

Local Trust | Big Local

A man wearing a grey helmet, orange-tinted safety glasses, and a high-visibility yellow-green vest over a dark blue long-sleeved shirt is riding a black bicycle. He is smiling and looking back over his shoulder. On the back of the bicycle is a large blue cooler with a silver handle and a blue duffel bag secured with a black strap. The background shows a paved road, a silver car on the left, a white car on the right, and a black metal gate leading to a green park area with trees.

# Community responses in times of crisis

Glimpses into the past,  
present, and future

Steve Wyler

## **About the author**

Steve Wyler is an independent consultant, researcher and writer in the social sector. He also co-convenes A Better Way. From 2000 to 2014, he was CEO of Locality, a national network of community organisations dedicated to community enterprise, community ownership and social change.

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## FOREWORD

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BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST radical and exciting grant programmes ever launched by a major lottery funder. Between 2010 and 2012, the National Lottery Community Fund identified 150 areas that had historically missed out on lottery and other funding. Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in the decision-making process.

The programme was designed to not only fund community projects of choice, but to build capacity, and in the longer-term, resilience within those communities. So, when coronavirus arrived in the UK at the start of 2020 it was not surprising, although still wholly impressive, that people in Big Local areas immediately responded to support their local area. Whilst mutual aid groups formed at a rapid rate and sought to understand how they could provide support, these existing networks of community groups were arguably a step ahead, with an already developed, deep understanding and connection to their local areas and the people who live there.

Despite rules around social distancing and isolation limiting more traditional community activity, it wasn't long before these groups had identified the support that their neighbourhoods needed and started to act. From remote mental health outreach in the suburbs of Manchester to tailored food packages in York, it was clear that the people in these communities knew what was required.

In this essay, Steve Wyler looks at crises of the past to better understand the response that has taken place in present day. Writing amid a national lockdown, he speaks to people from four different areas of the country and sees how they have supported their communities since the start of the pandemic.

Wyler reflects on crises from the Great Plague through to the floods of 2019 to assess how the community response has sometimes informed a better equipped and often more resilient future. He explores how crisis can transform social structures and how COVID-19 could play this role in Britain's future. Most importantly, he argues that if we can appreciate, and to some extent, even celebrate, that community has been at the heart of the nation's response to this crisis, then we should be looking ahead to ensure that our recovery from it not only includes, but centres around this appreciation.

As we emerge from the pandemic and start to rebuild, we should be looking to local people and neighbourhoods to better understand how we can start to create a resilient nation, building on the grassroots response rather than leaving it in our past.

### **Matt Leach**

Chief executive

Local Trust





Blossom in Chiswick Wharf

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# It is April 2020...

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It is April 2020, and in cities and towns and villages across the country, the gardens and the parks are beginning to look their best, and everywhere the blackthorn, cherry and apple are in bloom.

But this year far fewer people are able to admire such sights, beyond their immediate neighbourhood. Coronavirus has arrived, and we are in lockdown.

It is April 2020, and the world has suddenly become a strange and unsettling place, changing faster than we could have believed possible.

A month ago, if you had told me that once a week people in my street, and in just about every other street, would stand at their front doors and clap and cheer for the NHS; that the state would ‘throw its arms’ around millions of working people and pay their wages; that supermarket-shelf stackers and delivery drivers and front-line care workers would suddenly have a social status far above, for example, hedge-fund managers, I would have thought you had lost your mind.

And if, a month ago, you had warned me that the numbers



of infections and deaths would reach so high, and told me that medical and care staff would fall ill because they were lacking basic protective equipment, and that even our Prime Minister would spend time in intensive care, I would have shrugged this off as foolish scaremongering. And yet, here we are. And who knows what the next month will bring?

It is April 2020, and today I am sitting in what was once my daughter's bedroom and is now my office, taking part in yet another Zoom conference. I am listening to story after story from people right across the country, explaining how they are working every hour they have, mostly unpaid, as members of their community, in the same predicament as everyone else, worried for their families and themselves, but doing whatever they can to get food and medicines and friendship to their neighbours, to those who are frail or lonely or scared or forgotten about, to help each other through these hard times.

