



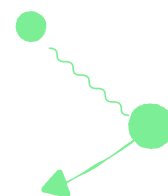
# LOCALLY ROOTED:

## THE PLACE OF COMMUNITY ORGANISING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

June 2020

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Community  
Organisers



# Summary

It is widely acknowledged that neighbours have played an essential role in supporting their local communities through the COVID-19 crisis. Often this support has bubbled up spontaneously from below.

At other times, especially in the most vulnerable communities, it has built on support provided over a period of time by community programmes and voluntary organisations. This paper describes the important role community organising has played in providing this support, and its potential significance as the crisis lessens and the country begins to re-emerge.

Community organising is ‘the work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and overcome social injustice. Community organisers **reach out** and **listen, connect** and motivate people to build their **collective power to effect change**’. They ensure that residents are at the forefront of any action taken locally.

Naomi Diamond, 2019, Community organising compared: what community organising is, and what it isn't, Community Organisers

## The response of community organising groups

### Practical help

Often community organising groups have been first responders, because they know their communities and are already connected and trusted there. They have organised food deliveries, collected medications, made ‘checking in’ calls to ensure people are not isolated.

### Gathering and providing information

Listening and reach – making sure that everyone’s voices are heard - are at the heart of the community organising process. Often community organising groups are the “Go To” organisation – both for local people wanting information and local agencies who want to extend their reach.

### Promoting collaboration

Organisers have supported other local agencies to ensure that responses are co-ordinated, identifying duplication and providing peer support and sometimes mediating between different approaches.

### Connecting people

The connections and trust that community organisers have built up over the years - within their neighbourhoods but also across neighbourhoods and with local organisations - have been essential in responding to COVID-19. Organisers have adapted to online working and in so doing have extended their reach. Their local knowledge also ensures that they reach those who are digitally excluded, using arts for example and improving access to technology.

### Changing policy and practice

Communities cannot always resolve issues of local concern on their own. To address these, organisers have worked with local people to identify where the power lies, who they need to influence and how to make their case.





## Coming out of lockdown

The pressures on poorer communities are likely to increase as the country goes into recession. And there is a danger that the community energies and relationships formed during the lockdown will dissipate as people go back to work or struggle to survive. Organisers expect mental health to be a major issue.

But there are opportunities too. The number of people involved in organising has increased significantly and communities are better connected, perhaps more willing to share their concerns. New relationships have been forged at an organisational level and the reputation of organising has been enhanced in many areas. People at community and organisational level are asking for training in community organising to help them better connect with their local communities. Organisers are planning new listening campaigns to find out about the longer-term impact of the pandemic, facilitating the difficult conversations needed to address ongoing sources of community tension and working with other local organisations to learn the lessons of the crisis response. Many see an opportunity – even the necessity – for community organising to channel the pent-up frustrations and anger of lockdown and beyond into positive directions.



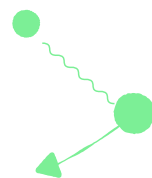
## Investing in the future

The experience in this paper suggests the following:

- Invest in the good times as well as the bad**  
 It is long-term ongoing support that has built the relationships, power and resourcefulness that enables communities to move quickly when faced with a crisis.
- It shouldn't be a privilege to volunteer**  
 Some communities can organise spontaneously. But communities that have been at the sharp end of change and austerity are less likely to feel they have the resources and community infrastructure that is needed. They need focused support to play their part in response and recovery.
- Make space for informality**  
 Organisers recognise the need for structure to harness energies and enthusiasm in the long-term. But the speed of the community response to COVID-19 has been based on trust and local knowledge, rather than regulation and safeguarding.
- Putting residents at the forefront means taking risks**  
 If residents are to lead, then outcomes cannot be specified in advance.

In summary, community organising is about *'being locally rooted, by the people, for the people'*. The investments made until now have put their faith in this; partners in many areas and fields of activity have recognised and tapped into it. This paper shows how people can organise together and build supportive, effectively serviced and more equitable communities. To what extent are policy makers at local and national levels willing to create an environment and enable the conditions whereby this can not only continue but thrive?





# Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, there have been widespread reports of people in communities coming together to support each other – an upsurge in ‘neighbourliness’: people looking out for each other, doing their shopping and picking up prescriptions.

It has been characterised by a shared sense of purpose, new connections and collaborations, as well as new ways of doing things online. Much of this is completely informal – ‘*neighbours shopping and lending money to people they hardly know*’, setting up street based WhatsApp groups, neighbours putting leaflets through doors and offering help with food and medications. At the other end of the spectrum it has been encouraged by more formal local and national volunteering programmes, organised by charities, local authorities and the NHS.

## Neighbours coming to the rescue

A survey by Ipsos MORI and Kings College found that almost two thirds of respondents had offered help to friends, family and neighbours in the previous week.

Making up with the Jones's, Esther Addley - Published in The Guardian - 6.6.20

As long ago as 1848, Titus Salt wrote about another public health crisis that: ‘*The cholera most forcibly teaches us our connection*’.<sup>1</sup> A recent Power to Change essay argues that mutual aid works best at the micro level and that national and other large-scale programmes rely on very local organisations if they are to respond. But it argues that it needs to be organised and that some places need more support in this. While community spirit is everywhere, effective responses do not bubble up from nowhere, especially in areas which have been neglected over the years.

