

Researching community responses to COVID-19: a methodological note

Written by the COVID-19 community response research team, led by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC)

Summary

Local Trust has commissioned a team of researchers to undertake a study exploring how communities react to, cope with and recover from COVID-19. The research is divided into three main phases. **Phase one** focused on the initial response of communities to the pandemic. **Phase two** was initially planned to focus on recovery, but given the ongoing nature of the crisis, focuses instead on the evolving nature of community responses. **Phase three** focuses on disseminating the learning from the research. The research involves three main elements: **literature review**; **community study areas** (26, involving 'learning conversations', observations, and a review of social media feed); and **additional stakeholder interviews**. Thematic analysis is being employed. The study is reporting in 'real time', with a focus on distilling emerging learning about community responses.

Introduction

Local Trust commissioned a team of researchers, led by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC), to undertake a study exploring how communities react to, cope with and recover from COVID-19. The aim of the study is to learn, in real time, how different communities have and are responding to the impact of COVID-19, how they make this happen and how they might be best supported. It is hoped that the findings will help Local Trust understand what communities might need to reboot once the crisis has passed; insight which might inform future support and investment.

The research is divided into three phases. Phase one focused on the initial response of communities to the pandemic, running from April 2020 through to September 2020. Phase two, running from October 2020 to March 2021, was initially planned to explore recovery, but given the ongoing nature of the crisis, focuses instead on the evolving nature of community responses. Following the research, there will be a third phase, running from April to June 2021. This will focus on distilling and sharing learning from across the whole study.

The research involves three main elements: literature review; community case studies; and additional stakeholder interviews.

In this note we describe the approach we are adopting. We describe the different research methods and processes involved, before concluding with some reflections on our experiences of conducting community-based research during COVID-19. It has been written as a companion to the set of publications which we are producing as the research unfolds (as outlined below).

Literature review

In recognition that there is much to learn from existing studies to inform responses to the current crisis, the first research element involves a review of literature. The focus is on how communities have reacted to and recovered from major crises in the past, such as epidemics, war, fire, flood or other disasters. While we concentrate primarily on England, we also include some international evidence. As well as reviewing extant literature, we are also gathering published evidence as it emerges from the current crisis.

Given the compressed time for the study as a whole and the importance of early and real-time learning, the search strategy for relevant literature has developed incrementally and iteratively as the study proceeds. It does not try to follow the full guidelines of a 'systematic review' – setting strict inclusion and exclusion criteria (for example, date, location, type of research, focus) – and search terms did not seem suitable in this context. Inclusion/exclusion criteria are developing organically as the review unfolds.

We began with targeted search terms, including, for example, 'disaster response', 'community resilience', 'spontaneous volunteering', and 'mutual aid'. This was followed by snowball searches for further items referencing or referenced by a particular piece of literature (for example, 'resourcefulness' or 'social infrastructure'). As time goes on, the search strategy has been adapted to capture an increasing amount of literature that is published relating to the current crisis.

Our focus when reviewing the literature is on the themes emerging from existing evidence, rather than a critique of the quality of that evidence. Findings from the literature review are being published through a series of briefing papers (see below). They are also used to inform fieldwork topics in the study and provide a basis against which we can assess how well responses fit with reactions to previous crises and draw out learning for current and future practice.

Study areas

The second, and most substantial element of the research, involves qualitative fieldwork in 26 study areas. The focus is on exploring how these communities are responding to and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