Those taking part in this call are from Big Local areas—neighbourhoods around the country who have received lottery money, via Local Trust, in a ten-year experiment to see what might happen if funders were to trust local people, especially in those places where investment and infrastructure have been weakest, to do the right thing, on their own terms.

Amid the multitude of stories of hardship and community activity, one simple comment sticks in my mind: “So many have come together.”

Yes, indeed, so many have come together. I heard on the BBC news the other night that 60% of the entire population have offered to help others at this time of crisis, and that 47% have already received help. At the time I write this, there are over 4,000 mutual aid groups, mostly sprung up in the last few weeks, listed on the Mutual Aid COVID-19 website. And that doesn't include the thousands of existing community

associations and charities and social enterprises which have stepped forward, and the WhatsApp and Facebook groups that have formed, street by street, in tens of thousands, across the nation.

And that made me think, was it always like this, at a time of national crisis? And are there things we might be able to learn from the past, that could help to guide our responses now and for the future? Are we indeed seeing a “national re-neighbouring”, as some have suggested, or is this wishful thinking? Or will new and positive ways of working diminish and maybe vanish altogether as eventually we emerge from coronavirus. Or perhaps, just perhaps, can something good and lasting come out of this universal calamity?

So, it is April 2020, and, in order to try to begin to understand what is happening now, I find myself starting by looking backwards, deep into the past...



The Great Plague of London, 1665. Distressing views in the streets.  
Engraving c1880

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# Glimpses into the past

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## The plague in 1665

I SUPPOSE I COULD HAVE GONE BACK even further, but I think 1665 is far enough. This was the terrible year when London and much of the country suffered one of the worst ever outbreaks of bubonic plague.

On Monday 4th September that year, Samuel Pepys made an entry in his diary. He described how he ate some fruit “out of the King’s garden”, walked in the park and visited a friend. A pleasant day, it seems. But then on his way home the mood suddenly changes:

“...it troubled me to pass by Coombe farm where about twenty-one people have died of the plague, and three or four days since I saw a dead corpse in a coffin lie in the Close unburied, and a watch is constantly kept there night and day to keep the people in, the plague making us cruel, as dogs, one to another.”

This, for Pepys, and for many others like him who belonged to the wealthy and privileged classes, was the story of the times. Even though the plague was no respecter of social status, and

many rich and powerful people perished, the gentry did their best to carry on living the good life and many were able to escape from cities like London to the relative safety of their country estates. But what they perceived around them was a widespread lack of humanity, and people acting towards each other, as Pepys so memorably expressed it, as cruel as dogs.

Of course, there were reasons for this. There was tremendous fear, intensified not only by the virulence of the plague but also by a complete lack of reliable information about how the disease was transmitted and what remedies might be effective. As Daniel Defoe was to write:

“But alas! This was a time when everyone’s private safety lay so near them, that they had no time to pity the distresses of others; for everyone had Death, as it were, at his door...This, I say, took away all compassion. Self-preservation, indeed, appeared to be the first law.”<sup>1</sup>

The authorities had few ways in which to safeguard the population or to provide relief to those who became sick or destitute. Not that state-organised response to epidemic was entirely new. As early as the 15th and 16th centuries, the wealthy Italian city states of Venice, Florence, Genoa and Milan had instituted what have sometimes been described as the first public health measures, by creating public health boards responsible for the construction of pest houses, quarantine and barriers to the movement of people and trade. So, in 1665 in England, the authorities knew what they had to do. Here, parish councils were placed on the front line of the response, and the method adopted, in London at least, was one of domestic quarantine.

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<sup>1</sup> Defoe, Daniel. (1722) *A Journal of the Plague Year*. While this was a work of historical fiction rather than on-the-spot journalism (Defoe was only five years old in 1665), it appears to be based on contemporary testimony.

It was a cruel system. If one person in a household displayed the symptoms of plague, the whole household was placed in lockdown. A red cross was painted on the door, a padlock applied and a guard set to ensure no-one fled the house. New occupations came into existence, watchers to guard the afflicted houses, searchers to enter the houses and determine if the plague was present, nurses to give comfort and basic medical help to the dying, and bearers to carry away the corpses to the common grave-pits on the edges of the city.

