September 2021

Full Report

RESOURCING RESILIENT GLOUCESTERSHIRE:

Learning from the Community Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Gloucestershire

barn wood

Foreword

In September 2020, a group of around 20 people from communities across Gloucestershire, who had been closely involved in supporting communities to respond to the first waves of the Covid 19 pandemic, came together to think about the role of trusted community organisations in getting across clear communication about how to keep safe in the pandemic. What we thought would be a one-off meeting, turned, at their request, into a frequent and regular online meeting space where people in community organisations met to reflect together on what was happening, get to know each other better and explore some of the challenges they were facing together.

What emerged was a fortnightly meeting for the best part of nine months at which all the participating organisations talked in turn and in detail about themselves, sharing their organisational practices and how they had changed with the pandemic. As we met, it was clear that there were many common issues, preoccupations, and questions. The fortnightly sessions took on a dual function: sharing practice and thereby getting to know each other better, identifying common issues of concern and finding out how others were dealing with them. We talked through questions such as "when does something you do as an emergency become something permanent, and when should it be allowed to end?", or " grassroots community work is done for, and in, the 'here and now'; does it need a long-term plan, and if so, how do you work out what that is?" or "can community anchors move into social enterprise, and if so how?"

As we listened to these conversations, it became abundantly clear that these organisations were doing a phenomenal job in reinventing themselves, on the hoof, and repeatedly, to meet the needs and enable the assets in their communities. But their challenges in sustaining themselves through irregular, often unhelpfully targeted funding, became increasingly clear. There were so many clear common

themes that merited exploration to make sure that collectively we can enable the extraordinary resources present in every community.

We decided to undertake this piece of research with some of the organisations involved in the fortnightly discussions, both to provide a way of sharing their remarkable practice, but also to raise more widely some of the questions about how we sustain this activity. We want to ensure that we are in a state of readiness to meet the challenges of the future in every community across Gloucestershire, and to ensure that every member of the community who wants to contribute is able to do so.

The findings from the research are relevant to **everyone** from informal, self-organising community and Mutual Aid groups to community anchor organisations, statutory bodies, commissioners and funders – including Barnwood Trust.

As a charitable trust ourselves we are reflecting on the learning from this research for our own funding practices. Participating organisations told us that they wanted funding to cover much longer-periods of time (at least five years), asked for greater trust in their expertise to use resources sensibly and efficiently, requested more autonomy to do what was needed where they worked and for greater flexibility to adapt when circumstances changed, or new ideas emerged. We are thinking through what these ideas mean for us as a Trust, and how we can continue to listen and respond most effectively.

We would like to thank all the many community groups and organisations, large and small, who have supported so many people across Gloucestershire to survive through this last difficult year, and especially those who have generously helped us to learn so much. As we move to a different stage of this crisis, these principles of

trust, autonomy and flexibility feel increasingly significant to building, resourcing and sustaining a resilient Gloucestershire.

Sally Byng

Chief Executive Officer, Barnwood Trust

Contents

Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in March 2020, the UK government took the unprecedented step of locking the country down and requesting that everyone 'Stay at Home'. People's lives were turned upside down, and everyday activities suddenly required significant logistical adjustments and emotional resources. Alongside an exceptional health emergency, a social crisis was also emerging. For many, this was an introduction into life with restrictions, for many others the lockdown made an already restricted life harder, and for some, the sudden switch to remote working, digital medical appointments and growing community spirit opened the world up to them in ways that previously had not seemed possible[1].

Resilience is often defined as the capacity to adapt and respond to difficult situations, the cornerstones of building resilience being flexibility, versatility, and perseverance[2] [3]. Gloucestershire's resilience was tested to an unprecedented level for recent times. Neighbours, community groups and organisations became lifelines in ways they had not before, reaching out to people across the county, some of whom never expected to be reliant on others.

The impact that the response of local people, community groups and organisations had on the county's capacity to manage this crisis is only now being fully understood.

This will not be the last crisis to affect Gloucestershire communities. Whilst this research highlights the extensive challenges experienced during the pandemic, many of these issues are not new. They have been accentuated by the scale of this emergency and there is much to learn from community efforts about how Gloucestershire can recover and grow as we move forward.

---

[1] Barnwood Trust (2020) **Our Changing World**: https://www.barnwoodtrust.org/news/our-changing-world/
[2] Post Carbon Institute (2016) **The Community Resilience Reader: Essential resources for an era of upheaval** Washington DC: Island Press
[3] Kretzmann, J. P. (2010) *Asset-Based Strategies for Building Resilient Communities* in: Reich, J.W., Zautra, A., and Hall, S.J. (Eds.), **Handbook of Adult Resilience** New York: Guilford Press

This new piece of research was designed as a listening and learning exercise which aimed to understand:

- The ways community groups and organisations were able to respond to the pandemic, what restricted them and how they overcame these challenges.
- The resources needed and how they were acquired – especially financial resources.
- What we could collectively learn from this crisis to ensure that Gloucestershire as a county is fully prepared for future challenges.

We were particularly interested in the community contributions of disabled people and people with mental health challenges. There has been a great deal of focus on 'vulnerability' and how people experiencing barriers to participation in society prior to the pandemic have required additional support during this time, but less has been said about how those with an expertise in living with restriction have contributed to this community effort.

We wanted to learn about how *everyone* can make a positive contribution to their community so that disabled people and people with mental health challenges can be valued for what they bring and fully included where they live.

Over the course of three months (January to March 2021), as the UK entered its third national lockdown, we interviewed 11 Gloucestershire-based community groups and organisations of various sizes about their experiences of responding to community need throughout the pandemic. Participants (most of whom were paid staff and four of whom led their organisations) were asked about how they planned and delivered activities, the challenges they faced, and their work with volunteers, funders, and commissioners. Each interview was recorded and transcribed before being thematically analysed around areas of learning, including:

- The nature of the community response itself
- The ways communities are resourced and how this can be improved

- How communities can increase their resilience for future crises. [4]

The interviews were extensive; for many participants it was their first opportunity to pause and reflect on what they and their communities have faced and the challenges to which they had risen. These conversations were revealing, not only about the ways in which groups and organisations responded, but also about Gloucestershire before the pandemic.

[4] A more detailed methodology is included at the end of this report.

Definitions within this Report

Several concepts are central to what we heard and the findings that follow in this report:

- **Resources** | In this report 'resource' refers to capital beyond the financial. Whilst funding and monetary resources are discussed at length, they are not considered the only assets that communities have been able to draw upon during this crisis. Resources included the wealth of strengths, capacity and resilience that exist throughout communities: the skills and experiences of local people, the existing community infrastructure and the approach and ethos of groups and organisations operating locally.

- **Community Resilience** | A community's ability to actively engage with, respond to and learn from adversity is a mark of its resilience. Throughout our interviews the responses of individuals and collectives was cited time after time as being essential to the positive outcomes across the county. Being able to actively embrace new, flexible ways of engaging, new roles within neighbourhoods and new perceptions in terms of skills and support was said to have been fundamental in the success of community action in Gloucestershire.

- **Sustainability** | This research shares the notion that our communities are part of an ecosystem. Sustainability within this system can be defined as "*avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance*"[5]. For the resilience and response which occurs naturally in our communities to be truly sustainable, the conditions for being ready to respond when needed must be created and maintained in order that they can be reignited when required.

[5] *As defined in the Oxford English Dictionary*

The Community Ecosystem

Alongside these key concepts, the notion of the 'community ecosystem' emerged from the interviews. Although not always named as such, this idea of the interconnected nature of relationships between different people, groups, organisations and services within the community, alongside the view of being part of something bigger than themselves was shared by several of the participants, especially in terms of community resilience.

Each element of the community ecosystem is suggested to contribute something different:

- **Local Decision-Makers** | refers to the statutory sector making up our local governance structures, health, and public services. This sector manages the county's resources (financial, logistical, and personnel) and routinely makes decisions on how and where these resources are distributed within the county.

- **Community Anchor Organisations** | organisations described by participants as holding a unique place within the community ecosystem. Recognised and trusted by local people and organisations alike, they interact with local decision-makers, the wider voluntary and community sector (VCS) within their community and informal networks on the ground. Advocating for the resources needed in the communities where they are embedded, they use their skills to enable and retain power for local people to do things for themselves. In the context of the pandemic response, participants spoke about how community anchors provided guidance and support. In terms of resources, they hold extensive local knowledge and, due to their trusted relationships, sometimes have access to funding from local decision-makers, their distribution of which is informed by the need of the local community.

- **Community Organisations** | hold a different position to anchor organisations. Whilst both share characteristics of being well-established and maintaining trusted relationships within their communities, community organisations are typically more hands-on with more direct, hyperlocal, support to community members. Often operating out of a hub, they run a range of activities and were amongst the first to respond at scale to the crisis when it emerged in March 2020. They were described by participants as being at the centre of the community ecosystem, giving time, offering activities, advice and support to local people and volunteers who are intrinsically connected to these organisations as both providers and recipients. They are able to enhance their work by drawing on the resources and guidance of anchor organisations where they exist.

- **Informal Community Action / Neighbourliness** | across the county some of the most dynamic responses came from small groups self-organising and forming a taskforce to support people through the unfolding crisis – picking up prescriptions, buying a bottle of milk or being there to listen for example. This activity was frequently not formally co-ordinated – emerging simultaneously from several directions – but demonstrated how often some of the most significant connections that people established came from neighbours helping each other out and recognising needs in their immediate area. Over time, these initially reactive and fragmented approaches were able to become more centralised and even more responsive to the situation.

- **Individuals** | are essential to the community ecosystem. Each person brings their own strengths and skills which have a unique impact when offered and valued where they live. Participants gave examples about a range of skills people brought including, but not limited to, creativity, empathy, technological skills, and their own life experiences.

Resources can be distributed anywhere, and indeed, in any direction within the ecosystem. For example, whilst local decision-makers may have access to extensive financial resources (relative to community groups), community groups possess a greater local knowledge than the statutory sector. Likewise, the informal networks between individuals in a community may be able to identify and reach people of whom formal community services may be unaware.

It was suggested that restriction or constraint of any one element in this ecosystem could impact the resilience of communities, for example through inadequate or inappropriate funding systems, or dismissal of local knowledge and connections in decision-making.

The Covid-19 pandemic shone a light on the challenges faced in our county but also on the ways communities utilise their resources, which has provided the opportunity to learn and develop new, more integrated, and collaborative ways of responding.

Aside from financial resources, the research identified three areas that contribute to community resilience at times of crisis: local people, infrastructure, and organisational ethos. These are explored in detail within this report.

By acting upon these community insights, this report highlights that **everyone** can learn from and have a role in implementing these crucial findings to create flexible and efficient ways of responding. For funders and commissioners, they provide an opportunity to co-design, co-create and co-produce[6] powerful and sustainable changes in collaboration with communities which will impact on the resilience and self-reliance of our county for future generations.

[6] Hilary Cottam (2018) **Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state** London: Virago

What contributes to resilient communities?

Local People

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted every community in the county. The resilience of communities in Gloucestershire has been tested in ways not experienced since the widespread flooding in 2007 left many people homeless and thousands without water for almost two weeks[7]. However, it was evident from the interviews that participants felt local people had risen to the current challenge, developing solutions that aimed to ensure their neighbours were not left without support or forgotten.

Existing Capacity within Communities

Almost all the community groups and organisations we interviewed were struck by the extent of the resilience shown by people who had quickly mobilised to support their communities when the pandemic started. One participant explained:

"What I wish I knew would probably be how well the community would self-organise on their own. I think I was probably a bit harsh in my assumptions of the communities, thinking they won't be able to do it without us… And actually, when we were working from home, they were doing it. They were just doing it on their own … they were doing it without us…"

For many participants, this potential for resilience was their biggest area of learning. Despite knowing their communities well, the pandemic was said to have demonstrated that local people already had the capacity to self-organise, to reach out, and to do what was needed without delay or extensive planning and, often with little or no financial resource to get started.

Another organisation reflected that this realisation around existing capacity might have influenced how they initially responded:

"We've learned a lot from the people who use our services … people were more resilient than I think we actually give them credit for … We had worries that we might, you know, we might create this dependency culture… But actually, no… So looking back now I think we would have, it would have just given us more peace of

[7] Tewkesbury Borough Council (2021) **Flooding:** https://www.tewkesbury.gov.uk/flooding

mind about what we were doing, you know, we wouldn't have agonised in the same way about this."

The following case study highlights how one Gloucestershire community utilised their existing capacity and resilience to respond to the pandemic.

Barton and Tredworth

When the pandemic began to take hold, the people of Barton and Tredworth swiftly mobilised across the area:

> **So in this area in particular, in Barton and Tredworth, a bunch of people got together and became kind of street reps. I think there were about 108 streets that were targeted, so that was every street in the ward, every street had a named representative… I think this was evident before lockdown, the first lockdown, actually happened, you know. Letters went out to every single resident in the whole area to say this is coming, if anybody needs anything this is who I am and this is what we can do.**

These self-appointed street representatives sought to reach every single resident and provide them with a way to contact someone who was specifically appointed to assist them.

One of the organisations who observed this reflected on how Barton and Tredworth was an area that was already well-connected and where there was already a willingness to look out for neighbours and do things for themselves:

> **…I think what it has always had is loads of people doing stuff on the ground. So there's loads of individuals doing things, there's loads of small street groups, people doing stuff. There's formal organisations, there's informal groups, I think traditionally there has always been that activity.**

Rather than organisations allocating their time and resources which would replicate the work already underway, this existing community capacity was said to have freed-up organisations to take up a more supportive and enabling role:

> **…essentially what we (the organisation) just did very early on was kind of like just be here, be a space, be a resource and say well actually, what do people want to do, what's the need, how can we kind of bring some of this altogether?**

This participant reflected how this resilience has impacted upon them personally and demonstrated that for them communities hold so many of the solutions:

> **I think I'm really happy that I am part of a huge community with people who are so passionate about just supporting one another and finding creative ways of just giving their time. I think that's been really amazing, and just through simple conversations someone will just say, 'I can do that', 'I've got a good idea', or 'here you go, let me take this on'. I think that's been really inspiring.**

Research participants across Gloucestershire shared similar examples of an array of strengths and skills contributed by local people, highlighting the willpower, tenacity and determination of some individuals. The pandemic response from communities represented in this research was described as expansive.

