

# Local Heroes

## How to sustain community spirit beyond Covid-19

5th May 2020



Vidhya Alakeson  
and Will Brett

---

## Acknowledgements

This paper has been inspired by the incredible work of community businesses in responding to the Covid-19 crisis. We are grateful to Ailbhe McNabola at Power to Change for invaluable support in developing this paper and to Adam Lent at NLGN, Ed Wallis at Locality and Will Tanner at Onward for insightful feedback.

---

## Executive summary

The Covid-19 crisis has been characterised by an extraordinary wave of social solidarity and community action sweeping across the country – epitomised by the organic growth of mutual aid groups and the clap for key workers every Thursday night. But this outpouring of community spirit is not yet well understood, and nor is its potential for defining what type of economy and society emerges from the crisis. This paper is an early attempt to do this work.

The paper presents a set of six insights into the initial community response to the crisis. These are based on a series of conversations with our network of community leaders, local authority leaders, civil servants, small businesses and others with intimate knowledge of what has been happening on the ground. Our insights are:

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

In combination, these insights demonstrate the central role being played by locally rooted community organisations in tackling the crisis and ensuring people's wellbeing. That has huge implications for public policy. It confirms a fact which some have long been insisting on, but which is still often dismissed as marginal – that it is communities themselves, in real strategic partnership with the local state, who are best placed to meet public need and to ensure the long-term sustainability of local economies.

The country's network of locally rooted community organisations needs to be rewarded for its role on the front line against Covid-19. But it also needs to be bolstered and grown, so that we can start to shift towards a more community-centred, and therefore more resilient, social and economic model. That shift will take time, but it's vital we take the first steps now. To that end we set out three ideas which together represent the foundation stone of a new, post-Covid 19 settlement – one that gives a pivotal role to communities themselves to own their own future. These are:

1. A **Community Heroes Fund** to reward and then resource the organisations at the front line of tackling the crisis. This would support the growth of social infrastructure in parts of the country which most need it, by funding new mutual aid groups which want to become formal, sustainable organisations in service of their communities. And it would bolster existing community organisations for the future, so they can play a leading role in the recovery and in building a new social and economic settlement.

2. New legislation to **put community organisations directly in charge of local budgets**. Throughout the crisis, community organisations have shown they are highly responsive to local need, and yet they control none of the taxpayer spend in local areas. Organisations which have proved their worth and their accountability to the community should be able to take on public money to develop the local economy, manage local assets and deliver non-statutory services.
3. A **new requirement to give community organisations a strategic role in the recovery**. The crisis has shown that great things happen when the local state acts in genuine partnership with communities. The huge challenges which we will face once Covid-19 abates – from rebuilding town centres and local employment to tackling ever more urgent crises in mental health and social care – will be best met if this lesson is taken on board. In every local area where strong, trusted community organisations exist, they must be part of the strategic decision-making process to tackle the key issues of recovery.



**Vidhya Alakeson**  
Chief Executive, Power To Change



**Will Brett**  
Campaigns, communications  
and public affairs consultant

---

# Introduction

“Some of us still recall World War I, which awakened our generation to the fact that history was not a matter of the past... And once started, it did not cease to happen.”

Karl Polanyi, from *For a New West* (1958)

There is no escaping the sheer scale of the crisis which has engulfed us. Coronavirus is a shocking and arguably unprecedented event, whose full ramifications will not be known for many decades.

But it has come after a series of recent social and political occurrences which have also been given the name of crisis, from the financial meltdown of 2008 and the subsequent rise of populist politics to the Scottish independence referendum and the Brexit saga.

Each of these events has been associated with big changes in the UK's political economy. The financial crisis prompted a huge state bailout, followed by a long, gruelling period of contraction in public spending. The vote to leave the European Union, with as yet unknown consequences, was in large part driven by a widening of social division in the country – between London and the rest, cities and towns, old and young, graduates and non-graduates. But despite the momentousness of these developments, there is still a strong sense that when it comes to change, we have not yet really started. It has been hard to escape the feeling that we have been living through the dying days of one socioeconomic model, waiting for a new one to be born.