To work in any of these occupations was of course dangerous, and many who did so became victims of the disease; but there was no shortage of men and women desperate for any paid employment. Many thousands of domestic servants had been thrown onto the streets at the onset of plague, and most labourers and trades people were without work. The choice for the poor was between death through starvation and exposure, or taking any work, however perilous, that provided the income necessary for at least a chance of survival.

And so the parish system of quarantine was designed at the same time to prevent further spread of the disease and to provide some modicum of relief for those who were destitute: those in need were expected to work in return for aid.<sup>2</sup> But for many people, and for the poor in particular, such a system offered little by way of even the most rudimentary assistance. As Defoe wrote, “The misery of that time lay upon the poor, who, being infected, had neither food nor physic: neither Physician nor Apothecary to assist them, nor Nurse to attend them. Many of those died calling for help, and even for sustenance, out of their windows ...”<sup>3</sup>

Nor was this a system which brought out the best instincts

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<sup>2</sup> Thorpe, Lara. (2017) ‘In midst of death’: Medical Responses to the Great Plague of 1665, 223.

<sup>3</sup> Defoe, Daniel. (1722).



of communities. In London's suburbs the parishes were crowded with the poor, who knew that if they fled they would be denied sanctuary and driven from place to place by frightened country people.<sup>4</sup> And, indeed, there were cases where villagers or townspeople threatened violence when a desperate populace, fleeing the great cities, attempted to approach them: “..At Barnet, or Whetstone, or thereabout, the people offered to fire at them, if they presented to go forward.”<sup>5</sup>

Not that there was a complete absence of philanthropy. It was said that, “The sum of money, contributed in charity by well-disposed people of every kind, as well abroad as at home,” was “prodigiously great.”<sup>6</sup> Funds were provided by the municipal authorities, the city guilds and wealthy individuals for distribution through churches and through parish committees. Payments were made not only for the watchers and searchers, nurses and bearers, but also for individual or family relief or nursing supplies.<sup>7</sup>

And we do have one astonishing example of community solidarity, which still has the power to haunt the imagination. The plague reached the Derbyshire village of Eyam in August 1665, when a flea-infested package of cloth arrived from London for the local tailor. Within a week, his assistant, George Vickers, was dead and others in his household started to die. As the disease spread, the villagers turned for leadership to their new rector, the Reverend William Mompesson, and to the elderly Puritan minister, Thomas Stanley, who had been deprived of office at the time of the restoration of the monarchy but who

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<sup>4</sup> Wear, Andrew. (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Defoe, Daniel. (1722).

<sup>6</sup> Defoe, Daniel. (1722).

<sup>7</sup> Champion, J.A.I. (1993) Epidemics and the built environment in 1665. In *Epidemic Disease in London*, ed. J.A.I. Champion (Centre for Metropolitan History Working Papers Series, No.1), 35-52.

still enjoyed considerable local support. The two of them put aside political and personal rivalry and introduced precautions to slow the spread of the illness, including the relocation of church services to a natural open-air amphitheatre. But the most important decision was to quarantine the entire village to prevent further spread of the disease.

The self-imposed quarantine was maintained and observed by the whole community over a long and agonising 14 months. It was said that only 83 people survived out of a population of 350, and even though the true mortality rate might be somewhat lower, it is likely that, at the very least, almost half of the people perished. Nevertheless, as a consequence of their sacrifice, many other surrounding towns and villages were spared.

So, some three hundred and fifty years ago, an all-pervading terror, a failure of the public authorities, the suffering visited upon the poor by the disease, and the absence of effective aid combined in most places to make everyone, most of the time, “as cruel as dogs” to each other.

But in Eyam, in this one extraordinary case at least, the very reverse was true, and this example was long remembered as a demonstration of the potential and the power of a community to come together at a time of great affliction and behave with courage and compassion.



Birmingham Union Mill token

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# Food crisis in the 1790s

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EYAM WAS EXCEPTIONAL, but I do know of another striking example of the ability of communities—and in this case, it was the poorest communities—to organise among themselves in the face of national calamity.<sup>8</sup>

In 1795 and 1796 there were severe wheat shortages as a result of disastrous harvests and harsh winters. The situation was made worse because Britain was at war with France, and much of the wheat that was available was commandeered for use by the army and navy. The price of bread almost doubled, and some corn factors and millers took to hoarding grain in anticipation of rising prices.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, many people went hungry and some were starving. The country was teetering on the brink of famine.