## Power to Change: Community support during lockdown

1. Mutual aid works best at the micro level
2. Mutual aid at scale needs community organisations
3. Community spirit is everywhere, but some places need more support
4. Community organisations have changed quickly to meet local need
5. Bigger institutions rely on community organisations to respond well
6. Trading community organisations are falling through the cracks

Vidhya Alakeson and Will Brett, Local heroes: how to sustain community spirit post COVID-19, May 2020

<sup>1</sup> A Better Way: Bulletin number 11 (April 2020)



An article in the Financial Times celebrates the way .... *the social sector is rising to the challenge of supporting the left-behind and left-alone.*<sup>2</sup> One important aspect of the community response to COVID-19 has been the work of community organisers in such 'left behind and left alone' places. Here, years of listening and relationship building have supported the energies of local people, trained them in organising and laid the groundwork for a nimble and effective response led by residents themselves.

Attention is now turning to the need to build on this explosion in mutual support and community activism. The legacy of the crisis, not only economic but in terms of mental health and education will require investment and imaginative solutions and it is essential that these solutions are informed by the communities that have done so much so far.

*... communities, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, can identify solutions: they know what knowledge and rumours are circulating; they can provide insight into stigma and structural barriers; and they are well placed to work with others from their communities to devise collective responses.*

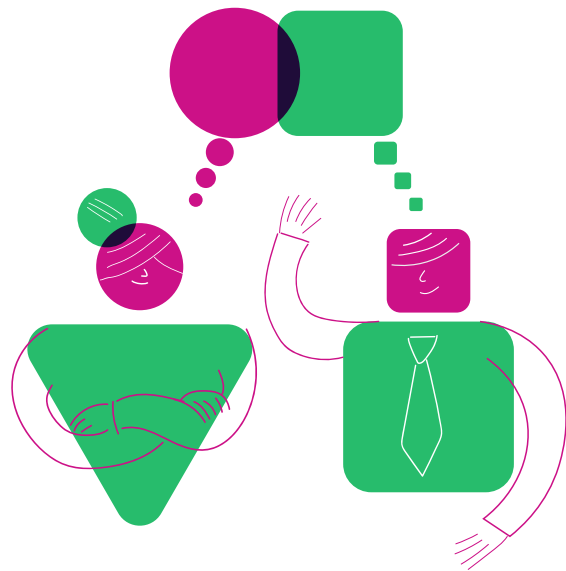
*With communities on side, we are far more likely—together—to come up with innovative, tailored solutions that meet the full range of needs of our diverse populations.*

Community participation is crucial in a pandemic - The Lancet, 4.5.20

In this paper we focus on the role community organising can play in this, by illustrating the contribution that it has made to the COVID-19 response and its potential significance in working alongside communities as the crisis lessens and the country begins to recover. The learning is drawn from a range of people involved in community organising, some who have been funded through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Community Organisers Expansion Programme and some funded from other sources. We have also held learning conversations with external policy shapers and reviewed recent literature and research. We haven't named the people whose examples of action are shared here - as one community organiser said, it isn't about individual heroes, but the approach of community organising.

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<sup>2</sup> Andy Haldane, Financial Times, 24.4.20



# What is community organising?

Community organising has been described as:

The work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and overcome social injustice. Community organisers reach out and listen, connect and motivate people to build their collective power to effect change. (Community Organisers, 2019)

It involves ‘moving away from seeing people as service users who can be ‘fixed’ to supporting people to become experts who understand their own stories and can bring about the change they want to see in the world’ (ibid).

Residents are at the forefront of action. As one organiser said:

*It’s all about people taking action on their own terms over issues they care about with other people close to them.*

Key to this is:

- listening – on the doorstep, in the places where people gather
- connecting – bringing people together to share their concerns, support each other and generate their own ideas and solutions
- building power – identifying where the power lies over the issues that they want to tackle and organising to influence external decisions.

One trainer described the skills required as: ‘how to build power, how to build relationships with people who may be different from you, how to hold one-to-one conversations, how to run a really great meeting so that decision makers will want to work with them, and how to share personal stories in order to persuade them to say yes’.

## The contribution of community organising during COVID-19

*Initially COVID was paralysing and deeply alarming. But now it feels OK – an opportunity to do things differently.*

There are a number of ways in which community organising has contributed to mobilising individuals, groups and agencies. Its response has depended in part on what else was available locally. In some areas there is little third sector presence, and while in others the local authority and/or larger charities were able to step up immediately, this was by no means always the case. In several areas, community organising groups were the first responders and it is not clear what would have been available in the early days if they had not been ready to step up. Previous community organising activity meant that local people were already connected and networked within their local communities and also with other organisations. As one organiser said, the relationships that had been built over time were now coming into their own:

*These are relationships amongst local individuals, but also with businesses and more formal organisations. There is some trust here and therefore more things can happen, including enormous acts of generosity. Quite a powerful phenomenon.*

Here and elsewhere, communities with a community organising history were able to respond quickly and flexibly; they were often much more knowledgeable about their area, were well networked locally and had established trust on the ground. Some had already demonstrated their worth in previous crises, like floods.

In one community, it felt as if it was what they had been building up to and they were ready to go:

*It was kind of what they had been waiting for. And they were skilled enough to engage with it without it being ‘charity’...they are learning new skills right now in dealing with the crisis.*

### All set up and ready to go

In one Midlands town, the organisers described how previous community organising activity meant that they were already connected and networked within the local community and within the wider community. They took a facilitative approach so that communities could take action themselves with support as necessary; people were put in touch with each other, encouraged to collaborate and to work in partnership with different organisations. They see the key to their success as being prepared, getting going from the start, not wanting to hang around:

It's easier to turn a car when it's moving than when it's not.