Strengths and Skills within Communities

As well as being struck by the way community members came together, participants also drew attention to the multitude of strengths and skills that people brought with them.

Interviewees spoke of the importance of recognising that such strengths and skills not only exist within formal and professional organisations but are *everywhere* in the community ecosystem. Identifying, valuing and drawing on them as a resource was felt to be essential to the benefit of everyone.

Amongst the skills and strengths residents were said to have offered were:

- Extensive knowledge of safeguarding procedures and practices
- Experience supporting individuals with mental health challenges
- Adult education and training
- Knowledge of digital technology
- Baking
- Volunteer co-ordination
- Creativity
- Empathy
- Compassion

We were told that uncovering these skills and strengths had helped enhance the responses that could be co-ordinated by organisations. One organisation told us how they identified a wealth of skills amongst local people, including database creation and interview experience. Drawing on these skills enabled them to build a data system that made it easier to keep track of requests for help and that sped up safeguarding procedures without compromising on safety.

We also heard about the range of backgrounds of the interview participants themselves which illustrated the breadth of expertise they had to draw on in their work. For example, several participants held roles such as community first responders with the ambulance service, had been teachers or social workers, or had worked in community development roles, and they also included a retired GP, a church warden, a person who provided end-of-life care, and others who volunteered in charity governance roles.

Individual People as Catalysts for Community Action

There were several examples within the interviews of how the willpower and commitment of individual people had catalysed action where they lived. These individuals were said to already know a lot of people within their communities or have been present in the local infrastructure before the pandemic: people writing the village newsletter, running local groups or sitting on the parish council. One respondent described that:

> *"…some of the most effective … 'services and charities' that's helped during the pandemic has been because somebody up the road went, 'let's help'."*

The case study below captures how one individual ensured a number of families in their area were supported to access food.

Family Food Parcels

One participant told us how they noticed that local families were struggling and how these struggles were being exacerbated by the isolation of living in a remote Cotswold village. The nearest foodbank was only open for limited hours and was not always accessible to families with young children or people who were reliant on poor public transport links:

> **"I think when it started the first thing that concerned me was people who would not be able to have, would not have enough food because they had perhaps lost their jobs, kids weren't at school, they weren't getting free school meals and so on. So I started to ask round whether we couldn't do something about the foodbank or help people in some way..."**

The participant set about contacting everyone they knew and within 48 hours had recruited enough people to be able to establish a makeshift community hub in the village and to divide it up to try to reach as many people as possible.

To help get the project up and running, they were again able to use their relationships with those in the village to seek donations for a food parcel delivery service:

> **"So we have a very, very local radio station. And it's a friend of ours who set it up… So I set up a Just Giving page, whatever you call it, and asked him to do some publicity for me. Well, I have to say, I was absolutely overwhelmed. Within three days I think we had over £1,000."**

Despite this, they described that many residents in the local community felt that it was the role of services to provide this type of support even though they knew some individuals had not been reached:

> **"I was so cross when people said to me, 'Oh you can't do that'… That's when I got told no, there's agencies who do things like that. And I just, we cannot leave it to everybody else. It's too easy, isn't it to say oh, somebody will deal with that. You can't do that all the time in this life."**

Over the year, this individual and around 40 volunteers were able to supply and deliver over 200 food parcels to the village of 2,000 residents.

Emergent community groups such as this one told us how they now felt a need to consolidate their work during the pandemic and establish something more permanent in their community. Now that the community knows what it can achieve, there is a real sense that this village and its residents are more resilient than they were at the beginning of the pandemic.

Building Community Capacity through Time-Giving

When we started these interviews, we were curious to learn about residents' reasons for offering time to their community. Participants understood many of these reasons to be about a sense of purpose:

"People having a purpose has been very important throughout the whole thing. And so actually we've had people who have been referred, you know, by other agencies as clients but we've taken them on as a volunteer and made it clear to them that they are volunteering … that's been really positive."

Organisations reflected that people suddenly had time on their hands, they wanted company or to help their family, friends and neighbours, and they wanted to support health and social care systems in their time of need.

This motivation was also acknowledged by the participants themselves. We heard that not only was a bottom-up response essential to a community during a crisis but being able to make meaning purposefully was also said to be essential to the protection of individual long-term mental health. Representatives of some of the organisations we spoke to were very open about the fact that their work throughout the pandemic had helped them cope personally and that it had been a source of strength to others, that it was useful to be busy, that they needed purpose. Some examples of this are given below:

"…it's surprising how many volunteers say how important it is for their own mental health to be able to volunteer and this is the thing that's kept them sane."

***

"…in Covid there's an awful lot of us who normally wouldn't feel ourselves at risk or vulnerable or those words, and some of us are – most of us really – and the people who can do a shift … or be a street volunteer, it's what holds them together."

However, the impact of time-giving to community capacity was considered to go beyond giving people a sense of purpose. Many groups relayed that once local people are more connected into their community there was potential for long-term relationship building and that this was less likely to be the result of more formal volunteering. Giving time to others in a community had a different implication than

a volunteer performing a role because it was more reciprocal and challenged the perception of a 'volunteer' as a beneficent 'helper' with greater capacity than those being 'helped'. As one participant described, those giving their time are able to see their role as far broader than it might first appear:

"Where you feel, you know, better connected with your neighbours, where you feel like you belong in a place, where you've got pride in where you live, these things happen organically … you're one person who's all they're doing is delivering one meal a day. But actually, through that one-meal-a-day delivery other things are happening and that's the important bit … it's just that change in their mindset to say you understand that you're part of this process and … you're not just doing a delivery job, you're looking out for a community."

Likewise, it was suggested that people's perceptions of their area change when they are no longer made to feel like passive recipients of a service: they feel a sense of belonging and connection:

"…last week we just delivered our 15,000th meal and clearly, it's a massive achievement and I know that, and it's really easy just to say yes, that's the real success of the story. The success of the story is with some of those individuals … who have changed as part of it, who kind of got to understand that … this is the community that they're part of, this is the space that kind of belongs to them as much as anyone else. You know, those are the kind of differences that I think are really important markers of this time".

Flexible and Inclusive Approach to Time-Giving

All 11 groups and organisations involved in this research were supported to some extent by people giving their time. The groups and organisations that were interviewed often referred to those community members giving their time as volunteers. This was utilised as a generic term, though from the interviews it was clear that the roles undertaken by these individuals varied greatly in terms of activity, mutuality, time, and regularity.

- **Activity |** Some organisations were very transparent about where volunteering sat within the work they were doing. People were recruited to specific roles based on the local needs identified by the organisation. Other organisations started from the perspective of the individual and allocated,

brokered them into, or created a role based on the skills that the individual brought. Some of the more established participants were able to build on their standard recruitment practice to create a hybrid of the two approaches.

- **Mutuality** | Whilst some groups were clear that there was a mutual aspect to the volunteering that was undertaken with/for them in terms of getting out of the house or feeling productive, in the most part roles were transactional. There were however several examples of time being offered that were more relational and therefore also more mutual. For example, people offering time on a phone befriending scheme where both people on the call were reported to have felt productive *and* supported.

- **Time and Regularity** | In a similar way, the time commitment to undertake a role varied depending on the group. Some recruited to a specific number of hours on particular days, others were more open to a less structured pattern of commitment dependent on what an individual could offer.

How an individual offered their time was described as being equally important to *what* occurred within the time. Three distinct approaches to time-giving were noted where groups and organisations combined the three aspects of time-giving above in different ways, with different levels of flexibility[8]. Some groups and organisations used just one of these approaches in their work with communities, whilst others used a mixture depending on the needs of those offering and receiving time. For the purposes of this report, they have been categorised as:

- **Volunteering** | A widely used term but from the interviews we undertook the parameters of 'volunteering' were described fairly narrowly. 'Volunteers'

[8] Volunteering is the topic of ongoing discussions within the county. The Enabling Active Communities and Individuals Board (EAC-I) have established the Volunteering in Gloucestershire project to build on growing enthusiasm and energy for volunteering in Gloucestershire and their work recognises the diverse forms volunteering can take and its many benefits.

were said to be recruited to perform specific roles *for* the recruiting party. Even amongst organisations where the ultimate goal was said to be the benefit of communities and local residents, the remit of these traditional volunteering roles was sometimes said to be indirectly decided by a third-party, for example, where there is pressure to reach certain targets to secure funding which necessitates a less flexible approach to the volunteering opportunities organisations can create.

- **Formal Activists |** Time-givers who were brokered *through* a third party into situations where their time, skills and motivation were most useful in the community but also most rewarding to the individual. There was a greater level of flexibility in terms of the time commitment and remit of the role, with less restriction and more autonomy. The anchor organisations which brokered their time were funded and resourced through their trusted relationships with both statutory services and grass-roots groups, allowing those giving time to work in a flexible, strengths-based way.

- **Informal Activists |** Time-givers who were self-motivated to help neighbours and the wider community and acted independently of any particular organisations. Whilst less well-funded, they could be well-resourced in other ways such as having excellent local connections.

In designing this research, it was imagined that questions about how groups recruited and retained volunteers within and beyond the pandemic would be straightforward to answer, but the interviews painted a complex picture. There was often an overlap between discussions of formal volunteering and the logistics of recruitment.

From what was described, it appeared that only formal 'volunteers' could be recruited or retained because there needs to be a formal role and process in place to recruit to, but this ran in conflict with the idea of flexibility. Groups that actively

tried to recruit and retain during 2020 told us that they found it more challenging to keep people on board in the long-term compared to those groups which co-ordinated opportunities that were based on the time and skills being offered by individuals.

Organisations signalled that whilst some individuals were comfortable with the clarity, regularity and boundaries of formal volunteering, others did not want or did not feel able to commit to signing up as it felt restrictive, and this impacted recruitment and retention.

One participant described how:

"…we know that for some people there can be a negative connotation to the term 'volunteering', but for us it's about community participation and community involvement, just being a productive member of society … so a lot of people who wouldn't have thought of themselves as 'volunteers' suddenly got involved and saw something different."

Several organisations, irrespective of their processes, referred to the NHS Covid volunteering programme as an example of where momentum was lost and never regained because of an inflexibility to react to the offers received. As one participant noted:

"…and that actually had more damage because what you then got was people wanting to step forward who then weren't utilised, if you like, who then weren't supported into anything, and it made them feel completely devalued."

However, for those organisations where systems for volunteering were already in place there was a capacity to respond immediately. Not only did these organisations have a number of community members who had already been DBS checked[9], trained and familiar with local people and groups that may need additional support, but flexible practices were also established which allowed a swiftness of continued process.

[9] Disclosure and Barring Service | a check of someone's criminal record and whether they have been barred from working with children or vulnerable adults.

Conversely some organisations without set policies around volunteer recruitment reported having the 'freedom' to be responsive as they were not restricted by procedures and often felt they were able to be more flexible because of this. Formal volunteering opportunities could at times be inflexible, creating rigid boxes to be filled rather than new, strengths-based, meaningful opportunities to build upon the passions and skills of the person offering their time.

One interviewee commented that the organisation they work for was in the process of changing the way they recruited and the roles they recruited to, based on their experiences in 2020. Whereas previously their volunteering opportunities had all required a regular commitment, they had now begun to develop a more ad-hoc approach in which short-term, more flexible opportunities are promoted.

Flexibility was also felt to allow for more genuine mutuality and access to the opportunity to offer time. It was recognised that this need to offer time, and for that offer to be taken up, was as much a key to well-being as receiving support could be for individuals:

"…people who came to us because they had a particular need didn't think they had anything to give back. And suddenly saw oh, hang on, no, I can be part of this … you move on to then understand actually for more deeper meaningful connections … it's not about me doing an act of volunteering for you and then me also receiving an act of volunteering from somebody else."

During the interviews it was highlighted that for many groups, the most successful way to recruit and retain volunteers was not to actively recruit and retain volunteers, but rather to continue to be a conduit for time, skills, and connection into the community. We were told that flexibility often led to an increase in people being more open to make an offer and subsequently created a larger pot of resources to cover time and work which was more sustainable in the long term. This was often achieved by groups focusing not on specific recruitment but on creating an environment where people could organically become more deeply embedded in and connected to their community.

One participant explained how:

"All we did was give somebody the opportunity to put some time in and help. So it's not as though, you know, we didn't do anything to her, she's the one who was helping us. But actually what we do, you see, the bit that I think has become my job is to make sure that we create that environment where that happens and that understanding is there. So my job is not to give people volunteering jobs, yes, I have to do that as part of the process, but my job is to make sure that I have that right environment."

During the interviews we were told that a number of people did not think they were and did not want to be 'volunteers'. They were simply giving of their time in their communities, to them 'volunteering' was something different, something more structured that was not for them. This suggested a preconception of the 'doing' of volunteering as opposed to 'being' a member of the community.

"Sometimes saying the word volunteer to somebody is really intimidating… They don't want to volunteer but they want to help out … you do hear stories of people entering into a volunteering scheme and, you know, they've not enjoyed it, it's not been for them, it's been sold to them in the wrong way or, you know, there is too much red tape in front of them, they've got to jump through too many hoops to do something."

We also heard that there had been a different response to less structured volunteering by those in receipt of the offer. In those organisations where volunteering was shaped as more of a service provision it had sometimes been more difficult to reach marginalised members of the community, suggesting that perhaps there was a perception of a 'doing to' culture attached to some elements of volunteering. Where local individuals were 'helping out' the offer had seemed to have been more accessible:

"…you have somebody from a street who's knocking on doors and saying 'How are you? I'm here to help', I think that sort of thing promotes mutuality rather than, you know, these people are the doers, and these people are the receivers. It was much more we're all neighbours helping each other … we had a lot of people with complex needs who maybe had, had not come the way of services before."

This flexibility was viewed as equally important to ensuring disabled people and people with mental health challenges were able to fully contribute to their

neighbourhoods. However, the research uncovered complex thinking and discussions about how exactly this was best achieved.