One consequence was protest: so-called bread riots broke out in Tewkesbury, Norwich, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Croydon,

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<sup>8</sup> This account of the union mills of the 1790s is adapted from my 2017 publication *In Our Hands: A History of Community Business*.

<sup>9</sup> Benson, Derek. (2013) *The Tewkesbury Bread Riot Of 1795*, *Tewkesbury Historical Society Bulletin* 22.

Cambridge, Carlisle, Nottingham, Newcastle and many other places across the country. Women played a major role, as an angry population occupied markets and demanded that traders reduce their prices. While there were some attacks on mills and hoarders and some shipments of grain were seized, the riots were generally peaceful attempts to achieve a fair price, rather than a free-market price, for bread.<sup>10</sup>

Protest was not the only response. Edmund Burke claimed that the food shortages were accompanied by a great wave of private philanthropy, producing “a care and superintendence of the poor, far greater than any I remember.”<sup>11</sup> Whether or not that was true, working people were not prepared simply to depend upon the benevolence of the wealthy, and so, alongside protest and philanthropy, there came a third response, one which has featured less often in histories of those times, but which I think was the most significant of all: mutual aid.

Friendly societies (associations of working people) started by bulk-buying grain for their members in order to keep prices as low as possible.<sup>12</sup> For example, at Rothley in Leicestershire, a friendly society drew £50 from its funds to purchase corn, have it ground and sell the flour at cost to members. Sometimes they banded together to achieve a greater impact: the Sheffield masons combined with fifteen other societies to purchase grain or flour of the best quality and at the lowest prices.

In order to reduce the price still further, some friendly societies took the bold step of establishing their own mills. In Sheffield, for example, they took out a twenty-one-year lease on a suitable site and the Club Flour Mill was built, containing two

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<sup>10</sup> Thompson, E.P. (1971) *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*.

<sup>11</sup> Burke, Edmund. (1795) *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*.

<sup>12</sup> Bamfield, Joshua. (1998) Consumer-owned community flour and bread societies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in *The Emergence of Modern Retailing 1750-1950*, ed. Alexander, N. S.

water wheels and eight pairs of millstones.

The first co-operative mill societies employed wind or water power, a system well suited to small-scale ventures. But the new steam technology offered a huge opportunity to increase scale and production. The Boulton and Watt experimental corn mill at Soho had already demonstrated viability, and in 1795 the co-operative mill societies were determined to take full advantage of this new technology. But there seemed to be an insuperable obstacle: the capital outlay required was at least £2,000, a considerable amount at the time.

In order to address this daunting challenge, a new form of co-operative venture emerged: the union mill society. Here, the capital for the mill was raised by the sale of shares to the public, augmented in some cases by donations from local benefactors. The legal status of these organisations was uncertain, but the model certainly worked.<sup>13</sup>

The first was the Anti Mill Society, launched in 1795 by the ‘poor inhabitants’ of Hull with the aim of raising £2,500 in share capital. The initial share price was six shillings and four pence, later rising to £1; there was a limit of five shares per person; and a 5% cash dividend was promised. Provision was made for the purchase of shares in instalments, the society’s rules emphasising that the object was “to make it convenient for the lowest capacity.” A large, seven-storey mill with adjoining granaries and a mill house was built in 1796, by which time there were 1,435 members, and production commenced the following year.

Support for co-operative milling grew in Hull, and a second union mill society was founded there in 1799. In Birmingham in 1796, more than £6,000 had been promised in shares and

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<sup>13</sup> Tann, Jennifer. (1980) *Co-operative Corn Milling: Self-help during the grain crises of the Napoleonic Wars*.



donation for a new 16-horsepower steam mill operated by the Birmingham Flour and Bread Company. This had 1,360 shareholders by the year 1800, and at the time it was probably the largest mill in the country.

The example was taken up elsewhere as other communities, in Manchester, Whitby, Bridlington, Newport, Beverley and Shardlow, realised that they too could take action to ameliorate the worst effects of the bread crisis. The Good Intent Society near Brentford in Middlesex, for example, raised more than £2,000 and began trading in 1803.

