



SHIFTING THE BALANCE

Local adaptation, innovation and collaboration during the pandemic and beyond

Simon Kaye and Charlotte Morgan

New Local (formerly the New Local Government Network) is an independent think tank and network with a mission to transform public services and unlock community power.

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Simon Kaye and Charlotte Morgan

FOREWORD

Community power works. That is the most important lesson to take from this report. When the first Covid-19 lockdown was called in March 2020, communities instinctively leapt into action to do what they do best. They regularly checked on their neighbours, used their networks and digital platforms to organise help for people in need, and went about their work with bucketloads of energy, pragmatism, kindness and a positive ‘can-do’ attitude.

This report tells the story of this upsurge of community power. But its chief goal is to learn from the experience and deduce what national governments and local public services can do to continue enabling these approaches during and beyond the current crisis. The key lesson being that those public service organisations that responded best to the first lockdown were those that followed the lead of their local communities and enabled, rather than inhibited, their activities.

So, it is gratifying to see so many local authorities, inspired by the example of community power during the first lockdown, already designing and embedding new initiatives to support communities’ development and participation in public services. We feature some examples of this work in seven place-focused case studies, but we heard many more stories in the course of our research of local public services eager to listen to, involve and work with communities more closely than ever before.

The people behind those initiatives know that ‘build back better’ begins with community power, and we urge national governments as well as the rest of the public sector to do everything they can to normalise community-powered approaches. The mindset that looks down on communities, preferring to emulate the transactional practices of the private sector or simply augment the power of the state, must be finally rejected. A sustainable, humane future of the public sector is now inseparable from a continuing upsurge of community power.

I would like to thank everyone who took time out of their extremely busy schedules to attend our workshops and speak to us in interviews – your contributions have been invaluable in shaping this study. Special thanks also go to Barrow Cadbury Trust, Carnegie UK Trust and Power to Change for making this report possible and supporting our research every step of the way.

The balance of power has favoured institutions for too long; it is time to shift it decisively towards communities. This report presents a powerful argument and clear evidence for that increasingly resonant rallying cry.

Adam Lent

Chief Executive, New Local



What is Community Power?

The term *community power* captures a wide range of different activities, approaches and initiatives. Common to all of these is the principle that communities have knowledge, skills and assets which mean they are well placed to identify and understand what they need to resolve any challenges they face, and to thrive. When groups of people are mobilised by their shared places or interests and have access to the autonomy and resources they need to make a difference, they have *community power*.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2020 was a year with unprecedented challenges for so many, and it was also the year that proved community power is possible at scale. Public services and communities came together to help each other as never before. The community power movement that responded to the immediate crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic broke down institutional barriers, disrupted hierarchies and, most crucially, produced tangible results.

Shifting the Balance is an investigation into this new community-powered approach, where people across localities worked together to achieve shared objectives as the Covid-19 crisis unfolded. Based on a series of interviews, workshops, and in-depth case studies, it identifies and explores a host of new practices and partnerships that emerged in the first Covid-19 lockdown. It sets out a series of proposals for national governments; local public services; voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations and communities to embed and build upon the new approach in future, beyond the immediate demands of the crisis.

Faced with the overwhelming challenge of the pandemic, our councils, civil society organisations, community groups and businesses adopted many new cooperative approaches at high speed. Though people who were already struggling socially and economically were disproportionately impacted by the crisis, in many places the new approach saw proactive efforts to reach communities and individuals with less voice and access to services. As a result, huge numbers of people across the country mobilised to help those in need and felt closer to their neighbours, local community and local area. The viability and value of community power was tested in ways unimaginable before

the pandemic hit. It is now important to understand what happened in order to retain what worked for greater resilience in the future.

Elements of the new community-powered approach

The new community-powered approach is driven by the adoption of 'balance-shifting practices' among local public services, VCSE bodies and communities. In this report, these practices are classified as **adaptations, innovations** and **collaborations**:

- Adaptations** of existing practices allowed organisations and community groups to be more speedy, flexible, and open.
- Innovations** saw localities take advantage of the moment of radical possibility created by the pandemic to experiment with wholly new ways of doing things.
- Collaborations** emerged in the context of a much more permissive culture within and between the communities, organisations, and institutions.

Adaptations	Informality & smaller scale
	Agility & outcomes-focus
	Modified risk appetite & anti-bureaucracy
Innovations	Use of digital technologies
	New organisational forms to solve problems
	New driving principles and motivations
Collaborations	Relationships over boundaries
	Holistic & whole-system approaches

Importantly, there is plentiful evidence that this new approach *worked*. The informal, agile, and technologically enabled new relationships and practices ensured the safety of thousands of vulnerable people. Barriers were removed, and needs were identified and met at a pace many observe was unprecedented before the crisis.

Shifting the Balance illustrates how these changes operated through a series of seven place-based case studies from across Britain.

However, many of these crucial practices and relationships are now at risk of slipping away in the face of economic instability, the longer term demands of the pandemic as early motivation ebbs, and the lure of a return to 'business as usual'.

Comparing the contexts: Wales, Scotland, and England

To better understand how community power worked in different places, *Shifting the Balance* examines the different operational contexts of the nations of Great Britain.

In Scotland and Wales, more established systems and incentives for long-term thinking and community planning were an explicit factor in the way that localities responded to the crisis. This may yet allow for the new model to be more easily sustained.

England, with no comparable structures at the national level, was more dependent on the emergence of long-term planning and community-led practices at the local scale.

Embedding the new community-powered approach

There are a number of risks and challenges that will hold back the sustainability of the new approach if left unaddressed or unchanged. These include growing fatigue with managing a long-term crisis response and widening economic, social, racial, and digital inequalities. To overcome these challenges and embed the

new approach for the longer term, *Shifting the Balance* identifies four core lessons for national governments, local authorities and VCSE organisations embedding the new practices post-Covid.

- 1. Work locally and protect informality:** Local institutions should identify ways in which they can remove or negotiate formal regulations and systems on behalf of community groups. In so doing, local institutions can help community groups to retain their informality, agility and versatility.
- 2. Foster innovations and harness pre-existing resilience:** Balancing the new with the old is key. The genuine innovations that emerged during the pandemic – brand new neighbourhood networks, entirely new funding schemes, wholly original partnerships – may require the most upkeep during recovery. Resilience also emerges from longer-term trends, the experience of crisis response, and meaningful civil society development.
- 3. Embed long-term planning across localities:** Short-termism is the enemy of community power. If this new approach is to be more than a flash-in-the-pan in many places, national and local governments will need to commit to long-term planning. By escaping from short-term funding deals and the incentives of the political cycle, localities will be better placed to engage in collaborative community planning and embed community-led practices that emerged quickly in a time of crisis.
- 4. Make space for VCSE collaboration:** The creation of peer networks would help to connect different kinds of community businesses, voluntary groups, and charities – both within and between places and between national, regional and local levels. These organisations can find common cause and should not always be competing with each other for resources or unaware of each other's existence.

Recommendations

With all of this in mind, the report concludes with nine recommendations for national governments, local authorities and other public service bodies, VCSE organisations and communities to sustain the new community-powered approach.

Adaptation

- 1. Proactively identify, map and embed new practices.**
Public services, community organisations and communities should work together to record and cultivate effective community-powered approaches across whole localities as we turn toward recovery.
- 2. Build more meaningful connections with communities.**
Local public services should maintain the more proactive, inclusive and collaborative style of engagement that we witnessed during the first lockdown.
- 3. Resource the community's core assets.**
National governments should devolve funding locally to support community power and infrastructure, alongside national and local public services creating opportunities for communities to participate directly in decisions about resource allocation.

Innovation

- 1. Normalise digital inclusivity.**
Local public, education, business and VCSE partners should work together to assess and address digital skills and equipment needs in their place. National governments should commit funding to support place-based initiatives.
- 2. Embed structural long-termism and community planning at the national level.**
The UK Government should table a Community Power Bill to strengthen community rights and participation in public services in England. The Cabinet Office should lead both the development of the Bill and the shift towards a more long-termist policy-making environment in Whitehall.

3. Facilitate informal community-led approaches.

Public services should support local community groups and frontline public servants to navigate formal bureaucratic processes and enable them to carry out their work with autonomy and agility.

Collaboration

1. Build a unifying narrative and vision for the whole locality.

Local public services, cross-sector organisations and communities should serve as equal partners and co-authors to a shared narrative capturing their place's story of the Covid-19 crisis and ambitions for the future.

2. Establish spaces and networks for communities and the third sector.

Local public services should support rather than manage charity and community networks to encourage joined-up working across a place and data-sharing where appropriate.

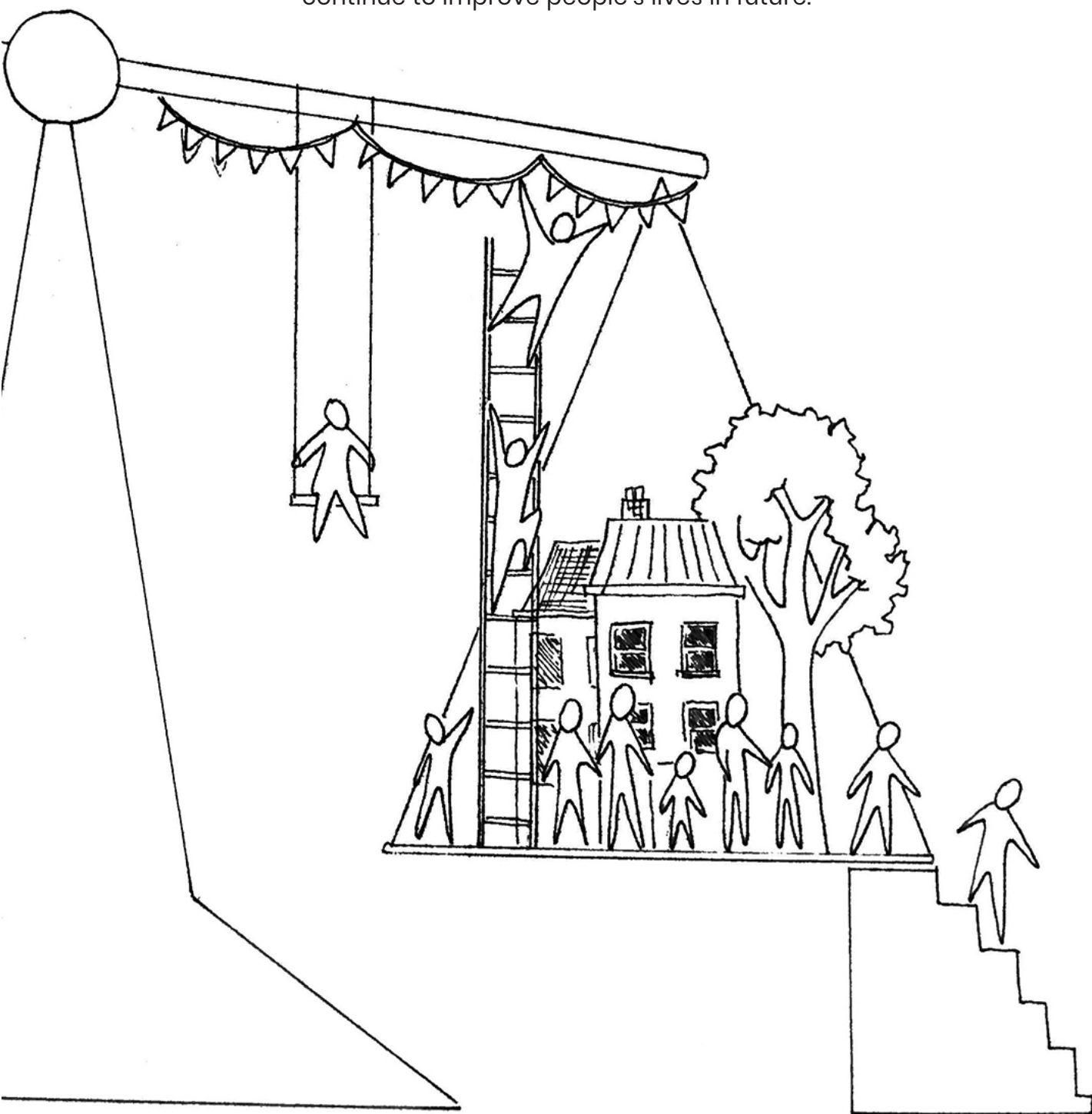
3. Incentivise cooperation, not competition.

Local and national government should adopt community commissioning and social value procurement to galvanise meaningful partnerships and trusting, collaborative behaviours across localities.

The new community-powered approach that emerged in response to the pandemic was the product of localities finding the best possible ways to respond collectively to a crisis. It was self-evidently the most natural and effective model to adopt in the midst of a pandemic. This is telling.

This report shows that through adopting community-powered approaches, public services were able to empower frontline workers, set up community hubs to coordinate local responses, and rely on communities to help vulnerable people with much more than shopping and collecting prescriptions.

However, it is not yet clear whether this experience has been enough to decisively shift the balance toward more community power. By learning lessons from the extraordinary adaptations and achievements that took place during the pandemic, we may yet realise that an entirely different approach is possible – one that can continue to improve people's lives in future.





INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW COMMUNITY-POWERED APPROACH

The unprecedented challenges posed to the institutions and communities of the UK by the Covid-19 pandemic brought with them a series of contradictions.

Though the emergency is global in nature, effective responses often function at the level of neighbourhoods or even individual streets. Though the virus is a universal threat – meaning we were literally ‘all in it together’ – its worst effects are by no means equally felt, with Black Asian and minority ethnic groups (BAME) and low-income areas more exposed than others. The experience has been an unquestionable tragedy, with many lost lives and livelihoods and people plunged into isolation and loneliness.

Yet the pandemic has also forced the rapid evolution of everyday working in our communities, councils, and civil society organisations. This surge of community power is the focus of *Shifting the Balance*.

Before the pandemic, under ‘normal’ circumstances, community power at scale faced heavy resistance in the UK. This was because of:

- **Institutional inertia:** A ‘this is how it’s done because this is how we do it’ mentality that ensures public service provision is largely characterised by transactional and top-down, deeply rooted in the norms of state provision or the market paradigm.¹

¹ Lent, A. and Studdert, J. (2019). *The Community Paradigm*. New Local.