In several cases, organisations simply did not know if there were disabled volunteers supporting their activities or not – largely due to the urgency of the response and a lack of time to ask about anything beyond safeguarding. However, the general assumption was that the volunteers were pooled from the whole community, including individuals who were shielding, and so it was likely that this included disabled people or people with mental health challenges.

Of the groups we spoke to, none could give us a specific number of how many people giving their time also had a disability or a mental health challenge, but several spoke about volunteers giving *and* receiving time and/or support:

"…before the pandemic we had 94 volunteers and probably the majority of them had some sort of disability or life-limiting illness … they didn't want to attend a group and do art or something, they wanted to do something useful…"

Some organisations challenged the rationale behind the question of whether any of their volunteers were disabled people or people with mental health challenges. For these organisations the active recruitment of disabled people and people with mental health challenges felt as though it would have created a barrier to inclusion. These organisations advocated strengths-based approaches in which everyone was asked what they wanted to do and what support they might need to fully contribute rather than seeking out disabled people specifically. As one participant explained, working in such a way requires a willingness on behalf of the organisation or group to be flexible:

"…for me it is how do you want to get involved and how do we make sure that you can get involved … if they're telling me they're on medication which means they're not very good in the mornings, then I know that actually afternoons are better for them…"

The view was shared that by empowering individuals and focusing on what they can bring to a group or their community more generally, community dynamics and

individual mindsets change, encouraging people from all backgrounds to participate.

The organisations that took part in the research were seeking to support and involve disabled people and people with mental health challenges, even if direct recruitment did not always feel inclusive to them. Best practice sector guidance[10] highlights the importance of knowing about disability and mental health status where possible in order to ensure that any reasonable adjustments can be made.

Valuing People's Strengths and Skills

The existence of strengths and skills within a community was not felt to be enough alone to build resilient communities. Respondents described the need to both **encourage** and **value** strengths and skills and the people who possess them, reflecting how the more a person is valued for time given to the community, the more that person values their community and is more willing to invest time and energy to it. If someone giving their time was not valued in their role, no connection could be created with it or the environment in which it occurs and retention became difficult. Time-giving in this way is about community care rather than provision of a service, about what a community offers itself *through* an organisation rather than offering something *to* an organisation.

Integrating this perception of the equal value of all experience into recruitment of volunteers had become best practice for a number of the interview participants. Rather than approaching recruitment from the position of 'do this person's skills fit this role?', some groups have reimagined 'recruitment' as 'how can this person's strengths enhance our organisation and community?' and 'how can our organisation best nurture and value those strengths?' One participant described how:

> *"…everyone has got strengths, everyone has got skills, everyone has needs as well, and our job is to marry those and saying you are in need, we'll deliver some stuff to*

[10] See NCVO (2015) **The Importance of Supported Volunteering:** https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2015/11/05/the-importance-of-supported-volunteering/

you, or you can do something, and you come and help us. It's up to you how you want to get involved."

Another explained that:

"…normally, you meet and assess a volunteer and, you know, try to sort of place them according to, you know, what's going to be a positive experience for them too."

A number of organisations talked about individual life experience being a valuable resource. Some actively sought to recruit volunteers from their community who may have been past or current recipients of support. This was said to specifically maximise the level of lived experience, of compassion and empathy, alongside other valuable skills offered through their organisations. This shift in what organisations perceived to be an 'asset' has been seen to open up the scope of time-giving to a much broader demographic. This was articulated by one respondent who described how:

"…so quite honestly, we make a point of recruiting people from the community, from this community, and not people with hundreds of degrees and all the rest of it, the ex-professionals, but people who are on the ground, which does give us a fairly complex staff team but it's worth it because people get it, they've been there. They've used the foodbank, they've had free school meals, they have had mental health problems. You know, we get it…"

Another participant described how:

"…quite often it's about when you're having conversations with them and they'll tell you about their interests and hobbies or whatever, and it's like well, actually, you know, I know someone else who would really benefit from that, you know, would you mind sharing, do you want to get involved in this. And it suddenly opens up a different opportunity."

The value placed upon the resource of those giving their time in local organisations was compared to participants' experiences of previously working within the larger, national VCS sector. They spoke about how they felt there was a lack of value within the wider sector for unpaid workers and a lack of acknowledgement that this support was essential to the organisation.

In contrast, those organisations that not only valued the time offered but also valued the range of skills and passions that community members brought to the

work reported that this led to more successful and long-lasting relationships internally and externally in the community. As one participant reported:

"It's not that we are just seeing them as a person to come and to do a job, it's actually we want to match you up with something that means something to you and something that you can do that you're going to be proud of…"

Existing Infrastructure

The expertise within communities, including the residents, groups and organisations based there, who have experience of acting both autonomously and in collaboration, was felt by several participants to be an important ingredient to fostering resilience.

From what we were told, the notable difference in the speed with which the groups we interviewed could co-ordinate their response was the existing community infrastructure. Established community organisations reflected that the processes required to manage a local support system in crisis were already in place for more provincial or small-scale emergencies, so with the foundation of action laid, all that was required to respond to a global pandemic was to elevate practiced process to a new level. In these situations, local relationships and knowledge were key.

Organisational Expertise

The majority of the community groups and organisations we interviewed were long-established. They had spent many years developing community working practices, establishing strong, trusting relationships with local people, and amassing a wealth of knowledge about their local area.

These organisations described being embedded within their communities, working alongside local people every day. Consequently, they felt they already had a good understanding of the people and the area, of those who may be vulnerable and might need support, which members of the community had particular skills or strengths, and what might be required where. They told us this meant that, even before lockdown officially began, they already had the knowledge, resource, and infrastructure to respond quickly and appropriately rather than trying to figure out a plan of action reactively. This knowledge was said to come with experience. Several of the newly-established groups remarked on their surprise at just how much need existed in the community when they looked more deeply.

Several of the participants we spoke to said they had been able to provide guidance and support to community members, utilising their experience and skills to enhance (not replace) what local residents had organically been able to do in response to the pandemic and to help them overcome any barriers they faced:

"…when people wanted to do something and probably, you know, hadn't maybe thought of some of the practical aspects of it, we could, we were able to input some ideas and some thoughts."

This organisation was able to co-ordinate the efforts of multiple groups, facilitating collaboration, pooling resources, and adopting a more strategic response:

"I think what's now become interesting though is because, as other little hubs become kind of strong everywhere, it became more, actually look, that group over there is doing really well, if we have someone, we'll send them and they'll send them to us and you know, we'll transfer them around. So that's how we ended up kind of splitting up the city piecemeal a bit which has been quite useful."

A different organisation, based in rural Gloucestershire, told us how they had been able to support the community response to continue whilst using their own expertise and connections to expand its reach and develop longer-term strategies around pervasive challenges such as food poverty and digital exclusion.

Forest Feed the Hungry

A community anchor organisation supporting residents, community groups and organisations across the Forest of Dean summarised their role in the Covid-19 pandemic as having been:

> **...that strategic way of thinking and bringing people together to allow that strategic sort of vision, I suppose, rather than it just being reactive which is what, of course, a lot of community effort has been.**

In practice, this was said to have involved connecting with their existing relationships and taking the opportunity to expand the food provision activities they were already aware of. They were then able to create a food provision network that involved both ad hoc community groups and key local organisations, such as the supermarkets, that streamlined and grew the potential reach and impact of the initiative:

> **...through (our) previous work there was already a link into the FareShare food redistribution scheme from supermarkets but one that was ad hoc in its use and there were plenty of capacity to spread that across to the district, across the Forest of Dean... we've actually managed to bring small pockets of communities together around a single aim. So, community food for me was something that lots of pockets of a community were trying to react to... We've been able to play a role around bringing that discussion together to open up more capacity from food redistribution from major supermarkets and actually join the pieces together to make a real difference.**

This offered some short-term relief to the families struggling to access food, but they told us how they were able to take this further. Rather than just putting all their energy into what was essentially applying a sticking plaster to a problem (the supply of short-term food parcels), they used their connections, their knowledge of what other organisations were doing, and their position as a trusted voice for the community, to convene sessions that have begun to explore the deeper causes of food poverty and seek long-term change:

> **...we're now actually enabling a network of all these various organisations that are supported through Poverty in the Forest of Dean and linking in with the local Equality Commission to actually get a joined up conversation to see who's doing what, where we actually perceive (what) the gaps are, and how we can then address that collectively across the Forest of Dean.**

There was consensus amongst the community groups and organisations that the initial, reactive, community efforts to provide neighbours with food and other essentials have been vital and were demonstrative of community resilience. This response was described as being enhanced by organisations with strategic knowledge and oversight helping co-ordinate and maximise the use of resources in a local area. This included considering longer-term challenges as well as drawing upon wider connections to convene all relevant people and organisations. A co-ordinated, multifaceted response was felt to optimise and promote an additional level of resilience on the face of crisis.

The example below highlights how community anchor organisations played a role as intermediaries. One participant whose organisation had benefited from their relationship with an anchor organisation felt that because of this, they had not needed direct statutory involvement:

"I don't think we really need it. I think we all, obviously we have a separate place and we don't provide all services but I think certainly not having those contacts [with statutory organisations] hasn't stopped us doing what you want to do … that's my personal experience anyway…"

A number of organisations felt they were able to do everything they needed to with the support of the community infrastructure that was already in place. Within this context, they were also able to tap into informal networks which included local groups and anchor organisations who in turn had contact with statutory providers. The role of statutory organisations working with intermediary bodies was highlighted as a means by which local connections can be maintained and activities delivered by community groups and organisations, without duplication by other commissioned groups, and allowing communities to be central to solutions and building their capacity as a result.

Trust

Throughout the interviews we heard how deeply these organisations were already trusted within their respective communities, but it was frequently suggested that

such trust was not as forthcoming in relationships between residents and local decision-makers, funders, and commissioners. It was felt that trust was essential to working most effectively with communities.

Greater certitude from statutory organisations and local decision-makers, we were told, would allow community organisations to work most flexibly and effectively:

"We have got direct links into the community which councils absolutely have not, certainly not higher tier councils … county councils have not got those connections with communities. And that was evident by their approach of the County Council Help Hub, you know, where they weren't getting volunteers in and getting people asking for help and they weren't able to connect them because they weren't aware of what was available on the ground, what support mechanisms were there. Without those anchor organisations like ourselves, without that buffer, you don't get that connection."

Alongside such challenges, examples of good practice were also shared including positive stories of proactive funding. The following case study describes how one community organisation and the local council were able to work together constructively during the pandemic – which contrasted with responses to previous emergencies.

Contrasting Crises: 2007 vs. 2020

The 2007 floods that hit Gloucestershire caused widespread disruption and difficulty for large parts of the county. Homes were destroyed, people were evacuated to nearby leisure complexes and many areas were without drinking water for almost two weeks. Just as with the Covid-19 pandemic, communities rallied to support one another.

Reflecting during their interview, one participant highlighted how difficult it had been to support the community efforts at that time:

> **So 2007, we were linked again with the council but it was a real, you could see that there was a real imbalance there… As a simple example they said, 'Right, I've got an elderly person whose house has flooded, she's got furniture in the house, she's sitting on a wet sofa right now, we can take her', the council said, 'We can take her away from the sofa but we are not allowed to go in her house to remove the sofa and put it outside, so have you got a team who can come and do that?' so it was like, yes, we can do that. 'Right, has everyone been CRB checked?', 'That will take two months.'**

The participant described their frustration that, in this particular incident, safety was only considered from a narrow process perspective:

> **We understand how to keep, you know, we're not going to do anything that puts anyone at risk, right. But keeping people safe is not the same as making sure you've got all their forms, application, you know, details on an application form, there's a difference there … that's one step of a process. But you can still do other steps of that process in different ways.**

In contrast, the dynamic of the response to the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 was said to have been very different:

> **It's been completely different this time around. And not just us, you know, the way the councils have… I think what councils have realised was, especially early on in the last year where the community led pretty much the work on the ground, I think that's fair to say, and the councils were catching up. And I think after a while the council just realised actually, they're doing it, let's just kind of support them as best as they can. And I think they've, they were really good with that… now it's let us figure out what needs to be done and we trust you.**

Hyperlocal Focus

All the groups and organisations that we spoke with described having a hyperlocal focus. In contrast to many public services which typically and necessarily have a broad geographic remit, these groups and organisations concentrated their work in a discrete locality.

The view was shared by several of the participants who spoke about the pandemic highlighting how communities already hold many of the answers around the best ways to be responsive to and supportive of local needs. Moreover, some reflected that taking a hyperlocal perspective utilising local expertise and connections has a value that could not be replicated by organisations with a much broader remit.

Participating organisations spoke about a range of benefits arising from being able to have this focus. Some benefits were practical – they allowed them to physically reach more people or provide the deeper level of support outlined below – whilst others were felt to be beneficial to the overall resilience *and* sustainability within a community.

Practical Benefits of a Hyperlocal Focus

Those organisations which focused their reach on a smaller area spoke about how they felt they could provide a greater depth of support to local people. For some, this allowed them to respond to local individuals in what they felt was a more relevant and timely way. Examples given demonstrated how their presence and acute awareness of what was happening locally enabled these organisations to quickly identify and fill gaps in provision as statutory services sought to respond to the initial crisis:

"Statutory services weren't on the ground, you know … and this does continue to be an issue that they aren't. They're working remotely and it's a reduced service. I mean, I've got every sympathy for them, I think their situation is difficult but I think we've picked up a lot of those pieces as well. Particularly the family team I'd say … so a lot of mental health issues there too with young people that are not being met by anyone else."

Similarly, we heard how they were often amongst the first to respond in providing practical, hands-on support: they could mobilise rapidly to provide their neighbours with shopping, prescriptions, and other essentials.

One participant reflected about the community they live in:

"I would say that within three or four days I had a slip of paper through my door saying, 'Your support co-ordinator is duh-de-duh, they're contactable on this number, ring them if you need this, this and the other, you know, we can help you with anything.' And it was literally days it was done".

Being physically embedded within the community, alongside their focused dedication to their community, was felt to position these groups and organisations where they were able to be a first port of call when needed. Organisations told us how their swift response was recognised by community members when they were consulted after the first lockdown, and they reflected that this speed had been enabled by their hyperlocal focus and presence.