These co-operative mills, whether established by the pooled funds of friendly societies or by the pioneering, community share issues of the union mill societies, generally prospered. Some not only milled the grain to produce flour but also baked the flour into bread. 38 sacks of flour were baked each week at Birmingham, and holders of five or more shares could have their flour and bread delivered to their houses. A society at Wolverhampton distributed 770 loaves each week, supplying about fifty shops in the area. Cash sales were insisted upon by all societies to reduce the problem of debt among the industrial poor.

In all, at least 46 flour and bread societies were set up, the majority in the years of great scarcity, 1795-96 and 1799-1801, and then later in the economic slump that followed the Napoleonic wars. And, while some failed, others proved to be of considerable duration: the Devonport Union Mill in Plymouth began operations in 1817 and continued to 1892.<sup>14</sup>

The industrialist Matthew Boulton was an active supporter of his local union mill society in Birmingham. He denied suggestions that it was a philanthropic venture and pointed

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<sup>14</sup> The Ivybridge Heritage & Archives Group, website: <http://ivybridge-heritage.org/lees-mill-2/>.

out its true significance: “This mill was not erected by the opulent for the benefit of the poor labouring workman, but it was erected principally by the latter class for the benefit of themselves.”<sup>15</sup>

It seems to me that these community ventures deserve to be better known. There is little doubt that, emerging from a period of national convulsion, they played a part in laying the foundation for early co-operatives and trades unions which eventually became worldwide movements, improving the lives of millions to this day.

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<sup>15</sup> Boulton MSS, Boulton. M. to Brandt. C. F., Dec 1799. Cited in Tann, Jennifer. (1980).



A man spraying the top of a bus with an anti-flu virus during an epidemic which followed World War I

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# The Spanish flu in 1918-19

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UNFORTUNATELY, A GREAT NATIONAL EMERGENCY has not always brought out the best of ourselves, at either national or community level.

The Spanish flu epidemic arrived in the UK in the spring of 1918 and lasted until the summer of 1919. It is believed to have infected some 500 million people worldwide, with a death toll possibly as high as 100 million. In the UK there were at least 220,000 influenza-related deaths.<sup>16</sup>

Around the world, government institutions and national health-care services proved ineffective in facing the crisis, while civil society, it has been said, experienced a serious breakdown, “due to the climate of generalised suspicion.”<sup>17</sup>

When the outbreak started, the First World War was still raging. Not only did the gigantic war effort consume almost all medical and logistical resources, but, in addition, the official

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, Niall. (2006) Britain and the 1918-19 Influenza Pandemic: a dark epilogue, 69, and 72-73.

<sup>17</sup> Aassve, Arnstein, Alfani, Guido, et al. (2020) Pandemics and social capital: From the Spanish flu of 1918-19 to COVID-19.

reaction of many governments, at least initially, was to suppress information about the scale and nature of the pandemic as much as possible.

In the UK there was of course no NHS or Public Health Agency or even a Ministry of Health, and the responsibility for responding to the crisis fell to the Local Government Board, which had relatively few executive resources at its disposal. In 1918, the UK public health system was still rudimentary. Those with financial resources were able to pay for private doctors, nurses and hospitals, but for others health care was not readily available. True, in 1911, Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George had introduced the National Health Insurance scheme, whereby subscriptions were paid by employers and their workers. The benefits of this scheme included limited free care from a doctor, but unfortunately, this system only provided for the person subscribing and not for their dependents. For the very needy there was only the hated workhouse, and if the inmates fell sick, they were placed in poorly equipped workhouse infirmaries.<sup>18</sup> For working people (mainly men) who were registered with friendly societies, there might be some health insurance benefits.<sup>19</sup> For others, there were handouts, often reserved for the deserving and respectable poor, from charitable institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Most hospitals were voluntary. In February 1919, during the course of the third wave of influenza, the eminent surgeon Sir Napier Burnett delivered a paper on 'Hospitals in Relationship to the State', in which he drew attention to the inadequacies

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<sup>18</sup> Abel-Smith, B. (1964) *The Hospitals 1800-1948*, p. 252.