The scale of the coronavirus crisis, and of the initial political response to it, makes the birth of a new model now almost inevitable. There is no way the state can simply snap back to its previous size after the kinds of commitment it has made in the last two months. Vast economic sectors like retail and hospitality will be changed forever. Most importantly, the entire country is collectively going through an experience without precedent. We don't yet know what effect this will have on us as a society, but we are surely likely to be transformed by it. The question is not *whether* there will be a new socioeconomic model, but *what* that model will be.

That's where the idea of community power comes in. Ever since the financial crisis prompted an initial bout of soul-searching about what kind of society and economy we wanted, community power has been bubbling up as the start of an answer. The idea of networks of local people having greater influence over the things which shape their day-to-day lives has, over the years, slowly gained traction. Putting community power first instead of the consumer power of the individual or the institutional power of large corporations or the central state could build stronger, more resilient and more inclusive local economies. And giving neighbourhoods more control over public services could better and more efficiently meet people's needs.

But 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.

Now, the time for community power has come.

An extraordinary wave of social solidarity has swept through the country. We clap every Thursday night to show our appreciation for key workers on the front line. Over 750,000 signed up to help out the health services. And mutual aid groups have sprung up almost everywhere. At the same time, many millions of us have come to understand (if we didn't already) 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.

That fact holds huge implications for public policy. If the community response to the crisis has been central to ensuring people's wellbeing, what does that mean for how we think about the economy, and public services? This report is an early attempt to start answering this question. We do that by firstly seeking to understand what exactly is happening in communities during this crisis, beyond the headlines. We start by setting out a series of insights drawn from what we know about the organic mutual aid effort, and about how that is interacting with more institutionalised forms of social support ranging from the work of very local organisations embedded in their communities to the local state, the central state and the NHS.

We then set out three core ideas designed to ensure this moment of community power does not fade away but instead shapes the post-coronavirus social and economic settlement. Because make no mistake: sustaining that community spirit holds the key to creating a stronger, fairer and more resilient society in the wake of the crisis.

Homebaked, Anfield



Sutton Hill Community Trust, Telford



# The community response: six insights



There are nearly 3,500 local mutual aid groups registered on the Covid-19 Mutual Aid website. Around two million people have joined local support networks on Facebook, and the number of daily users of Nextdoor, a hyperlocal social network, has risen by 90% during the crisis. All this activity happened spontaneously and organically in response to the crisis. And yet this does not tell anywhere near the whole story of the community spirit which has swept the country. That figure does not include the countless acts of kindness and solidarity taking place every minute between neighbours, nor many of the micro-level organised mutual aid efforts which haven't registered on a national website because they are already embedded in their community.

National surveys reveal how this surge in community action is grounded in how people all over the country are thinking about their own communities during the crisis. For instance, a recent survey for Onward supports the idea that people are putting community first in this crisis – even ahead of their own or their family's needs. Respondents are more worried about the impact of Covid-19 on the health of their wider community than they are about their own physical or mental health. And they are more concerned about the jobs and incomes of the wider community than the jobs and incomes of their immediate family or their own jobs. This is true of every age group, every social class and every region.

This increased sense of social solidarity has been made manifest in a series of events. More than 750,000 people have volunteered to support the NHS in their own community. And every week, much of the country comes to their front doors to applaud not just health and social care workers but all those who are going out to work to meet our essential needs.

Clearly, something big is happening at the level of community. But so far this story of a surge in community spirit has been broad-brush and simplistic, to the extent that we are in danger of taking it for granted, or assuming that this is just what happens in a crisis – or that community action is equally effective everywhere. There are big questions to answer about the detail of the community effort – how effective has it been, what has worked best, where has it worked, and so on.

In this section we set out a series of our own insights on the reality of the community effort so far. Through this analysis, we identify the central role played by embedded local organisations in channelling the wellsprings of community spirit.

## What do we mean by 'community organisations'?



We define community organisations as not-for-profit organisations that are strongly rooted in place and whose purpose is to improve the physical and social fabric of that place. They have long-standing relationships with other organisations in that place across public and private sectors and civil society, enabling them to quickly mobilise resources and respond to need. Most importantly, they are trusted by local people to act in their interests. Community organisations can take many forms, from local charities to development trusts to community businesses and social enterprises.

Overall, community organisations have three critical characteristics: they have deep local knowledge; they are trusted; and they have strong and extensive local networks.