One example of an initiative which emerged in response to a particular need came when an organisation identified the significant impact that loneliness was having in their community and responded with a resident-staffed listening service to which local people gave their time:

"…then our phone line started getting very bunged up with people who were lonely and miserable and not wanting to get off the phone … we've had some Listening Ears who were really befrienders who, you know, just happy to have a chat with a lonely older person on a weekly basis."

It was swiftly realised that the need was even greater and more urgent than anticipated. The organisation went on to seek out other individuals from within the community who had more specific expertise around mental health:

"We put out an ad, we just said are there any counsellors, mental health workers, psychotherapists who are stuck at home and would like to volunteer for us, and we had a whole team of people who were all like trained, qualified counsellors of one kind or another who volunteered … then we were able to offer that as a service and put people in touch with the listeners … although we anticipated it become a light-touch befriending service, it became a bit of a crisis mental health service because of course, a lot of those callers were months away from accessing anything like professional help, I mean, from the NHS."

The potential significance of this had emerged in conversations with a community organisation operating in Gloucester which reflected that despite operating in one

of the county's most financially disadvantaged districts people went *"to the street reps rather than going into the County Council Help Hub[11]".*

Moreover, community groups and organisations told us how they were able to draw on their local knowledge and connections to re-allocate their own resources and ensure they were distributed appropriately to the requirements of the situation in their communities. This included allocation of volunteer time to support parts of the community:

"As well, if there were patches like sheltered housing, they'd get their own volunteer just for the sheltered housing because we knew that there'd be much higher usage…"

This could benefit both volunteers *and* communities.

Broader Benefits of a Hyperlocal Focus

Community groups and organisations involved in this research repeatedly spoke about the broader benefits of a hyperlocal approach, including how it contributed to building sustainable and resilient communities.

One of the challenges organisations told us about was around disinformation and the importance of clear and accessible communications to all residents. Participants reported that a hyperlocal approach has been an important tool in building trust, including with marginalised groups and groups that are more wary of public sector organisations, and ensuring they receive the right information.

One participant summarised:

"I think if somebody who you trust tells you something,
then you'll listen to it more likely…"

Throughout the research interviews there was a consensus that trust was crucial in forming relationships, and these relationships were considered integral to both the work of the organisations and to enabling resilient communities. Several

[11] The Gloucestershire Community Help Hub was a centralised service established early on in the pandemic by Gloucestershire County Council. It operates as a portal through which Gloucestershire residents could both request help and offer their services.

organisations reflected that, by keeping their focus local during the pandemic, there had been opportunities to create and strengthen connections between some neighbours and organisations that were known to have been sustained beyond the first lockdown.

One participant reported:

"Certainly anecdotally from people like street volunteers who will say 'Oh, it's been great, I've got to know neighbours, and I've got to know this lovely old lady at the end of my street'. And even though the street vol scheme has been wound down, they're still doing the shopping for the lady at the end of the street that they got to know. So I think there have certainly been a lot of contacts and friendships and that informal support that's been forged by that street vol structure."

Sustaining these connections was said to have been organic, without the need for investment of additional time and resource from community groups and organisations. Some participants suggested that these connections now exist in ways that can be utilised both in everyday life and future crises. Nevertheless, their existence was felt to be a crucial mechanism for making this happen:

"…I think there is a huge risk that if organisations such as [ours] weren't there, you know, to be putting their arms around the mutual aid groups and you're offering that kind of support, then I actually think when we hit lockdown two in November, there wouldn't have been established relationships and, you know, between community activists and the local community, those relationships wouldn't have been there, the volunteers that were involved in that quite likely would have suffered volunteer fatigue and moved away from what they were doing … goodness knows how in lockdown three in January the community would have coped … the whole sort of community emphasis wouldn't have been there"

The example below shows how hyperlocal connections were sustained in another part of the county in a different way:

Connecting in Lockdown

Just before the first national lockdown was announced in March 2020, several residents in one community came together to establish a mutual aid group and quickly set about designing and delivering a variety of activities and initiatives to support the community in the months ahead.

They first chose to divide up the town and surrounding villages to recruit volunteers who could work specifically with the people in their area. This hyperlocal approach was intended to further establish local connections (as well as more efficient support systems) that could be sustained beyond the initial emergency if required:

> **"We were encouraging people to volunteer within a local area so that if somebody had asked for some help, you went for which area they lived in so: Wotton, Charfield or King's Wood, they had a volunteer from Wotton or Charfield or King's Wood so we were hoping that those connections would develop, and we talked about them hopefully developing..."**

Such encouragement was felt to have had the desired outcome:

> **"In the second lockdown, (the need to co-ordinate as much support) was almost non-existent, because the people who had helped their neighbours, many of them continued to keep in touch with them..."**

The group conducted a survey to identify any gaps in provision, specifically asking about whether people were still in contact with their volunteers. This survey showed that generally people were still in some sort of contact with their volunteers either regularly or when they needed something. This was happening without the need to use them as a conduit.

Whilst the co-ordination role of the group was substantial in the first lockdown, the group told us that this tailed off considerably in the second and third lockdowns. This was said to have allowed them to look ahead to planning initiatives to support upcoming challenges and to establish a more permanent community hub.

Informal Networks

The groups and organisations we spoke to reported having a wealth of connections in their communities that they had been able to draw upon immediately as they initiated and developed their responses to the crisis. These connections included:

- Local schools
- Medical services
- Counsellors and mental health workers
- Foodbanks
- Other community groups and organisations
- Connections between neighbours.

Participants shared multiple examples of how the connections held within communities could enhance the response on the ground, including the distribution of resources and, often, who in those communities could be reached.

The importance of these informal networks and connections held by local people was noted by several participants as a means of reaching those most isolated, for which there was no substitute:

"I think there's something about building the right networks, you know, [where we live] it is quite an isolated community, but with isolated communities there's always somebody that knows somebody that is connected to somebody."

There were several examples within the data of how existing connections and local expertise meant potentially isolated or vulnerable individuals and families were able to be recognised, reached and supported. One participant had been creating art kits for local families and spoke of how they sought to reach out as widely as possible:

"…somebody who was volunteering, helping me, has been quite heavily involved in the foodbank and she was able to say, 'Oh, did you meet that family, I've never seen them come to an event before'. So, week one, as well as giving these kits away at the cafes I was very aware that a lot of the families that [the community centre] were supporting wouldn't come out … so I donated each week I gave [the community centre] art kits to put in their food bags."

***

"So, at Christmas, we worked with the wellbeing service and Citizen's Advice and various other local organisations to identify where people may be struggling, where they might need some additional support with food items but also actually some small gift items and things like that, you know, might make a difference to somebody that was isolating at Christmas. And that was targeted at people that may be alone or families that may be in need, so it was quite an open scheme and we distributed 100 hampers through our team of volunteers at Christmas".

In both these examples, the connections of one individual (the first example) and other locally focused organisations (the second example) helped community organisations to extend their reach and identify particular people who would benefit from these initiatives.

Previous research undertaken by Barnwood Trust during the first national lockdown highlighted that some people who had become 'socially vulnerable'[12] during the pandemic, for example due to barriers to adhering to Covid-19 social distancing restrictions, may not have been known to statutory service providers nor have been on existing registers held of vulnerable individuals[13]. Several community organisations in this research highlighted that whilst these people may not have been flagged as needing support by statutory services they may well have been known to their neighbours or to people on the ground working in the VCS sector as someone to check in on.

Reaching Different Groups

Participants acknowledged that often there were challenges to reaching different groups of individuals in communities. The two most common challenges reported were:

- **Digital Access |** Digital skills, devices, and the internet were not accessible to everyone. We heard that some people struggled to access online activities for a variety of reasons including poor rural connectivity, finances, and lack of experience. For disabled people this was even more difficult, and their access requirements were often not met. Some participants felt that remote interactions, either for a social or therapeutic purpose could feel less meaningful in some instances and that face-to-face activities were more engaging and easier to access.

- **Service Closures |** The temporary closure of key signposting services, reported to include some social prescribing services, restricted the number

[12] Social vulnerability refers to people who may not be at clinical risk to Covid-19 but who, have a disability or mental health challenge and may have become dependent on others for support during the pandemic due to changes in the social context. Examples of social vulnerability include people with visual impairments who may struggle to navigate one-way systems in shops or adhere to social distancing, or someone with a hearing impairment for whom the compulsory use of face coverings may make communication extremely difficult or impossible.

[13] Barnwood Trust (2020) **Our Changing World:** https://www.barnwoodtrust.org/news/our-changing-world/

of people who could be connected to local community groups and organisations. The groups spoken about included those for people with mobility problems.

Whilst efforts were made to overcome these challenges, the groups and organisations involved in this project spoke of their frustration at not being able to reach everyone in the community and that there is still a need for developing alternative ways of reaching wider numbers of people:

"That's the biggest challenge is to reach the people that you never see, that don't have a phone number, that are essentially invisible, and I don't think we have the answer yet. The answer is, for now, hopefully we can know someone who knows someone or we can, we often door knock, obviously not at the moment but we door knock but they tend to maybe not open the door. So it's the biggest challenge."

***

"We know there's going to be people who are struggling. We know that there's people who want to do something, get involved, who don't know about us, don't know the community groups and organisations across the city… How do we reach out a bit more?... How do we all make sure that our work goes deeper?... There are people who are struggling and there are people who are isolated. How do we get them involved? "

Many groups told us that they were surprised by the number of people reaching out for support with whom they, and more specifically services, had no previous contact; those who had balanced life precariously until the pandemic made autonomy impossible. Groups felt that for numerous reasons volunteers and those offering time could reach more deeply into their own communities than statutory services. Possible reasons included, but were not limited to, the perception of what it is to be 'in need', a sense of 'shame' attached to reaching out or not coping, and even more so as someone 'in receipt of services'. This may be based on societal perceptions or previous negative experiences leading to a greater trust in people rather than systems.

One participant spoke of how:

"…hard to reach people who were not currently in receipt of services were suddenly, you know, suddenly being sort of triaged our way."

Engaging with existing connections was just one way that communities reached out during the pandemic response. Whilst digital access alone was recognised as a barrier to connecting with some people during the pandemic, it was also considered to have been vital to linking into communities at a time when people had been unable to meet face-to-face.

Several organisations turned to social media to share content and information and maintain engagement in their work. Elsewhere, we heard about the establishing of community Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups to share information about what was happening locally and where people could turn for help:

"I suppose some of what [we] were doing was information sharing through a Facebook page. We'd have information, we'd use it to send out things like, if you're afraid to pick up the phone, you can text these people, those mental health organisations, so lots of information shared…"

Although there were organisations who felt members of certain groups such as older people, disabled people and people with mental health challenges might have been excluded by digital media, there were others who noted its strengths and how it unlocked opportunities for those usually excluded by in-person activities:

"Zoom enables people with very little time to actually take part, you know, we're all Zoomed out as individuals but actually I think that there is a way of perhaps getting other people on board that wouldn't be able to take half a day out to go and travel to somewhere."

Whilst social media, Zoom and WhatsApp were felt to have been invaluable sources of connection during the pandemic, there was also widespread use of more traditional forms of media that did not rely on digital access. Over half the groups and organisations we spoke to attempted to reach local people in the same way: through leaflet drops to every household in their community – often more than

once. These leaflets often included a personal touch: an introduction to a named volunteer covering their area, a contact number or a knock on the door:

"…the first thing volunteers all did is we had printed, or I had photocopied actually the first one, a little leaflet going through everybody's door and the volunteer put their contact number on or however they wanted to be contacted. And they put those in all the doors of their individual streets. So, within however long it was, you know, ten days or something everybody had got a leaflet with the details on… We've since, we've done another, on another two occasions."

In terms of resilience, they felt there was a real value in learning from an existing wealth of knowledge about the ways in which some communities are already both incredibly self-sufficient and have become the places and people others can turn to and learn from about what works well but also what reduces a community's ability to proactively respond in a positive way.

Organisational Ethos and Approach

The groups and organisations we spoke to were keen to tell us how their approach and ethos differed from more traditional public service provision. They described taking both an individual and community focused approach, seeking to ensure local people were given the opportunity to do things for themselves.

A defining factor in the ethos and overall approach for those participants representing organisations from areas where there was perceived to be less of a statutory presence, was the necessity of residents to be actively contributing to their locality and responding to local needs.

Rurality, distance from key services and amenities, and being on the margins of the county borders (dividing services between local authorities), all played a part in a sense of disconnect from centralised services in certain areas and subsequently, we were told, encouraged more community autonomy. Participants working in these areas felt less concerned with holding responsibility and doing everything in lieu of statutory agencies but more focused on ensuring communities could do things for themselves:

"It isn't about us doing it, it isn't just about us doing it and employing a bunch of people that can go and visit every corner of the [community], but it's us identifying trusted people within or near those areas and those communities and getting them to understand the importance of working holistically and reaching out to those who may be isolated within those communities, to enable them to do it…"

Anchor organisations in particular, told us how they were confident in their role and had trust in these existing networks. Consequently, it was not necessary for them to know and understand everyone's individual needs. Instead, their role was described as one of guidance and support in fostering connections and brokering resources across the ecosystem

Resident-Orientated, Community-Centred Ethos

Participants told us that the hyperlocal approach ensured that not only did all work take place inside the community, but it also came from within it. All activity was described as being resident-orientated with a community-centred ethos which they

felt guaranteed everything offered was requested by, appropriate to, and situated within the community.

For some groups, their approach centred on primarily responding to the requests for help however it was required:

"…the helpers, they all help in all sorts of other ways. The sort of standard ways, you know, collecting a prescription, perhaps giving somebody a lift. We had all sorts actually. Somebody helped mend a shed roof, somebody else was doing some gardening. It's whatever somebody felt they needed help with and they were happy to give. No questions asked on any of it".

Several organisations told us how they were careful not to impose their own thoughts and feelings of what the community *might* need. Instead, they were keen to step back, actively listen to what residents were saying and develop responses and activities in ways that the communities said they needed, for example:

"I think part of what we were saying really early on is look actually, you know, we're here, we're part of this community, we're involved … I think it's fair to say we really didn't know what we should be doing or could be doing. But actually we were very receptive to what was needed".