<sup>19</sup> There were 4.8 million individuals registered with friendly societies in 1913. See Harris, Bernard. (2018) *Social Policy by Other Means: Mutual aid and the origins of the modern welfare state in Britain during the 19th and 20th centuries*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Knight, Joan Eileen (2015) *The social impact of the influenza pandemic of 1918-19: with special reference to the East Midlands*. PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 158.

of the voluntary hospital system in treating the victims of influenza, due to a lack of proper facilities and a diverse range of treatments.

As the Spanish flu spread across the county and thousands of people fell ill, the disruption to everyday life was enormous. Bus and train services were curtailed; schools, hospitals, chemists, post offices, bakeries and laundries were short of staff; police and fire services were similarly affected; and undertakers were unable to make enough coffins, dig enough graves or bury the bodies quickly enough.<sup>21</sup> But the decision was made to keep factories and mines, shops and businesses, as well as public transport open, partly to maintain the war effort but also to preserve the economy, even though the dangers of contagion were well known.<sup>22</sup> The health of the people came third, it appeared, after victory in battle and the making of profits.

There were three waves of the pandemic, and schools were generally closed during the outbreaks. However, this was a matter for the local authorities. In London there was resistance to school closures, “the medical authorities being of opinion that such action would simply release the children and allow them to congregate in places where the danger of infection is greater.”<sup>23</sup>

Churches remained open throughout on the grounds that, during a crisis, people should turn to religion and not be excluded from it, and that to deprive the people of the opportunity for public prayer would be a “profoundly irreligious step.”<sup>24</sup>

Government did, however, single out cinemas for special

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson, Niall. (2006), 117.

<sup>22</sup> Tomkins, Sandra M. (1992) The failure of expertise: public health policy in Britain during the 1918-19 influenza epidemic. In *Social History of Medicine*, 5, 435-54.

<sup>23</sup> The Times newspaper, 23 October 1918.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, Niall. (2006), 120. Also Knight, Joan Eileen (2015), 262-265.



treatment. They were allowed to remain open, but only two screenings were allowed in a day and the auditoriums had to be thoroughly ventilated between the shows. Children under 14 were banned and soldiers too, initially. It was believed, no doubt correctly, that the rules regarding cinemas were prompted more by a desire to safeguard public morality than to protect public health.<sup>25</sup>

As the crisis worsened, the public authorities and voluntary hospitals were quickly overwhelmed. They started to appeal for volunteers to act as nurses, and also to provide domestic help so that, where several family members were infected, there would be someone available to prepare food, keep the house clean and care for any children not affected. Initially the response was disappointing, and the increasingly desperate municipal authorities even offered to make payments to volunteers, “the question of money not being allowed to stand in the way of securing the help which is so badly needed.” Despite this, insufficient numbers of people came forward. “We regret to learn that so far the number of volunteers for nursing and domestic help falls lamentably short of need.”<sup>26</sup>

There were perhaps several reasons for this. One was that the level of contagion was so high that many potential volunteers were themselves sick, while others were fearful of the virulence of the disease. But the lack of enthusiasm for volunteering may also indicate a profound lack of trust in the authorities, who had proved so unwilling to share information or to take adequate measures to protect the public.

Despite this shaky start, the scale of the emergency and

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<sup>25</sup> Knight, Joan Eileen (2015), 262-265. There had been numerous complaints that darkened cinemas provided ‘easy opportunity for improper practices’, and in 1917 the National Council of Public Morals had established a commission of inquiry into the matter. See Moody, Paul (2011) ‘Improper Practices’ in *Great War British Cinemas*.