In the South, another organising team had been setting up a quarterly People's Assembly, with arts and



culture thrown in, so that people would want to come. The team had engaged 50 artists and recruited 42 street mobilisers. When COVID-19 came along they were able to repurpose this for lockdown support ...this period has proved that communities can organise ourselves really quickly and plug the leaks. [It's a] testimony to the organised community.

## Practical help

A survey carried amongst community organisers funded by DCMS' Community Organisers Expansion Programme at the beginning of April showed that the vast majority of support being provided was 'practical help' to those who were isolating and / or in financial difficulties. This included delivering food, providing hot food, collecting prescriptions and making 'checking in calls'.

### Stepping into the breach

In a London borough, the food bank closed down because the person running it was stranded abroad. Despite having no funds, the community organiser supported the hub where he was based to take this on, sourcing the food and staffing it with volunteers that he had trained.

Some organising teams had set up initiatives before lockdown that came into their own – a social supermarket in the Midlands for example, and a gardening project in North London.

### Providing food

County Stores, a surplus food project, was started by community organisers in the Midlands in 2019. The social supermarket was primarily an affordable shop with a subsidiary food bank. As Covid-19 began to impact, they tweaked their social supermarket concept to begin doing deliveries. They now have almost 300 new members who now fall into the vulnerable and at risk category. When lockdown started, the balance between the two functions of shop and food bank changed dramatically, with considerably more demand on the food bank, but this has now rebalanced as more people have joined as supermarket members

### Community gardening in North London

This community garden had already taken off because more people have been growing their own food. Plant sales raised £4000 in the last few months.

It has expanded its business through COVID-19. It has been a 'massive' route to engaging people as people are going out for walks, for example, and discovering the Farm. This has generated new relationships and brought different people on board.



A national community organising body – ACORN – meanwhile had the systems and structure to scale up this practical response across the country.

### Community organising at a national level

ACORN launched a support system whereby people could volunteer their time and people could seek help with shopping, prescriptions or just ask for a friendly chat in nine cities in mid March. Over 2000 households have been supported, some directly via referrals from other agencies. Finding they had a lot of volunteers, they also acted as a volunteer bank for other groups and agencies providing support services e.g. food preparation and delivery in Brighton and Manchester.

ACORN already had networks of members and system of communication in these cities as a result of years of organising and campaigning activity. Its organisational structures are thorough and rigorous and enable people to work together collectively. Its effectiveness was based on this existing membership and reach – literally hundreds of people wanted to support others - and ACORN invested in a few day's work to put systems in place to make this happen.

*Sometimes a bit of structure can help to harness energies and enthusiasm. The fact that we already had hundreds of people who wanted to support others and the structures and systems in place to make this happen, could turn this round in 4 or 5 days.*

As a result of ACORN's success responding to the COVID-19 crisis, members have been invited by the House of Lords to give evidence to the Public Services Select Committee.

More generally, because of prior contact through organising and the trust community organisers have established, they have often been able to reach people who otherwise wouldn't be reached: disabled people, people with no internet access, asylum seekers, below the radar black and minority ethnic groups.

## Gathering and providing information

Listening is at the heart of the community organising process and several organisers had carried out surveys or listening campaigns to find out what local residents' experiences and needs were. Sometimes the surveys were circulated with food deliveries. Both surveys and food deliveries also provided an opportunity to get information out to people, especially those without internet access:

*A lot of people are not online so there is the question of how to reach them. We sent out a paper version of the listening campaign and some children's activities in foodboxes – 100 or so, asking them to tell us what they were doing and what we could do to help. And a list of organisations that can help.*

### Combining practical help and information

One community organising team delivered hand sanitisers as a free gift to more than 5000 households, working with Red Cross volunteers, but included information on its own work and the support it could offer as well as an online survey.

Some people might find it hard to ask for support but another organiser commented that while they might not ask directly for a check in phone call but *'might request a loaf of bread and then have a 45 minute call with a volunteer'*.

Because they are trusted locally, community organising hubs have also been a 'Go To' place for people wanting advice:

*Just to have an answer to a simple question – just talking to someone will help to relieve anxiety.*

They have also been the 'Go To' place for formal organisations like local councils and larger charities, both for information and for practical help. For example, in areas where local authorities have been able to respond quickly themselves, they have invited local organising teams to join their partnerships to ensure that official support and information reaches those that need it, including in one area, asylum seekers:

*A lot of statutory bodies/apex bodies in the locality have turned to smaller community based organisations to reach people, recognising that this is the only way to reach the people they need to reach, because these are the organisations that are trusted.*

Organisers emphasise the importance of reach to their work, going to where people are – the doorstep, bus stops, the chip shop, constantly asking themselves: Are we engaging everyone?

*Without effective reach, we can't do effective listening because all we are actually doing is reinforcing the injustice of only hearing a few voices.*



## Reaching out

A community organising approach to ESOL classes meant the organiser needed to take more time informing students about what was happening, incorporating that information into lessons, doing more casework.

She made lots of phone calls to see how people were. But people in the group were also checking up on each other, calling each other and would get in touch with the community organiser if there is someone who needs further advice or help.