The way in which some organisations approached food package delivery is also an example of this focus on what is needed within specific communities. They actively listened to residents about what was missing from some foodbank provisions (fresh food, household cleaning products and toiletries, etc.) and included these in their offer. They also took time to discover whether there were any particular foods people wanted or needed, due to allergies or intolerances, cultural requirements and, for some, familiarity.

Throughout the interviews there were many examples of how this way of working resulted in the creation and development of a range of activities including:

- A listening ears initiative for people feeling lonely, isolated or finding lockdown particularly challenging to their mental health.
- Offers of support to local community groups at risk of closure due to the impact of the lockdown restrictions.

- Initiatives to improve digital inclusion – particularly in rural and isolated communities.
- Schemes to enable people to travel to medical appointments and vaccinations without having to rely on poor public transport links.
- Information delivered in a way that was accessible to people (considering people with English as an additional language, those with access requirements relating to their disability alongside other factors).
- Multiple food provision initiatives supplying people with shopping, hot food and essentials.

Being a focal point in the community also meant that a number of organisations were sought out to provide support beyond practical help. As the pandemic peaked, organisations spoke about a significant increase in residents reaching out following a decline in their mental health.

Several organisations told us how they had been delivering structured mental health support for people during the pandemic. Each of these organisations were well-established in their communities and employed paid staff (or volunteers with professional experience) to deliver this.

All these organisations told us they felt they had been filling the void of other mental health and crisis services that were either closed or unable to cope with demand. Whilst at least one organisation already had experience of this type of work, others had not provided such help before. Seeing people's mental health impacted by the financial fallout of the pandemic, the isolation of lockdown, addiction, and domestic violence, compelled them to respond out of a perceived necessity because there seemed to be no alternative for the people in their communities. Local counsellors, mental health workers and psychotherapists responded to one group's plea for trained, qualified support and volunteered their time to help bridge the gap. This organisation has since received funding for a

mental health engagement worker to continue offering this service longer-term as they anticipate demand to be so high.

We also heard about how organisations had indirectly supported mental health of individuals in their communities through:

- Campaigns encouraging people to look after their own mental health
- Organisations creating spaces for others to continue offering their face-to-face services
- The benefits of volunteering during the pandemic for individuals' mental health and wellbeing
- Signposting to those with more expertise.

Looking more broadly at outlook and ethos, some organisations contrasted themselves with that of public services, suggesting that bottom-up approaches which place the community's needs and requirements at the centre of their work will resonate more deeply than if the community feels it is being fixed all the time:

"The way in which services treat people compared to the way in which communities treat people. And that is a real struggle that we continue to have and will probably continue to have for many years to come. Whilst it's great we recognise the value of communities for people, we need to recognise why that it is: because it's bottom-up, because it's on the basis of what matters, not because it's there to fix people".

This approach did not seem to be specific to the pandemic response. Several organisations told us this had always been their way of working and that in some ways, the pandemic had vindicated their ethos and approach to working in communities:

"The activities are different, but how we're doing it has not changed in any way. For us, this is exactly the same as what's always been done. We've got new restrictions and new limitations on the activities … but the way we work with people hasn't changed in any way. If anything, you know, for me this has highlighted just how important this part of our work actually is."

Some reflections from organisations who said they held such an ethos, suggested that to create the right conditions for resilient communities to flourish, the focus of

the work should centre on ensuring the autonomy of local people. This was something they considered integral to their own work and for it to be authentic they felt it important to step back and allow the whole community to form its own ideas and solutions whilst being available as a resource if needed.

Resident-orientated, community-centred work was described as '*bottom-up*', in which local people are both the architects and the beneficiaries of community activities. Everyone is considered to have something to contribute.

Flexible and Responsive Approach

To be as resident-orientated and community-centred as possible, the community groups and organisations we interviewed also highlighted the need to be flexible and responsive throughout the pandemic. We heard repeatedly how they were ready to adapt as the situation changed – even in ways that were considered beyond the role they should need to play in communities. As one participant explained, their purpose is not to feed parts of their community, but the nature of the pandemic has made this a core part of their response over the past 18 months:

"While we're in crisis mode and all that kind of stuff, we absolutely should be doing this. This is not the work that we should be doing going forward. So I'm really inspired by the attitude of the people who are part of this, and at the same time, I'm also really horrified that we have to do this. That kind of terrifies me."

Other examples of this flexibility and responsiveness included:

- Moving existing activities to Zoom and social media and expanding others (including befriending and foodbank services) to ensure they were still able to deliver some activities to meet changing demand.
- Setting up completely new activities such as digital enablement sessions, providing devices and training on how to use them.
- Looking for ways to speed-up the recruitment of volunteers without compromising safety.
- One anchor organisation who felt unable to wait for funding before creating a new post because they felt its need to be essential.

Flexibility was said to be within the fabric of these groups and organisations with one noting: *"as long as you've got the flexibility to be able to respond a bit differently, you can"* and another telling us how they had completely reconfigured themselves within a week of closing their doors to provide alternative support:

"The phrase we just kept using all the time was look, we're trying to build the plane while we're flying it, and everybody just like understood that … the volunteers were quite incredible of being very flexible, being very tolerant of systems that were kind of new and we were still trying to build them."

Things did not, however, always work out as expected – testing the organisations to be flexible and deliver something different, as the example below explores.

Flexible Food

One community centre had, through their connections with other local organisations, joined the FareShare food redistribution scheme to support local families in poverty. They tried to use the scheme as an opportunity to reconnect with local people and set about creating a space where they could safely socialise after picking up their food parcels:

"…we opened the centre on a Tuesday morning and the first week I got myself and our chair and two volunteers, three volunteers, because we were all at that point thinking we'd be able to do a cup of coffee and we put chairs in the garden area thinking once they got their bag of groceries, that we could make them a cup of coffee and we'd sit outside… We had nobody, we had nobody come."

Despite the setback, the organisation told us that they did not see the lack of demand as a sign to stop but, rather, as a sign that their approach was not quite right and set about reconsidering how they could help their community:

"…so a little bit of thinking outside the box and telephoned the local primary school and spoke to somebody in the office there and said: 'do you have any families in need if we were to bag up some of this food?'… to which they were very, very grateful and said 'absolutely'."

The community centre was able to support six families through this approach and, by following up other connections, extend this to ten:

"(The centre) as an entity has evolved and we are now reaching out in different directions, in the directions that we've been able. Like we have never been involved in a food distribution thing and although it didn't quite pan out as we thought, we thought people wanted to come to (the centre) and they would come because they needed the food, but actually, we learned from that, we've evaluated that situation, we've thought about it, and we think actually people didn't want to come into (the centre) to be seen to be getting food parcels… But you know, we're still able to help by getting the food out in a different way so I think you always have to assess what you've done, change it if it's not working, think of something else."

Ultimately, their flexibility was something the organisations we spoke to were immensely proud of:

"The fact that we were able to respond so flexibly and so quickly, to you know, the needs that arose. I mean, we, you know, we were the first responders and we're really proud of that. You know, we're really proud that we had to reshape the way that we work with our existing services. We had to, our face-to-face befriending went to phone befriending and online, our groups went to Zoom, but we also did, you know, set up services that we never thought we would be doing, like shopping and transport for people. And we responded to the people's own desire to help."

Collaborative Ways of Working

The community groups and organisations involved in this study were keen to recognise that they did not hold all the answers, skills or resources to solve every problem or meet every need in their local area. Drawing on networks and the connections of others was reported to have enhanced the offer these groups could make to their communities during this crisis. Collaboration was felt to have improved their reach and supported the design of resident-orientated and community-centred activities and initiatives.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on a range of issues within Gloucestershire communities, some of which were exacerbated by the pandemic, including:

- Food poverty
- Digital exclusion
- Isolation
- The need for greater mental health support

Each of these issues, alongside the many other challenges people have faced during the pandemic (for example difficulties associated with public transport and the substantial economic impacts) were reported to require significant resources and support to overcome. In the research interviews we heard that, by working

collaboratively, groups and organisations had started to take the first steps to increase the response they were able to offer, both in breadth and depth.

The *Forest Feed the Hungry* case study in the previous chapter highlighted how organisations were collaborating to tackle some of the deeper issues underpinning food poverty, but it was also noted how this level of collaboration was important to many aspects of community food provision during this time.

Another organisation told us that they had worked collaboratively with different groups to produce free or subsidised hot meals and well-balanced food parcels, but also to try to reach the most isolated groups and individuals to keep them informed around what was being offered.

Collaborations were not always issue-specific and during the interviews we heard that, in certain areas, joint working was commonplace. For example, in one area, regular *Know Your Patch* forums have brought together residents and organisations across all sectors to establish and co-ordinate a joined-up response throughout their respective locales:

"We facilitated the Know Your Patch Forum which of course is a county forum … but the difference with us is that we decided because it was what's needed and obviously that's what we're all about, is that this is something that shouldn't be quarterly, you know, this is needed more so than ever so what we decided to do from the first week of lockdown is run them every single week to anybody who wanted to attend, services, tiers of government, you know, community groups, local people. And we talked about what was going on in communities, what mattered to them, and what we can do collectively to overcome some of those barriers."

Collaboration was viewed as a way of enhancing the work of each organisation: complementing one another's skills and filling any knowledge gaps that may arise through organisations acting alone. By working cooperatively, it was felt they could bring together different areas of expertise and support people in a much more useful and meaningful way.

Collaboration was felt to have actively opened doors for organisations and groups which led to them being able to help in a range of new and different ways that had potential to last and grow beyond the pandemic.

The collaborations established during this time were reported by some organisations to have laid the groundwork for projects that can begin to tackle some of the ongoing systemic issues faced by local communities:

"So I think one of the things that's happening more now is we're more joined up with many, many more organisations and with the district councils and so on. And so we're looking at sort of enterprise stuff and supporting new enterprise and businesses in the area. We do that in partnership because again, it's not our expertise… So working in a much more embedded way with other organisations is really important."

Amongst the newly established organisations we spoke to, there was a desire to learn from others and a valuing of what they had been part of so far:

"I just think it's really important actually while we're new to all of this to build as many contacts as we can and then every time I go to a meeting I'm hearing things again and thinking, I know what that is now… So we're certainly not trying to do any of this on our own, we are asking questions, hopefully not making a nuisance of ourselves too much by asking too many questions, but we need your advice and your guidance throughout really if we're going to get it right."

An impact of collaborative working for these organisations was that they felt that they are not alone in their effort whilst helping them develop new working relationships.

When asked how different their work might have been without this support from other organisations, one interviewee reflected:

"I think very different actually. I think it's, it's helped me have a perspective on we're not just [one organisation], we're not just on our own, there are a lot of other, you know, there's a lot of support out there. And even learning about training opportunities that you have through that, learning about writing successful funding applications and understanding how all that works is not something I'd ever done before. Just the whole voluntary sector, the whole charity sector that is, that's all new to me. So yeah, it's made me feel part of a bigger thing, not just myself in my little centre that's closed, you know … I felt part of a bigger picture which has been really useful."

Although many groups felt that collaboration had been a valued part of the community and organisational response throughout the pandemic, we also heard that, historically, this view had not been held by all.

One organisation shared their reflections on how collaboration has always been part of community working but it has not always been done consciously or celebrated. Nevertheless, there were examples of organisations who saw it as an opportunity, who looked to build upon the alliances they had established, sought to create new ones and ultimately, were able to deliver a broader offer in their local communities. Without this type of collaboration, it was suggested that work may have been duplicated or organisations might have overstretched themselves to fill perceived gaps where they lacked the expertise (in mental health provision for example). Consequently, communities could have received a very different response in terms of the practical support available to them. We heard examples of organisations recognising their limitations (in the support of children and young people for example) and building collaborative partnerships to ensure the best support was still available and that no one was excluded. Collaboration was indicated to have been a huge source of support both to newly establishing organisations and ones that had existed before the crisis.

Looking Ahead – A blueprint for a more resilient Gloucestershire

As noted at the beginning of this report, Covid-19 may be an unprecedented crisis in our lifetimes, but it will not be the last. There will be future tests of community resilience and it is imperative that this resilience is given the best opportunity to be nurtured and developed.

During the interviews for this report there was a feeling that the pandemic has already triggered significant shifts in the way communities have operated, with local people feeling re-empowered to make decisions and develop schemes that suit them. The pandemic, whilst a source of pain and uncertainty for many, has also created an opportunity to rethink how services, organisations and local people interact and work to sustain one another.

Here in Gloucestershire, a number of elements were highlighted as contributing to communities being resilient; from local people to community infrastructure, to an inclusive approach and a community focused ethos, all underpinned and enhanced by enabling and supportive funding and commissioning systems.

This section explores three important considerations in allowing community capacity and resilience to grow and thrive in Gloucestershire communities:

- Community leadership
- Readiness
- Self-sufficiency

Community Leadership

Whether communities are self-sufficient, ready for future crises, or are just beginning such a journey, the importance of community leadership was said to be vital to building resilience within communities. As demonstrated in the first section of this report, whilst local people have been at the forefront of community efforts over the past 18 months, the leadership and expertise of organisations (including individuals in both paid and unpaid roles) has been crucial to co-ordinating these efforts and ensuring they could reach as many people as possible.

During the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the role they had played in the community response and to consider its impact in the context of how their community might have managed this emergency without the support they offered. This lens offered clarity around the significance of what had been undertaken in the previous months. The organisations we spoke to recognised the important role they played with the communities in which they were embedded:

- Some were advocates, securing resources and recognition for local people, groups, and organisations.
- Some were the focal point of a community: the social centre, advice hub or safe space.
- Some were the conduit for people's energy and need to help others, providing some direction and co-ordination to ensure as many people were reached as possible.

Moreover, this leadership was considered equally important at the point communities began to transition out of the pandemic emergency response and started to consider what they wanted their local areas to be like going forward.

This was often linked to an awareness and understanding of their organisational boundaries and competence. This clarity was argued by some participants to assist communities, ensuring they responded to crisis in a way that played to their organisational strengths, and thereby enhanced their resilience as a result.

Of the more established organisations, several felt that a defined remit ensured a swiftness of support to local people and enabled space for more long-term learning and planning that built upon the current response work. Similarly, participants from groups which were established specifically to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic remarked how organisations with this clarity were more confident to draw upon external expertise with the understanding of when others were better placed to offer a particular response.

