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Rapid research COVID-19

Community responses to COVID 19: Power and communities

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SYNOPSIS: Community spirit has flourished and community power has been realised during the pandemic. But as thinking turns to recovery and 'building back better', it is timely to think critically about how power operates within and between communities, and to consider what this might mean for its potential for transformation. In this briefing we look to the literature to explore different ways of thinking about power, and how this relates to community, participation and inequality, focusing particularly on how these issues play out within communities, rather than only between community and the state.

Key points

- Community power has been realised during the pandemic – but power operates in different ways within and between communities.
- How power operates can affect participation in (and outcomes of) community responses.
- It can also affect the potential of communities to challenge or to reinforce existing inequalities.
- While recognising and celebrating all that communities have achieved, it is important to ask critical questions about the limits of community power – particularly as attention shifts to 'building back better' and the urgent need to 'level up'.

This briefing is the 11th in a series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Briefings were published throughout 2020 and will continue through 2021 to share findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

#RespondRenew

COMMUNITY FUND

Introduction

"When people come together in collective endeavours, power within civil society grows" (Civil society Futures Inquiry, 2018, p. 38).

As previous briefings within this series have evidenced, people across the UK and beyond have responded to the pandemic through an outpouring of acts of kindness, mutual aid, volunteering and support within their communities. This has led some to suggest that community spirit rose during the early months of the pandemic, and that there is a potential for our communities to emerge from the crisis stronger and more powerful than ever (RSPH, 2021; Coutts, 2020). Community power has been identified as a potential legacy of the community spirit and social action generated through responses to the pandemic (Coutts, 2020).

As time has gone on, however, after an initial outpouring of support, energies have begun to wane, and some question whether the community sprit realised in the early days of the pandemic has already begun to diminish (RSPH, 2021). Whether or not COVID has been enough to decisively and enduringly 'shift the balance' towards more community power is a moot point (Kaye and Morgan, 2021). More fundamentally, it has become increasingly clear that not everyone was, or is, 'in it together'. COVID has amplified existing inequalities, affecting who has been hardest hit and how communities have responded, including through influencing capacities to participate.

As thinking turns to recovery, and a desire to 'build back better', with the urgent need to 'level up', it is timely to think critically about how power operates within communities and to consider what this might mean for its potential for transformation. As the Civil Society Futures Inquiry (2018) pointed out, in order to shift power, you need to know power. This includes thinking about how power operates to structure relationships between communities and the government (which was the focus of Briefing 9 and Briefing 10 within this series), but also between and within communities.

In this briefing we start by looking at the notion of 'community power', before turning to wider literature to explore different ways of thinking about power, and relating this to ideas of community, participation and inequality. The focus is on how power operates between and within communities. Our concluding section on power *and* communities brings these ideas together, to frame a set of questions to be explored in our next briefing (12), which will consider what the pandemic has taught us about how power operates within and between communities, what this means for community responses to and recovery from COVID-19.

Community power

The pandemic has brought many changes to our daily lives, including where we spend our time, whom we associate with and whom we turn to for help (whether giving or receiving). Coutts (2020) suggests that through COVID-19 people have come to appreciate the communities in which they live. Others have found that people chatted more to their neighbours, came together for common good, and supported local business during the pandemic (RSPH, 2021).

More broadly, surveys conducted before and during the pandemic by More in Common have shown that twice as many people in Britain now believe that as a society we look after each other (rising from 24 per cent to 46 per cent), and an increasing proportion of people

think that they have the ability to change things around them (Juan-Torres et al, 2020, p. 15). This is community power in action.

New Local talks of a "surge" of community power during COVD-19. Community power, they argue:

> "is an idea whose time has come. At its heart, community power is based on the principle that communities have a wealth of knowledge and assets within themselves, which if understood and nurtured by practitioners and policy makers has the potential to strengthen resilience and enable prevention-focused public services" (Pollard et al, 2021, p. 7).

Community power is realised, they suggest, when communities have the knowledge, skills and assets that mean they are themselves best-placed to identify and respond to any challenges they face. Underlying this is a fundamental shift in power and resources away from the state (which is seen to create hierarchies and professional silos and to cast individuals as service users) and from the market (driven by efficiency, cost and transactions, with individuals cast as consumers) towards a new 'community paradigm' (Pollard et al, 2021; Lent and Studdert, 2019). Responses to COVID-19 can be seen as evidence that community power is possible at scale.