## Connecting people and providing support



The above example demonstrates how groups formed through community organising have been able to offer mutual support through the crisis. Community organisers have organised regular phone checks with their contacts in local areas and those who might be isolated. They have also set up new initiatives to bring people together or supported existing groups to continue.

One organiser commented, for example, that most people locally were on Facebook and this was a good way of reaching people: *'People wanted to be somewhere once the doors shut'*.

## Bringing people together

Working with others, community organisers in a Midlands town set up a Facebook group for people who were self isolating in theirs and the next town in mid March, to enable people to ask for help and offer help. Within one month it attracted 3,000 people and by week 12 of the lockdown (June 2020) it has 4,000 people.

Some organising teams who operate across wider areas have been linking different groups and organisations together to provide peer support and mentoring, often essential given the pressures they are under. Or they have brought together residents in areas that previously had little to do with each other. In one area, for example, an organiser described how links had been made between the wealthier parts of the borough and those that are more disadvantaged:

*The West is wealthier than the East and both had misconceptions about people living on the other side. But people in the West really mobilised – never seen anything like it before. Asking: What else can we do?*

Organisers also spoke about the positive links that had been made within their communities:

*Now we are a whole community with lots of different people in it. Rather than segregated.*



## Technical support

A strong theme throughout the interviews we carried out was the way in which organising teams had adapted to the need to go online and in doing so, offered new kinds of support to their communities. This has been particularly important when it comes to connecting people. Lockdown has posed particular challenges to a way of working that depends on doorstep conversations and face-to-face meetings.

*I can't go out and meet anyone. That is anathema to a community organiser.*

But several organisers described how they had risen to the challenge and in so doing reached new audiences, particularly young people for example:

*We've shifted a lot online – all of the public meetings, the training events. We are streaming via Zoom and Facebook.*

*Online, we have reached people we wouldn't have reached with an event in the local Children's Centre. Our Facebook analytics have gone through the roof.*

*It's attracted a lot more people from different backgrounds compared with when we are doing community organising face to face.*

Across larger and dispersed areas, where face-to-face meetings might have involved lots of travel, meeting online means more people can participate.

However, not everyone is online. The loss of face-to-face connection has been a particular challenge to people in poorer communities, where significant numbers may not be technically skilled, have no technology and/or no access to the internet. One organiser described the need to walk the streets because there were people without internet access who were putting notes in their windows. Another carried out strategy walks to talk to people in their gardens. Organisers commented on the poverty premium attached to pay as you go and the high costs of downloading data on a mobile. This has been a particular issue in relation to home-schooling.

Some teams have found imaginative ways of ensuring those who are digitally excluded can still be supported.

## Reaching the digitally excluded

In the South West, an African Caribbean woman had started an art group with support from the community organising team. After lockdown, a Zoom group wouldn't work because a lot of the women there didn't have computers. But they did have mobiles. So the team gave her a grant so that she could make art packs for everyone, put them through people's doors and then text them a challenge. She could then pick the stuff up, take pictures of it and put it all through their doors. It was a way she could make them feel included in something without them leaving their space. After the first round, all of them had loved it, with one suggesting the next challenge.

Others have worked hard to extend access to technology, refurbishing laptops in a Midlands town and South London, for example.

## Extending access to technology

At the start of the lockdown, a South London community organising hub carried out a systematic listening campaign. The community organisers listened to residents and they listened to partner organisations. The hub then reflected on what was happening already, people's needs and the gaps that existed. One big need was access to WIFI and to IT equipment.



## A library of laptops

Three weeks into the lockdown, the social action hub convened a partnership comprising the local primary school, the local councillors and another local community project. Building on links made by the local MP, the community organiser brought in a community technology company and secured some free time from them to recondition laptops that were no longer needed by businesses. The laptops are prepared with adult filtering, child protection, adult learning resources, a file to describe what is on the laptop, phone links, referral information etc.

Meanwhile the partnership has created criteria and a referral process for people requiring laptops and agreed to provide follow up support. Funding for 120 laptops has been crowdfunded.

*People are now connecting regularly though the laptops. They said it has been transformative in terms of how they were feeling. They felt cut off before.*



## A WIFI solution

Many residents couldn't afford the monthly WIFI charges. Indeed, 30% of people on the estate don't have WIFI. So, the community organising hub brought together the laptop supplier, the Council's housing department and local councillors to design a solution through community based free WIFI. As with the library of laptops, success will lie in multiple organisations working together, something initiated and supported by the community organising hub. A potential project of using fibre already in place and uplinks on the housing estate is now a possibility, and if agreed by residents and the Tenants and Residents Association, it could be in place by September with a relatively small amount of funding.

Attempts to secure community WIFI in the past have stumbled but they now have a system that can potentially be shared across the country and a legacy of community WIFI in a South London neighbourhood.

Another community organising team is working with IT experts to reach out on Facebook and create a Geomap of the effects of COVID-19 and the assets in the area.

## Changing practice and policy

Communities cannot always resolve issues of local concern on their own. As a Local Trust research briefing argues:

*The idea that a community can withstand shocks if it is 'resilient' does not recognise how communities are nested within wider power structures that largely shape their fate<sup>3</sup>.*

So, whilst community organisers have supported residents to take a wide range of action themselves, they have also supported them to challenge external policies and practices where these are creating local problems. They work with residents to identify where the power lies and who they need to influence and then to decide how best to take their case forward. One organiser spoke about the 'juxtaposition between nice neighbourliness and then people working together to challenge'.