In terms of sustaining and building more resilient communities in the future respondents identified that community leaders should:

- Be recognised by all for the critical ongoing role they play in nurturing, enabling, holding and mobilising community responses
- Consider their organisational and personal boundaries, where they are best placed to support and when external expertise is required.

Readiness

We were told by some of the more established organisations that their engagement with residents over a period of time was fundamental to ensuring communities were ready to respond to crises big or small. Although not always the term participants used, readiness in this context was not simply described as being about communities being briefed or having instruction, such as volunteer inductions or first responder training (though this was useful and allows for immediacy of response to critical events). Rather, these organisations described a notion of entrenched responsiveness, compassion and clarity about the role of local people throughout their communities, coming about through connections and drawing on *all* the resources within these communities.

In this research, there was a distinct difference in how ready the groups and organisations felt as the pandemic emerged. Some communities were coming together for the first time in such a way, whilst others, particularly in rural areas and locations that border other local authorities, described a sense that the preparatory work had already been done by local people when the pandemic emerged:

"…we weren't starting from scratch … because the county council and the district council recognised that they didn't have the local grassroots connections to those who needed that funding. So they approached us and said, look, you guys have got this, you know, the trust of these communities, you know what's going on, you know where this money needs to go, let us give it to you to distribute, which was a massive success…"

Similarly, another participant gave the example of how:

"…within kind of days of there even possibly being a lockdown … it wasn't the council that were saying 'we need'… it was residents saying 'Who can help me with this, we know that we've got in this area, who will take some kind of control and oversight', and, you know … that's why we're so resilient."

Several organisations spoke of how this was enhanced where groups and organisations were already working collaboratively with statutory services *and* each other. One of these organisations, for example, told us how they believed residents within their locale were already very active because generally statutory services were less hands-on, choosing instead to outsource to trusted key partners. There was a recognition that these partners had established local relationships which afforded them a better understanding with which to respond to local need. This meant that when required, those connections and processes of recovery were already embedded within the community.

In some areas, the response to the initial crisis was said to have laid the foundations for communities to be more ready to respond to future crises. In one community we were told that the volunteer pool they had recruited at the beginning of the first lockdown had become a group of reservists ready to be deployed as required. Therefore, when the vaccination rollout started, these 'reservists' were able to be called up to help as required:

"They're all there ready and waiting. And we were able to email them when the vax thing kicked off, we had a list of people who had all said yeah, 'I'll be on your reserve list, just tell me when you need me' … 94% of people said that they'd either carry on or be in the reservists. And I think you could count on one hand the number of people who didn't want to continue being on our books as a volunteer ".

Participants from this organisation described how the initial response had helped to *"fertilise the whole place"* as actions inspired other actions and a community spirit and willingness to look out for one another established itself.

In terms of sustaining and building more resilient communities in the future, readiness was said to be about:

- Ensuring the grassroots connections are in place.
- Enabling local people to autonomously organise themselves.
- Establishing trusting connections between local people, organisations *and* local decision-makers.

Self-Sufficiency

Organisations also stressed the importance of communities being not just ready for crises but being actively developing greater self-sufficiency. In one organisation's opinion, helplessness and dependency are perpetuated by systems that disempower communities. By changing these systems to work *with* communities, local people can increase self-sufficiency, build their capacity to solve local issues and ultimately become more resilient:

"If commissioners put more weight into the opinions and the values of anchor organisations I would think … they'd be able to commission stuff better that supports communities rather than what we've seen [for decades] … is commissioning services it replicates community effort and ultimately leads to learned helplessness and learned hopelessness and this feeling that you have no power in the place that you live and the decisions that impact your life. So anchor organisations I think there is a real role for."

Some participants felt local people were already incredibly self-sufficient due to the conditions of the communities in which they were based. They described these areas as being different to centralised urban areas where local authorities have chosen to make substantial investments, as more isolated communities have evolved to maximise their natural resources:

"[This] is a very unique place, you know, where we've always been isolated, independent, you know. We're on the periphery of the county and the country, always been isolated from services and I think because of that there's always been an element of communities have to do things for themselves… So what you often see [here] … is the way things get replicated every couple of miles. Everything is very small, everything is very much about your immediate community… And I think again, one of the benefits, and I think we've seen that with Covid, is how we can organise things on a very localised level as opposed to probably more urban areas where it's slightly more fragmented and it's slightly more competitive or people stepping on people's toes because there are so many people in one area."

Paradoxically, where there was most investment, there was also said to be the greatest risk of overwhelm and detriment to community self-sufficiency. Unlike communities which have historically felt the need to be self-sufficient, where there was said to be a greater appreciation of the expertise already held locally – these communities recognised that they already held the solutions and set about putting these into action.

In terms of sustaining and building more resilient communities in the future, self-sufficiency was said to be about:

- Changing systems to work *with* not *for* communities.
- Consider the unintended consequences of investment in communities: what is already being done here, are local people involved?

Funding Resilient Communities

Towards a 'New Normal' for Funding and Commissioning in Gloucestershire

This report has utilised the concept of the community ecosystem and explored three areas that contribute to resilient communities: local people, existing infrastructure, approach and ethos. The interviews with community groups and organisations highlighted how these three areas are essential to the resilience of communities and the capacity of those within them to respond to crises.

In terms of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we heard about how these three areas have affected the urgency, scale and approach to their response, its effectiveness, and its sustainability. When local people are involved and valued, local knowledge is considered, and resident-orientated and collaborative ways of working are adopted, we were told that communities were better prepared and more able to thrive in the face of a crisis.

Throughout the pandemic so far, the Insights Team at Barnwood Trust has conducted research with the Gloucestershire Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), exploring key challenges and seeking to understand the funding landscape[14]. This study builds upon that work, exploring how the nature of funding and commissioning processes in the county can pose challenges which participants felt could restrict what can be achieved.

It is also important to note how participants talked about the ways that funders and commissioners *had* been supportive when the pandemic struck: showing flexibility in their expectations, trusting the skills of local organisations to deliver what was needed, and seeking collaboration with the people working on the ground.

There was a general feeling that their expertise had been recognised and trusted at the most difficult of times, and this had heightened the desire to create a 'new

[14] Barnwood Trust (2020) Research **on VCS Organisations in Gloucestershire during Covid-19**: https://www.barnwoodtrust.org/vcs-reports/

normal' for funding and commissioning in Gloucestershire whilst developing and growing systems that work for everyone in the community ecosystem.

Much of what organisations learned during the pandemic is relevant to informing further discussions about the future of funding and commissioning in Gloucestershire. This chapter focuses on sharing that learning based on what has been highlighted in this report as being possible, achievable, and crucial to the resilience of Gloucestershire communities.

All participants noted core challenges within current funding and commissioning systems which had impacted the work they were able to deliver. These included:

- Short-term funding
- The omission of local expertise
- Restrictive outcome measures
- An emphasis on competition over collaboration
- Complex processes

Short-Term Funding

The short-term nature of funding – often awarded in one- or three-yearly cycles – was a source of frustration for organisations, causing barriers to their work:

- Participants worried for the security of their team's employment and the subsequent impact this would have in the community because of the lack of certainty about whether their contracts can be extended.
- Organisations' focus shifted away from their preferred ways of working due to the need to meet targets and secure future funding.
- Short project timescales meant there was not the time to effect lasting change and a constant feeling of starting again rather than cumulative building or development.

Short-term funding was not just said to impact paid staff but also translated into how organisations were able to work alongside volunteers. An important way of

retaining people's willingness to contribute was felt to be clarity about what groups and organisations could offer and for how long. Within the research, organisations which had secured the trust of funders and their own sustainability felt better able to confidently offer longer, flexible options to volunteers. As previously noted, flexibility in when and how often people could offer their time was considered especially important for disabled people and people with mental health challenges to be able to contribute their strengths and skills to their local community. Long-term funding could therefore be considered a pre-requisite to accessibility, inclusion and the ability to draw on valuable experiences within communities because organisations have the time and space to develop opportunities.

As well as fuelling disillusion, short-term funding was said to lead to short-term fixes, these organisations, and the communities they represented, wanted something longer-term and with sustainability as its overriding purpose:

"It feels like funders just go, right, there's people over there, they've got all the food we'll give them money because they can give it out as quickly as possible. Whereas actually, that's not always the best way and that's not sustainable … we need people to be able to, you know, sustainably help other people, not in this kind of pushing money out because it doesn't work, we know it doesn't work in the long-term."

It was reflected that to take this long-term perspective, funders and commissioners needed to trust those on the ground to deliver the work effectively whilst offering secure funding streams for initiatives built around a community or services rather than those built around what money is available:

"… if you want sustainability and real change that's going to take time, you can't base that on a sixteen-week intervention, you know, two years is still a short period of time to have that breathing space to actually work and adjust along that period. It also builds relationships with those people involved in it and that's going to create more opportunity within the community going forward and therefore create more resilience … you have to demonstrate so quick about what you're achieving, you know, that can take time and you should be allowed space for that to happen."

Thinking specifically about the pandemic context, organisations stressed how vital it was that funders and commissioners take a long-term view of recovery. Whilst the initial emergency may be coming to an end the long-term impact is still unknown, and most organisations felt their work was not yet finished and is unlikely to be for a long time.

Food poverty, isolation, and digital exclusion, for example, were existing problems in Gloucestershire prior to the pandemic and will all persist beyond it. Likewise, it was considered probable that the socio-economic upheaval of the past eighteen months would trigger even greater challenges that communities need to prepare themselves for.

Even so, there was an impression that funding streams had already '*dried up*' and that funding was becoming more difficult to access. Organisations called for the trust and flexibility shown in the first year of the pandemic to persist for as long as possible to sustainably rebuild our communities.

Omission of Local Expertise

There was a view that decisions made about funding and commissioning often do not pay attention to the local expertise within communities and the existing networks that could be utilised. By not doing so:

- The views of communities are under-represented in decision-making
- Decisions do not consider the variation between different communities
- Funders and commissioners are disconnected from the people and places their resources are intended to help and consequently base choices on perception rather than what is happening on the ground.
- There is insufficient recognition of the added value brought by the formal and informal aspects of the community ecosystem.

Organisations felt their experience working in communities, their extensive knowledge of where they worked, and the trust they had developed with local people and other groups, meant they were best placed to create connection and co-ordinate the work on the ground. Yet, their absence from decision-making and commissioning processes was felt to hinder the way resources could be distributed in communities:

"…I think the system has to change, you know … this is the best time for it to change because everyone has this understanding that the world was slightly wrong … and so if we're looking to do things better then now is the time we do it."

Examples were also given of contracts going to the 'biggest' organisations or those based outside of the county, rather than those who might be best placed to distribute resources exactly where they are needed. This added to the sense of frustration felt by some of those we spoke to:

"…contracts going to the biggest [organisations] … who are the voluntary sector in name only because they're so big and so detached from what matters to communities that they might as well be, you know, private … it's a real frustration of ours where we constantly see big national organisations coming in and deliver stuff that we feel on a local level we know far more about."

Some participants felt there was a disconnect between commissioners, funders and communities and felt the crisis had brought with it an opportunity to create important links: local expertise, for example, could be built into the funding and commissioning process. By having representation from people and organisations working on the ground, it would not only be possible to distribute resources in more appropriate ways but also to build on the existing skills in communities. This would mean that even when funding stops, the impact of the initial investment has the potential to last longer. Bringing local expertise into the room was therefore considered to be key to improving the system.

Restrictive Outcome Measures

An apparent overreliance on targets was described as inhibiting the potential for funding and commissioning decisions which may have the greatest impact for local communities and the effect of which can be more readily articulated. Such an approach was said to:

- Fail to recognise the variety of outcomes that are possible beyond the initial aims of a project.
- Restrict creative ways of working that could lead to better overall outcomes.
- Indicate a lack of trust that, given the right resources, these organisations could have a suitable and meaningful impact on their communities.
- Constrain organisations to a particular way of working that may be in opposition to their ethos or culture and that do not consider the diverse demographic of an area.

Organisations highlighted how the capacity to be agile during the pandemic, had enabled them to change their plans or develop new ideas as time progressed, circumstances changed, or things worked less well. This agility was felt only to be possible because of the trust funders gave them and the flexibility offered to them by placing fewer restrictions on certain income streams during the pandemic. Organisations reflected that this had not previously been the case which meant that their income and, for some, their very existence, was predicated on and subject to meeting specific targets – no matter how arbitrary they seemed:

"...it's much easier for us if we can be talking about impact rather than outputs because we don't want to have to deliver 20 groups for long-Covid if actually long-Covid ceases to be an issue ... in so much of what we do, every individual has their own take on it and their own specific solution to what's going to work for them. So there's no point is saying we're going to run weight loss groups or we're going to run depression groups or domestic violence ... we have to wait and see what people want because some people coming out of domestic violence may prefer to learn the ukulele and have a bit of fun rather than endlessly talking..."

Organisations felt that their capacity to contribute was underestimated and the tendency of commissioners to concentrate primarily on narrow outputs such as providing a certain number of classes or a set target for food parcels to be delivered could lead to a situation where the depth of impact that a project might have could be unacknowledged:

"You might be funding a food programme, for example, but there are all sorts of implications and all sorts of other areas that might have implications towards employment ... towards mental health or you know social wellbeing, or whatever it is. Each individual thing has overlap with other areas. And I think that's always the frustrating thing as someone who has to fill in funding reports, you report back to a funder and it was 'can you report on these things?' and it's like well, yes I can and I will but actually there's all this other stuff that's happened out of this work and I know you're just not interested."

Organisations told us that when this interconnectivity of issues affecting people's lives is both understood and valued by those providing and developing services, people can achieve more holistic, sustainable outcomes which allow them to develop their own resilience and subsequently require less support:

"We've had lots of dealings with services who deliver stuff, you know, weight loss for example and their only focus is weight loss - they've got no connections to the community … actually what they come and they find is the reason that they're comfort eating is because they don't have any social connections, you know, they haven't got any friends or anyone around them to do things with, they haven't got the connections to say we know what's going on in the community, we can connect you up with something you're really passionate about. They haven't got that because they're just seeing it as a single issue. And I think we need to get over that, it needs to be about that ecosystem approach…"

By focusing and commissioning on single issues it was suggested that commissioners and funders were at risk of missing numerous opportunities to address the causal and interrelated issues which underpinned numerous difficulties (a lack of social connection, for example), addressing the symptoms but not the cause.

