Strengthen and expand community-led social infrastructure that underpins the vital services and support structures needed to enhance local resilience, particularly in the most deprived areas." (British Academy, 2021: 2, p. 34)

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Looking to the future

The first-phase report, *Stronger than anyone thought* (2020), concluded that, while there had been one crisis, there had been many responses. It is to the credit of the study areas that they have mostly sustained those responses, at different levels and in different ways, throughout the past year, and adapted to meet changing needs (alongside growing concerns around increasing unemployment and mental ill health).

Our research found communities that have:

- met immediate needs **and** taken the long view

- worked through existing structures **and** developed new networks

- increased formality **and** informality

- developed new ways of delivering services **and** maintained existing services

- concentrated on service delivery **and** prioritised community-building

- provided open access to services (for example, foodbanks) **and** regulated provision

- had a locality focus **and** a community of interest/identity focus.

If quick and flexible responses characterised initial community responses to the crisis, then connections, strategic relationships and funding are likely to be fundamental as communities move on and face the longer-term impact. Many Big Local areas are already planning for community life beyond COVID-19. For some, this means continuing activities they started successfully during lockdown, such as street exercise and neighbourliness projects. Others are assessing the landscape and shifting

priorities to emphasise mental health, digital inclusion, employment and financial support. There are examples of some communities believing they can do more through recovery plans than through their lockdown responses of last year.

Differences between emergency and longer-term responses approaches across the 26 study areas depend on many contextual factors, including differences in programme status and assumed levels of social connection. These will be explored in more detail in the third phase of the research, April 2021 to March 2022. Variances across the study areas at this stage in the research appear to relate to:

- involvement, or not, in a Local Trust programme and the attendant resources and support

- levels of pre- and post-pandemic poverty, and other quality-of-life indicators

- access to physical space (such as community hubs) in which people can reconnect and access services at a neighbourhood level

- the ability of community leadership to encourage and sustain engagement across the whole community

- the extent of networking and routes to influence, including relationships with public and voluntary sector agencies, and the systems and cultures that

promote or hinder co-operation.

All these dimensions are nuanced. For example, within Big Local areas, differences may also relate to:

- the presence, or not, of paid workers and whether they are also local residents

- the stage an area may be in in the Big Local programme, and the development of CLI

- the amount of flexible funding left in the pot

- levels of focus on creating and sustaining a Big Local legacy

- whether digital communication and decision-making have been embraced

- the relationships between members of Big Local partnerships and their openness to welcoming new members and embracing greater inclusion.

Similar differences will relate to the CCC areas, including whether or not they are also a Big Local area – while in the non-Big Local programme communities, there may be disparities in availability of community infrastructure, funding and support.

The British Academy (2021) shares the belief that:

> **Effective community-led responses have been underpinned both by established, funded community infrastructure and by voluntary engagement by individuals."**

It cautions that hyperlocal responses will not be sufficient on their own, and argues for a range of broader actions involving multilevel interventions and building

collaborative capacity to address:

- more equity as a goal in digital infrastructure investment

- improving sustainability in urban spaces, and promoting health and wellbeing

- enhancing cross-sector working to develop inclusive recovery plans.

Our research will follow the extent to which all or any of these are enacted.

The road ahead will be difficult, particularly in terms of levelling up 'left behind' communities. Moving out of the third lockdown, many people are tired and apprehensive, but there is also some degree of optimism. It is this journey beyond the third lockdown that the research team will follow in the coming year. Rapid research briefings will focus on the value and use of community buildings and physical spaces, learning how community action is sustained over the longer term, and how community needs shift and change. The study will share insight into why communities have reacted differently to the crisis and its aftermath, and how responses have changed over time.

At this point in time, however, it is important to celebrate what communities have achieved and sustained thus far.