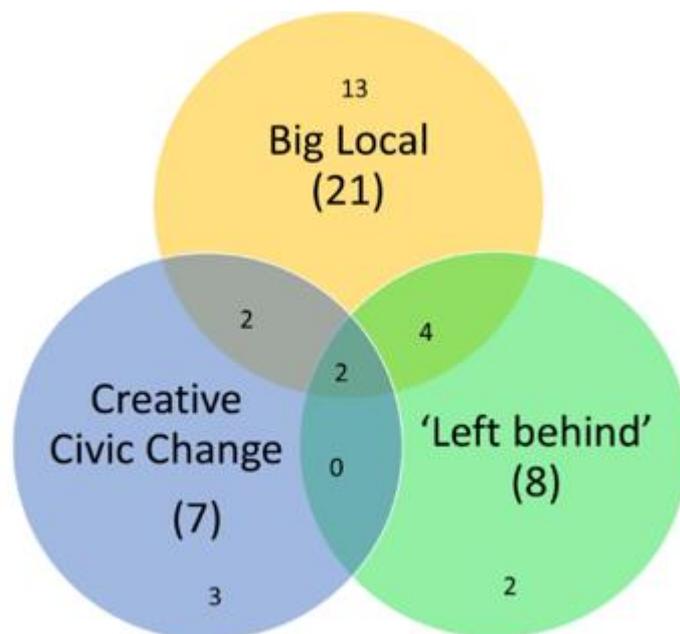
Selection

The starting point was that members of the research team already had trusted relationships with people in the selected communities. This was thought to be essential when attempting to engage with and provide support to communities during a time of crisis: a period when resources (including time and emotion) are already stretched. In practice, the breadth and depth of those relationships varied across the 26 communities.

Beyond that, study areas were chosen to ensure the inclusion of:

- communities involved in different Local Trust initiatives – principally [Big Local](#) and [Creative Civic Change](#) areas, and two not involved in any Local Trust programmes at all
- communities classified as [‘left behind’](#), in that Local Trust recognise that they have [‘tended not to receive a fair share of the investment available and therefore lack the services and facilities that many of us take for granted’](#)
- a diversity of geographical locations.

There is some deliberate overlap between these different groupings.



Data collection

There are three aspects to the data collection within the study areas. First, **'learning conversations'** are being held between the research team and key community stakeholders. These are an adapted version of semi-structured interviews: they are more informal, flexible, conversational, developmental and supportive than standard semi-structured interviews, reflective of the engaged nature of the relationships between the researchers and the participants involved in the study. They provide a space for mutual learning, with both the interviewer and interviewee sharing insights and reflections. Although informal, the learning conversations are guided by a set of topics, derived from the research questions being addressed through the study. These topic guides were adapted as time went on, with new questions added in – both to reflect the evolving context and to enable themes emerging from earlier stages of the research to be explored further in subsequent interviews.

In the first phase of the research – between April and September 2020 – over 300 learning conversations took place across the 26 study areas. These were held with community workers, volunteers, residents, and Big Local reps or Creative Civic Change Critical Friends (representatives of Local Trust who play a facilitative role in Big Local and Creative Civic Change areas respectively). They took place online, often via Zoom, or by telephone, and, where possible, were digitally recorded. Many were with individual participants, but some

were with groups. Some were one-off conversations, others were repeats (we spoke to some respondents up to four times within the first phase). We envisage a similar number and pattern of learning conversations in the second phase of the research.

Second, we are observing relevant meetings and events in the study areas. To date, these have tended to be [Big Local partnership](#) meetings (resident-led decision-making forums established in each Big Local area to guide the overall direction of Big Local within communities) and/or their working groups, such as health and wellbeing groups. They have all been virtual, again mainly via Zoom. In communities that are not part of the Big Local programme we are still looking for other equivalent forums and meetings to observe as the research continues.

Third, we have been monitoring the social media feeds emerging from all the study areas (initially, we also looked beyond the 26 areas, but this was scaled back due to the overwhelming quantity of content). To date we have reviewed over 1,000 posts, mainly on Facebook and Twitter. This will also continue throughout the study. The aim has been to review key themes being discussed as the pandemic progresses. We have, for example, been able to identify key types of response (for example, food provision, befriending, activity packs) within the study area communities, and how these have shifted over time. Short films have been produced using this material (see below).

Study area analysis

Where possible, learning conversations were digitally recorded and either transcribed verbatim or in detailed note form. Notes were written up from observation sessions. Thematic analysis was employed. Early themes identified included those developed from an initial starting point of the research questions raised, concepts from the literature, and discussions amongst the research team about the data as fieldwork progressed. The study team includes 10 researchers with responsibility for the study areas fieldwork and analysis.

Regular team meetings were a vital part of the analysis process, enabling the sharing of reflections on emerging themes and the coproduction of an associated coding frame. These initial themes were refined and grouped as analysis progressed. The data from each study area was analysed individually by the member of the research team with responsibility for that area; this involved manually coding interview transcripts and observation, in line with the agreed themes and coding frame.

Summary reports are then produced for each of the study areas, organised according to the key themes, but also including space for additional reflections and so the emergence of new themes. Once the within-case analysis was completed, cross-case analysis was undertaken by two members of the research team. This was done by bringing together each of the individual study-area report summaries and focusing on identifying points of similarity and difference across the cases, and the distilling factors that may explain this, revisiting transcripts when necessary. Analysis continues throughout the research period, with new themes regularly added, enabling real-time reporting and learning.