### Changing policy and practice

In Wales, community organising charity TCC (Trefnu Cymunedol Cymru/ Together Creating Communities) told us how they were able to change national and local policy in relation to free school meals vouchers:

Local authorities have been left to their own devices and many were running a scheme where families were having to go physically in person to pick up a sandwich every day. In one county there was only a 3% uptake, which meant that 97% of children in poorest families were getting nothing. The campaign involved persuading the local authorities in North East Wales to make cash payments and persuading the Welsh Government not to bring in a national voucher scheme, which, families felt, posed both practical and ethical problems, but to promote cash payments instead. It happened really quickly.

<sup>3</sup> <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Briefing-1-220420-V2.pdf>

In North London, listening to young people showed that their top issue was the difficulty getting to and from school: ‘Community organising demands that you honour their agenda and build on their self-interest’, so the organising team helped residents to persuade Transport for London to run extra bus services, which represented a significant investment in the area. The organiser hadn’t expected to make much progress on this but the young people did their research and were supported in presenting their case. The head teacher from the school weighed in and the parents also offered support.

## Promoting collaboration

Often, organising teams were doing a mixture of all these things, combining practical help with information and different kinds of social support. While many of those they mobilised had already had community organising training, these activities have put them in touch with new people and mobilised new volunteers, as the gardening project described earlier shows.

### A wide range of different activities.

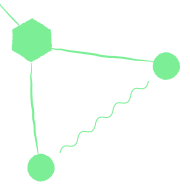
In the North West, a mutual aid group has formed out of the local organising team. It has created a Facebook group with 925 members, recruited 109 volunteers (called neighbours), created a phone-line which is managed seven days a week, formed a sewing bee to create PPE, established a doorstep depot as an informal response to community food distribution, created family cooking and activity packs, kept a community allotment going which is now open for six people to meet (public health guidance as of June 2020), hosted weekly zoom calls, created a shopping group, created a prescription collection service, created a phone buddy system, organised one off community activities for Easter and VE day, and created a community nature walk.

Community organisers have not only built hyperlocal networks, mobilising local people to offer support to their neighbours. Organising also involves building relationships and developing strategic responses with other organisations, including private companies and public authorities to benefit local residents and they have used these to ensure that responses are co-ordinated:

*We have succeeded because we are organising at an organisational level as well as a community level.*

### A coordinated response in the South West

The community organiser described the main function of the community organising team as networking. So, the community organising response has been a direct crisis response but also ‘*leaning on other people and bringing them together*’. The first thing the team did was to network ‘*furiously*’ with the social housing officers in the area and the City housing officer in order to facilitate access to all the tower blocks in the city for ACORN, which was all set up and ready to go (see above). As a result, in the first week of lockdown, every flat had a leaflet saying: We can help.



The organiser was aware of a lot of big initiatives but there was also a lot of silo work going on, ‘*people doing the same thing 10 metres apart.*’ He brought together 30 organisations in one area of the city, all of whom were doing food distribution – but none of them knew about the others, even if they were just down the road. He also brought two community information organisations together to produce 5000 directories to put through people’s doors with all the information about local groups. The team linked up with the children’s centres, local housing officers and local groups to make sure those directories went to people without a computer.

In another area, tensions have arisen between different approaches – very local mutual aid groups and often slower responses on the part of public and voluntary sector agencies - and careful organising has allowed these to be addressed.

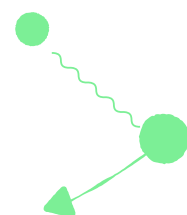
### Mediating between different responses in North London.

As in many places when the lockdown happened, it quickly became apparent here that there were tensions between different approaches – who was seen to be doing what, who had responsibility for what, who was working with who, who could lead on particular aspects of the response etc.

The community organiser spent the first few weeks listening to what different groups and organisations were doing and trying to understand the patterns of activity. She felt that, whilst there was a lot of good work going on, there was a need for it to be better networked. Building on relationships built over several years of community organising, she set about trying to connect and mediate between faith groups, community groups, community centres and council services.

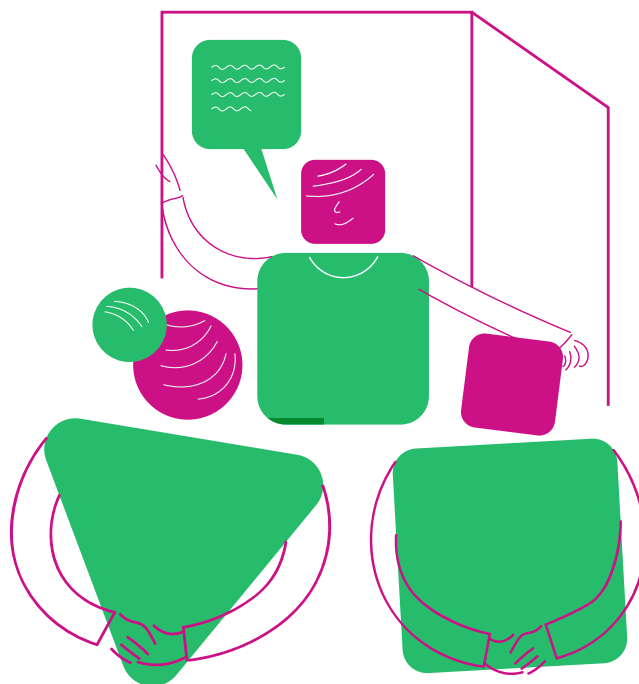
One result has been a food collaboration project involving national food projects, two churches, two community based organisations, council officers and member and lots of individuals who have given their time to make the project happen. Families needing food were identified across a number of wards, community café space was offered, as were fridges and freezers; food has been cooked and distributed to hundreds of people a day. Tasks are shared, ‘an amazing collaboration’. The community organiser has enabled reach, because she already has trust and relationships with local residents. The mediation role is ongoing, but she sees it as important to ensure that groups capitalise on all they have achieved rather than differences. The community organiser has unlocked the capacity of the massive swell of volunteers and the doors to agencies ....