## 1. Mutual aid works best at the micro level

On Colvestone Crescent – a residential street in Dalston, east London – neighbours were quick to organise in response to the crisis. By 19th March, well before the full lockdown was in place, a couple of the most active residents had organised a Whatsapp group with 50 participants. That week an elderly neighbour was taken to hospital with Covid-19, and the group worked out who had been in contact with her and made sure they were all aware. The group then quickly identified elderly and isolated residents and worked out who was going to look out for each of them and do their shopping. They then started to exchange items (food, protective equipment, fitness equipment, gardening equipment, children's activities, books, etc) and detailed information about local availability of food and medicines.

This kind of thing is happening all over the country, as neighbours come together to support each other. Mutual aid at street level needs little organising. It is an extension of basic neighbourliness, and simple tools like Facebook and Whatsapp are all that are needed to co-ordinate action. It needs little resourcing and few systems or processes to be successful. At this level, there is little need to worry about DBS checks, safeguarding or GDPR.



## 2. Mutual aid at any scale needs community organisations

But it has been much harder to scale up this spontaneous mutual aid beyond the level of the street. At the same time as the Colvestone Crescent group was being formed, a Dalston Ward mutual aid group was forming too. It quickly attracted hundreds of volunteers, and multiple Whatsapp groups and online systems were formed by the lead organisers to try to marshal the efforts of the group. Questions about helping people safely, and about overcoming suspicion and distrust, quickly began to dominate. Despite tireless work by the residents most active in forming this group, and extensive flyering of the ward and other activities to promote awareness, at time of writing the group acknowledged that they had struggled to attract requests for support from residents. Volunteers far exceeded requests for help, and in the meantime other higher-level volunteering systems had been introduced (Hackney Council's own service, as well as the national call for NHS volunteers) which had potentially redirected many volunteers' energies without necessarily giving them concrete things to do.

Those who have tried to step up mutual aid to the level of a town, or even a ward, have quickly found they need organisation, co-ordination, systems and processes. But they have also needed something else which is even harder to magic up in the teeth of a crisis: they need experience, local knowledge, relationships and trust to be able to respond most effectively to local need. In many parts of the country, this is where existing community organisations have stepped in.



Hastings Emergency Action Response Team (HEART) is a good example of the level of systems and processes required to deliver town-wide community support. While 900 volunteers provide the helping hands that are needed, it is community organisations such as Heart of Hastings that provide the infrastructure in the background. They use their deep-rooted local knowledge to help other institutions like the local authority and the health service understand where to direct volunteers' efforts.

In Watchet, Somerset, the mutual aid effort across the town is being co-ordinated by Onion Collective, a community business that has led community engagement in the town for many years. And in Bamford in the Peak District, the Anglers Rest, a community pub and hub for local people, is providing a home for 'Helpful Bamford', a mutual aid group with 40 volunteers who offer people support with collecting prescriptions, shopping, phone calls.

It is these community organisations that are making sure volunteers keep themselves and those they are supporting safe. They have quickly innovated, for example using SumUp as a way of avoiding cash transactions when shopping for people. They are the ones worrying about safeguarding when volunteers are visiting vulnerable people. And they are often the ones providing the physical space for local Covid-19 support operations. The infrastructure to scale up mutual aid is being provided by community businesses and other community organisations.

Heart of Hastings



Onion Collective, Somerset



### 3. Community spirit is everywhere, but some places need more support

We know from previous crises such as natural disasters that communities which are better connected and cohesive, and which have well functioning and shared community infrastructure, are more resilient in the face of challenges. For instance, when the Boxing Day flood hit in 2016, Hebden Bridge Town Hall (a big community business in the area) co-ordinated the local response, organising volunteers and making sure needs were met. Calderdale Council now say that this changed how they think about crisis management, recognising that community organisations need to be central.

This is often a question of social capital. An early analysis by the Bennett Institute of the mutual aid organisations registered with Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK suggests that the scale of community response to Covid-19 is correlated with various measures of socioeconomic advantage, including disposable income and proportion of graduates. That would be in line with what we know about the role of social capital and community infrastructure in tackling not just emergencies, but many other types of social problem.

But that does not tell the whole story. We also know from conversations with community leaders in some of the most deprived parts of the country that the wellsprings of community spirit exist everywhere, perhaps more so in places habituated to dealing with crisis. For these places, the big question is how to channel that spirit to best effect. In the words of Sacha Bedding, manager of the Annexe in Dyke House, Hartlepool:

“People being neighbourly and friendly is just what they do. People in places like Hartlepool are always facing a crisis and just respond to what they see in front of them. They don’t need it to be professionalised, just organised. There are loads of examples of people looking out for one another across the town and I dare say it’s the same up and down the country.”