Similar thinking can be found within parts of the Kruger Review (2020), which argued that: "… a whole new paradigm is possible in which *community power* replaces the dominance of remote public and private sector bureaucracies" (p. 7, emphasis in original). This new social model, Danny Kruger MP argued, with community power "at its heart" is the way to "level up the country" (p. 13).

In a similar vein, the Sheila McKechnie Foundation has been talking of 'social power': "the capacity that civil society has to deliver profound transformational change – in individual lives, in communities, and in society as a whole" (2018, p. 5). While the Sheila McKechnie Foundation talk of "unleashing" social power, and the recently launched Law Family Commission on Civil Society is exploring how to "unleash" the potential of civil society, others have talked of its "untapped potential" (Martin, no date), or the "renewable energy" that could be provided by communities (NHS England, 2014).

All are suggestive of a latent resource, waiting there ready to be set free, to transform society. Similar sentiments were expressed within the Civil Society Futures Inquiry report when it argued that "People are hungry for the power to make their lives, their community, and their county better" (2018, p. 4). Arguably, COVID-19 has, for some, provided the trigger to unleash community power, acting as a common cause behind which people could unite through collective action, in a way which has been mutually reinforcing.

While the idea of community power is compelling, as thinking turns to recovery, and a desire to 'build back better', it is timely to think critically about how power operates within and between communities and to consider what this might mean for its potential for transformation.

Power

There are different ways of reflecting on ideas about power. In general, however, there is a tendency to think of power as something that is held by certain actors (Gaventa, 2006),

which some people have and others do not. Those who have power control the resources and decisions, and so have the ability to direct the behaviour of others. They have power *over* others. Power privileges some people, and marginalises or excludes others (Just Associates, 2006). It perpetuates inequalities.

Further, thinking about power along these lines often reflects a zero-sum understanding of how it operates: for some people to gain power others need to give it up (or have it seized). If communities have more power, then the state and/or the market must have less – or at least there is a different balance in its distribution. There are echoes of this recently within the Kruger Review (2020), which talks about the "transfer of power" and of "giving" power to local people and communities; earlier on, within the rhetoric that surrounded the Big Society, which was based on the idea of handing over power from central and local government to communities; and earlier still within New Labour's concept of double devolution (DCLG, 2008).

Alternatively, power can also be thought about as something that is everywhere, present in all situations, affecting everyone: all social interactions involve the use, or misuse, of power. Rather than being held or owned by certain people, power can be understood as something exercised through the relationships of everyone. Community power, for example, comes through people coming together within communities, sharing their knowledge, skills and resources and taking action on issues they care about. Within this line of thinking power is associative, relational, ubiquitous and transformative. It is an enabling force. It is the capacity to act, to get things done, which Barnes (1988) argues make this concept of power more closely aligned to common-sense usage.

Rather than representing mutually exclusive definitions, these can be understood as different dimensions of power, interacting and operating together in complex ways. As Hunjon and Petit (2011, p. 5) argue:

> "In reality, power is dynamic, relational and multidimensional, changing according to context, circumstance and interest. Its expressions and forms can range from domination and resistance to collaboration and transformation. This is good news for social justice promoters whose strategies depend upon new opportunities and openings in the practice and structures of power".

How might notions of power be further unpacked, to reflect on how power has operated during the pandemic within community responses? Building particularly on earlier theorising by Lukes (1974), Gaventa (2006, see also Just Associates, 2006) proposes the 'power cube' as a useful way to analyse power. The three dimensions of the cube draw attention to different aspects of power, allowing for a more dynamic understanding:

1. Forms, or expressions, of power

The framework identifies four different forms that power can take.

a) **Power over**: The power of one person to manifest effects over others.
b) **Power to**: An individual's ability to act and shape the world around them; this might be multiplied by new skills, knowledge, awareness and confidence (Just Associates, 2006).
c) **Power with:** The ability to act together; this can come through finding common ground and building networks, which create collective strength.
d) **Power within:** Individual and collective senses of self-worth, value and hope.