Sometimes the crisis has generated ‘*unexpected partnerships – with organisations finally collaborating for the first time.*’





# Coming out of lockdown



It is impossible to be certain about what lies ahead as we come out of lockdown. But with recession the pressures on the poorest communities will increase and inequalities are likely to widen.

Unemployment will be a growing issue as furlough comes to an end and there are concerns about how the quality of jobs and employment rights would be affected. Services that people have depended on may well not return. Organisers feared that the impact of lockdown on mental health would be profound:

*The trauma is tangible but there is massive trauma that hasn't been expressed yet because of lockdown. If they don't express this trauma... A lot of people will need counselling and mental health support.*

One group had been working on housing solutions for people with learning difficulties and supportive communities that include people with learning difficulties and their carers:

*They've only had one meeting during lockdown because they've had to stop any kind of respite and support coming into the home and can't take any time away for themselves. They were describing the impact on their children (all teens and adults) and said they were suffering from anxiety and depression, many now not able to even sit in the garden. They are not exercising and their child isn't exercising. Our lock down listening survey showed us there are so many people with anxiety, depression and long-term health conditions who haven't left their house for months, while other are thronging to the beach. They are still at home and more anxious because of unclear guidelines. Of all the people they are having the worst time. With many homes not fit for*

*habitation we are deeply concerned about both the mental and physical health of our community.*

For organising itself, there are both challenges and opportunities going into the next phase. The main challenge is not to lose everything that has been gained with this explosion of community activity. The value of community activity has been recognised by everyone from government to local residents but:

*We need to harness the goodwill that has appeared or else it could dissipate.*

Over the weeks of the lockdown, people have been able to give time to their local communities but as they return to whatever normal life becomes they won't be as available as they are now. People will be struggling to survive. Some organisers also questioned whether residents would be prepared to take the important next step in organising – to engage with external actors and decision makers to change their local situation in the longer-term:



*People taking power' can be quite shocking if you phrase it like that.*

*People are dealing with the here and now and don't want to say this is because of a structural and systemic issue and now I've got to take the next step in changing that.*

Another set of challenges relates to safety. Several organisers commented on the fact that so much of their work has in the past relied on bringing people together face to face. While connecting online has offered opportunities and will continue to allow new ways of connecting, it is not enough on its own. But will everyone embrace a return to face to face working – at least in the medium term? As one organiser said:

*People in the tower blocks have formed their own safe spaces – their fortress - they can control everything. So getting them out again is a big challenge – unlearning.*



Most of the people we spoke to for this paper argued that things needed to be done differently in the 'new normal'. Going on as before hadn't worked for their communities and they wanted to see change. But there were opportunities. The number of people involved in organising has increased significantly in many areas:

*We have twice as many people giving their time to the Farm than they did 12 weeks ago.*

Local organising groups are more deeply embedded in their communities and organisers were making contact with parts of the community they had not reached before, sometimes directly, sometimes through new contacts with the below the radar organisations who are working with these communities.

Contacts with other agencies have also increased and the reputation of organising has been enhanced in many areas:

*We have got more contacts with community groups and support agencies now – built relationships with them and can better signpost. These relationships won't disappear.*

*The Council's Strategy Team is interested in more collaboration – they've been impressed by what has been done. They want to capitalise on civic participation, The organiser can help them understand what community organising is by listening to what people want and supporting them to take action - rather than placing them in volunteering roles.*

Several organisers reported that new groups and agencies were coming to them for training, having seen what community organising could do. A national umbrella organisation said that many of its members realised that they needed to up their game in relation to community organising because they had lost touch with their local communities - organisers can offer support in re-establishing these links.

At community level, several organisers felt that people were more likely to engage - to talk, to share their concerns:

*a lot more people are used to being offered support:*

*Before we had to sell ourselves. People are used to doorstep conversations now – or seeing them with other people. And the volunteers we know are more embedded in their local communities because that's where they have been active.*



One also suggested that people were more willing to talk about poverty now:

*People are masking a lot of stuff. But it's the first time I can have these kinds of conversation. We can start talking about poverty now – people wouldn't before because they were too proud.*

So, what contribution do they feel they can make?

Some were planning listening campaigns in the community in order to set the path forward:

*The Council is working with us to ask people why they came forward and what could encourage them in the future, what would they like to do now, and hopefully more actions will happen in the future.*

Others wanted to take the opportunities to bring together the local agencies and other organisers they had been working with during lockdown to discuss what they had all learnt from their experience of the crisis.

Many were looking forward to the opportunity to resume training and were developing online packages if necessary. For people who had become involved for the first time in their communities, the hope was that this training would help to maintain their involvement, offering them the opportunity to build on their experience, providing 'a way of thinking' and giving them a framework to inspire future activity.