Appendix 1

Summary COVID-19 timeline, August 2020 – February 2021

1/8/20	Cumulative number of people in the UK who have died within 28 days of a positive COVID-19 test is 41,367, averaging 12 per day
8/8/20	Use of face coverings extended to more indoor venues
28/8/20	Government encourages people to return to their workplaces
6/9/20	Health secretary Matt Hancock warns younger people they risk causing a second wave of the virus if they do not adhere to social distancing rules
8/9/20	Professor John Edmunds of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) warns that COVID-19 cases are increasing exponentially
14/9/20	'Rule of six' comes into force
16/9/20	Prime minister Boris Johnson says that a second national lockdown would have disastrous financial consequences for the UK
19/9/20	The UK government announces the levy of a fine of up to £10,000 for people in England who refuse to self-isolate
21/9/20	The UK coronavirus alert level is upgraded to level 4, meaning transmission is high or rising exponentially
22/9/20	Boris Johnson tells the House of Commons the United Kingdom has reached "a perilous turning point" as he announces new restrictions for England
12/10/20	SAGE recommends a short 'circuit breaker' lockdown for England in October
14/10/20	The COVID-19 tier regulations come into force, defining three levels of restrictions to be applied as necessary in geographic areas
21/10/20	A further 26,688 COVID-19 cases are recorded, the highest daily figure so far
22/10/20	Chancellor Rishi Sunak unveils increased support for jobs and workers affected by COVID restrictions
30/10/20	SAGE documents suggest COVID deaths will remain high throughout the coming winter, leading to a greater number of deaths than seen earlier in the year
31/10/20	Boris Johnson announces a second lockdown for England, for four weeks from Thursday 5 November to Wednesday 2 December
31/10/20	Chancellor Rishi Sunak extends the furlough scheme until December
5/11/20	The furlough scheme is extended to the end of March 2021
10/11/20	ONS figures show the number of weekly COVID-related deaths has exceeded 1,000 for the first time since June, with 1,379 deaths in the week ending 30 October
23/11/20	An extra £7bn of government funding is announced for NHS Test and Trace, now totalling £22bn

24/11/20	The leaders of the UK's four nations agree on plans for Christmas that will allow three households to meet up indoors and outdoors for five days from 23 to 27 December
26/11/20	England's tougher new tier system of COVID restrictions is announced, to come into force on 2 December
1/12/20	MPs vote 291 to 78 in favour of introducing England's tough new COVID tier system, with 55 backbench Conservatives voting against
2/12/20	The UK becomes the first country in the world to approve the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine
3/12/20	COVID-related deaths in the UK pass 60,000 after a further 414 deaths take the total to 60,113
14/12/20	Health Secretary Matt Hancock tells MPs that a new variant of SARS-CoV-2 that has been identified is spreading faster in some areas of the country
16/12/20	137,897 people were given their first dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine between 8 and 15 December
17/12/20	Chancellor Rishi Sunak extends the furlough scheme for a further month until the end of April 2021
19/12/20	In England, plans for Christmas bubbles are scrapped completely in tier 4, while in the rest of England Christmas bubbles are limited to meeting up on Christmas Day
20/12/20	35,928 new cases of COVID are recorded, almost double the number recorded on the same day the previous week
25/12/20	The number of recorded COVID-related deaths in the UK passes 70,000 after a further 570 deaths take the total to 70,195
26/12/20	Tougher COVID restrictions are imposed on large parts of the UK, with more areas of England entering tier 4 restrictions
28/12/20	A further 41,385 COVID cases are recorded in the UK, while officials express concern about the pressure on the health service in England
30/12/20	The regulator (MHRA) approves the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, meaning it is the second vaccine available for use
31/12/20	A further 55,892 new COVID-19 cases are confirmed (rising to 57,725 the following week), the largest daily numbers so far
4/1/21	Another lockdown is announced in England and Scotland
6/1/21	A further 62,322 new COVID-19 cases are confirmed, the largest daily number so far; a further 1,041 people have died, the largest daily number since April 2020
7/1/21	The Moderna vaccine becomes the third COVID vaccine to be given approval for use in the UK
8/1/21	The UK records its largest number of daily COVID-related deaths so far, with 1,325 new deaths, bringing the total to 79,833
10/1/21	Health Secretary Matt Hancock says everybody in the top four most vulnerable groups will be offered a vaccine by 15 February, while every adult in the UK will be offered one by the autumn