Here it is possible to think about the extent to which COVID-19 was felt to be a common experience, uniting people through networks built across communities, bringing together individual and collective resources and generating power with community members acting together and with broader institutions. In addition there is the potential to think about how COVID-19 has seen the emergence of community leaders across the country, drawing on considerable personal resources, hope and positivity, to realise power within and to use it to galvanise others into action. It is also important to reflect on whether all individuals, groups or communities have been free to act however they might have chosen to in response to the pandemic, or whether certain actors have come to dominate responses and guide (enable or constrain) the actions of others.

2. Faces of power

Building on the work of Lukes (1974) the power cube also identifies three 'faces' of power:

- **Visible power:** The rules, structures and procedures that are used to control the action of others.
- **Hidden power:** People in powerful positions who manipulate agendas and marginalise the concerns of those in less powerful positions.
- **Invisible power:** The belief systems created by those with power, which shape meaning and what is seen as acceptable, influencing how people think about their place in the world and the extent to which they can know their own interests (Clegg, 1989).

Lukes (1974, p. 25) argues that recognising these three faces of power enables us to focus on "decision making and control over political agendas, issues and potential issues, observable (overt and covert) and latent conflicts, subjective and real interests". Here, reflection on the extent to which individuals and communities felt enabled or constrained by the rules, structures and procedures; whether they got bogged down, for example, in the need for risk assessments and checks before volunteers were able to help local residents with the shopping. Were the concerns of all community members heard and responded to equally? It is critical to reflect on the experiences of the most marginalised in society during the pandemic. The needs of people with learning disabilities, for example, were marginalised to devastating effect (Public Health England, 2020). These issues are likely to have played out at a local level, in communities across the country.

3. Spaces, places and levels of power

The third dimension of the cube focuses attention on the spaces, places and levels at which power is exercised:

- **Spaces**: Closed, invited, created.
- **Places:** Public, private (family), intimate (self-esteem/confidence).
- **Levels:** Household, local, national, global.

Here it is possible to reflect on spaces such as the gold-silver-bronze command-and-control structures that came into force during the pandemic, and ask who from our communities were or were not invited into those. At the same time there are the spaces that were generated within communities – autonomous spaces created through people coming together, often at a hyperlocal level to work collaboratively. One question to ask might be who participated in those, and whether the nature of those spaces changed over time?

Rather than thinking about these as separate elements, Gaventa (2006) stresses the interconnections between these different aspects of power. To consider how the

configurations of power are shaped by interplay of the forms, levels, and spaces of power. Spaces, for example, are not neutral, but are shaped by power and knowledge – affecting who is allowed in, what is possible within them, and which identities, discourses and interests get privileged. Certain voices, ways of thinking and doing gain credibility and legitimacy, while others are marginalised or excluded (Brock et al, 2001).

Positions of power are contextual, and constantly shifting; one individual or group may be in a relatively powerful position in one situation, and relatively powerless in another. French and Raven's classic account of power (1959) for example emphasised how sources of power are situational, and many are dependent on social context. Sources of power (for example, human, social, economic and symbolic capital) and positions of power may have shifted during the pandemic; so too may have the power 'holders' and the ways in which they exercised power (for example creatively, coercively or through domination). How might this change again moving into the next phase of the pandemic?

Power and community

Notions of 'community' are also problematic and require some unpacking. Community is a contested concept (Crow and Allen, 1994), meaning different things to different people at different times. Implicit within the concept of community are ideas of shared values, belonging, boundaries, inclusion and exclusion, raising questions about who belongs and who doesn't; who are the insiders and who are the outsiders (Crow and Allen, 1994). Power is involved in the very construction of 'community' (Liepins, 2000), through the ways in which certain meanings about what community is and how it should operate come to dominate.

During the pandemic, the prevailing notion of community has been a place-based and geographically bounded one. In part, this reflects well the locally based nature of responses and the relationships that for many people have come to mean most during periods of lockdown. It also reflects a longer-term direction of travel within government policy.

Within this, however, there has been a tendency – among policy makers in particular – to talk about communities (of place) in relatively simplistic and idealised ways; to treat communities as homogeneous, harmonious, undifferentiated and self-sufficient, with community members having common needs, common capacities to address them, and common experiences. Referencing Dinham (2005), Shaw et al (2020) argue that this is problematic: "approaching communities as homogeneous masks disadvantage and excludes those with low status". Dallimore et al (2019) highlight some of the "boundary issues" associated with development programmes working within geographical communities.