Local Trust runs the Big Local programme which is investing at least £1m in resident-led action in 150 ‘left behind’ communities across England. It has observed how the work it has done to build community capacity and engagement over the last eight years is paying huge dividends in the face of Covid-19. As Matt Leach, Chief Executive of Local Trust, wrote recently:

“The impressive mobilisation across... Big Local areas would not have been possible without the focused support these areas had received, over an extended period of time, to build the confidence and capacity of local people to step up and make a difference.”

Community spirit is everywhere. When it is properly resourced and organised, it becomes the key not just to tackling Covid-19 but also to unlocking better social outcomes and more resilient local economies in the future.

The Annexe, Hartlepool



## 4. Community organisations have changed quickly to meet local need

Crisis forces speedy innovation, and we have seen that take place at every level. In the private sector, some manufacturers have successfully repurposed production lines to help tackle the crisis. And in the public sector, we have seen the rapid construction of new hospitals around the country.

But when it comes to meeting rapidly evolving local need, it is community organisations which have been quickest to change. That's because community organisations can, in the phrase used by Director of the Brighton Food Factory Iain Chambers, "move at the speed of trust":

"Communities have moved much faster than the government, councils, big charities and funders, corporations and philanthropists. Without even so much as a handshake – because remember that's not allowed – people who already trusted each other because of their existing connections, agreed to move with safety, purpose, determination and speed to get help and reassurance that same day to those that needed it most. Again no contracts, no financial models, no funding streams, no command structures, no application forms, no sodding impact assessments..."

The Bevy, Brighton



Many community pubs, cafés and shops rapidly switched to meal delivery for the most vulnerable after lockdown. Within a week of shutting its doors, the Bevy, a community-owned pub in Brighton, delivered 100 meals to vulnerable older people who used to attend its weekly lunch club. The Bevy is deeply connected to its local community on the Moulsecoomb and Bevendean Estates in Brighton, so it has the advantage of being able to provide meals that are appropriate to local people. Its staff know who can microwave and who can't, who can open up the delivery box unaided and who can't, and who can eat which foods. The Bevy is trusted by local people and its local knowledge makes all the difference.

Homebaked in Anfield, a community bakery, made a similar transition. It closed down large parts of its traditional operations and switched to baking 50 to 70 fresh loaves a day which it provides to the local foodbank and a local community centre. It has also developed a frozen pie delivery service to generate income and meet further community need. Bretforton Community Shop in Worcestershire has added a food delivery service to its current opening hours to ensure it continues to meet the needs of vulnerable members of its community.

Homebaked, Anfield



Bretforton Community Shop, Worcestershire





Meanwhile, many organisations that ran vital community hubs – homes for a vast array of community activity – have shifted that activity online. Community businesses that deliver services, from youth work to mental health support, have rapidly switched their services online and over the telephone. Within a week of lockdown, Inspired Neighbourhoods in Bradford had shifted its diabetes and mental health support services online – a transformation that would normally have been months in the planning.

Others have launched entirely new initiatives. Isolation Station Hastings, a new TV channel to bring together local people in Hastings, was launched by several community organisations that have been at the heart of community engagement and community-led development in Hastings over the last 15 years. And The Annexe in Dyke House, Hartlepool – once it had got on top of the essential job of ensuring food distribution to the most vulnerable and isolated residents – organised for 400 Easter eggs to go to every child across the neighbourhood with no exceptions.

**Observer Building, Hastings, one of the organisations behind Isolation Station Hastings**



Community organisations are imbued with entrepreneurialism, a passion for their community and a deep knowledge of what their community needs. That means they can respond rapidly to crisis, and many are doing so regardless of the financial challenges they face. This ability to innovate at speed will be essential as we enter a new and challenging world post-crisis.

**The Annexe, Hartlepool**



**Sutton Hill Community Trust, Telford**



## 5. Bigger institutions rely on community organisations to respond well

“Over and over again, from the AIDS epidemic in the 80s to the Ebola crisis in Western Africa in 2014-2016, we have learned that the only credible response to significant public health crises is a community-driven one. The Covid-19 pandemic is no different, it will not be unilaterally addressed by a top-down deficit-based agency response nor will it succumb to volunteer drives to target the most vulnerable. There is only one credible, evidence-based, tried and tested response to the current challenge, that’s the one that puts communities in the driving seat, with institutions in a strong support role.”