- **Unintended disincentives:** Such as tight auditing, financial, or electoral horizons that cause short-term thinking, and funding frameworks that force voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) groups to compete with each other rather than collaborate more strategically across localities.
- **Vested interests:** The political and administrative centre has every reason and opportunity to hoard power. There is little scope within the system to wrest it away when the centre largely retains control of finances and ultimate say over what can be done.

For the duration of a few weeks following the first lockdown, which began in March 2020, these obstacles – in many places and for many people – melted away.

- The scale and urgency of the crisis made agility and speed non-negotiable for all involved. In the past, the status quo was the less risky option, change was gradual– but in an emergency the risk-reward profile turned upside down: standing still became the riskier proposition. Bureaucracy and usual processes were scaled back so that swift responses to urgent need were prioritised.
- Everyone's incentives shifted toward resolving problems as collaboratively and rapidly as possible. Job descriptions were cast aside as people, often working outside professional roles and from all walks of life worked together to help others however they could.
- Many public bodies recognised the value of community and mutual aid groups mobilising swiftly on the ground. Some quickly made funding available for VCSE-led initiatives, which allowed communities to invest in their own priorities.

Although in so many ways a difficult year, 2020 is also the year that proved community power is possible at scale. We have seen public services and communities come together before to help others during severe floods or heavy snows, but never in such a widespread fashion in all corners of the country. The community power movement broke down institutional barriers, disrupted hierarchies and, most crucially, produced tangible results.²

² For a sample of these impacts and some proposed ways to support communities, see Kruger, D. (2020). [Levelling up our Communities](#). Commissioned government report.

The first lockdown can be seen to have precipitated first full-scale test of the arguments put forward by advocates of community power. The actions that emerged in response indicate a prototype of a more enabling, facilitative model for the state, and for the power of place-based, collaborative ways of working.³ One council officer described the shift to working with communities as ‘partners’ rather than ‘service users’ as having achieved the progress of “decades in days”. Yet, as the Covid-19 crisis drags on and exhausted public servants increasingly retreat to the comfort of traditional ways of working, there are signs that the opportunity to build on the explosion of community power that happened in the first lockdown is fading away.

What emerged at a moment of crisis was effectively a *community-powered approach* for problem-solving and public services. *Shifting the Balance* is an effort to understand this new approach before the end of the crisis sees it slip away. We analyse the new practices and relationships that appeared – and how they may have played out differently in different places. This enables us to recommend ways to embed and preserve the hard-won patches of progress that have been achieved by our committed public servants and mobilised communities. To fail to do so would be a terrible mistake, and risk losing again the resilience that could prevent tragedies of this scale in future.

Sustaining this new approach will only be possible if all members of civil society are involved. Yet one of the most damaging side-effects of the Covid-19 crisis is its contribution towards widening inequalities. Digital and educational inequalities in particular grew considerably.⁴ A more intense spotlight was cast on existing income, health and racial inequalities – the latter issue also the focus of powerful global messages and protests organised by the re-energised Black Lives Matter movement. Gender disparities also became more pronounced as women took on the bulk of additional childcare during lockdown,⁵ while most of the 40,000 calls made to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline made in the first three months of the first lockdown came from women.⁶

³ See, for example, the results of Carnegie UK Trust’s ‘listening project’: Coutts, P., *et al.* (2020). [A Shared Response](#). Carnegie UK Trust.

⁴ Stone, E., Nuckley, P., & Shapiro, R. (2020). [Digital Inclusion in Health and Care](#). NHS Digital; Andrew, A., *et al.* (2020). [Inequalities in children’s experiences of home learning during the COVID-19 lockdown in England](#). Institute for Fiscal Studies.

⁵ Savage, M. (2020). [How Covid-19 is changing women’s lives](#). BBC Worklife.

⁶ Kelly, J. and Graham, S. (2020). [Coronavirus: Domestic abuse helpline sees lockdown surge](#). BBC News.

For public services seeking to retain those positive new practices and relationships with communities, working with communities to reduce these detrimental inequalities must be among their top priorities.

About this project and the new approach

Shifting the Balance seeks to identify, analyse, and offer practical steps toward embedding the new community-powered approach that emerged during the pandemic.

Through a combination of research workshops, expert and participant interviews, and in-depth case studies we investigated the experiences of new practices across Britain. This allowed us to distil an understanding of how relationships have changed between institutions and communities in many places.

As this report shows, those experiences have been diverse. In this report we identify three core elements within the new approach:

adaptation, innovation, and collaboration.

- **Adaptations** of existing practices to be more speedy, flexible, and open.
- **Innovative** practices that took advantage of the moment of radical possibility created by the pandemic to experiment with wholly new ways of doing things.
- **Collaboration** within and between the communities, organisations, and institutions that make up localities.

In the places where institutions and organisations engaged in new practices within these categories, new relationships with communities also tended to emerge. In this report we elaborate on these new relationships and approaches, and we explore their impact within our case studies. We also found that longer-standing structures and national frameworks provided crucial background context for partners as they established new systems or considered how to embed them for the long-term. By comparing how things played out in Wales, Scotland, and England respectively, this generated lessons about the different approaches taken at the national scale for community development and long-term thinking.

Unique conditions and the challenge of embedding

Ultimately, this report is concerned with articulating not only the case for a new community-powered approach, but also for exploring its viability beyond crisis conditions. How can these practices and relationships be sustained?

When a crisis is caused by a disastrous event outside human control, communities generally pull together in response. Anyone who has lived in an area struck by heavy floods or snow will have stories to tell about people checking on their neighbours and doing whatever they could to help others. But the Covid-19 crisis has proved to be unique in modern times, for a variety of reasons:

- It is widespread, affecting all parts of the country rather than just confined to a small number of places.
- It has required many people who had previously not regarded themselves as vulnerable to 'shield' by not leaving their home for long periods of time and relying on others to supply them with essential items.
- It has necessitated rules for 'social distancing', forcing people to stay apart from family and friends and restricting the ability of public services and volunteers to help those in need as close social contact risks spreading the virus.
- It is – though this was not wholly clear from the start – a long-term crisis, which means the country will be in crisis mode until a sufficient proportion of the population has been vaccinated against Covid-19.

During the first lockdown, a set of special conditions were created for councils, community groups, and people themselves. Economic paralysis and furlough schemes generated a mass of new volunteers and mutual aid participants. The immediate, universal nature of the threat – a largely not-yet-understood novel virus – clarified and unified the priorities of groups and sectors that might in other times find themselves working alone, or even in competition with each

other. These special conditions were important – and impossible to replicate. They include:

- Occasion for a powerful emergency response mentality, which involved:
 - Unassailable consensus around clear shared priorities.
 - Need for speediness of delivery & outcomes focus – ‘just get things done.’
 - Risk recalibration in response and in relation to everyday experience of a deadly virus.
 - Collapsing need for structures and hierarchies in order to solve problems fluidly.
 - Necessary suspension of cost-efficiency calculations, even as localities were faced with expensive new upfront service needs.
- Major changes in availability, demography, and expertise of potential volunteers created by economic lockdown and the furlough scheme.

At the level of localities, an enormous amount was achieved at unprecedented speed. The pandemic led to:

- The empowerment of people on the frontline of public service.
- More decisions being taken at, and attention being paid to, local and hyper-local scales.
- The breaking-down of entrenched departmental silos and organisational boundaries.
- Greater agility that was enhanced by a reduction in bureaucracy, support for civil society and informal neighbourhood groups.
- The adoption of remote and digital tools.

While the unique conditions that led to such innovations cannot themselves be sustained or recreated, *Shifting the Balance* will propose ways of sustaining what amounts to an entirely new approach for local area working, public services, and relationships.

Never going back?



...there is a general consensus that something fundamental has changed. The balance has shifted – going back to business-as-usual would be all but unthinkable.

Many of the people who shared their experiences and insights for the *Shifting the Balance* project made one thing abundantly clear. Whether or not they are optimistic that this new approach could be fully embedded in a period of recovery, there is a general consensus that something fundamental has changed. The balance has shifted – going back to business-as-usual would be all but unthinkable.

Realising this potential would be one fitting legacy from the pandemic. These experiences could drive the inspiration and growth of a community-powered approach for working across localities in less disruptive times. The resilience that would emerge as a result could also help to ensure that the response infrastructure to large scale disasters is fit for purpose for the future.



THE ELEMENTS OF THE NEW COMMUNITY-POWERED APPROACH

The new community-powered approach that emerged under the crisis conditions of the early days of the pandemic comprises a host of practices and relationships. These emerged within both councils and communities:

- More autonomous and hyper-localised problem-solving, such as mutual aid groups and neighbourhoods getting organised on social media, or councils actively engaging with people who they usually never reach.
- More work and relationships beyond traditional professional remits.
- More connections between institutions and communities, with a greater emphasis on partnership and collaboration both within and beyond organisations and departmental boundaries.
- Speedier and less bureaucratic working overall, with decisions taken rapidly and efforts made to facilitate the activities of informal groups to deliver results.
- Greater value placed on 'human' qualities such as compassion and 'humanness' as the broader implications of the emergency became clear.⁷

⁷ Coutts, P., et al. (2020). *A Shared Response*. Carnegie UK Trust, p. 3

- Major expansion in the use of digital technologies and media for the purposes of working and organisation, allowing wider participation and more inclusive working practices.⁸
- Major shifts in risk appetite as the usual constraints and barriers fell away.

While some of these features appeared almost everywhere, very few places saw the emergence of all of them.

Shifting the Balance identifies three categories of new practices within the community-powered approach that emerged in many places during the pandemic: adaptation, innovation, and collaboration.

1. **Adaptation** signifies a family of practices, driven by the urgency of the crisis. These are marked by speediness; a greater willingness to learn and iterate; more informality and individual autonomy in the pursuit of goals; and reduced rigidity, bureaucracy, and hierarchy. This played out across both institutions and wider communities.
2. **Innovation** denotes those practices that saw rapid acceleration of modernisation trends that were playing out before the start of the pandemic, and the emergence of wholly new organisational forms and ways of solving problems. These efforts were often enhanced by digital technologies, or saw the adoption of new priorities, partnerships, and funding models across localities.
3. **Collaboration** refers to the emergence of new working relationships across organisational boundaries. This involved a generalised culture-shift toward more institutional openness. Across whole places, this also meant a willingness to operate beyond traditional silos and remits, build new partnerships, and allow communities to take the lead and learn from their experiences.

Table 1, on page 25, sets out the full typology of categories and 'balance-shifting' new practices.

⁸ Copeland, E. (2020), *Beyond the crisis: How might local government build a positive legacy after Covid?* Medium.

Table 1: Seven types of ‘Balance-Shifting’ new practices during the pandemic across councils, third sector organisations, and communities

‘Balance-Shifting’ new practices and emerging norms			
Category	Practice	Institutions & councils	Civil society & communities
Adaptation	Informality & smaller scale	More autonomous working for frontline staff & at smaller scales	More informal & new, younger, hyper-local groups emerging
	Agility & outcomes-focus	Faster, less bureaucratic decision-making & problem solving	Immediate response and rapid growth driven by informality
	Modified risk appetite & anti-bureaucracy	Less risk-averse culture driven by emergency imperatives	Many groups accepting relatively high risks to achieve objectives
Innovation	Use of digital technologies	Increased use of digital tools & approaches, more accessibility	Huge increase in use of digital/social media to organise
	New organisational forms to solve problems	Facilitation of communities & novel hyper-local delivery structures	Ambitious mutual aid activities & new networks across places
	New driving principles and motivations	Increasing importance of ‘human’ qualities	Commitment to ‘human’ qualities supplemented by clear imperatives
Collaboration	Relationships over boundaries	More collaborative & facilitative with community/social sector	More collaborative with councils & other local institutions
	Holistic & whole-system approaches	More work beyond/ between departmental silos	Groups working together and as ‘all-rounders’ to meet needs

Balance-shifting practices within the new approach

This section highlights some of the key and overlapping trends and examples of new practices and relationships that emerged during the pandemic, as well as seven case studies from across England, Scotland, and Wales. These case studies deepen our analysis in specific places, illustrating particular kinds of experience and the lessons that may be learned from them.

1. Adaptation: How localities transformed at speed

Informality & smaller scale practices represent some of the most important shifts in how institutions have responded to the crisis. But we can also observe community groups and volunteers working in more informal and spontaneous ways – sometimes to address problems that only they can see. By allowing for more highly localised work and a reduction in hierarchical structures, a huge amount of activity became possible in a short period of time – setting localities up for deeper partnerships. In Kingston upon Thames (case study 1, on page 28), the ideas of more junior council employees who were suggesting innovative ways to work with communities were given a strong hearing due to the needs of emergency response. In Gwynedd (case study 2, on page 30), the imperative to reach all members of the community and secure funding for Covid-19 response initiatives encouraged greater collaboration between the local authority and third sector organisations.

Agility & outcomes-focussed practices reflect the way that the pace of the response was so important, particularly in the earliest stages of the first lockdown. In many places community groups were the ‘first responders’, but our research also shows that many councils moved with extraordinary speed to establish new systems. In North Ayrshire (case study 5, on page 40), the community hubs that were to become the pivotal ‘frontline’ of local pandemic response and adaptation were established in under a week. This was achieved through a combination of rapid institutional action, good use of pre-established structures, and ever-closer working with groups and citizens in the community. Like many localities, it is neighbourhood hubs and networks like these which seem likely to be a lasting legacy of the pandemic.



By allowing for more highly localised work and a reduction in hierarchical structures, a huge amount of activity became possible in a short period of time – setting localities up for deeper partnerships.

Modified risk-appetite and anti-bureaucracy

practices were the result of shifted incentives that made institutional risk-aversion far less likely at the height of the crisis. The bureaucracy that usually emerges as a result of low-risk appetite was set aside, while many social sector and community groups bravely took on notable new risks in order to continue their operations. The simplest reason for this is that, in comparison to the self-evident threat posed by Covid-19 itself, most of the daily risk factors that play a part in local activities and operations are reduced in relative importance. Many informal community groups and local organisations knowingly took on additional risks, and the best role played by institutions in those situations was to mitigate risks and offer as much advice as possible. In Wolverhampton (case study 6, on page 43), community businesses were able to continue some operations and offer crucial spaces for mutual aid efforts through rapid collaboration with local public health experts.