Cutting across and extending beyond communities of place, multiple so-called communities of identity and interest intersect and interact. Communities are saturated with the same divisions and power differentials as the rest of society. They are sites of contest, as well as of consensus. Attempts to impose definitions or to fix boundaries and frame the spaces for participation and action risk reinforcing, rather than challenging, wider patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Communities of all kinds have acted, in different ways, to meet the needs of their members during the pandemic.

Further, we may question how ideas of power interact with those of responsibility within government rhetoric surrounding communities. When there is talk of a transfer of power to communities, and how do we ensure it means more than a transfer of responsibility? Getting communities to take on the responsibility for identifying and meeting their own needs could be seen as one of the key mechanisms of governmentality (governing without government) (Rhodes, 1996; 1997), as a way of masking the dismantling of the welfare state

as government creeps away while communities take on responsibility for addressing need (Murdoch 1997).

As we move from thinking about how communities have responded to the crisis to thinking about recovery, it is important to think critically about community power, to ensure that a growing recognition of and emphasis on community power does not become a cloak to hide a further retreating state.

Power and participation

Drawing on wider literature on community participation can be useful in thinking about how communities have responded to COVID-19, what this reveals about how power operates *within* communities (as well as between communities and others), and what this might mean for future potential of community power that relies on collective action. As Greico (1990, p. 31) points out, a "…simple delegation of responsibilities in the existing local power structures may generate as many problems as it resolves".

Goodwin (1998) argues:

> "the participatory process is affected not just by power relations between local people and outside experts, but by the social relationships between participants in the projects themselves, as well as between participants and other members of the local community" (p. 490).

There is a need to consider how motives, resources and opportunities that enable participation, and pathways and barriers which shape participatory experiences, are structured according to unequal access to and control over resources and power (Edwards and Woods, 2000). Community infrastructure has been identified as an important resource, its relative strength influencing the ability of communities to respond. Has access to that resource been equal within communities, as well as between them? It is important to ask about "the people who participate and those who do not", about "who leads and who follows, who gains and who loses, who is empowered and who is disenfranchised, and what expectations drive the process?" (Edwards, 1998, p. 75).

Similar issues were highlighted within the Civil Society Futures Inquiry, which reported that:

> "Across the country – and in civil society – too many people feel unheard, ignored, frustrated. Imbalances in power are often at the heart of the issue: who gets to be listened to, who makes decisions, who is in control" (2018, p. 69).

Drawing on these ideas, questions remain of whose voices have been heard (and whose have not) in discussions about community needs and responses during the pandemic; who has come to speak on behalf of communities and the individuals within them; who has set the agenda about what needs are to be met, and how? How well do those in positions of power know their communities, and what judgements are being made about inequality, need, and deservedness in their decisions? How far were existing patterns of participation disrupted or reinforced by COVID-19?

As discussed in Briefing 5, there is some suggestion that mutual aid groups have functioned more effectively in communities already rich in social capital (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020), and previous studies have found that those living in more deprived areas are less likely to participate in formal volunteering (DCMS, 2019), leading to concerns that inequalities in access to volunteering could have been exacerbated through the pandemic.

The Civil Society Futures Inquiry reported that discussions about race and race equality were often muted or insufficient within civil society (brap, 2018). Power imbalances had been evidenced in community groups prior to the pandemic: tensions between established and emerging community groups, between paid workers and local activities, and between those "representing" communities of place, interest and identity (McCabe and Phillimore, 2017). Have these shifted during the pandemic or further entrenched, and to what effect?

Power and inequality

COVID-19 has both highlighted and exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities that structure our society according to income, age, gender, and ethnicity (for example: Blundell, 2020). Prior to the pandemic the UK was recognised as one of the most unequal societies in the developed world in terms of interregional disparities (McCann, 2018) and overall income inequality (OECD, 2015). And inequalities have only grown through COVID-19.

Not everyone has been equally affected by COVID-19, with experience depending a lot on a person's situation prior to lock down (Fancourt and Bradbury, 2021). As Pollard et al (2021) observe:

> "The virus has been a disrupter, sometimes an accelerator, but it most certainly has not been a leveller. People and communities that are the most deprived and vulnerable have been the hardest hit" (p. 5).