**Cormac Russell, 16th April 2020**

Much as communities have stepped up, we have also seen huge mobilisation of the resources of the state to meet the needs of those at the sharpest end of this crisis. National government has brought in military logistics experts to ensure that the 1.5 million most vulnerable people can be fed if they have no social network to support them and tens of thousands of food boxes have already been delivered. Similarly, local authorities are stretched to the maximum dealing with those in greatest need, from vulnerable adults requiring social care support to the street homeless who need to self-isolate in hotels and ensuring that adults and children at risk of violence and harm can be kept safe.

This work is of course vital, but there are many more who are vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 – those affected by poverty or by isolation, or those not on the shielding list who still have serious health concerns, or who need support to buy food or access their medicines. It is impossible for the state to identify all those in need and respond swiftly and appropriately. And state institutions often lack the trust to reach people effectively. This is where the deep local knowledge and reservoir of trust of community organisations comes in. It is also where the adaptability and entrepreneurialism of community organisations can rapidly find solutions which more hierarchical systems struggle to achieve.

Where local authorities recognise the reach of community organisations, they have partnered effectively to ensure that needs can be met, especially in

disadvantaged communities. In Bristol, for example, community hub Wellspring Settlement is helping Bristol City Council co-ordinate the frontline response to the crisis in the deprived Lawrence Hill ward, as part of the council’s Keep Bristol Fed initiative. They have been leafleting local blocks of flats to check on everyone and understand their needs. They have created their own triage system to respond to the most vulnerable first, and help with food deliveries (making and distributing around 50-100 meals a day), prescriptions, dog walking and so on. They have redeployed people who have been furloughed by other organisations as volunteers or volunteer coordinators. And, demonstrating once again the ability of community organisations to innovate at speed, they have created a system with the local authority to get volunteers DBS-checked in 24 hours. Similarly, Sutton Hill Community Trust, another community hub on the most disadvantaged estate in Telford, was approached early on in the crisis by its local authority to be part of the local response, with additional funding provided to make sure the trust has the resources to meet greater levels of need on the estate.

At a time when many millions are experiencing various degrees of crisis, community organisations are helping government extend its reach in ways that it would not be able to do alone.

### Wellspring Settlement, Bristol





## 6. Trading community organisations are falling through the cracks

On 8th April the Chancellor committed £750m to charities to support them through the crisis. While this funding is desperately needed and welcome, it is now well-documented that it will not go anywhere near far enough to stop many charities from going out of business, reducing the ability of the sector to meet need, just at the point when need is rising.

Within the very broad category of charities which are facing an existential crisis as a result of Covid-19 – from household names like St John's Ambulance and Mencap to small local charities – are those which rely on trading. Many of the community organisations best equipped to support communities through, and out of, this crisis have trade-based business models. From community hubs and leisure centres to pubs, shops and nurseries, community businesses know their clientele intimately and are therefore extremely well placed to understand people's evolving needs as the crisis unfolds. And yet because community businesses rely on trade – and trading of all sorts has been massively impacted by the crisis – many are in dire straits.

For example, the highly successful BS3 Community Development (a charity and community business) in Bristol usually provides a wide range of popular services to its community, from nurseries to social clubs for older residents and almost everything in between. As almost all of this activity is now impossible under social distancing and lockdown rules, the organisation is predicting a reduction in income of around £700,000 and a £320,000 deficit for the year. That is despite the fact it has furloughed three quarters of its staff and taken up all available government and other financial support. Given the level of need in the community, BS3 Community Development has repurposed itself to co-ordinate volunteering and mutual aid efforts with a huge amount of success despite being reduced to a skeleton staff. As a result, there is – in the words of its CEO, Simon Hankins – a “constant stream” of requests for help and support, both from the immediate community and from other areas of Bristol which have seen what they are achieving and want to learn from them. But if significant, fast and easy to access grant funding isn't made available to BS3 soon then they may have to shut up shop. That would be a disaster not just for the organisation, but for the community and arguably for the whole city.