Another important contribution organisers wanted to make was to provide the space for 'difficult conversations'. An organiser who is working on housing issues said she wanted 'to take a stronger stance, hosting spaces where members can have difficult conversations with us. One issue is green belt building – people feel differently about that. How do we balance the need for housing with the need for conserving nature? Another is true affordability'. Another organiser wanted to have 'a brokerage role: making different parties come together and shake things out. A critical role – more proactive about overseeing learning and change in micro-detail. Instead of trying to get commissioned or volunteering, getting into messy conversations'.

Organisers spoke too about the opportunity to channel pent-up frustration and anger into positive directions;

*And when things are feeling pretty terrible and people within communities are feeling powerless and communities are feeling really fragmented and divided physically, we can be a way to deal with that and navigate through that and we can show that by organising effectively there can be a really constructive channel for all of that anger to go through to make a systemic change that's really going to benefit you and your community.*



# The significance of an organising approach

Community organising is a multi-layered approach. As one organiser explained:

*Understanding all aspects of organising has been crucial, from reaching through to organising and then power and strategy at different levels. Understanding relationships and recruiting key influential allies to gain support and trust. It also influenced how we have organised across the town, creating smaller micro groups in the neighbourhood in order to build local relationships that will extend past the crisis. Folks will recognise each other in the streets, neighbours becoming friends.*

Organising is based on relationships. It builds the social capital that many commentators have said is needed for society and the economy to thrive, and on which the trust to move quickly and reach people depends. Over the years, networks had been established within and across areas, local people and local organisations have been trained in community organising, social action hubs have established trust in very local areas as well as with other local agencies. Many of the volunteers they have mobilised are people that they have trained in community organising over the past three years.

This has allowed organisers to respond quickly and comprehensively to the crisis of COVID-19 both at a very local level and across larger areas. As one community organiser commented:

*It's simple. At times like these our community shines. And it shines in a way that is not professionalised but organised.*

For the future, it is essential that this potential is realised. But it takes coordination and someone to ‘ignite that spirit and to support those people to step up and take action’. This doesn’t happen without investment. The Power to Change essay quoted earlier argued that:

*..despite progress, the idea of ‘community’ is still habitually seen in policy circles as a sideshow; as something which is nice to support and worth throwing little bits of money at, but never the answer to any of the big public policy questions of our time.*

This has to change because, the authors argue, what the pandemic has shown us is that:

*when real crisis comes, our immediate community is the front line of defence. Community isn’t just ‘nice to have’. It’s a matter of life and death.*



An organiser commented that some of the services people depend on, especially in the poorest areas, are unlikely to survive, so:

*There is a need to invest in those nurturing networks – already formed, formed as a result of COVID or that will form as a result of the pandemic - because a lot of public services will be scrapped and we will need new forms of relationship to bridge those gaps and offer support that will disappear as the result of the financial crash. The resources will need to be given to those who organise, pick up on leaders doing good stuff, give them a head start to keep going.*

And this has been recognised more widely in places as diverse as the New Local Government Network and the Financial Times:

*The local public services that emerge intact – or even stronger – from the crisis will be ones where councils have had the imagination, resource and humility to work in partnership with residents, rather than struggle to meet every need alone. Collaboration is for life – not just for crisis. National government needs to resource and empower them accordingly<sup>4</sup>.*

*Societies and policymakers must recognise...the importance social capital plays in our economies and societies. This [social] sector needs financial as well as volunteer support if it is to serve as a countercyclical societal stabiliser<sup>5</sup>.*

But what does this investment entail?

The experience of the community organisers detailed here and from others we have spoken to in this field suggests the following four elements of any effective investment.

## 1. Invest in the good times as well as the bad

First of all, investment needs to be ongoing. As one of the people we spoke to at a national level said, this shouldn't just happen when there's a global health crisis. The investment in community organising has been long-term (albeit stop and start) and it is this that made it possible for these communities to move quickly when it was necessary:

*There seems to be an assumption that this has all happened spontaneously and therefore you don't need to do anything to make it happen or flourish – it's a natural phenomenon. You don't need to create any kind of system or resource. This is a dangerous and a wrong assumption. Community life, in a sustained way, only flourishes when relationships are built up over time. It needs giving continuing support and credibility to people to make this happen – without this it peters away very quickly. You can't take this community life for granted.*