<sup>26</sup> Knight, Joan Eileen (2015), 181.

the urgent need for assistance became evident to all, and levels of voluntary and community effort did start to rise. By the end of November 1918, more people had rallied to the call, including some schoolteachers who, because of the closure of schools due to the pandemic, used their time in the service of the sick. A variety of voluntary organisations provided people and equipment, such as the Red Cross which lent ambulances to transport patients to hospital. The Boy Scouts, it was noted, were especially active.<sup>27</sup>

The most effective responses to the pandemic were made, it seems, at local level. For example, in Leicester there were soup kitchens, offers of cars and ambulances to transport the sick to hospital and doctors to tend patients, as well as volunteers offering their time for nursing and domestic duties. In Nottingham, a temporary influenza hospital was established and apparently plenty of nursing care was made available.<sup>28</sup>

While the community response was slow to materialise, when it came it played a significant role. It has been said that, “...in the face of this overwhelming and, to some extent unknown enemy, the frontline role was often taken by volunteers ... Without these volunteers, it is quite possible that the medical systems of many localities may well have failed to cope at all.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Knight, Joan Eileen (2015), 181-2.

<sup>28</sup> Knight, Joan Eileen (2015), 191.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, Niall. (2006), 130.



11th December 1935: Finishing touches are added to furniture in a showroom at a factory in Brynmawr, South Wales. The factory has produced furniture, made by the unemployed, for an exhibition in London.

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# The Great Depression in the 1930s

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JUST TEN YEARS LATER, THE COUNTRY, indeed the world, was facing a new crisis. It was another time of great distress and a further test of the ability of communities to respond to national emergency.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 was followed by the Great Depression, with extended periods of mass unemployment and widespread deprivation. No-one chronicled this better than George Orwell, who described how enormous groups of people, probably at least a third of the whole population of the industrial areas, were living, or attempting to live, on the dole.

Unemployment benefit was means-tested and, as Orwell explained, the means test broke up families: if a pensioner, for example, stayed at home with his children he would be classed as a lodger and the children's dole would be docked. The dole money was scarcely adequate for survival: "a man and wife on twenty-three shillings a week are not far from the starvation line," and the life of a single unemployed man on fifteen shillings a week was "dreadful".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Orwell, George. (1937) *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 78-81.

Alongside the dole, the government provided occupational centres for the unemployed: “There are shelters where men can keep warm and there are periodical classes in carpentering, boot-making, leather-work, handloom-weaving, basket-work, sea-grass work etc., etc.” Orwell was deeply critical of the attitude, widespread at the time, that those who received relief should be expected to act in a grateful and submissive manner, and claimed there was “a nasty Y.M.C.A. atmosphere about these places which you can feel as soon as you go in.”<sup>31</sup>

But in one community in the South Wales Valleys, in response to the harrowing economic and social conditions, something rather more positive was happening. It became known as the Brynmawr Experiment.<sup>32</sup>

Few places suffered more in the Great Depression than Brynmawr. The closure of collieries had devastated the local economy, and poverty was severe by any standards: gardens and allotments were abandoned for lack of seeds, pets were given up for lack of food, public services were reduced to a minimum and shops closed down because customers were unable to pay for their goods. The town of Brynmawr was slowly starving. In response to the national emergency and in particular to help the people of Brynmawr, a branch of the Quakers in Worthing in West Sussex set up a Coalfields Distress Committee. Their plan was to alleviate unemployment by developing light industry, and in 1929 a Quaker couple, Peter and Lillian Scott, began the Brynmawr Experiment.

A community council was set up in Brynmawr to direct activities and a community survey was undertaken. Local labour

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<sup>31</sup> Orwell, George. (1937), 83.

<sup>32</sup> This account of the Brynmawr Experiment is adapted from my 2017 publication *In Our Hands: A History of Community Business*. A main source is Eurwyn, Mary, and Wiliam, Dafydd. (2012) *The Brynmawr Furniture Makers: a Quaker initiative, 1929-1940*.

was organised to build an open-air lido, with local men giving their service in exchange for a midday meal. Subsequently, a nursery school was built in the same way and a Subsistence Production Society was established to supply seeds and manure for allotments.

Some of the most malnourished children were housed with families in Worthing for a few months to help them recuperate. Sympathisers in Worthing raised £1,600 for a distress fund. A building was taken over as a community house and became the base for welfare and social activities, including an advice bureau and over twenty different youth clubs.

In 1931, Brynmawr and Clydach Valley Industries Limited was formed to create and manage local enterprises and provide work. An appeal was made with the aim of raising £15,000, and by July 1932 £10,579 had been collected: £5,672 in donations, £3,382 in shares and £1,525 in loans. Further capital for new companies was raised by issuing shares to the workers in the form of loans. Surpluses produced by the companies would repay the loans, and control of the company would end up in the hands of the shareholders, the workers themselves.