These tendencies were all particularly pronounced in places with a previous experience of crisis response. For example, higher levels of spontaneous community response and civil society-led action were reported in parts of the country that had a longer-term need for resilience – for example, in places that had previously experienced severe flooding.⁹

Adaptations of this sort were made possible, in part, by a new ‘whatever the cost’ attitude throughout localities. Many *Shifting the Balance* interviewees were clear that meaningful flexibility and longer-term capacity-building investment would be pivotal for embedding the adaptations. Realising such an approach in the midst of post-Covid economic turbulence will be a particular challenge.

⁹ As reported by participants in a *Shifting the Balance* research workshop.



Case study 1: Building trust and transforming culture in Kingston upon Thames



In a matter of months, the way we worked before has started to feel really old-fashioned! Working in silos seems really old-fashioned now.” – **A senior interviewee from Kingston Council**



Covid has revealed so many people who want to have a local impact. They’re not commuting any more, they have more time, they want more of a work-life balance, they’re thinking more about other people.” – **A community group organiser interviewee, Kingston upon Thames**

The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames is a populous, demographically diverse, and primarily suburban borough of London. During the first lockdown, its communities and institutions were motivated to innovate quickly in the interests of saving lives. Beyond that immediate crisis response, the council moved to identify ways to embed the new ways of working that had emerged, while many of the existing innovative community groups operating throughout the borough saw their projects, and the prospects for reinvention of public spaces in the area, in a new light.

In order to respond to the developing emergency, Kingston Council rapidly instigated some radical shifts in structure and culture. Non-hierarchical and dynamic new teams and working groups came together in an organic way to solve problems. New and junior staff and frontline professionals found new opportunities to pitch their

ideas to senior leaders in the organisation. Galvanised by a sense of shared endeavour, a new mindset – where no practices are deemed acceptable only because they are longstanding – also emerged.

The rapid adoption of digital tools – for remote working, video-conferencing, and more – are credited by council staff as playing a role in cementing a more open, trusting, and learning-centred approach. The immediacy of the connections offered by these tools, their sense of placing all participants on the same level, and the way they lower the bar for public participation all made a difference for the council and for collaborations with the wider community. Partnerships across the borough have been enhanced by the experience of the pandemic. Interviewees from both the council and from influential local community groups say that contact has become more consistent, more frequent, and more authentic. In the words of one interviewee in the council:

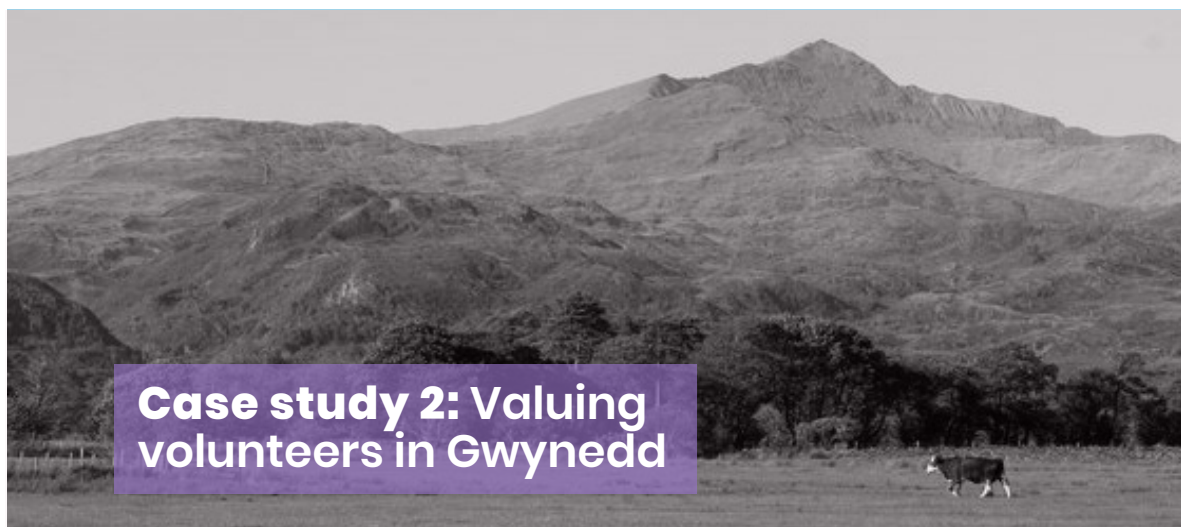
"In the past we've been unconsciously controlling of community groups. Unintentionally wording things in a way that preserves our power. It's become important to question the tone that underpins these relationships. The desire to work collaboratively with partners and communities is huge now. We really didn't know how to put that into action prior to Covid."

One expression of the importance of these new relationships takes the form of a novel approach to community facilitation. In the summer of 2020, the council appointed a dedicated bid facilitator embedded within the local authority, whose role is to help community and voluntary groups navigate the, often complicated, application processes to access financial support. The result is a new bridge between the institutions and groups in the locality, setting up entirely new partnerships.

The radical potential created by the experience of pandemic response is not lost on Kingston's community groups. Some are looking toward the recovery as an opportunity to recast the power dynamic between state and civil society, and to radically rethink how local spaces and assets might be put to best use. Many of the spaces operated by community groups, though

theoretically not in use at various points during the year, have nevertheless been put to use at various points to support parts of the pandemic response or sustain other things the community holds dear, such as safeguarding refugees and creating opportunities for young people.

Just as in the council's ongoing cultural transformation, local community groups believe that everything now hinges on trust. The pandemic demonstrated how valuable community groups can be. High streets are changing, as are working patterns, and as a suburb Kingston upon Thames has significant post-pandemic opportunities. By thinking creatively, and with the right resources and space in which to operate, many of the borough's community groups believe they can foster new thinking that will transform the way that local people think about their area.



Case study 2: Valuing volunteers in Gwynedd



Volunteers are not paid, not because they are worthless but because they are priceless.” – Mantell Gwynedd interviewee

It was no surprise to see people pulling together in a crisis in a rural community like Gwynedd, but the county's response to the first Covid-19 lockdown was particularly remarkable. Within two weeks

at the start of lockdown, over 600 people had registered with Mantell Gwynedd's Volunteer Bank.¹⁰ Gwynedd Council and third sector bodies such as Mantell Gwynedd held formal weekly online meetings and worked together in a more fast-paced and joined-up manner to serve the needs of communities by identifying gaps, sharing resources and stepping up to the demand.

Although the nature of volunteering has changed since that initial lockdown, especially as more people return to work or education and have less time to spare, the volunteering spirit remains alive and well. Many of the people who registered with the Volunteer Bank came back during Wales's 'firebreak' in mid-Autumn to ask if they could help. People might be busy and tired, but there is still energy and enthusiasm for volunteering – which the public and third sectors in Gwynedd will respond to both during and after the Covid-19 crisis by staying in touch with volunteers and providing them with support.

Gwynedd's response to the pandemic could also serve as a platform for a new relationship between the local authority and third sector. During the first lockdown, the Welsh Government made £24 million available to support resilience and invested significant sums of that fund in the third sector. This helped to promote a level playing field and collaboration between the local authority and third sector. The third sector was also able to have conversations with people in communities who are reluctant to speak to the public sector and therefore 'harder-to-reach' for the local authority.

Measuring the value of the third sector is a difficult task, but Mantell Gwynedd has made it one of their objectives. Working closely in partnership with Social Value UK, Mantell Gwynedd has become the first umbrella organisation in Europe to achieve the internationally recognised Social Value Certificate.¹¹ Mantell Gwynedd has the benefit of Social Value Accredited Practitioners on its staff team and because of this skills set is currently developing an analysis of the social return on investment (SROI) for two projects that

¹⁰ Mantell Gwynedd is a County Voluntary Council (CVC), an organisation that supports the voluntary and community sector in its area.

¹¹ See Mantell Gwynedd's [Social Value Certificate](#).

received the Welsh Government's resilience funding during lockdown – one in a more deprived community (Maesgeirchen); the other focused on addressing food poverty in Caernarfon. The aim of these SROI reports is to explain the value of investing in the third sector so that, in future, strategic planning is based on best return on investment and the majority of people benefit.

2. Innovation: How localities became experimental

Use of digital technologies, communications tools and video conferencing platforms

became more widespread as the risk of exposure to the virus curtailed person-to-person interactions. During the first lockdown, many communities set up street-level or neighbourhood WhatsApp groups to support each other in self-isolation and bring necessities to those shielding. The power of digital platform technology to facilitate community action and campaigns also manifested in the formation of mutual aid groups all over the country and in 'online marketplaces' encouraging people to support local independent retailers.¹² For example, in Aberdeenshire, social media hubs created by community groups brought together hundreds of local people during the first lockdown and helped to coordinate food gathering activities and mutual aid efforts. These virtual spaces are now deliberately repurposing to promote 'buy local' campaigns.

Technology has also helped to build bridges between public services and communities. In Sheffield, hosting regular and well-attended online community engagement workshops has triggered a notable culture shift in the council (case study 3, on page 34). Officers are now starting to develop services and projects more inclusively, based on listening to the insights and lived experiences of communities, rather than relying mainly on business intelligence. In Pembrokeshire, it has been noted that the shift to home-working has also helped many staff to think differently about the scale of the council's operation and the connections between different strands of activity.¹³

¹² Tiratelli, L. and Kaye, S. (2020). *Communities Vs Coronavirus: The Rise of Mutual Aid*. New Local. shop 4 Plymouth is a good practice example of an online marketplace created during the UK-wide lockdown. See: Plymouth City Council. (23 April 2020). [Shop 4 Plymouth: New online marketplace links you with local retailers](#).

¹³ Prior, N. (2020). *Learning Through Crisis*. Local Government First.

New organisational forms and ways of solving problems

came to the fore in lockdown, particularly in the shape of informal mutual aid groups and community networks. Public organisations responding particularly innovatively to the emergence of these informal structures were those that supported communities to develop their own solutions. In Monmouthshire, the council played a facilitative role to help communities work with each other and assist them with any difficulties they encountered (case study 4, on page 36). Although Monmouthshire County Council had invested in community development before the pandemic, lockdown changed its relationship with communities to one where the council stepped even further back and enabled community leadership to thrive. The council is now building on the new relationship by supporting communities to lead efforts encouraging visitors to return safely to local town centres.

New driving principles and motivations underpinned these innovative practices. These placed wellbeing and compassion as higher priorities than abstract targets, cost-efficiencies and unhelpful rivalries between organisations or individuals. The fact that we were all facing a deadly virus as mortal human beings created a powerful shared purpose that galvanised people to treat each other humanely. For some public services and communities, the result was a rediscovery of the importance of dialogue and listening – as our Sheffield case study exemplifies in particular. Although a shared purpose of ‘life and death’ will only hold for the short term, the empathy and kindness that made impossible things possible in local responses to the first lockdown will be key to sustaining community participation in public services for the long term.

In Wales, this shift towards values, which some interviewees suspected would previously have been dismissed as “soft” or “fluffy”, played an explicit role. This departure has been so marked in some places that community organisations and participants in the wider social sector have voiced scepticism over the sustainability of this new working culture. It is clear to those involved, however, that the new language and pivot in values has played a central role in making closer and more flexible collaborations across localities possible.



Case study 3: Innovative new relationships in Sheffield



COVID-19 has really shone a light on the importance of listening.” –**Sheffield Council interviewees**

‘Look after each other’. This was the single purpose that brought Sheffield’s public services and communities together in the first lockdown. As the measures continued over weeks and months, people across the city pulled together and forgot about their job descriptions. Energised by a can-do culture and aided by swift decision-making processes, they used whatever skills and expertise they had to support others however they could. More grants were handed over by public bodies directly to communities for them to develop their own responses and spend on their own priorities.

As lockdown restrictions gradually lessened, public services in Sheffield sought to continue working more inclusively with communities. Sheffield City Council has shifted to a more ‘dialogue-based approach’ in its operations, making the time to listen to the lived experiences and ideas of communities rather than just developing work mainly on the basis of business intelligence. The council now runs virtual workshops in some areas of the city for communities to talk about what matters to them. In those areas, the workshops currently take place bi-monthly or quarterly. With the council helping people to access and use digital platforms in advance, the workshops are well-attended and reach a good representation of Sheffield’s diverse communities. The council’s

ambition is to hold online workshops in all areas of the city in future. Listening to communities in this way has already been insightful for the council. For example, in one workshop for communities living in a specific area of the city, participants raised concerns over youth violence. They told council officers that the youth services commissioned for swimming and subs for local football clubs are too expensive for families on low incomes to access. Officers and partners are now working on making local activities accessible to all community residents.

These insights are feeding directly into Sheffield City Council's plans for a new community-centred approach to high street redevelopment. The council would like to develop the '15-minute city' concept to its neighbourhoods, so that the majority of people are able to access work, facilities or meeting places within 15 minutes of where they live. Officers intend to run a series of workshops so that the experiences and desires of communities all over the city will contribute directly to shaping these plans.

The '15-minute city' ambitions dovetail well with Sheffield's existing efforts to breathe new life into local high streets. The Heart of the City project, for which the council is acting in a property development role, will bring a mixture of new individually designed and repurposed retail, office and meeting spaces to the city centre.¹⁴ The council is requiring Heart of the City tenants to pay their employees the real living wage and, in order to enable more community businesses to have a presence on high streets, is weighing social value more than financial value in its competition for tenants in certain buildings. The Fargate and High Street regeneration project, which has been awarded £15.8 million from the Future High Streets Fund, will turn Sheffield's main high streets into a social hub.¹⁵ Online community consultations and engagement activities will directly feed into the project's development. The council's commitment to be more inclusive of communities, made in response to the first lockdown, is now targeted at ensuring the city's high streets once again become local resources that meet the needs of all communities who use them.

¹⁴ For more information, see: <https://heartofsheffield.co.uk/>.