### BS3 Community Development



One of the challenges for community businesses like BS3 and other social enterprises is the way in which crisis support from government has focused on businesses entirely separately from charities, failing to recognise that social purpose businesses span both sectors. As a result, many have missed out on the support aimed at businesses because it is linked to small business rate relief. Many community businesses and social enterprises receive charitable rate relief or are based out of shared spaces where each individual workspace does not have a rateable value. This means that many have not benefited from the grants available to small businesses, while others in their supply chain have been able to take them up. Some of the gap will be bridged by the support aimed at small charities which will focus on organisations meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in their local community. However, at £370m, this will meet a fraction of the need.

This matters because many of these social purpose-led businesses are at the heart of today's crisis response and will be essential to a number of the challenges we face in rebuilding our communities and local economies, whether that's redesigning our town centres in the face of mass closures or creating job opportunities for those who have been hard hit by the crisis. Those community businesses and social enterprises that survive the crisis will need an institutional response that recognises that innovation and positive change will increasingly come from the grey area between business and civil society. Institutions will need to adapt to this altered reality and provide more appropriate support.

#### BS3 Community Development





# Recommendations

How can we sustain community spirit beyond the crisis?



“The crucible of a crisis provides the opportunity to forge a better society, but the crisis itself does not do the work. Crises expose problems, but they do not supply alternatives, let alone political will. Change requires ideas and leadership.”

**New York Times Editorial Board, 9th April 2020**

The explosion of community spirit and mutual aid in the teeth of the coronavirus crisis has been extraordinary and heartwarming. But it could easily turn out just to be a blip – a feature of the crisis itself, rather than of the society which comes out the other side of it.

According to Robert D. Putnam, that is exactly what happened after 11th September 2001 in the US. During the first six weeks after 9/11, Americans reported rising trust in government, rising trust in the police, greater interest in politics, more frequent attendance at political meetings, and more work on community projects. But by March 2002, just six months later, all these changes in public attitudes had completely vanished. This section is all about how to make sure the same thing doesn't happen here in the UK after the current crisis. It's about how to make community spirit stick for the long term.

To do that, we have to recognise what really works when it comes to meeting social need and building stronger and more prosperous local economies.

It means understanding that the future for public services relies on us meeting more of our needs at the community level. If we want good outcomes for people, services that can be sustained by the taxpayer, and a more resilient society that can withstand everything that the 21st century throws at it, then we have to make a big shift. As many influential thinkers and practitioners have shown in recent years, we have to shift the focus of public services from the centralised state to the living, breathing community.

And if we want an economy that is fairer and more equal, it will have to be an economy that is more locally rooted, where hard work is fairly rewarded and more of the wealth generated in a place remains in that place. For this sort of economy to thrive requires businesses to be locally rooted and deeply connected to their communities.

That means trusting community organisations to shape their local areas, and giving them the resources to do so. It means protecting this crucial social infrastructure and helping it to rebuild after the crisis. And it means building up community organisations where they don't yet exist. If we did all that, then we would truly be rebuilding our economy and society in the best image of ourselves.

A shift like this will take time to work through the system. It won't happen overnight. But this crisis offers us a chance to take the first step on a journey we simply have to make. As we respond to the immediate demands of the crisis, we must keep in mind a bigger, longer-term shift towards community power. Our three ideas for change are presented in that spirit – both as an immediate response to the Covid-19 crisis, and as the crucial first step which will put us on the path towards the more resilient social and economic model we need.

**The Annexe, Hartlepool**



---

## Recommendation 1: A Community Heroes Fund

The ability of communities to respond quickly and effectively to crises is intimately linked to the strength of the social fabric – the local charities, community organisations and community businesses in a place. Those places which have strong social fabric have been able quickly to organise a response based on deep local knowledge of what is needed and to mobilise to meet the needs of diverse groups in the community. In many places, this social fabric has also provided the backbone to support an explosion of mutual aid, providing the infrastructure to enable street-level action to flourish.

Despite the efforts of government and philanthropy, the social fabric of many communities will emerge from this crisis on its knees. Many organisations will be lost because they cannot access the support available or because it is not enough. Those which survive will be weaker and the most entrepreneurial may have the most rebuilding to do. Community businesses that depend on trading are likely to have to reimagine the business models they relied on as they went into the crisis. Tenants may not return when community hubs reopen. Many activities may shift permanently online, and pubs, shops and cafés may need to reconfigure themselves to add food distribution to their activities on a permanent basis.