Most devastatingly, these inequalities have shaped who has been hardest hit by COVID-19, with "higher death rates among certain occupations, ethnic minority groups, and poorer localities" (Blundell, 2020, p. 8). As Whitehead et al (2021) evidence:

> "COVID-19 does not strike at random – mortality is much higher in elderly people, poorer groups, and ethnic minorities, and its economic effect is also unevenly distributed across the population" (p. 1).

While inequalities have been amplified through COVID-19, however, they have also arguably been side-lined within some of the discussions about community responses. While volunteers and community groups have undoubtedly been vital in ensuring basic needs have been met, often in the absence of state services, do more critical questions need to be asked about how patterns of inequality have affected patterns of participation within community response? What might this mean for whose needs have and haven't been recognised and met during the pandemic? What are the implications for the future in terms of the potential for levelling up and building back better? Will community responses prove to have challenged and transformed structural patterns of inequality, or to have reinforced them? Are there limits to community power? To begin to answer these questions, there is a

need to consider "the knotty intersections of inequality, power and participation" (Gaventa and Martorano, 2016, p. 11).

Gaventa and Martorano (2016) suggest that there are two arguments as to how patterns of inequality affect patterns of participation. The first is that high levels of inequality *inhibit* participation: this is the dominant view, represented through the "participation paradox" (Verba and Nie, 1987), which suggests that those most likely to participate are those who have the greatest resources, with deprivation and disempowerment working in a vicious circles. As Taylor and Baker (2018, p. 13) note, for example, "Poverty makes it difficult for communities to become powerful"; when people are just about getting by they have little time or energy to participate, which further disadvantages them.

The second argument, however, is that high inequality *increases* participation, in part because people take action and protest in the face of inequality. The strength of the Black Lives Matter movement during the pandemic can be seen as evidence to support this argument. At a more local level, however, emerging evidence suggests that mutual aid responses have been weaker in areas that had already been identified as being 'left behind' in terms of having fewer community assets and less social infrastructure (OCSI, 2020). A report by RSPH (2011) concludes that:

> "…one of our key findings – and the most concerning – is that the benefits of community spirit are being felt disproportionately by the well-off, which may therefore be compounding health inequalities" (p. 11).

Time will tell which side of the argument collective evidence from community responses to COVID-19 supports, and – importantly – what the implications of this might be for the potential of such responses to disrupt or reinforce the status quo.

Conclusion: Communities and power

As local residents came together en masse to swiftly and collectively meet basic needs, individuals and communities gained a sense of their own power and agency to affect change through COVID-19. This was widely recognised and rightly celebrated. As we emerge from the initial response phase, move into recovery and continue to think about how to 'build back better' and to 'level up' our society, reflecting on communities and power can help us understand what both enables and constrains their potential.

Community power can be thought of as a legacy of the community spirit and associated social action generated through the pandemic. In order for this legacy to last, thought needs to be given to what support communities needed and will need to become more powerful (Coutts, 2020).

Prior to COVID-19, Taylor and Baker (2018), had identified four essentials for supporting communities to become more powerful: accessible spaces, financial assistance, community development support, and the skills and will of external agencies to work with communities to create change. Cardinali (2019) suggested what is needed is: humility, transparency, grace and patience: "the work of sharing power and turning the curve has to be done urgently, but it can't be done quickly" (p. 618). Analysing evidence from communities' responses to COVID-19 can promote more understanding about what support communities have needed to become more powerful, and what this might mean moving forward.

It is also possible to ask critical questions about how power operates through, within and between communities, and what this might mean for the potential of communities to challenge inequalities in the way that is required if we are to truly build back better. There is a need to acknowledge and work with power in all its dimensions; to recognise that the power of communities to act, to achieve change, is not unbounded. Analysing the interaction of different forms, faces and spaces of power that operate within and through communities will help to ensure that community-based approaches help to challenge rather than reinforce differentials in access to power and resources.

These issues will be explored further in Briefing 12 through analysing data on community responses to COVID-19, focusing in particular on:

1. What has community power looked like during the pandemic?
2. How and to what extent have power dynamics changed within communities during COVID-19?
3. What has the pandemic taught us about how power operates within and between communities?
4. What does this mean for how communities might be agents for change in the future?

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About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

These are places where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme
- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme
- areas categorised as "left behind" because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community.

The research, which also includes extensive desk research and interviews across England, is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

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 policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk

Local Trust

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