¹⁵ Wood, A. (26 December 2020). [Up to £96m awarded to High Streets in Yorkshire and the Humber](#). The Yorkshire Post.



Case study 4: The council supporting communities in Monmouthshire



“We now have hundreds more eyes, ears, hands and feet in our communities.” – Monmouthshire County Council interviewee

Informal community-led solutions were the cornerstone of Monmouthshire’s response to the first lockdown, but communities were not left to fend for themselves. Monmouthshire County Council and the third sector worked together to build a support structure for community groups. This involved training and screening volunteers for safeguarding; sharing information; building neighbourhood networks so that community groups could help each other; and providing a single point of contact in the council who could assist groups with any challenges they were experiencing.

Monmouthshire’s collaborative and community-focused response built on, and benefited from, the significant investment in voluntary and community infrastructure made by the council for many years. The council employs a dedicated member of staff to lead its ‘County that serves’ citizen engagement programme¹⁶ – the only role of its kind that exists in local government in Wales. It also runs a ‘Be. Community Leadership Programme’ to provide mentoring, training and coaching in leadership to people in the community.¹⁷

¹⁶ Wilce, O. (11 September 2019). *A county that serves*. Nesta.

¹⁷ Monmouthshire Council. (Last updated 6 March 2019). [Community Leadership Programme](#).

Asset-based principles and belief and trust in communities were the foundations of the council's strategy to manage lockdown. Rather than redeploy officers into community roles, the council focused on creating a support structure for people in the community to take on those roles and on nurturing their relationships with both existing community groups and new mutual aid groups. The strength of those relationships meant the council was able to benefit from the support of communities in much more than shopping and collecting prescriptions. For example, a man with autism asked for help with shopping, and the local community group also helped him create meal plans and built a relationship with him so that he would have friendly faces to turn to if he needed further support. The council's social workers involved in the support structure enjoyed working in a more proactive and preventative manner, enabling better outcomes to be achieved for individuals and moving the 'front door of social services' out into the community.

This type of approach, led by the community and driven by personal relationships, has inspired the creation of the county's new Town Ambassador Programme.¹⁸ Organised by town councils, with support from the county council and the Gwent Association for Voluntary Organisations (GAVO), the Programme sees local volunteers meet people who feel uncertain about leaving their homes and walk with them around their town centre. The volunteers are given training so that they can talk to their companions about local landmarks; show them the new Covid-19 measures in town centres and shops; chat about their general wellbeing; and signpost them to local services. As lockdown restrictions begin to ease, who better to promote confidence and visitor experience in reopening town centres than local people who care passionately about their place?

¹⁸ [Monmouthshire Council Facebook](#). (22 October 2020).

3. Collaboration: How localities came together

Relationships over boundaries practices saw departmental silos dissolve within organisations, new collaborations emerge between them, and entirely new networks spring up across localities. These networks were driven, in part, by the organisational power of digital technologies and social media, both of which created new conduits between local institutions and community groups. In many places across the UK, a huge number of new volunteers were mobilised within spontaneously emerging mutual aid groups as well as through engagement with existing organisations. Preserving these networks and volunteering spirit would require new kinds of funding: smaller pots that explicitly offer resources for very local community-scale activities that do not have easy access to existing funding streams and which will face a particular challenge without the welter of volunteer time created by the national furlough scheme.

In many places, entirely new collaborations emerged between community organisations which have had little to do with each other in the past – see, for example, the Wolverhampton case study (case study 6, on page 43). For such collaborations to persist within and between localities, new spaces – both physical and in terms of virtual networks – could be needed to help build collaborations and share information.



Councils and communities cited higher levels of trust – both across the institutional divide and between community groups themselves – as one of the crucial enablers of effective local responses to the first lockdown.

Holistic & whole-system approaches practices are a notable feature of the pandemic response experience. Teams comprising individuals from a range of organisations and backgrounds have increasingly assembled on place-based terms or based on participants' ability to contribute. This creates strong arguments for pushing forward with joining services together and partnering closely to achieve results. Multi-disciplinary teams emerged in many councils, paying little attention to departmental remits and often engaging more fluidly with local partner organisations and community groups in order to get things done, as in Kingston upon Thames (case study 1, on page 28) and Aberdeenshire (case study 7 on page 45).

The emergence of *trust* was described as pivotal in many places. Councils and communities cited higher levels of trust – both across the institutional divide and between community groups themselves

– as one of the crucial enablers of effective local responses to the first lockdown. There was a sense that people had the licence and freedom to “do the right thing” rather than seek permission from a senior authority or worry about whether their actions fitted in with ‘normal’ practices.¹⁹ The statutory services that were regarded as most successful in their response to the pandemic were those that did not attempt to control or formalise the efforts of the social sector.

Combined with a strong sense of shared purpose, the development of more trusting relationships between organisations and communities within localities produced demonstrable results. One local organisation reported that 800 volunteers had engaged in local efforts in the space of two weeks, going on to support 2,500 households during lockdown.²⁰

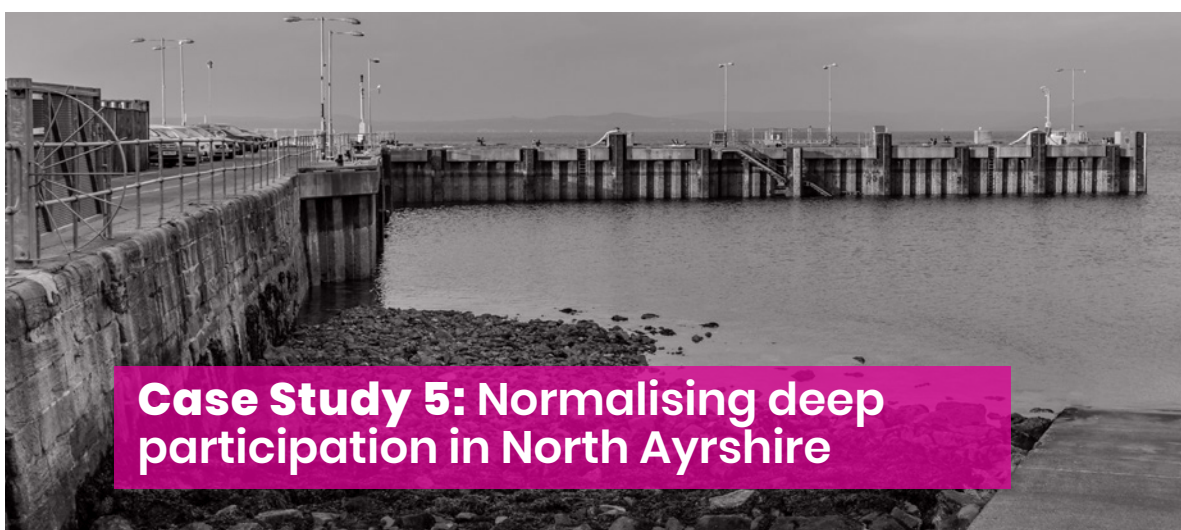
One important set of practices that contributed to growing trust was a pattern of local institutions proactively engaging with communities. This was particularly true of communities with much less history of direct participation or involvement, mirroring the uptick in voluntarism. Many within councils and other public sector institutions, now contemplating a more community-led culture after the pandemic, are becoming concerned that this more extensive and representative engagement will fade as we turn toward recovery. This would leave those with the loudest voices once again dominant in many places.

In response, forward-thinking councils have started proactively going to where local people are, rather than simply adopting an open stance and hoping for engagement – an approach embraced by public health experts during the first lockdown, where crucial Covid-response messaging was deployed for maximum public attention by explicitly engaging with local networks and communities, online and off. This proactive style could, in different combinations, include open-agenda conversations, conscious adoption of networks and media preferred by those social and ethnic demographics who are often left out of traditional consultation processes, and establishing ‘ambassadors’ with better links to such groups so engagement can begin without any appearance of attempting to manage or control from them top-down.

¹⁹ The discussion on trust and shared purpose is based on a series of comments made by participants in a workshop held for this research.

²⁰ As reported by participants in a *Shifting the Balance* research workshop.

Nationwide, co-operatives and social enterprises have been strongly engaged in support programmes, and many now feel they have a better relationship with their local authority.²¹ Established community organisations and new mutual aid groups worked closely together, with some groups and businesses swiftly reallocating their own funds at the start of lockdown to support mutual aid activities. Again, digital platform technologies enabled many of these joint-working initiatives and closer relationships to develop.



Case Study 5: Normalising deep participation in North Ayrshire



Something has changed this year. There's been less bureaucracy. More risk taking, but not in a way that harmed anyone.” – Community group interviewee, North Ayrshire

Many of North Ayrshire's residents have significant experience of economic hardship in an area that recorded higher-than-average rates of unemployment and child poverty before the start of the pandemic.²² However, the scale of local adaptation and crisis-response during the pandemic has been widely noted for its comprehensiveness and speed.²³ North Ayrshire's council – driven, in part, by the need to address the area's inequalities

²¹ This was reported by multiple participants in our *Shifting the Balance* research workshops.

²² Get Heard Scotland (2020). *North Ayrshire – Get Heard Scotland Summary Report, 2019-20*. The Poverty Alliance.

²³ See, for example, the case study discussion in Coutts, Ormston, Pennycook & Thurman, (2020). *Pooling Together: How Community Hubs have responded to the COVID-19 Emergency*. Carnegie UK Trust.

– has worked for a decade to engage with communities. This meant that, when the first lockdown started, many of the people most closely involved in emergency response measures felt that the area was in a “good place” to adjust to lockdown and an unprecedented public health crisis.

Even before the introduction of the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act, North Ayrshire was working to meet its requirements, establishing a framework of community partners within localities alongside Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) to act as a conduit between institutions and the wider social sector. This proved to be a crucial tool during the pandemic, creating an overview of capacity within the whole locality to allocate much-needed funds from many sources. Over the course of the pandemic, many new relationships emerged between parts of the third sector, partly as a result of the coordinating role of the TSIs.

In North Ayrshire, as in many other places, community groups were the first responders in March as lockdown came into effect. They moved quickly to support shielding people with food and medicine and then establishing dedicated helplines and other support services. The area’s longer history and more developed culture of engagement engendered mutual respect for the distinct skills and capacities present in both institutions and community groups, and embedded relationships led to the sharing of systems and approaches. In this way the council and community were soon working closely together around newly identified priorities.

Six dedicated community hubs were established in public-facing facilities within each of the area’s six sub-localities, and these were enhanced by a number of wholly community-run centres. Within these, a small dedicated staff coordinated the local response and connected local people with what they needed through a blend of council provision and effort from neighbourhood volunteers. In each hub, the approach and available tools was slightly different according to the unique demands of each locality.

These hubs were established at speed. From the council’s perspective they have established high-quality partnerships

which mean their relationships into the third sector are stronger now than they were before the pandemic. The benefits of this approach have also been felt by local businesses, who have played a role in supporting and upskilling residents to engage digitally and in turn are now closer to the heart of the community. The hubs have been so successful that they are set to outlive the pandemic, and will be placed at the heart of a more distributed, networked, and inclusive council strategy in future.

Highly-placed interviewees from the council's pandemic response strategy identify some crucial components of this local success story, and what might be needed to build upon it once the crisis is over. First, being able to effectively share relevant data was a revolutionary step in ensuring comprehensive support for those who needed it in an emergency situation. North Ayrshire was able to do this while staying within data protection rules. As a result, many locals and staff are now far more savvy about how to access and safely share information in order to achieve their objectives.

The second lesson that emerges as a point of consensus for both council and community in North Ayrshire is about moving beyond the short time horizons implied by most one- or two-year funding partnerships. The pandemic response demonstrated a snapshot of local groups' capabilities. To sustain the work they are starting to do, a transformative change would be to normalise much longer-term funding cycles.

The final insight into the successes between partners, is that for some of those involved in North Ayrshire's community response, there is appetite for deeper direct participation in the civic life and decision-making of the area:

"People should be involved in the planning for what happens next – meaningful stuff. We've all been learning about what's been going on on our own doorsteps during this crisis. Everyone was put on the same level. Why shouldn't these people take that experience and use it to think about what should happen next?"



Case study 6: Community partnerships and crowdfunding in Wolverhampton

The pressing urgency of supporting the most vulnerable people during a pandemic led to the emergence of entirely new partnerships and approaches among community groups and businesses in Wolverhampton. Some of these were supported by unusual forms of funding. A collaboration between the local authority and the Voluntary Sector Council saw a crowd-funding effort to support local civil society and bolster grassroots organisations working to supply food to those who needed it. This campaign also illustrated the nature of the crisis response beyond day-to-day partisan politics, with the local Labour and Conservative parties each contributing equal amounts to kickstart the funding drive.

Meanwhile, long-established community businesses with plenty of existing relationships with social enterprises and charities in and around the city found themselves engaging with a whole new layer of voluntary and community groups with which they had little or no prior contact. This experience shines a spotlight on Wolverhampton's community businesses: the particular challenges they faced in lockdown, and the role they played as hubs of community activity during the pandemic.²⁴ While community businesses are in most cases an important locus for volunteer activity, they appear to have seen dropping levels of

²⁴ Community businesses can take a variety of forms – from non-profit charities to 'CIC' social enterprises – but what they all share is that they are rooted in, accountable to, and working explicitly toward the betterment of their localities. See <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/what-is-community-business>

voluntarism during the pandemic.²⁵ They have fewer dedicated funding streams or alternative sources of revenue open to them compared to traditional charities. This makes them especially vulnerable to the pressures of economic lockdown, even though they are often a crucial component in meeting people's needs at such a time, and have a more sustainable local investment approach under normal economic circumstances.

In many places, however, community businesses were at the core of the local response to the crisis. In Wolverhampton, they sat at the centre of brand-new collaborations, sometimes involving groups which usually have little in common. In one example, a regeneration-focused community business partnered with a traditional charity and they both discovered complementary strengths. The community business was able to provide logistical expertise and furnish the space required, while the charity opened new networks for engagement with people who needed support.

These collaborations also entailed engagement with the council. Keeping any facilities open during lockdown required support from Wolverhampton's public health teams, who moved speedily to assess and advise community groups and charities who wished to participate in the local response. Similarly, close collaboration with local ward councillors helped to broaden the reach of these support efforts.