Even though public finances will be constrained, it must be a priority to **create a £300m Community Heroes Fund to reward the people and organisations which have led the community fight against Covid-19, and to rebuild our social fabric as we come out of this crisis**. The government should match its commitment to emergency funding for small charities and community organisations with significant new money to support rebuilding and recovery. It can build on its existing £150m commitment to a Community Ownership Fund to create a resource that will put community organisations back on their feet and in charge of the recovery, where they belong.

A Community Heroes Fund would recapitalise communities in two ways. It would provide £50m of start-up grants to mutual aid groups which want to become permanent organisations, working to meet the needs of their communities for the long term. Priority would be given to mutual aid groups in areas which lack existing community infrastructure. This is a chance to harness the amazing community spirit that has welled up during the crisis, so it can be put in service of building a stronger, more resilient and fairer economy and society. In order to be able to deliver on this ambition to build community capital where it is currently weak, government should establish comprehensive, national, open data on the social

fabric. This could build on initiatives such as [KeepItInTheCommunity.org](https://www.KeepItInTheCommunity.org) and the Community Needs Index, and should include data on elements of local capacity such as community asset ownership, numbers of community organisations, and levels of volunteering.

Secondly, it would provide a blend of grants and affordable loans to existing charities, community organisations and community businesses to rebuild, with a focus on long-term resilience. The fund could offer £150m for community organisations specifically to recover after the crisis, while earmarking £100m for these organisations to take on vital assets in their communities that will otherwise be lost such as pubs and shops, town halls and leisure centres. These assets strengthen organisations for the long term. They will also likely require much less up-front capital to purchase given the enormously destructive effect of this crisis on the whole economy.

## Recommendation 2: Put communities in charge of local budgets

This crisis has shown that some needs can be met with no consideration for location. Fitness guru Joe Wicks, for example, has gained a global audience of over a million viewers with his morning PE sessions on YouTube. People have connected with friends and family across the world with an ease that would not have been possible even a decade ago.

However, what this crisis has also revealed is the critical value of the very local. Feeding those at risk of going hungry, ensuring that people who need help can get connected to the internet, making sure that those at risk of domestic violence are supported – these all require a very local response. And the response is effective because it is delivered by people who are also local, who know the area and its needs because it is their home too and are trusted because they are not providing a service so much as supporting the place where they live. This is the essence of community business and community organisations more widely.

This highly responsive local action has been essential to dealing with the crisis, but it must be sustained if we are to effectively meet need in the longer term and build stronger local economies. To make this happen, budgets need to be devolved to community-level organisations along with the responsibility to meet local needs. As Giles Piercy, Chair of White City Enterprise (which runs a range of activities and buildings on an estate in West London), comments:

*“Across a population of 13,000 people on the estate, we consume about £35m-40m per annum of health and social care spend. The local community, through local charities, our neighbourhood forum and other groups, has direct control over effectively 0% of this budget. We must get to an administration covering 190,000 people (London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham) before one can, through the ballot box, influence spend. At that level, the council nominally controls around 25% of the spend, although there’s a strong argument to challenge the degree of control they actually have, versus central government pulling the strings.”*

In other words, communities have no say over how public money is spent on them. That inevitably leads to huge inefficiencies. We have seen throughout this crisis that embedded community organisations know best what needs to be done at the very local level, and where resource needs to be spent. So let’s make that a permanent reality.

**The Government should bring forward new legislation, building on the Localism Act 2011, to enable community organisations to take on public budgets so they can manage local assets, take on the job of building stronger local economies and meet non-statutory needs in their area.**

Government has already committed to supporting residents who want to take ownership of council estates and associated green spaces, and to helping communities to take ownership of local assets. We need to build on this and go much further. If community organisations can demonstrate significant local support, they should be able to take on the budget for managing parks, playgrounds, local sports clubs, markets, local museums, community centres and civic spaces. Community organisations should be able to play a pivotal role in how local amenities like these are managed, so they can positively shape the experience of living in a place and bring their community together.

They should also be able to take on budgets for service delivery in areas such as public health, family support, employment support and regeneration to meet non-statutory needs. In contrast to the current Right to Challenge which triggers a new procurement process and has been poorly used, a simpler process should be put in place. Community organisations would have to apply to the local authority to be designated as community-budget holders before budgets could be devolved, in the same way that Neighbourhood Forums have to be approved by local authorities.