It was suggested that this narrow vision has also resulted in the commissioning of programmes that lack the community expertise of local organisations which could actively address these underlying problems by using their connections and skills to work more deeply on what is important to local people whilst continuing to support them in numerous other ways.

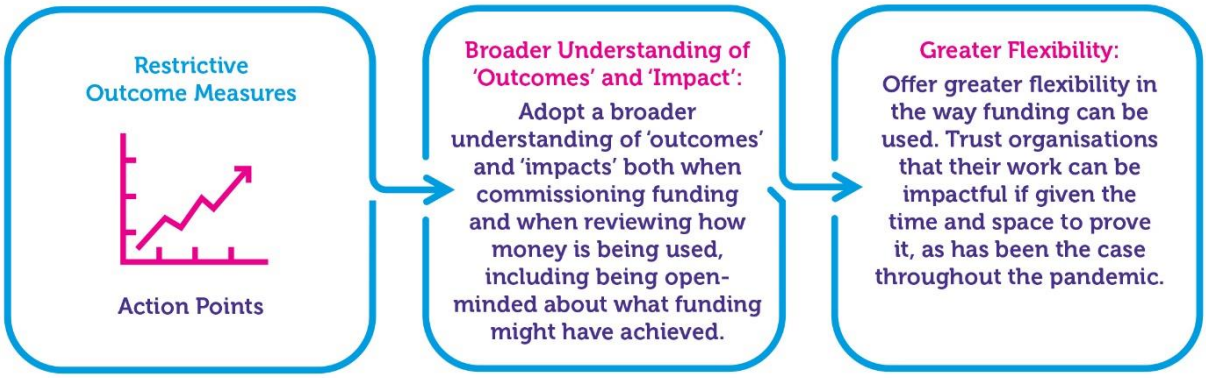
These organisations told us that they wanted to see more trust and autonomy offered by funders and commissioners. Trust, in this context, was not simply about resourcing activities but real engagement around where resources could be best distributed within a community. The hope was, that over time, funders would increase their trust that desired outcomes can still be met (or exceeded) and acknowledge the benefits of providing core and unrestricted funding. At the same time space could be created to review the variety of impacts a project may have:

"…it's also saying to funders, look if we do this work we know there is going to be some outcome. We don't know what that outcome is going to be. I bet some people will have an improvement in mental health, managing their mental health, some people will have more social networks, other people might have weight loss, some people might not have weight loss. There's going to be something out there, why don't you just let us do the work on the ground and fund the work rather than funding a targeted outcome."

Some suggested that to date, the process of funding has meant organisations and community groups have been compelled to divert money to a particular workstream or have been constrained to delivering a particular activity that was not necessarily the best fit for their community, rather than offering what is most needed in individual areas.

This top-down decision making about what to fund has reduced what is achievable for community organisations and ultimately limited the impact they are able to have. Organisations spoke about being desperate for space, for greater autonomy and to be trusted that they would be able to deliver outcomes that were meaningful, and tackle some of the long-standing challenges within their communities sustainably:

"It's getting better, right. At the moment, for example, we've got a good relationship with the council, so we've just been given £20,000 to support people … and that's clearly good and the fact that they've come to us and say can you do this for us, again, it shows that things are very different … there's a difference there but it's still within the old framework. It's still about having to deliver. I've still got this thing where, right 80% of that money has to go to families with kids under five … there's still all that stuff that I have to contend with. And yes, I will do it, I'll deliver that how they want but what that means is that I rarely have enough breathing time … what would be brilliant if for the next year all of us … were allowed the space to just go and explore … let's just work and let's just see what happens."



Competition over Collaboration

Funding streams were felt to promote competition at the expense of collaboration, creating an environment that:

- Normalises more siloed ways of working in the VCS sector.
- Takes a narrow view of what can be achieved in communities.
- Implies a lack of trust in organisations and therefore those organisations are pushed into a cycle of continually having to prove their value to funders and commissioners.

Participants argued that funding was high stakes, pitting them against each other, rather than focusing on the value of what they could deliver together. In this context, other organisations could be seen as both a rival and an existential threat, and consequently seeking collaboration was viewed by some participants as an admission of weakness, rather than an asset or strength:

"It's seeing it as a positive and perhaps historically that looks as though you're weak, you know, and I think there's a lot of history attached to this, you know, it's got to be mine, it's got to have my name attached to it".

The pandemic was said to have altered this feeling to some extent. Many of those we spoke to were clear in their view that working together was better and that funding and commissioning systems need to catch up with this newly appreciated way of working:

"We need to change the system and I'm working with various people on this very subject. And so you know, changing the ways services are commissioned, prioritising the relationship and impact over outputs, stopping the silos."

The pandemic made it clear to the people we spoke to that every element of the community ecosystem provides something that other elements do not have. A community organisation, for example, may not possess the expertise in mental health support, but they hold the connections within the community and the trust of the people for whom such services are required. They understand individuals at a

personal level and can adapt in ways that enable people to participate. They also possess the connections to people with the relevant skills and training.

In addition, there was a call for funders and commissioners to embrace collaborative ways of working themselves: pooling resources in a way akin to the *Gloucestershire Funders* initiative launched early in the pandemic[15].

"I think, because of the funders being able to talk to each other, for them to understand that some of their remits do overlap, even though sometimes people's remits have been quite narrow … a group that works exclusively with people with learning disabilities for example … because there's going to be a mixture of people and that, and if we're looking at how communities work together that work has to be done cohesively. It cannot be done piecemeal because I don't think that serves anyone. And so I think the more funders can get on the same page with that the better."

The view was that the funders and commissioners themselves bring different experiences and knowledge to decision-making and that by collaborating (and involving people within communities) more, they can utilise their resources in ways that are more holistic.

[15] www.glosfunders.org

Complex Processes

Many organisations felt that the actual process of applying for funding was a barrier that needed to be simplified:

- The process is time-consuming and sometimes disproportionate to the amount of money being requested
- It is inaccessible to those who do not have experience of applying for funding – restricting the power communities hold to self-organise and giving larger VCS structures more access to investment.

Several of the participants we spoke to had very little experience of the funding system prior to their involvement in the pandemic response and remarked how inaccessible it could feel. Information about where to source funding, eligibility criteria and processes were felt to be barriers to independently resourcing activities in their communities.

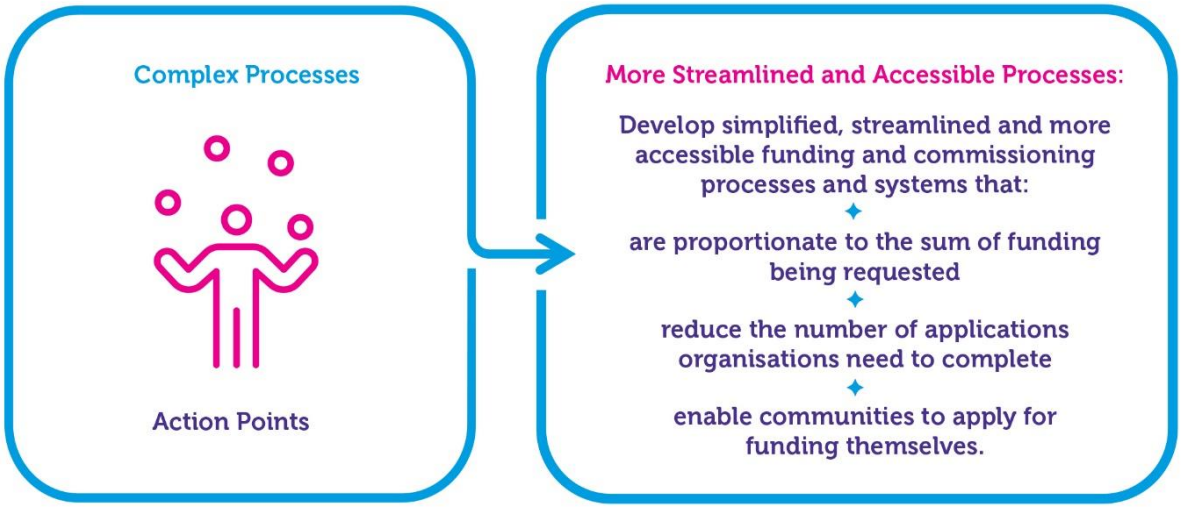
Before the pandemic, Barnwood Trust had a funding programme called Small Sparks. In our report *Investing in Community Groups* which evaluated the impact of this programme, we heard how being able to apply for just a small pot of money (up to £250) simply, quickly and inclusively enabled residents to pursue activities they wanted to do. It also allowed for an array of outcomes and impacts for community members, especially those who reported living with a disability or mental health challenge: people were doing more, building connections and social networks and described how their mental health had improved. This also indicates that inaccessible funding systems and processes stifle community activity and the potential benefits that brings[16].

Organisations already acquainted with the system, also reported ongoing challenges; funding processes were described as often being administratively time-consuming and disproportionate to the amount of money being applied for:

[16] Barnwood Trust (forthcoming) **Investing in Community Groups**

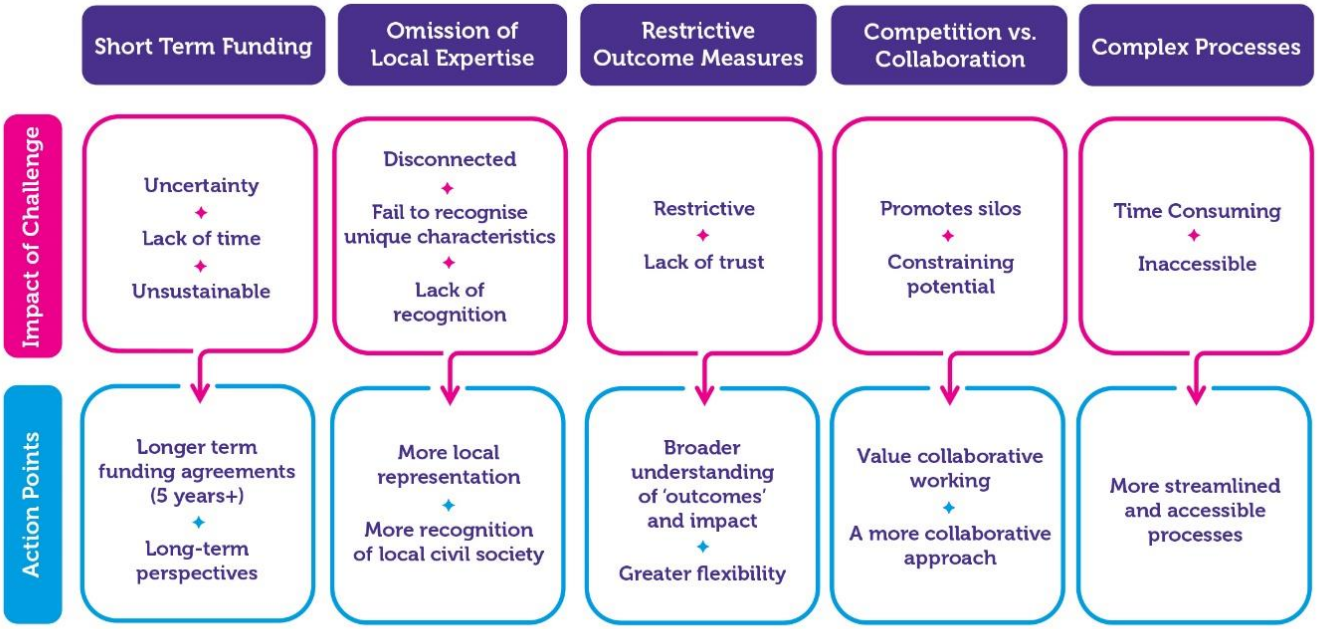
"I sometimes spend as much time applying for funding and getting £200 and it's equal in terms of my admin as if I'm applying for £4,000 … I've been contacting local charities and it's fantastic they're supporting me but it's a lot of applications for a very small amount of money."

There was a collective view that processes should be simplified where possible, especially for smaller amounts of money and smaller-scale activities, thus maximising the potential for a range of applications and, ultimately, who can benefit. The knock-on effect of such improvements was suggested to be more time for organisations to dedicate to delivering activities and demonstrating their impact.