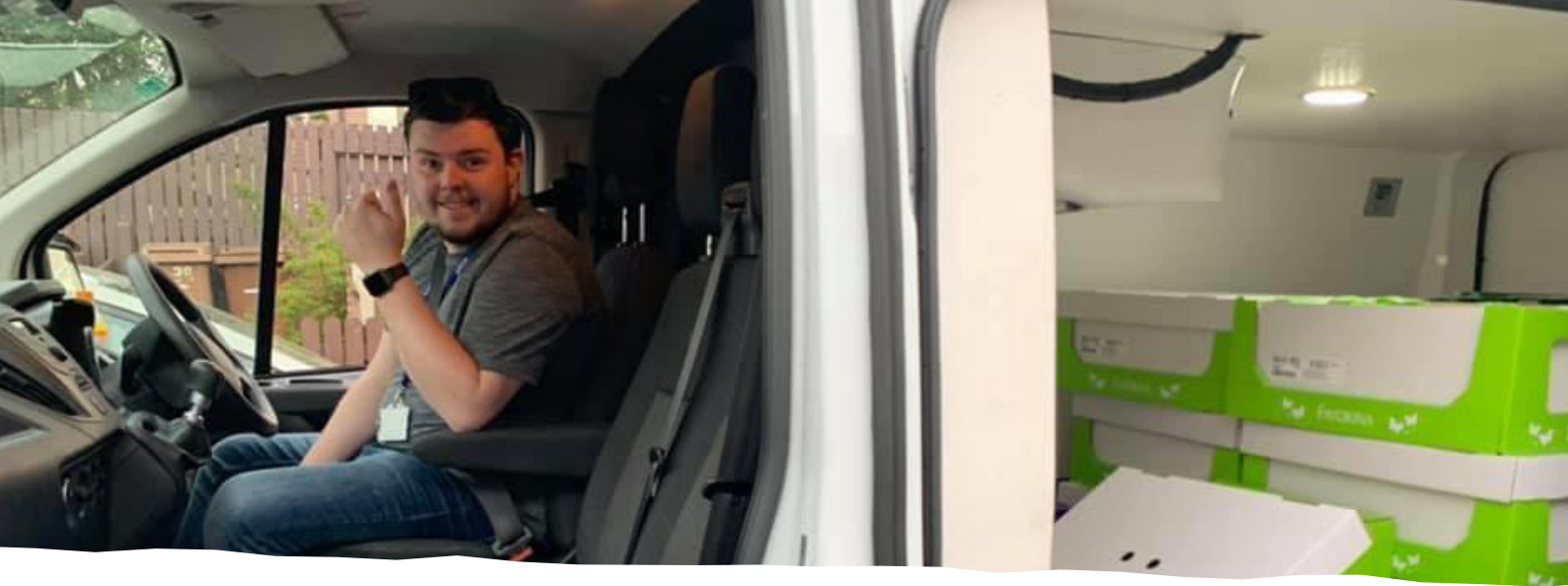
Long-term investment in community organising has paid dividends. Quick fixes may be attractive to investors but they may also be built on sand. As one community organiser said:

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<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Morgan (NGLN researcher), The Guardian, 21.4.20

<sup>5</sup> Andy Haldane, Financial Times, 24.4.20





*When things take a long time, you are all the richer for it. It builds organically. Communities move at the speed of trust.*

## **2. It shouldn't be a privilege to volunteer**

We asked organisers whether all this activity would have happened without community organising. In some areas, they said no, because there was nothing else locally that could respond; in others they said probably yes, but that it would have been unlikely to have involved the local people who community organisers had mobilised. As organisers said:

*People talk about residents being 'dependent and unskilled' when they have amazing interests, skills and backgrounds. Every door we knock on, there is a person who has something to offer the community.*

More affluent communities often organise themselves (although we had example of community organising helping there too). But communities with few resources and little confidence need support:

*It shouldn't be a privilege to volunteer or take the opportunity to talk to a developer that's going to develop a property near my house. That shouldn't just be for retired people or rich people, it should be for everybody. Without community organising of some sort and funding to support those people who give up that time to help people who are struggling, the inequalities will rise even more sharply than they are already.*

And for those who are usually on the receiving end or labelled as dependent, being able to contribute can be life-changing. As one person we spoke to at a national level argued:

*We need to broaden our idea of what a volunteer is. Make it easier for those whose lives are difficult to contribute to supporting others.*

### 3. Make space for informality

Government likes to talk about volunteers but community organisers often prefer to talk about ‘neighbours’ and ‘activists’ organising the response. The trust that has been established at community level has allowed responses to be speedy and not have to wait on permission, filling in forms, or the formal checks that are needed when this trust cannot be guaranteed. For example, one group was asked how it could guarantee that its food store was not being abused by people taking too much. Their answer was simply that they knew their neighbours and the fact that it was a local initiative meant that nobody took advantage of it anyway. David Robinson, who has a long track record in community action, writes about ‘*Neighbours shopping and lending money to people they hardly know, doing things that would never be allowed in a Volunteer Manual*’.<sup>6</sup> He expresses the hope that ‘*if the trust is honoured and the outcome positive, we won’t unlearn the experience*’.

There is, however, a time for formality. Commenting on the ‘energy and enthusiasm that has come out during the pandemic’, one of the organisers observed that:

*... sometimes the systems and therefore opportunities to do this have been missing. Sometimes a bit of structure can help to harness energies and enthusiasm*

It’s a question of finding the right balance. Judgements need to be made about what is needed and when, so that initial enthusiasm is not quashed by regulation but can be channelled effectively in the longer term.

### 4. Putting residents at the forefront means taking risks

Related to this is the comment several organisers made about the kind of investment that could best inform their actions. If residents are to lead, then outcomes cannot be prescribed in advance. This is a message that seems to be coming across:

*Funders are coming around to the idea of being led by the community. Funders are asking how our work is supported by the community and more willing to fund things that are led by the community and less certain about outcomes as something that’s a service. That chimes well with community organising.*

In summary, community organising is about ‘being locally rooted, by the people, for the people’. The investments made until now have put their faith in this; partners in many areas and fields of activity have recognised and tapped into it. This paper has shown how people can organise together and build supportive, effectively serviced and more equitable communities. To what extent are policy makers at local and national levels willing to create an environment and enable the conditions whereby this can not only continue but thrive?

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.betterway.network/david-robinson-relationships-a-reason-for-hope>



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