13/1/21	A further 1,564 COVID-related deaths are recorded, the highest daily number so far, which brings the total to 84,767
17/1/21	With 3.5 million COVID vaccines given, 324,000 in the last 24 hours, Health Secretary Matt Hancock says the UK is "nearly on the home straight"
18/1/21	The House of Commons votes 278 to 0 to pass a non-binding motion calling for the government to extend the £20 Universal Credit top-up beyond 31 March
19/1/21	A further 1,610 COVID-related deaths are reported, the largest number reported in a single day, taking the total past 90,000 to 91,470
20/1/21	A further 1,820 deaths are reported of people who died within 28 days of testing positive for COVID-19, the highest daily figure so far, and bringing the total to 93,290
24/1/21	491,970 first vaccinations were administered over the most recent 24-hour period, the highest daily figure to date, bringing the total number so far to 6.3 million
22/1/21	Cumulative number of people in the UK who have died within 28 days of a positive COVID-19 test exceeds 100,000 – the total is now 100,428
29/1/21	Office for National Statistics figures have suggested the level of COVID cases remained stable in the week to 23 January, and may have even fallen slightly
30/1/21	The latest government figures indicate that 8.9 million people have received their first COVID vaccine
31/1/21	This date marks one year since the United Kingdom recorded its first domestic cases of COVID-19
2/2/21	The UK records 16,840 COVID cases, the lowest daily figure since 9 December
10/2/21	Jonathan Van-Tam, England's Deputy Chief Medical Officer, has expressed concern that uptake of COVID vaccination may not be "as rapid or as high" among ethnic minority communities
11/2/21	Figures from the Office for National Statistics show the UK economy shrank by 9.9 per cent in 2020, the largest economic contraction on record
14/2/21	The UK reaches the target of vaccinating 15 million people before 15 February
21/2/21	Health Secretary Matt Hancock says there is early data to suggest that transmission of the virus is much lower among people who have been vaccinated
22/2/21	Prime Minister Boris Johnson unveils a four-step roadmap (*COVID-19 response – spring 2021 (roadmap)*) for ending coronavirus restrictions in England by 21 June

Appendix 2

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This research also draws on material from 12 rapid research briefings produced between May 2020 and April 2021. These are all available on the Local Trust website.

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Appendix 3

Glossary of terms

Big Local	Big Local is a resident-led funding programme providing communities in 150 areas in England with £1.15m each to spend across 10-15 years to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods.
Big Local area(s)	Big Local areas are neighbourhoods selected by the National Lottery Community Fund to receive at least £1m. Local Trust is working with 150 Big Local areas.
Big Local partnership(s)	A Big Local partnership is a group comprising at least eight people that guides the overall direction of a Big Local area.
Big Local plan	Each Big Local partnership is required to produce a plan. This is a document they write for themselves, their community and Local Trust. It is a guide and action plan that the partnership can follow, share and use to get others involved.
Big Local reps	Big Local reps are individuals appointed by Local Trust to offer tailored support to a Big Local area and to share successes, challenges and news.
Community-led infrastructure (CLI)	Community-led infrastructure (CLI) refers to networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money, and was explored in Briefing 7 and Briefing 8.
Creative Civic Change (CCC)	The Creative Civic Change programme offers flexible long-term funding, in-area mentoring and peer learning to 15 communities across England. Residents lead every step of the way. Whatever the local priorities, the programme helps communities use creative methods to achieve their goals.

'Left behind' areas

'Left behind' neighbourhoods are 225 wards across England that were identified through research conducted by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI) for Local Trust in 2019. These areas were classified as 'left behind' because they fall within the most deprived 10 per cent of areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and also lack social infrastructure (defined as places and spaces to meet, an active and engaged community, and transport and digital connectivity). They are home to 2.4 million people across England and are predominantly located in coastal areas and on the outskirts of post-industrial towns and cities in the North and Midlands. Any mention of 'left behind' areas, neighbourhoods or places in Local Trust outputs refers specifically to areas from that research.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of communities.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long-term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policymakers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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About TSRC

The Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) at the University of Birmingham co-ordinates a research team of 15 members examining community responses to COVID-19 for Local Trust. TSRC was established in 2008 in order to enhance knowledge on the third sector and civil society, with a focus on understanding the scale, extent and dynamics of the sector, its work in service delivery, the work of 'below the radar' organisations and the changing policy context.

birmingham.ac.uk/research/tsrc

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