For one local community business, despite the ongoing challenges, the story of the pandemic has been one of engaging with people who are very often left out of local decision making or alienated from the services and local networks that have an impact on their lives. Alongside unexpected new relationships with local organisational partners, this experience been transformative. The business is now investing in hiring a new employee to focus solely on community organising – working with community groups and sustaining, nurturing, and building upon the powerful new horizontal relationships that have emerged during the crisis.

²⁵ Paine, A.E., et. al., (2020). *Volunteering in Community Business*. Power to Change.



Case Study 7: Partnering with businesses in Aberdeenshire

The gradual lifting of restrictions imposed in the first lockdown was accompanied by a new imperative to support businesses to re-open, especially those needing to adapt outdoor spaces to resume their operations.

To support this, Aberdeenshire Council set up a cross-service Infrastructure Strategic Group (ISG). Comprising officers from economic development; licencing; environmental health and trading standards; planning; transportation, roads and landscape; and legal teams, the ISG's remit was to respond in a 'one council' approach to businesses seeking information or assistance. This has allowed the group to manage enquiries from businesses strategically, making the process of re-opening as streamlined as possible and reducing timescales on any necessary decision-making processes.²⁶

The ISG also organised three cross-service webinars to provide information and advice to businesses. The webinars were attended by 550 local businesses.

²⁶ Scotland's Towns Partnership. (2020). [Aberdeenshire Council and towns case studies – Response to lockdown and reopening](#).



COMPARING THE CONTEXTS: WALES, SCOTLAND, AND ENGLAND

National context has mattered during the pandemic. For both councils and communities, Wales and Scotland offer a fundamentally different environment from that of England. Community planning and long-term thinking created a different platform from which to build new approaches when the virus struck. Just as importantly, they are a potential game-changer for efforts to embed new practices in the future.

Some aspects of the new community-powered approach that emerged across Britain during the pandemic were already embedded at the national level in Wales and Scotland. These devolved nations had moved independently to institute meaningful commitments to long-term planning and community engagement. By establishing new roles and responsibilities at the level of councils and localities, backed up by additional investment, a very different playing field – with very different incentives – came into existence.

By contrast, and due to some extent to the unbalanced approach to devolution undertaken over the years, very few comparable requirements or frameworks exist for localities in England. Instead, meaningful community involvement and longer-term planning tends to play out at the level of councils – if it happens at all.

This section explores some of the differences between Wales, Scotland, and England at the level of national frameworks, and the extent to which they may explain the differences that emerged in the experience of the pandemic from place to place.

Wales: National long-termism, local innovation

The 2010s saw the subject of community empowerment steadily rise up the national agenda in Wales. It was most notably supported by two important and connected pieces of Welsh Parliament legislation,²⁷ both of which came into force in April 2016:

- The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014:** This Act brought changes to the way in which social services are planned, commissioned and delivered in Wales. There is now a stronger emphasis on greater voice and control for people who use social services (both carers and people who need care); co-production; multi-agency working and cooperation; and promotion of wellbeing.²⁸
- The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015:** This Act places a duty on public bodies to set and publish objectives demonstrating how they will achieve seven well-being goals. One of these goals is ‘a Wales of cohesive communities’. Public Service Boards (PSBs) were established to assess well-being in each local authority area.²⁹

The implementation of the Future Generations Act is overseen by a dedicated Future Generations Commissioner, who revealed in her 2020 annual report that public bodies and PSBs set more well-being objectives on the theme of ‘community’ in 2018/19 than for any other topic.³⁰ The Commissioner’s report features plenty of examples of good practice from public bodies to fulfil the well-being goal,³¹ such as Rhondda Cynon Taf Council’s ‘RCT Together’ approach to community asset transfer.³²

Although positive steps have been made among Wales’s public bodies to support community development and involvement in public services, there is still more work ahead. In 2018/19, only 52 per cent of people over

²⁷ At the time these Acts were passed, Wales’s legislative body was known as the National Assembly for Wales. Its name changed to Senedd Cymru, or Welsh Parliament, in May 2020.

²⁸ Care Council for Wales. (2017). [Getting in on the Act: Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#).

²⁹ Welsh Government. (2015). [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015: The Essentials](#).

³⁰ Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. (2020). [The Future Generations Report 2020: Chapter 3](#), p.11.

³¹ Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. (2020). [The Future Generations Report 2020: Chapter 3](#)

³² Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, [RCT Together](#).

the age of 16 agreed that there is good community cohesion in their local area, a decrease in 10 percentage points since 2013/14.³³



These are all things we should be doing anyway according to the Future Generations Act, so why would we stop after the pandemic?” – a participant in the Wales-focused workshop

Our research is clear that the Well-Being of Future Generations Act in particular has influenced the ways in which council officers and public servants thought about their work during the pandemic. While many of the practices that have emerged in Wales during the pandemic are comparable to those in Scotland and England, they played out in the context of established responsibilities to involve communities and think about the longer-term prospects of such approaches.

The reported experience of many from within public and third sector organisations across Wales refers to how communities came together during lockdowns, going above and beyond the call of duty to support each other. Many organisations are already considering how they can change their own practices in future to facilitate, rather than direct, the activities of community groups. We feature some of these considerations in two case studies that shine a spotlight on the experiences of Gwynedd and Monmouthshire (see pp. 30, 36).

Scotland: A national commitment to community planning

Scotland's government has been working to develop a comprehensive framework to empower communities and civil society organisations to address local issues. The resulting systems have had a significant impact on the way that Scottish localities have been responding to the pandemic.

The 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act established in law a 'community planning' approach, whose roots lie in the earlier 2003 Local Government in Scotland Act. 'Community Planning' entails specific duties to collaborate with local people and establish partnerships at

³³ StatsWales. (last updated July 2020). [Percentage of people who agree that there is good community cohesion in their local area by local authority and year.](#)

the scale of local authority areas (and at smaller 'locality' scales). Each Community Planning Partnership (CPP) then develops local plans, with an explicit emphasis on tackling inequalities. The Act also created new avenues for community participation in decisions, ownership of assets, and control over public services.

A parallel framework that played an important role in the functioning of community and civil society groups was that of 'Third Sector Interfaces' (TSIs). These create a unified conduit in each authority area for charities and voluntary organisations to collaborate with both the local and national state.



We were all on a slow journey in the right direction – and now we've been catapulted in that direction!" – an interviewee from Scottish Council.

Though the depth of implementation and engagement with these frameworks certainly varies in different parts of Scotland, the areas where these structures have had significant focus appear to have found themselves well-positioned to confront a crisis on the scale of the pandemic – and originate new practices in response to it. Our case study on North Ayrshire (on p. 40) provides examples of how the local CPP and TSI made a difference, effectively fast-tracking the emergence of the new community-powered approach.

Our research found that many working within Scottish councils considered that the transformations playing out in many places – fewer boundaries and silos, more fluidity, more engagement with private and social sectors – were explicitly connected to the nationwide emphasis on longer-term community planning.

England: The promise of local leadership

Around 84 per cent of the UK's population lives in England. Given this size and the lack of a comparable national or regional devolution project to those that have progressed in Wales and Scotland, it is perhaps unsurprising that experiences of new approaches and adaptations during the pandemic have been extremely varied for the millions of people who live across England's localities.

UK-wide community empowerment measures are broadly limited to the set of tools and 'rights' incorporated into the 2011 Localism Act. Without the comprehensive frameworks that are being implemented in Scotland or the pursuit of structural long-termism in Wales, England's experience of the pandemic is much more of a patchwork. At the scale of local government, the emergence of new practices and community-led approaches was widespread – but uneven. The success of such new approaches has been contingent on the leadership of particularly forward-thinking councils rather than any wider structural incentives.

The scale of the community response across England has been significant, with thousands of spontaneous and largely self-organising mutual aid groups, for example. However, the forms that these groups, and other non-state responses, have taken has varied from place to place, often depending on the posture of local government and the health of local civil society institutions.³⁴

England has a history of competitive financial support schemes offered inconsistently to different localities, as opposed to a supportive national framework with similar entitlements and expectations everywhere as in Wales and Scotland. For example, the Towns Fund – where a limited number of localities are invited to collaboratively develop an application for a funding 'deal' – is a nascent venue for funding that could go to support community-scale efforts, but is for the most part set to play out in the aftermath of the pandemic crisis.

In response to Danny Kruger MP's wide-ranging report on how to support the community response to the pandemic,³⁵ a new 'Levelling-Up Fund' for England was announced in November 2020. The full details of how this fund will work have yet to be clarified, but it is possible that some of these funds will ultimately help to sustain the innovative practices and approaches that emerged during the crisis. However, the basic structure of this fund is top-down and set to invite competitive bidding between areas with only some to gain at the expense of others, rather than a more consistent approach to supporting local resilience.

³⁴ Tiratelli, L. and Kaye, S. (2020). *Communities Vs Coronavirus: The Rise of Mutual Aid*. New Local.

³⁵ Kruger, D. (2020). *Levelling up our Communities*. Commissioned government report.



Nobody is keen to go back to how things were. We want to build from here.” – A senior interviewee from Kingston Council’s public health team.

Many forward-thinking councils around England take special care to establish long-term plans, to work in an inclusive way with communities, and to foster meaningful partnerships with the local third sector. The case study on Kingston upon Thames (on p. 28) shows how a whole locality can start to move toward this kind of community-powered approach in the aftermath of the pandemic. But a more thorough-going commitment to and requirement for long-termism and community planning could have improved each English locality’s ability to adapt and innovate during the emergency – and embed the new approach long-term.

While the national approaches taken in Scotland and Wales are not perfect, they offer useful lessons – through the lens of crisis – for how things could be done differently in England. *Shifting the Balance* suggests how these lessons might inform policymaking in its recommendations section.

A black and white photograph of a person rappelling down a steep rock face. The person is positioned on the right side of the frame, holding onto a rope that extends from the top left. The background shows a misty or smoky atmosphere around the rock. A bright pink rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title text in white.

RISKS AND CHALLENGES TO THE NEW COMMUNITY- POWERED APPROACH

The first Covid-19 lockdown showed us glimpses of a community-led approach to public services in action: one where the state and civil society work together side-by-side in a mutually reinforcing partnership. We have seen what is possible; now the work starts to capture and sustain it.

Community power is already starting to flourish in certain areas of the country. However, many of the good practices we identified previously only became possible in lockdown because some long-term systemic, structural and cultural barriers collapsed under the weight of an extraordinary health crisis. Other barriers held firm (for examples, see the 'Inequalities' section on page 53), and even those that crumbled are rapidly rebuilding and reasserting themselves. To normalise the community-powered approach, partners within localities must work swiftly and collaboratively, knowing that there is light at the end of the tunnel but significant obstacles to overcome along the way.

Here we outline some of the risks and challenges that will hold back the sustainability of the community power approach if left unchanged or unaddressed.

■ **Inequalities:** A community power approach for localities will not work unless all members of the community have the time, skills and resources to play their part. But the Covid-19 crisis has already reinforced pre-existing inequalities.

The experience of the pandemic has had notable consequences for many women, according to multiple evidence sources. Women with children spent an average of 65 hours a week taking on household chores and childcare responsibilities – almost double their number of hours of unpaid labour before the pandemic struck.³⁶ Women are disproportionately affected by the increase in domestic violence, the “silent pandemic”, that has been recorded in lockdowns.³⁷ One mental health support organisation estimated that 70 per cent of those who accessed their services in the first four months of the pandemic were women: a predictable outcome as women tend to take on the brunt of household responsibilities, unpaid, and administrative labour – exposing them more to the economic impact and social disruption of the virus and the mental health implications that come with it.³⁸

The pandemic has also exposed the deep-rooted nature of racial inequalities in our society. People from BAME communities are disproportionately more likely to die from Covid-19 than white Britons because they are more likely to experience health inequalities, work in public-facing roles, or live in overcrowded households.³⁹ BAME communities are also overrepresented in key worker and public-facing roles in the NHS, social care, retail and transport.⁴⁰ Digital and financial inequalities have widened considerably because of lockdowns, with BAME communities particularly affected.^{41, 42}

³⁶ Oppenheim, M. (26 May 2020). [Mothers doing extra 31 hours more housework each week than before coronavirus chaos, study finds](#). The Independent.

³⁷ Mohan, M. and Le Poidevin, O. (11 June 2020). [Coronavirus: Domestic violence 'increases globally during lockdown'](#). BBC News.

³⁸ As reported by a participant in a *Shifting the Balance* research workshop.

³⁹ Butcher, B. and Massey, J. (19 June 2020). [Why are more people from BAME backgrounds dying from coronavirus?](#). BBC News

⁴⁰ The National Lottery Community Fund. (Last Updated 21 May 2020). [Learning and Insights about Covid-19: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic \(BAME\) communities](#).

⁴¹ Participants in our England workshop reported that BAME communities were more likely to struggle with access to digital devices and low levels of digital literacy.

⁴² Parkes, H. et al. (24 September 2020). [Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups at greater risk of problem debt since Covid-19](#). IPPR.

Beyond these divides, a particularly notable challenge for the new approach discussed in this report is the widespread concern over the risk of ‘loss of voice’ through too much collaboration with institutions, where distinct community insights are ultimately co-opted. Many people – be they elderly, disabled, or members of the BAME population – face serious challenges in having their voices heard. For these groups the impact of the pandemic has been complex.⁴³ While there is evidence to suggest that institutions are more proactively engaging with and seeking out input from, for example, BAME communities, there is understandable scepticism among some BAME people about the ultimate outcome. Some are concerned that, rather than collaborating as equal partners, BAME communities will have engaged for the first time during the pandemic only to then lose their voice completely when organisations or councils absorb their ideas.⁴⁴ This would leave the groups in question unable to win funding or support to act on their ideas themselves. New funding approaches, and a more trust-based approach to local collaboration, would need to be in place to mitigate concerns of this kind.

If the benefits of some practices in the pandemic, such as more working from home, are to be sustained for the long term, the negative consequences of those practices need to be addressed in partnership with people experiencing inequalities. There can be no unifying post-pandemic ‘shared purpose’ if the advantages of and access to the community power approach are not shared and experienced evenly across the whole of society.