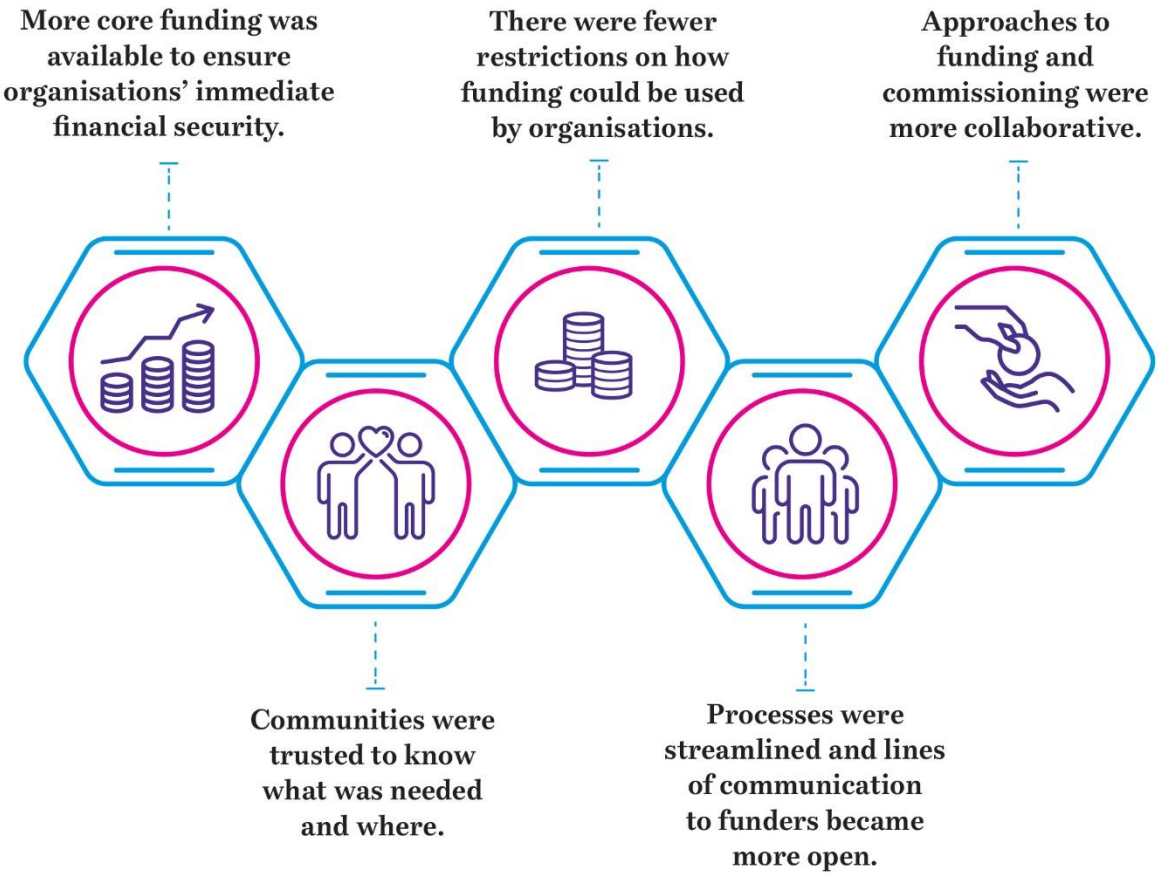
The Future of Funding and Commissioning in Gloucestershire

This chapter has highlighted five key challenges to local funding and their impact on communities. It also suggests a series of changes to build a funding and commissioning landscape in Gloucestershire that works for **everyone** from the individual, through the informal and formal networks and organisations as well as local decision-makers:

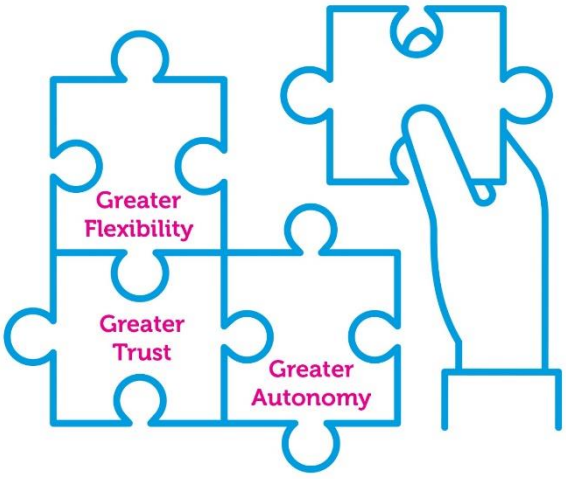


Many of the interviewees acknowledged that changes were already happening organically throughout the pandemic, and it was hoped these would continue going forwards. The area where there was reported to be the least progress in this time was in funding efficiency. The nature of the pandemic meant long-term financial considerations could not always be made, however, this was an area that participants felt warranted significant amount of attention as we look ahead to the recovery phase of the pandemic.

Whilst these challenges are ongoing, participants shared how, during the initial emergency, the funding and commissioning systems had adapted. Participants told us how this had the following benefits:



Participants' recommendations can be summarised as three changes:



Participants were united in asking for one thing of funders and commissioners going forward: sustain the trust in them that has already been given to allow them to work flexibility and with greater autonomy.

Conclusions

This report set out to learn from the community response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Gloucestershire and explore the existing capacity and resilience within the county. Through interviews with 11 community groups and organisations we were able to explore:

- What contributes to community resilience in Gloucestershire?
- How do we resource resilient communities?
- As we look ahead, what can we take forward to a blueprint for a resilient county?

The examples shared throughout this report indicate that in many ways Gloucestershire is already a resilient county. We heard about how during the early stages of the pandemic people across the county gave their time and energy to support neighbours, friends and strangers alike; about how existing infrastructure expanded and evolved to reach and give support to those responding on the ground; and how the foundation of this response was an approach and ethos that was resident-orientated and flexible to the changes and uncertainties that the pandemic brought.

As we move beyond the initial health emergency, participants stressed the need to look ahead both to the recovery phase of the pandemic and future crises that may affect communities. In doing so, they talked about three important considerations for how to sustain and build capacity and resilience in Gloucestershire communities:

- Community leadership
- Readiness
- Self-sufficiency

It should be noted that participants also reflected on the importance of this resilience being nurtured and resourced to enable it to flourish. Whilst it was agreed that the strengths and skills of local people combined with the expertise and understanding of groups and organisations already offered a wealth of

resources to communities, throughout the interviews the resource considered to be possibly the most vital, was **funding**.

Participants from organisations of all sizes commented on the challenges they experienced with the county's funding and commissioning systems:

- Short-term funding
- The omission of local expertise from decision-making
- Restrictive outcome measures
- A sense of competition rather than collaboration
- Complex processes

But at the same time, they proposed changes – many of which had been shown to be possible by the response of funders and commissioners during the pandemic:

- Longer-term funding agreements
- Long-term perspectives – especially towards resourcing the pandemic recovery.
- More local representation in decision-making
- More recognition of the wealth of skills and insights within the local VCS
- Broader understandings of 'outcomes' and 'impact'
- Greater flexibility in how funding can be used
- Appreciate and value collaboration
- More collaborative approaches to funding and commissioning
- More streamlined and accessible funding and commissioning processes.

Future research will enable us to further understand how resilience continues to be fostered in Gloucestershire.

Researcher Reflections and Remaining Questions

> Resilience is the ability of a system–like a family, a country, or Earth's biosphere–to cope with short-term disruptions and adapt to long-term changes without losing its essential character. A crisis is an unstable state of affairs in which decisive change is both necessary and inevitable. We depend on the resilience of all the systems that support us for life and well-being; if these systems falter, we suffer. Today we face four major crises–environmental, energy, economic, and equity–that threaten to overwhelm the resilience of the systems we care about, particularly at the local level. The failure of international sustainability efforts to thwart these crises means that resilience-building efforts at a community level–working on all issues and systems, not just on climate change and infrastructure–are needed more than ever.
>
> Daniel Lerch – The Community Resilience Reader 2017

Whilst we are mindful that this study involved only a handful of the hundreds of groups which spent the lockdowns helping their neighbours, we are confident from the consistency of their observations and findings from previous research that their experiences were by no means unique.

This research has opened our eyes to the sheer scale of the response that communities were able to organise with little or no prior planning, to the interdependency of the different aspects of the community ecosystem, and the existing capacity and resilience within Gloucestershire.

We hope that these findings will ignite new conversations throughout the county about:

- how communities can be even better prepared for future crises
- what can be done in between crises to promote autonomy and resilience within communities and for individuals
- how the relationships between residents, the VCS and local decision-makers can be re-imagined.

When drafting this report we were asked how important the learning from participants really was, not just in the response to Covid-19, but on a day-to-day basis. As two people who have been totally immersed in this interview data for the past nine months, the reply felt obvious: it is *essential*.

Essential to the preparedness of our communities and their resilience to future crises – particularly those arising from the climate emergency, essential to ensuring that a comprehensive community response can be supported and maintained, essential to safeguarding that individuals do not emerge from future crises with an increased requirement for long term support from services and essential to creating a culture of community inclusivity which guarantees no-one is marginalised in any future response.

Throughout the interviews participants stressed the importance of co-design, co-creation and co-production with local people and there was a feeling that the pandemic had already triggered significant shifts in the way communities have operated: local people have felt re-empowered to make decisions and develop schemes that suit them. There was a feeling that established organisations and systems will need to adapt to these re-empowered communities, that there will not necessarily be an automatic reversion to the way things were, and that sustainable resilience was reliant on communities being given the space for this kind of long-term systemic change.

There was a sense that funders need to be realistic about the investments they are making, giving time for a community to adapt and grow, whilst recognising the need for longevity because short term funding to the community is not compatible with the shifts that are required to create sustainable resilience.

When we started these interviews we were curious to learn about residents' reasons for offering their time to their community. During our conversations we heard

about a wealth of experiences but the thread that ran through them all was driven by a sense of purpose.

> In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning...
>
> Viktor E. Frankl

We wondered if there was something fundamental here that services could learn from and carry forward in preparation for future crisis; how to support a community to support itself and how to mitigate communities emerging from a crisis with more ill health than they entered it?

We heard about how being able to make meaning purposefully was essential to the protection of individual long term mental health and this reminded us of the disaster recovery work undertaken by trauma specialist Bessel Van Der Kolk, particularly following his work in communities after Hurricane Katrina.

Van Der Kolk states that in order for communities to be able to process crisis and limit the impact on residents' mental health there needs to be a level of autonomy and reason in any strategy, and by being able to actively engage with the local response to crisis, community members were able to be 'agents in their own recovery'.

Work with trauma response across the world supports the idea that there is a physical human need to be purposeful and active at times of crisis to reduce the likelihood of long -term trauma in our communities, by both allowing action and creating meaning. It felt significant enough for us to think about how statutory bodies and services could be reflective of this in future disaster planning to ensure any reaction to crisis is also a humane response.

> …people talk a lot about stress hormones. Our stress hormones are sort of the source of all evil. That's definitely not true. The stress hormones are good for you. You secrete stress hormones in order to give you the energy to cope under extreme situations… What goes wrong is, if you're kept from using your stress hormones, if somebody ties you down, if somebody holds you down, if somebody keeps you imprisoned, the stress hormones keep going up, but you cannot discharge it with action. Then the stress hormones really start wreaking havoc with your own internal system. But as long as you move, you are going to be fine. I landed in Puerto Rico, {after Hurricane Hugo} and everybody is busy doing stuff and building things, and everybody's too busy to talk to me because they're trying to do stuff. But on the same plane… officials from FEMA came in, who then made announcements, Stop your work until FEMA decides what you're going to get reimbursed for. And that was the worst thing that could have happened… similar to what happened in New Orleans, where people also were kept from being agents in their own recovery.
>
> **Bessel van der Kolk - How Trauma Lodges in the Body**

During 2020 we too entered a shared crisis, the potential for shared trauma, and were collectively immobilised, yet most of the groups we interviewed did not tell us about this in their communities, they spoke of joy, of camaraderie, of connection.

This is an indication that transformation is possible in communities when they are given the opportunity to be active within any response rather than passively receiving help. Perhaps this is a cautionary consideration, that dismissing the human need to be purposeful, particularly at times of crisis not only weakens the active response of local communities but can be harmful to both collective resilience and an individual's capacity to bounce back from adversity.

The county's response to the pandemic has revealed the value and necessity of engaged, resilient communities and robust, adaptable services, whilst at the same time bringing to light areas for future consideration and development. As is often the case with research, the interviews with community groups and organisations raised some challenging questions that are beyond the scope of this research:

- What different perspectives could be gleaned from taking the time to be immersed in the areas you are resourcing?

- How could opportunities for people to contribute to local communities be expanded? How can these opportunities be made flexible enough to enable *everyone* to contribute?
- What difference would it make to focus on the unique qualities of individual areas (e.g. those on the county border, areas where services are organised by different authorities, rural and isolated places)?
- If trust had not been central to decisions during the pandemic, would responses have been different? How might trust continue to be nurtured in the future?

Appendix: Methodology

Between January and March 2021 – as the UK entered its third national lockdown – researchers at Barnwood Trust undertook a series of interviews to explore the community response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Gloucestershire. Throughout the last 18 months, community groups and organisations across the county have been on the frontline responding to the social consequences of this health emergency: food poverty, digital exclusion, isolation and impacts on mental health to name but a few. Whilst much of this was led by established community organisations, the period was also characterised by the self-organisation and mobilisation of sizeable numbers of informal groups, coming together with the core aim of supporting their neighbours.

The Study

This research, sought to understand what took place in Gloucestershire communities at this time, with a focus on: the role of new and existing community organisations providing frontline support, including how they were resourced, the challenges they faced and ultimately, what can be learned about the resilience within our communities and our preparedness for future crises.

The main criteria for approaching community groups and organisations was that they were embedded within a community and were there to serve everyone in their local area. Some of these organisations were already well known to Barnwood Trust but as we also wanted to understand the experiences of less-established groups, some groups were contacted according to the area they were based in (for example, to ensure that participants were from across the county.

Barnwood Trust's vision is to create the best possible environment for disabled people and people with mental health challenges to make the most of their lives. As a group who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic we were also interested in how disabled people and people with mental health challenges were able to contribute to the community effort, including through the work of these organisations.

Methods

The announcement of the third lockdown necessitated that the data collection took place online. To gather an in-depth perspective of organisations responding to the crisis in Gloucestershire, a qualitative study comprising of semi-structured research interviews with local organisations across the county was developed.

In order to adhere to the restrictions, all the interviews took place over Zoom with two researchers and they were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. Each interview was then thematically analysed. The themes emerging from these interviews form the basis of this report.

Participants

In total 18 participants (most of whom were paid staff and four of whom led their organisations) representing 11 community groups and organisations from different parts of the county participated in the interviews. In addition, five other groups were approached to participate but were either uncontactable or were unable to arrange a time. Unfortunately, this meant there were no participants from Cheltenham or Tewkesbury Boroughs.

All participants were provided with information in advance of the interview (either via email or through a phone call), including being sent an information sheet and consent form, and had the opportunity to ask questions at several points during the research process. With the interviews taking place over Zoom, everyone was asked to provide written consent and return the form by email, or to give recorded verbal consent before any interviews took place.

All participants have been shown a draft copy of the report before it was published.

If you would like to find out more about this research, please contact:

Dan Jacques | Lead Researcher –

✉ dan.jacques@barnwoodtrust.org

Abi Freshwater | Policy Advisor: Resilience –

✉ abigail.freshwater@barnwoodtrust.org

We would like to thank all the groups who have participated in this research and who generously gave their time to share their learning to inform this report.

Barnwood Trust
Overton House, Overton Road, Cheltenham,
Gloucestershire, GL50 3BN

01242 539935 | www.barnwoodtrust.org

Registered charity number 1162855