Additional interviews

The third element of the research is a series of interviews to broaden its scope beyond the study-area communities.

These will be undertaken with Big Local reps, covering an additional 57 areas:

- 15 Big Local reps who between them cover an additional 42 areas are being interviewed at two points during the research; once in phase one and once in phase two. Although some of the reps may be responsible for communities within the case studies, the interviews have focused on their perceptions of responses outside of our

study areas, bringing a wider understanding of community responses to bear. The interviews focus on exploring perceptions of different responses between communities, particularly between those designated as 'left behind' and other areas.

- Five Big Local reps who between them cover an additional 15 areas were interviewed by Local Trust during phase one, and the findings were shared with the TSRC team for analysis as part of this research.

Local authorities:

- Representatives from five local authorities that have been identified (either through our own research or through other research) as working proactively with communities will be interviewed during the second phase of the research. In each of the five local authorities we will interview approximately three representatives. The focus will be on the approach adopted by local authorities to working with community groups during the crisis, and perceptions of what has enabled proactive engagement and effective working relationships.

Synthesis

As well as ensuring each element of the study is both reported on in real time and informs the next phase of research as the study progresses, we will also bring together and synthesise findings from across the study as a whole. This will be achieved through an iterative process of moving between the analysis from each of the research elements, identifying points of consensus and points of difference, and where necessary revisiting the analysis to understand more about underlying factors. By comparing and combining findings from the literature, case studies, and stakeholder interviews we will be able to identify key learning from the study in terms of how communities have responded to and recovered from COVID-19, how this compares to community responses to previous crises, and how it might inform responses to crises in the future.

Reporting

A key principle underpinning the research design is the sharing of emerging findings as the study progresses. This is being enabled through a comprehensive programme of publications and events, including:

- occasional blogs (the [first one focused](#) on the variety of responses emerging from communities)
- briefings (12 – [six published at the time of writing](#))
- reports (two – [the first focused](#) on findings from phase one of the research)
- [short films](#) drawing on social media content from Big Local areas.

Some early reflections on doing community research during COVID-19

The methods and processes that researchers usually rely on have had to shift, along with those of the community activists involved in the research. The most significant change has been from face to face meetings and interviews, to being online. Some things have worked well, others have been more challenging. Reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the approaches we have adopted; two aspects are emerging as being particularly striking.

First is the engaged research in communities within which we had existing relationships. A key strength of this approach is that it has enabled us to research communities that would otherwise have proved very difficult to access during this time of crisis. Further, it has helped

ensure that the research is developmental; that is, building on existing working relationships. This has been facilitated through the learning conversations, which have proved to be a useful adaptation of semi-structured interviews in this context, allowing for a more conversational based approach with an emphasis on a mutual sharing of insights and the creation of a supportive space for reflection for community members. While these have been more time-consuming and arguably more emotionally demanding than standard interviews, the research may not have been possible if it had relied upon traditional methods in such a challenging context. This method has unquestionably made the research richer and more impactful.

The second aspect that stands out is virtual research. Conducting interviews and observing meetings online has enabled the research to go ahead when in-person interactions have not been possible. It has even proved to have some advantages over face-to-face methods. We have found that some people have been more willing to speak to us online than had previously been the face in face to face interactions. It has also meant less time spent travelling, which means more time can be spent on interviews themselves. But there are also drawbacks. We have missed out on many of the wider clues that we would usually take from face-to-face interactions; the look, feel and smell of places we would otherwise have visited, which altogether would have told us so much more about what is going on than words alone can. We have also missed out on the more informal conversations with wider community members that usually come from just being there. And it can be hard to read what is really going on in meetings; to get a sense of the dynamics between group members, especially when not everyone fits on the screen at once or chooses to have video switched on.

Next steps

This methodological note was written in October 2020, as we move from the first into the second phase of the research. Although the broad approach we have adopted will not change, the individual methods we use may evolve in response to the changing context. For example, if COVID-19 restrictions are eased in the future, we may be able to build in visits to study-area communities and include face-to-face learning conversations in our research. If the changes are significant, an updated version of this note will be produced at the end of the research.

About Local Trust

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

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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