The need to nurture and invest in self-organisation is vital so that there is the capacity for all communities to be equal partners. There has to be disruption to bring about greater equality. This is a pre-Covid journey which Covid and Black Lives Matter have propelled forward.” – a participant in the England-focussed workshop.

⁴³ Bowyer, G. and Henderson, M. (2020). *Race Inequality in the Workforce*. Carnegie UK Trust et al. p. 7.

⁴⁴ As reported by a participant in a *Shifting the Balance* research workshop.

- **Fatigue:** Subsequent lockdowns following the first set of restrictions in March 2020 have involved more rule-breaking and less togetherness. Restrictions affecting livelihoods and limiting social contact with loved ones are becoming harder to endure the longer the crisis persists and more politically charged. Exhausted from responding to the first wave of Covid-19, and facing significant economic turbulence in the months to come, some public servants are leaning towards the comfort of 'traditional ways of working' in their management of the second wave.

- **Finances:** Ten years of austerity, combined with responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, have left many public organisations and VCSE bodies in a precarious financial position. Implementing a community power approach requires an 'invest-to-save' programme – that is, by investing properly in community development and capacity in the short term, savings will be achieved through community-led preventative approaches in the long term. But there can be no significant long-term savings without upfront investment. With the financial settlements they currently possess, there is a risk that the public and VCSE sectors will struggle to do much more than maintain statutory services and stave off bankruptcy.

- **Short-termism:** Policy and financial frameworks often incentivise short-term mindsets, particularly when settlements are agreed on an annual basis or tied to four- or five-year electoral cycles. Building capacity among communities to enable more community-led approaches to public services is a long-term project, but many organisations that work with communities on the ground are subject to short-term financial settlements or only funded for specific programmes. Long-term and flexible funding arrangements would provide stability to the enablers of community power in local public and VCSE sector bodies.



We should look at different types of funding streams with different requirements and accountability. For example, more flexible long-term capacity building funds, possibly from non-government sources like lottery funds. It would help the voluntary sector body to come to the table as an equal rather than as a supplicant – this would mean a healthier relationship with councils – but we may need new ways of funding community-based action rather than requiring outputs every three months.” – a participant in the Wales-focused workshop.

- Formalisation:** Community groups that appear in emergencies are agile and responsive precisely because of their informal nature. By trying to sustain good practices from lockdown and support communities with bureaucratic processes such as funding bids, there is a risk that public services are inadvertently formalising these informal groups and damaging the essence of what makes them successful.

What these challenges demonstrate is that there is no simple button to press that will sustain the community power approach. Many of the challenges relate to deep-seated systemic, structural and cultural flaws in how the UK's public services are managed and funded. Remedying them will not happen overnight.

Although we should be mindful of the challenges ahead, we must not be daunted by them. The first lockdown demonstrated that radical change is possible in a short space of time, especially when public services, VCSE sector bodies and communities work together on a level playing field and with shared purpose. In the next section, we set out practical steps that national government and local areas can take to embed the community power approach and enable radical change for the long term.



HOW TO SUSTAIN THE NEW APPROACH AFTER THE CRISIS

The new approach that emerged for places and public services during the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated that, in times of real need, highly localised and community-powered approaches offer the swiftest and most resilient response. It is also clear, however, that many of the elements of this new approach were founded upon the immediate demands of crisis-response. When those conditions subside, sustaining and embedding these new whole locality practices will be a significant challenge.

Learning from the place-based case studies and wider research summarised in previous sections, this section now turns to a series of approaches for embedding the core elements of the new working approach after the end of the immediate crisis – and even beyond the needs of the looming economic recovery. These summarise what can be learned from the emergence of new practices and relationships during the pandemic and point the way to our final conclusions and recommendations.

1. Work locally and protect informality

Localities were the natural operational unit for much of the pandemic response.

This fact was understood very well by local people – from hyper-local engagement and neighbourhood-scale community groups to public health and public service partnerships between local authorities



In some local institutions, decades-worth of transformation and culture-shift have been achieved within weeks – or even days – of the first lockdown being called.

and civil society organisations –. And, more than anything else, the possibility of *informal* working and relationships drove the balance-shifting local action.

As noted throughout this report, the operational scale for *successful* responses to the pandemic has been largely local. Thanks to councils' dedicated and expert public health teams, local contact tracing systems were estimated in autumn 2020 to have had a 97.1 per cent success rate in reaching close contacts and advising them to self-isolate. The same analysis estimated that national Test and Trace in England achieved a success rate of 68.6 per cent.⁴⁵ Councils and other public services bodies have innovated, adapted, and reinvented their everyday work in order to save lives and protect the areas they serve through lockdown.⁴⁶ In some local institutions, decades-worth of transformation and culture-shift have been achieved within weeks – or even days – of the first lockdown being called.

Meanwhile, hyper-local mutual aid groups organised the safe delivery of food and medicine to people who were shielding from the virus, their efforts magnified by the public-spirited actions of people forced into furlough. Community businesses, charities, churches, and parish councils were among those that saw record levels of engagement as they worked tirelessly on localised responses to a global crisis.

All of this stands in contrast to the notable policy failures that have played out at the scale of *central* government, leading many to conclude that the pandemic experience has revealed more clearly than ever the extent of the UK's (and England's) over-centralisation of power in Westminster and Whitehall.⁴⁷ Even those centrally-determined policy responses that were successful were unusually dependent on local-scale, and even neighbourhood-scale, realisation. The welcome 'Everybody In' objective to minimise rough sleeping was delivered not only through sheer weight of investment, but by the work and innovation

⁴⁵ Figures apply to the week ending 30 September 2020. See: Barry, R. (8 October 2020). [Lowest weekly Test and Trace contact rate as figures show one in four positive Covid tests returned in 24 hours](#). ITV News.

⁴⁶ See: Local Trust and New Local. (June 2020). [How is Covid-19 changing the relationship between communities and public services?](#)

And: Dobson, J. et al. (November 2020). [Network Support: Community business peer networking before and during coronavirus](#). Report prepared for Power to Change.

⁴⁷ Studdert, J. (22 May 2020). [England's over-centralisation isn't just a governance issue now – it's a public health emergency](#). INLOGOV.

of councils and communities within localities. The ‘shielding’ policy to minimise exposure risk for people with underlying health conditions could probably not have had any success without the efforts of mutual aid groups in many places, backed up by councils and civil society organisations. Even the simplest of public health guidelines – hand-washing and social distancing – require meaningful articulation at the local level and buy-in by communities.

The evidence in this report identifies the local-within-local nature of the informal practices that made a difference in responses to the Covid-19 crisis. It is important to emphasise that this creates a platform not only for councils, communities, and civil society groups to learn lessons from what they achieved together during the pandemic, but for the political and administrative centre to learn those lessons too. Perhaps most clear is the lesson that a more meaningful and informal localism is possible, and that it would create far more regional resilience than the cumbersome over-centralisation of the approach that is currently dominant, particularly in England.

The informality of community-led initiatives was a key factor behind their success.

The mutual aid phenomenon during the crisis illustrates the wider potential of community power. New Local’s research on the thousands of informal mutual aid groups that spontaneously emerged at the start of the first lockdown found that they were crucial to society’s response to Covid-19.⁴⁸ In many cases, they were able to reach people more swiftly than traditional public services and help them with a variety of needs – supporting individuals to cope with isolation and financial stress as well as delivering food parcels and medicines to their door.

Wider civil society, social sector, and local government organisations should aim to take a facilitative stance toward these community groups as we move toward recovery, but without over-formalising their operations. Their main advantage is their speediness and popularity, both of which could be damaged by insistence upon complex regulations or formalised structures in the future.

⁴⁸ Tiratelli, L. and Kaye, S. (2020). [Communities vs Coronavirus: The rise of mutual aid](#). New Local.

This is not to say that all formalities are unhelpful. Formal systems create the basis for lines of accountability and often ensure the safety and security of people, which is particularly important during a public health crisis. Institutions, local or otherwise, will be motivated to ensure that safeguarding and accountability are properly sustained across localities in future.



the best examples of local partnerships revolved around different organisations playing to their own strengths in a complementary way.

Crucially, the best examples of local partnerships revolved around different organisations playing to their own strengths in a complementary way. Less formal approaches allowed for speed and flexibility – but also created more formal needs that could be effectively absorbed by local institutions working in a more facilitative way. In this way, a council can free up community businesses and mutual aid groups to keep moving fast and building networks of support, while also ensuring they are accountable and aware of their responsibilities regarding the safety and well-being of others.

2. Foster innovations and harness pre-existing resilience

Necessity is, as the saying goes, the mother of invention. But necessity is also shaped and defined by past experiences and longer processes, both of which had an important bearing on the emergence of the new community-powered approach in the first lockdown.

Crisis as accelerant and catalyst

The pandemic had the effect of catalysing entirely new practices and of accelerating existing trends across both institutions and communities. In many places, preparedness for the crisis was informed by existing local social capital and/or past experience of emergency response. Moreover, some trends – such as the drive toward digital and flexible working – significantly predate the pandemic and were merely fast-tracked by the demands of crisis response.

Shifting the Balance reveals that both innovations and accelerated trends were produced by response to the pandemic. Practices in either category could slip away without efforts to sustain them (see Table 2 on page 61). But in general, localities should take note of the emergent

innovations that helped comprise the new community-powered approach. These are perhaps the most ‘fragile’ of the practices discussed in this report. Without any longer-term grounding, they are more likely to slip away as councils and larger organisations face a period of retrenchment and *status quo* bias asserts itself. Those trends that were accelerated rather than initiated by the pandemic response, however, may in some cases have more staying-power.

Table 2: Four categories for desirable working practices between councils and social sector during the pandemic

	<p>More robust greater likelihood to become normalised</p>	<p>More fragile likely to backslide or be abandoned in favour of the status quo without special efforts</p>
<p>Existing trends accelerated by the pandemic & lockdown</p>	<p>Most longer-term trends have emerged more organically over time and may thus be more robust once crisis conditions end</p> <p>e.g. increasing and widespread use of digital working practices, remote videoconferencing</p>	<p>Some longer-term trends will still be likely to ‘backslide’ if vested interests or institutional inertia oppose their acceleration</p> <p>e.g. deeper collaborations across whole localities</p>
<p>Emergent trends created by the pandemic & lockdown</p>	<p>Brand-new innovations during the pandemic may sometimes be so self-evidently effective that they will be more robust</p> <p>e.g. breakdown of departmental silos in order to solve problems</p>	<p>Many brand-new innovations will be at greater risk of fading away once crisis conditions end unless steps are taken for cultural and structural reform</p> <p>e.g. flexible procurement methods</p>

To embed the new approach, then, the wholly innovative approaches that emerged during the pandemic may be worthy of particular attention across whole localities. At first, this may simply involve keeping track of where the genuine experiments are taking place, and how they are working. Pembrokeshire council, for example, is taking a systematic approach to ensuring that its many innovations are tracked and learned from in real time.⁴⁹ This makes sense: the conditions that led to their emergence may end, which creates the need for a collective effort if they are to be sustained.

The foundation of resilience is shared experience

Meanwhile, the existing trends and experiences accelerated and given new meaning by the pandemic are not by any means self-sustaining – but they point to a different kind of resilience, and require different responses from localities. The experience of crisis itself will deepen many places’ preparedness in future: longer-term trends that were put into overdrive by the experiences of lockdown. What these longer-standing approaches and assets require is sustained and flexible investment.

Covid-19 is not the first crisis many communities have faced, nor will it be the last. Some communities, particularly those in rural areas or places at risk of severe flooding, already have experience coming together in difficult times to check on their neighbours and help out however they can. For them, mobilisation in times of crisis has become second nature: a kind of community-powered resilience.

Community development and mobilisation are not just processes that happen during crises. Local authorities that had already made significant efforts to engage and work in partnership with communities before 2020 were the ones who best supported and realised the potential of mutual aid groups during lockdown.⁵⁰ From Wigan Council’s pioneering Deal for Communities to East Ayrshire Council’s dedicated Vibrant Communities service and Monmouthshire County Council’s ‘A County That Serves’ programme, forward-looking local authorities

⁴⁹ Neil Prior and an officer in Pembrokeshire designed an approach based on a series of interviews with Pembrokeshire council staff. The results are discussed in Prior’s [Learning Through Crisis](#) (Local Government First, 2020)

⁵⁰ Tiratelli, L. and Kaye, S. (2020). [Communities vs Coronavirus: The rise of mutual aid](#). New Local, p. 26. We also heard this point echoed in our workshops.



Local authorities that already had strong relationships with their communities have found it easier to adapt, innovate and embed new practices in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

across the UK have incorporated a deep understanding of the importance of facilitating community power into their approaches.⁵¹ Local authorities that already had strong relationships with their communities have found it easier to adapt, innovate and embed new practices in response to the Covid-19 crisis. They had the awareness and humility to step back and play a supporting role to the targeted interventions led by communities in their neighbourhoods.

Investment and recognition as routes to sustaining practices

This highlights one of the most important lessons from the first lockdown. It is now a necessity, not a 'nice-to-have', for the local state to invest in its communities, listen to and build relationships with them, and learn how to mobilise them. Resilient, confident and capable communities are the foundation on which swift and effective local responses to future crises will be built.

One starting point is to develop an understanding of the different types of communities within a place. For example, in many places it was people with experience of economic or social inequalities who stepped up most during lockdown. Many mutual aid groups were founded in the more deprived parts of boroughs.⁵² One of our interviewees observed that people living in those more deprived areas are already the most resilient because of the challenges they face. For them, there is little point talking about building resilient communities: they need opportunities and support. They need to feel like they are being listened to, and that any actions taken as a result of their concerns are done *with* rather than *to* them.

The experience of this crisis has had the deeper effect of preparing almost every place in the country for future shocks. Public organisations must now learn from and facilitate the energy, responsiveness and intelligence of local communities to build back better.

⁵¹ The 'Wigan Deal', East Ayrshire's 'Vibrant Communities' approach are both well-documented. On Monmouthshire's strategy, see Wilce, O. (2019). *A county that serves*. Nesta.

⁵² As reported by participants in a *Shifting the Balance* research workshop.