Community organisations are by their very nature already accountable to their community. As Hannah Sloggett of Nudge Community Builders in Plymouth comments:

*"If you run a community business and you make promises, you are held very firmly to account by local people. It's where you live, you can't go anywhere. Developers or others who come in from elsewhere can make lots of promises but then they move on, there is no long-term accountability."*

The devolution of taxpayer spend to community organisations can only increase this natural accountability as communities scrutinise how money is spent.

**The Anglers Rest, Bamford**





## Recommendation 3: Give community organisations a strategic role in the recovery

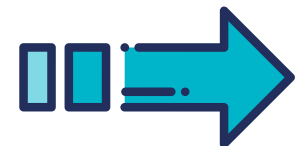
One of the remarkable things to come out of this crisis is the speed with which local public sector bodies and civil society organisations have formed partnerships and worked collaboratively to ensure that needs have been met. In some parts of the country, civil society organisations have even been part of Gold Command, the highest level in the emergency command structure that is responsible for the overall strategy of the emergency response.

While the challenges presented by this immediate crisis phase remain acute as lockdown continues, our minds are already turning to how we start to rebuild our local economies and communities that will emerge severely weakened from this crisis. There are major challenges ahead at the local level. Governments at all levels were already concerned about the future of town centres before this crisis. Rebuilding town centres will be a more critical but far harder task once this crisis abates, leaving retail, hospitality and leisure on their knees. Finding ways to rebuild enterprise and employment will be another major challenge, as will dealing with profound mental health issues caused by a prolonged period of social isolation, fear and anxiety. And in some markets that are highly dependent on the state – such as social care – this crisis has shone a bright light on the urgent need for reform, not just of funding but of the model of care itself.

The depth of strategic partnership between the state and community organisations that is getting us through this crisis must continue as we enter the recovery phase. Those community organisations and community businesses who have deep knowledge about their local areas, are trusted to deliver and have proven themselves able to innovate at pace are critical to meeting the challenges of rebuilding post-crisis. **In every local area where these organisations exist, they must be part of the strategic decision-making to tackle the key issues identified above.** That could mean requiring community representation on the governing committees of all agencies involved with the recovery, including Local Enterprise Partnerships, Integrated Care Systems, Town Boards and Health and Wellbeing Boards. It could mean requiring councils to establish high-level strategic oversight boards for the recovery which included representatives from community organisations. Or all council cabinets could be required to include a portfolio holder responsible for deepening community engagement at all levels of the council's work.

Where rooted community organisations do not exist, they should be encouraged to develop – either through the Community Heroes Fund or through proactive efforts by local authorities and other agencies.

We need to make the boundaries of the local state porous so that community organisations can be part of senior teams developing the strategic response post-crisis, and not just tasked with delivering that response. Ultimately, this is about culture change within the public sector and between the public sector and community organisations towards shared power and accountability. This is perhaps the hardest change to bring about, one that is least amenable to the mechanistic changes of legislation or governance. More collective thinking is needed to seed this culture change and enable it to become widespread.



## Conclusion

The debate has already started about which elements of this crisis we want to keep and which changes we want to discard. Less car and air travel is something that many want to hold on to given the ever more urgent threat of climate change. Whereas social distancing is something that most of us are anxious to see the back of as quickly as possible.

A shift towards community power is surely in the category of things we want to keep. The crisis has accelerated a movement of community power that had already taken shape and was building slowly, largely unseen and unreported. The arrival of Covid-19 on our shores thrust it centre stage, with community action becoming critical both to us as individuals and to the state in being able to meet its responsibilities to all citizens when its own resources were at breaking point.

Now we have the opportunity to embed this change for the long term, and to knit it into the way our communities and local economies start to recover and rebuild. We must ensure that the wave of community spirit that has been unleashed by Covid-19 sticks for the long term and can be developed in all communities. Doing this is the crucial first step to building a better, more equal future out of this national crisis. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.

Sutton Hill Community Trust, Telford





**Power to Change**

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

020 3857 7270

[info@powertochange.org.uk](mailto:info@powertochange.org.uk)

[powertochange.org.uk](http://powertochange.org.uk)

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

Registered charity no. 1159982