3. Embed long-term planning across localities

Many of the adaptations discussed in this report were instituted at high speed – indeed, we identify such speediness and agility as a crucial new practical approach brought about by the crisis. Moving fast, however, should not necessarily be associated with short-termism. Places with a more embedded commitment to long-term approaches are generally more committed to permanent, rather than immediate, values, such as community engagement, wellbeing, and resilience. These in turn have an impact on our capacity to respond to crises.

Our research into ‘balance-shifting’ practices during the pandemic revealed a variation in tone and culture between places. The pressures of emergency response created the conditions for many innovations, but attitudes to the longevity and role of such changes – and the way that public servants thought about them – seemed to some extent to be influenced by wider differences of approach and emphasis to long-term policymaking.⁵³

How the nations help embed long-range community planning

Taking a long-term approach is in many ways counter to the demands of our current system. Electoral and financial cycles strongly incentivise a short-term approach to institutional spending and visible decision-making. Balancing these pressures against the longer-range interests of future generations calls for an institutional response. Due to the national comparisons undertaken for this research, we are able to examine some of the differences of attitude and culture that may emerge in places with different levels of commitment to fighting short-termism bias.

In Scotland, the Futures Forum, Community Planning Partnerships, and various other national frameworks place a distinct emphasis on long-term approaches beyond short term responsiveness and

⁵³ This was made clear by research workshops dedicated to participants from specific national contexts.

the demands of electoral cycles.⁵⁴ Similarly, in Wales, both the Social Services and Well-being Act and the Well-being of Future Generations Act – which created the totally unique role of a dedicated future generations commissioner – establish a set of incentives for long-term thinking, community participation, and sustainable practices.⁵⁵ These institutions at the national scale reflect what has been referred to as “a more prominent strand” of environmental, social, and long-term awareness “than in mainstream UK politics ... an element of ‘conscious exceptionalism’.”⁵⁶



Welsh and Scottish communities and councils were in some cases better-positioned to make the needed changes because of the incentives established at the national level.

From immediate crisis response to the long view

There is no comparable national framework, charter, or law for England.⁵⁷ When the pandemic crisis forced the adoption and acceleration of different approaches, Welsh and Scottish communities and councils were in some cases better-positioned to make the needed changes because of the incentives established at the national level. In future, they may also be able to sustain the new practices and relationships more effectively too.

In several of the *Shifting the Balance* interviews and workshops, participants from Scotland and Wales, explicitly mentioned the national strategic and legislative context while discussing the drive to embed innovative practices and deeper community relationships after the crisis.

Yet such national-level frameworks are necessary but not sufficient. Our research also found that theoretical commitment to community involvement and the provision of national-scale frameworks – though welcome – does not automatically mean that localities will see real action and implementation along the same lines. While England must learn from the examples set in Scotland and Wales, all three nations exhibit long-term planning and community-led resilience in a patchy and inconsistent way that is strongly contingent on the dedication

⁵⁴ The Futures Forum is a non-partisan think tank owned by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body: <https://www.scotlandfutureforum.org/>.

⁵⁵ The Act is clearly explained in its official literature, available here: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/>.

⁵⁶ Jones, O'Brien, and Ryan. "Representation of Future Generations in United Kingdom Policy-making", *Futures* (2018) p.29

⁵⁷ The Sustainable Development Commission, which was closed in 2011, was probably the closest UK-wide equivalent. Its website and much of its work is archived at <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/>.

of local communities and leaders. A *systemic bias* toward such long-termism will be required for true resilience to emerge, and for the lessons of crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic to be learned.

4. Make space for third sector collaboration

In order to embed new practices and learn lessons beyond the particular places in which many organisations and groups operate, new forums for sharing insights will be needed. However these spaces or networks are designed, they should be established in a way that is independent of local or national institutions. This will facilitate learning and the dissemination of good practice, and help groups to jointly articulate their shared objectives and concerns during recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. When civil society or social sector organisations come together, it often happens in a forum that is convened by the local state so that strategies and activities are coordinated in a place-based manner. Although place-based working is highly desirable, and the convening power of public bodies is invaluable to enable it, this kind of set-up can make the local state the *de facto* manager of the space. Sometimes it is possible for public bodies to step even further back, allowing civil society organisations and community groups to come together beyond public service boundaries to find common cause across places – which can in turn lead to richer collaboration and innovation within places as well.

Networks drive partnerships and innovations

There is already evidence to suggest that, for organisations of particular kinds – such as community businesses – peer networking has played an important role during the pandemic.⁵⁸ The emergence of new habits of regular coordination and discussion could only support the creation of partnerships in future.

This isn't to say there is no role for local government, rather a shifting one to rebalance the power dynamics. During the first Covid-19 lockdown, Monmouthshire County Council helped community groups working at a hyperlocal level to form larger-scale neighbourhood networks so that they could develop solutions together and support

⁵⁸ Harris, C. (2020). [How community business peer networking operated before and during coronavirus](#). Power to Change.

each other (case study 4, page 36). The council was on hand to provide assistance whenever needed so that communities and volunteers felt supported, rather than abandoned or directed, by public services. This example illustrates well the fine line the local state needs to tread: developing and coordinating place-based working with partners, where 'place' is defined as the geography of the local authority; and stepping back so that civil society and community groups have the space and support to form horizontal networks beyond their place in a way that feels natural and organic to them.

The lessons set out here – if internalised by localities and the public sector – would represent a major challenge for the pre-pandemic *status quo*. In the next section, we offer ways that communities, VCSE organisations, and local and national government can act to take a genuinely community-powered local approach from temporary crisis-response to ongoing reality.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since this project was initiated, the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted several times, from early fervent crisis response, to the dawning realisation that the recovery horizon was more distant than first hoped. Fatigue and cynicism increasingly came to replace the initial energy and hope in communities and institutions alike.

The pandemic response proved not only that a new community-powered approach is possible in our localities – indeed, in many ways it demonstrated that the locality is the best and most natural level of response when a genuine emergency arises. Yet experience has also shown how easily that approach risks being forgotten or set aside when emergency conditions subside.

As this report has shown, the new community-powered approach that emerged from the passionate response that galvanised both neighbours and public servants is worth fighting for and preserving. It puts real people and communities centre stage as active participants, fundamental to their own health, wealth, and well-being, rather than an afterthought to be ‘consulted’. For this new role to emerge, an overnight transformation was required in the culture of councils and other formal institutions. The communities and civil society organisations which forged new partnerships during this time had little patience with the boundaries, siloes, and bureaucracy that define how work is usually done.

Recommendations

We set out here a series of recommendations which are only a starting point for embedding this community-powered approach beyond the pandemic and into recovery. The approach taken in each locality will be unique: the product of an inclusive and collaborative process that builds upon the extraordinary new relationships that came about during the crisis response. The new community-powered approach will be slightly different in every place where it emerges, because every place has its own spin on the challenges and assets explored in this report.

What each of the following recommendations has in common is the unequivocal need for engagement beyond the most vocal parts of communities. This starts with public services listening to and working more proactively with the people and places who are too often heard from the least, whether due to their gender, their ethnicity, their disability, or the relative economic development of their neighbourhoods. These are the groups who have, in many ways, borne the brunt of the pandemic.

It is also notable that these recommendations prioritise *culture change over structural change*. The new community-powered approach, wherever it emerged, was one that transformed and operated within long-established systems. There is clearly a case for deep structural reform for many of these systems. But the extraordinary things achieved demonstrate the power of a shift in mindset, of a simple alteration of priorities. We believe that more lasting change can be achieved through approaches that build upon and sustain this culture shift.

All of these changes were powered by a clear set of shared priorities in the midst of a crisis. But perhaps a sufficiently well-articulated sense of shared purpose across whole localities, driven by communities' clear enthusiasm to participate, could yet see a decisive and historic shift of the balance toward community power. We should not need emergency conditions to prevail in order to adapt, innovate, and collaborate.

The new, community-powered approach identified in this report was composed of three core elements:

- Adaptations of existing practices to be more speedy, flexible, and open.
- Innovative approaches that took advantage of the moment of radical possibility created by the pandemic to experiment with wholly new ways of doing things.
- A fresh culture of collaboration within and between the communities, organisations, and institutions that make up localities.

Our recommendations reflect each of these categories for embedding the relationships and approaches that made the biggest difference during the pandemic. All of these are aimed at partners across localities *as a whole*, though some will have greater import for councils, civil society groups, or community groups respectively, and some will impose clear demands on central government as well.

Adaptation

■ 1. Proactively identify, map and embed new practices.

The *adaptation* examples and practices discussed in this report clearly demonstrate the potential for more rapid, versatile, and inclusive ways of working across localities. But their emergence may not be noticed or remembered in every part of every local institution or diverse community.

Local public services, community organisations and communities should work together to record local responses, learn from what worked and did not work, and begin the collaborative effort of embedding the adaptations that successfully enabled new community-powered approaches.

Local authorities should coordinate the efforts to collate evidence and initiate the embedding of effective new practices. However, they should do so in close partnership with other local public services, businesses, VCSE bodies and communities. The *processes* of identification, mapping and embedding must be led and owned by organisations, networks and people across a place if the new practices are to become normalised.

2. Build more meaningful connections with communities.

Local responses to the pandemic have debunked the myth that certain communities are difficult to engage. Rather than sit at their desks and wait for people to approach them, public servants proactively went to the physical and virtual spaces where people naturally gathered during lockdown. Instead of seeking to manage and control all local communications about the pandemic, public organisations worked closely with community leaders and neighbourhood networks to disseminate public health messages and support.

Public services across the country should continue this proactive and collaborative style of engagement with communities both during and beyond the Covid-19 crisis. They must also commit to engaging with communities in a more inclusive way. This means a concerted effort to reach people in social and ethnic demographics whose voices are often not heard in traditional consultation processes, as well as conscious adoption of networks and media favoured by these groups. Working with members of diverse communities on public health messaging is one approach that some public services organisations have put to effective use during the pandemic.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ For example, see: Elworthy, J. (31 March 2020). [Coronavirus: Councils create videos in up to 30 languages to help those from overseas in Cambridgeshire get to grips with key health issues.](#) Cambs Times.

3. Resource the community's core assets.

The importance of existing civil society organisations, voluntary networks, and community businesses during this crisis is impossible to overstate. But many of these local assets are vulnerable to the conditions of economic lockdown or the vicissitudes of prolonged economic instability. Successfully embedding a new community-powered approach will therefore require resources.

In the short-term, **national governments** should ensure that the national structures and systems that made the biggest difference during the crisis should be further resourced.⁶⁰ 'Third sector interfaces' in Scotland, for example, have performed admirably in many places, but their funding level has not changed since their introduction. They should also re-configure and devolve to local authorities place-based funding streams such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund so that they are more specifically targeted at supporting community power and community organisations, businesses and assets.⁶¹

In the long-term, **national and local governments** should commit to building community capacity and infrastructure by working with local public and VCSE bodies to establish a dedicated Community Wealth Fund.

Whichever funding arrangements are agreed, **national and local public bodies** should take decisions about resource allocation more inclusively and create opportunities for all communities to play an active role in decision-making, implementation and evaluation processes.

⁶⁰ In this section, 'National governments' refers both to the UK Government and to the devolved governments of the UK.

⁶¹ In England, we believe that the Towns Fund and the Levelling-Up Fund are further examples of funding streams that should be reimagined and devolved.

Innovation

1. Normalise digital inclusivity.

The pivot to greater use of digital tools and social media was non-negotiable during the pandemic. They provided a platform for crucial services to continue running, key decisions to be taken, and mutual aid groups to convene and organise. But there were also unexpected side-effects that contributed to the emergence of a new community-powered approach in localities. Videoconferencing can have a levelling effect, giving participants an equal footing to contribute. At the same time, the sheer convenience of digital approaches can make citizen participation and engagement much more likely.

By moving to identify and tackle the ‘divides’ – be they economic, or to do with demographic differences such as ethnicity or gender – that saw some people excluded from these advantages, many desirable practices may be sustained in future.

Local public services, education and skills providers, businesses and VCSE organisations should come together across a place to identify and address digital skills and equipment needs.

National governments should commit funding to addressing digital skills and equipment needs in all parts of the country, including working with local areas to enable broadband and network infrastructure improvements where necessary.

2. Embed structural long-termism and community planning at the national level.

Shifting the Balance found that several localities in Wales and Scotland benefited from those nations’ structural commitments to long-term

planning with the active participation of communities, as a better basis for embedding desirable new practices. Partly as a result of the unbalanced nature of the UK's programme of devolution, most localities in England lack comparable frameworks, and were dependent instead on local commitments and leadership toward similar ends. A crucial obstacle to a new community-powered approach is the short time horizon attached to most funding, and the short-termism incentivised by the political cycle.

The UK Government should emulate the Welsh and Scottish Governments by committing to a robust approach to facilitating community engagement and enshrining long-term policy-making in England. This approach should involve the passage of a Community Power Act to place duties on national public bodies to commit the necessary funding and on local public bodies to engage communities in the design and delivery of the policies and services that affect them.

The Cabinet Office should lead the development of the Community Power Bill and embed more long-termist policy-making practices across Whitehall departments.

The Treasury and MHCLG should also be closely involved in this work so that policy and financial frameworks are designed to incentivise long-termist approaches in local authorities.



3. Facilitate informal community-led approaches wherever possible.

Some of the most innovative work that took place during the pandemic was only possible because genuine informality was possible. Community and mutual aid groups were able to galvanise at speed and help people without overt formal processes, while people working at the frontline of public services discovered they had enough autonomy to realise their objectives in the best possible way. This informality contributed to a fresh culture where people are kind, decent and compassionate towards each other.

Local public services should continue to set the example with how they work with people in communities. They should move into a facilitative stance, where they take on essential formalities, such as support to fund and arrange DBS checks, on behalf of communities. This will allow community groups to continue in informal and kindness-driven ways.

Collaboration

1. Prioritise building a unifying narrative and vision for the whole locality.

The galvanising and unifying effect of the pandemic cannot – and should not – be replicated. But its effects – of creating new grounds for ambitious collaborations across whole localities – were responsible for the emergence of a new community-powered approach in many places.

Local public services should come together – in partnership with other local organisations, businesses, and communities – to develop a distinctive and compelling shared purpose or narrative. This shared vision should emerge organically as part of an ongoing, open-ended, and honest conversation, supported by an independent facilitator, that takes in as much of each locality as possible. By being as inclusive as possible and proactively engaging with communities beyond the loudest voices, this process has the best chance to replicate the sense of mission that existed during the pandemic.⁶²

2. Establish spaces and networks for communities and the third sector.

Some astonishing things were achieved when communities and civil society organisations worked together during the pandemic response. *Shifting the Balance* found examples of collaborations between

⁶² Practical lessons and reflections on building a place-based narrative are available in: Pennycook, L. (2020). [Talk of the Town: Supporting place-based story-telling](#). Carnegie UK Trust.

organisations that had previously been unaware of each others' existence. Before the Covid-19 crisis began, there were few venues or opportunities for direct interaction between these organisations even within localities.

Local authorities should prioritise the creation of new spaces and networks for communities and the third sector – both within and between places and within and between causes – to enable these groups to find common cause, set up collaborations, and plan for the future.

Local public services more broadly should support, but not manage, the operations of these spaces and networks by working with them as partners and sharing data to encourage joined-up working where appropriate.

3. Incentivise cooperation, not competition.

One of the biggest obstacles to the longer-term life of the new approach discussed in this report is the near-universal norm of competitively-allocated funds.

National government often finances local growth and place development programmes through competitive initiatives, to which local authorities are required to prepare and submit bids for funding.⁶³ The one-off and short-term nature of these initiatives restricts the ability of local authorities to plan strategically for the longer term.

VCSE representatives in *Shifting the Balance* workshops highlighted that local authorities' financial frameworks and funding programmes tend to incentivise competition between similar voluntary and community organisations rather than place-based collaboration.

At both national and local levels, the ways in which funding schemes are designed can cause perverse incentives within localities, setting into competition the organisations that have the most in common with each other. The result is a locality filled with winners and losers, and many lost

⁶³ In England, the Towns Fund and the Future High Streets Fund are recent examples of such initiatives.

opportunities for partnership and cooperation. While some competition is healthy, it should by no means be the default way that group access funds or achieve participation in a given public service.

National and local governments should ensure that new resourcing and funding schemes are designed to incentivise collaborative working, drawing on practices and lessons from community commissioning initiatives and social value commissioning and procurement.⁶⁴ One important step towards achieving this will be to embed more long-termist approaches to policy-making and public financing, as discussed previously.

The new community-powered approach that emerged in response to the pandemic was the product of localities finding the best possible ways to respond collectively to the greatest global public health crisis in 100 years. It was self-evidently the most natural and effective model to adopt in the midst of a pandemic. This is telling.

Our recommendations ask national governments, local government, other local bodies and communities to commit to decisively shifting the balance toward more community power in public services. By learning lessons from the extraordinary adaptations and achievements that took place during the pandemic, we may yet realise that an entirely different approach is possible – one that can help us on the long road to recovery from the pandemic and continue to improve people's lives in future.

⁶⁴ For example, see: Lent, A. et al. (2019). [Community Commissioning: Shaping public services through people power](#). New Local.



RESEARCH METHODS

Beyond desk research to establish context, and a literature survey of the many current efforts to capture innovative practices during the pandemic and set out a ‘build back better’ agenda for the coming recovery, this project involved:

- Three dedicated peer research workshops, one each to focus on the experiences of councils and communities in Wales, Scotland, and England respectively, allowing for a more comparative analysis of how adaptations emerged in each national context.
- A fourth follow-up workshop, attended by participants in all three previous sessions, to discuss some initial findings and arguments.
- Zoom interviews to identify examples and explore new practices during the pandemic.
- Seven in-depth, place-based case studies to be developed in the final report. These case studies are based on *places* rather than councils, which means we sometimes interviewed contacts in multiple organisations to inform a case study.

For a more rounded impression of the new practices that emerged in response to the shifting challenges of 2020, our research went beyond our core case studies of Aberdeenshire, Gwynedd, Kingston upon Thames, Monmouthshire, North Ayrshire, Sheffield, and Wolverhampton (each of which resulted in a separate write-up in this report).

BARROW CADBURY TRUST

Barrow Cadbury Trust is an independent, charitable foundation committed to bringing about a more just and equal society.

Building on its Quaker heritage it seeks long-term solutions by looking at root causes of inequality. The problems it addresses are complex so it frequently works in partnership with others; grant-holders, other trusts and foundations, local and national government, to identify solutions. It focuses on a small number of distinct policy areas and seeks to influence them by building an evidence base, advocating for change, and ensuring the voices of people affected by social injustices are heard in the debate. Much of its work is directed towards change at the national level: where it works locally this is almost always in Birmingham and the surrounding area.

To find out more, visit www.barrowcadbury.org.uk



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CARNEGIE UK TRUST

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve wellbeing across the UK and Ireland through policy, research and practice development.

This year, we have drawn on our research and practice development to provide ideas for policymakers as they make the difficult decisions during the COVID-19 emergency and recovery. In *Building Back for the Better*, we set out six propositions for putting wellbeing at the heart of the recovery process.* One key change we'd like to see is more focus, by funders and policymakers, on local areas, and local actors. In this Shifting the Balance of Power project we were delighted to support New Local to research the importance of a local response and strong partnerships during the pandemic.

To find out more, visit www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk



CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

* Wallace, J. et al. (2020). [Building Back for the Better: A perspective from Carnegie UK Trust](#). Carnegie UK Trust.

POWER TO CHANGE

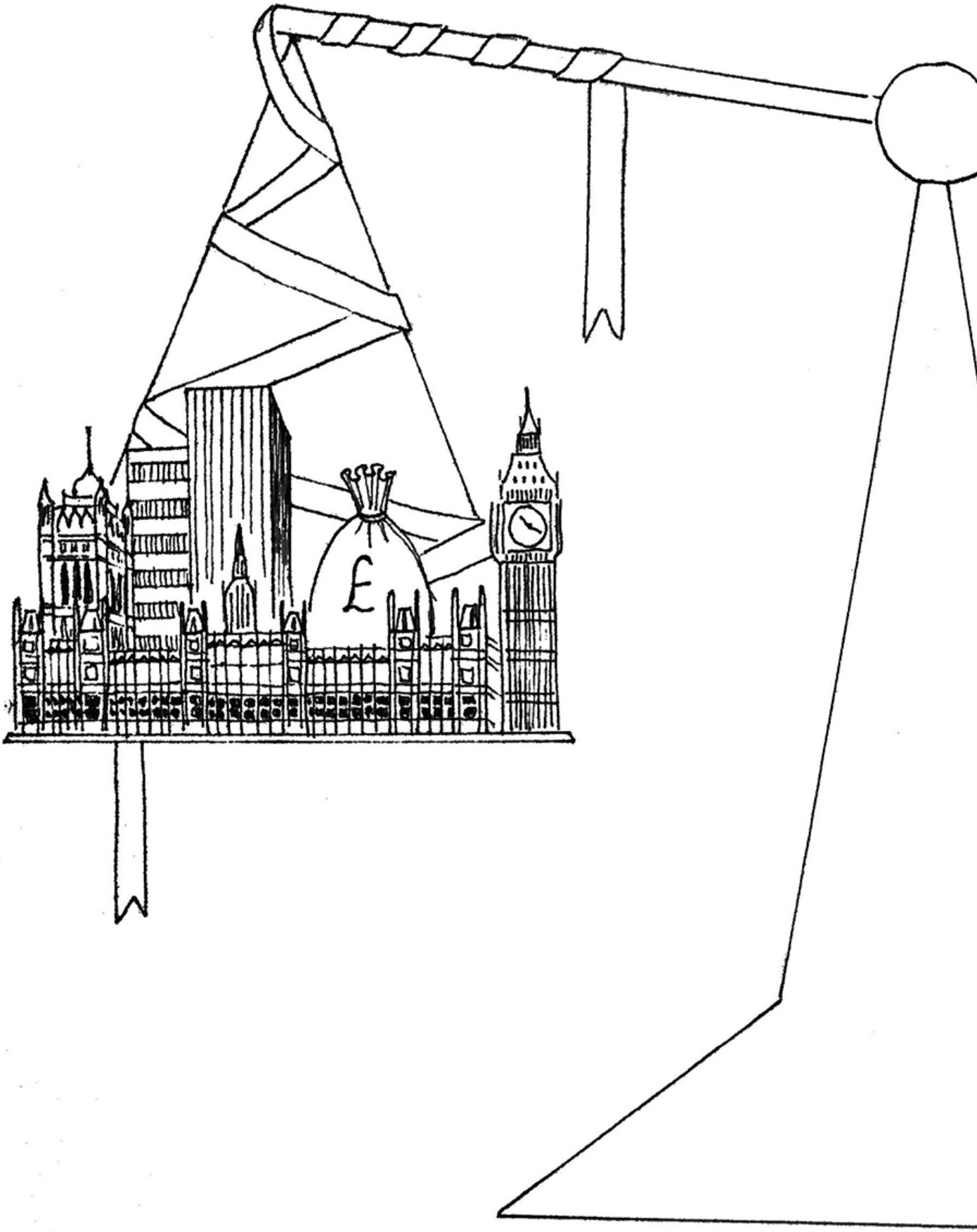
Power to Change is the independent trust that supports community businesses in England. Community businesses are locally rooted, community-led, trade for community benefit and make life better for local people. The sector owns assets worth £890 million and comprises 9,000 community businesses across England who employ 33,600 people. (Source: Community Business Market 2019).

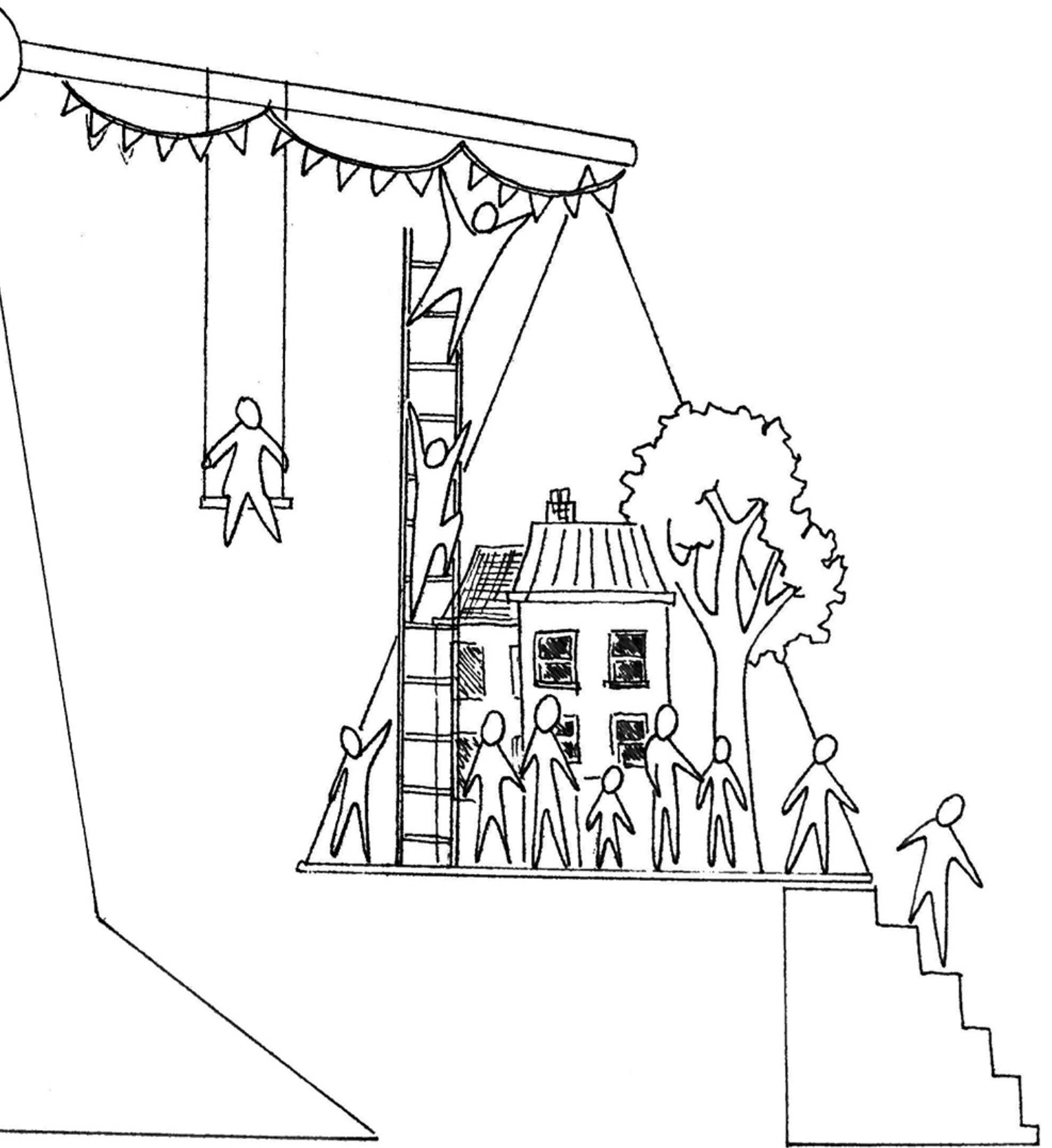
From pubs to libraries; shops to bakeries; swimming pools to solar farms; community businesses are creating great products and services, providing employment and training and transforming lives.

Power to Change received its endowment from the National Lottery Community Fund in 2015.

To find out more, visit www.powertochange.org.uk







2020 was a year with unprecedented challenges for so many, and it was also the year that proved community power is possible at scale. The community power movement that responded to the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic broke down institutional barriers, set aside bureaucracies, disrupted hierarchies and, most crucially, produced tangible results.

Shifting the Balance is an investigation into this new community-powered approach, where people across localities worked together to achieve shared objectives as the crisis unfolded. Based on a series of interviews, workshops, and in-depth case studies, it identifies and explores a host of new practices and place-based partnerships, and explains why they are worth holding on to in future.

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