Various enterprises were attempted. A weaving venture employed some two dozen women, making long stockings for farmers and colliers, and quilts of silk filled with wool, but this only lasted for two years. But another, Brynmawr Bootmakers, was successful throughout the 1930s, winning army contracts during the Second World War and becoming fully self-financing. The most celebrated of the Brynmawr community enterprises was the Brynmawr Furniture Makers, which began production in 1931 at a converted brewery, Gwalia Works. The furniture was designed by the talented Paul Matt on minimalist Arts and Craft principles and quickly established a nationwide reputation.

At its height, around 50 people were employed. While



working conditions were basic, there was a revival of associative life. According to a Brynmawr Bulletin produced in 1933 the workforce was “notorious for their vocal versatility during working hours,” and an amateur operatic society was set up, as well as a flourishing sports club.

Marketing of the Brynmawr furniture was undertaken on the most advanced principles through newspaper articles, promotional leaflets, Art Deco posters and a glossy catalogue bearing the slogan ‘Designed for the Modern Home’; and in May 1938 a showroom opened in London’s fashionable Cavendish Square.

The company was successfully selling its message of product excellence and social value. Only the Second World War brought a halt to this thriving business, as it became impossible to import materials, and employees were conscripted. The stock and equipment were sold and the company closed.

For some time, however, from 1934 to 1938, encouraged by the results at Brynmawr, the government had supported a rapid expansion of the Subsistence Production Society movement. In the Welsh valleys hundreds of acres were acquired and in Lancashire four sites were established, supported by a grant of £30,000 from the Nuffield Trust. Commercial activities ranged from animal husbandry and market gardening to tailoring, cobbling, butchery, baking and woodworking. Altogether, around 900 people, mainly men, took part in these schemes in Wales and Lancashire. They remained on unemployment benefit and were not paid but could take home the product of their labour and barter surplus goods among themselves without suffering deductions in their dole money.

Such schemes were too small and too few in number to improve the lives of the vast majority of unemployed people, given the immense scale of the economic crisis; and, in a society

that was bitterly divided on political lines, they inevitably attracted controversy. The Subsistence Production Societies, for example, faced initial hostility from local Labour parties, as well as trade unions and shopkeepers (some participants were stoned on their way to work). However, the schemes also won many admirers, above all, it seems, from the unemployed themselves. At their best, these community enterprises made it possible for some people to survive a time of great hardship without sacrificing their dignity, at least in those cases where control of the schemes was in the hands of local people. This was never entirely forgotten and has inspired subsequent generations of social entrepreneurs and community activists to this day.



Vehicle driving through floodwater along Bakewell Road Matlock, Derbyshire, November 8th, 2019

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# The Great Flood of 1953 and the recent floods of 2019-20

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ONE SATURDAY NIGHT, ON 31 JANUARY 1953, a deadly combination of natural forces produced Britain's worst ever peacetime disaster. A spring high tide, a low-pressure system above Scotland which raised the sea levels, and a gale-force northerly storm which whipped the wall of water still higher, produced huge flooding in low-lying coastal areas of England and Scotland as well as Holland. In all, over 1,800 people lost their lives on that dark and desperate night.

The community response was urgent and purposeful. In Harwich, at 3.00am on the Sunday, the town clerk phoned Miss Weston of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS). Already by 3.30am, twelve volunteers had reported for duty and the Territorial Drill Hall was ready for action:

"Victims poured in, shocked, wet, cold, often badly cut and frightened. Names were given to the police, while the Red Cross and St John Ambulance nurses attended to injuries, and the Co-op provided food, tea and milk. The Salvation Army and the WVS kept the organisation running smoothly. Wet clothes were

washed and hung up to dry. One member had brought along her mangle – and her husband to turn the wheel!”<sup>33</sup>

On Canvey Island “nobody waited for instructions” and the local police sergeant reported, “I know of no instance where it was necessary for a police officer to ask for assistance.”<sup>34</sup>

In Jaywick, Mrs Allard, an officer of the Red Cross, lived in her first floor flat in Beach Road, the highest part of Jaywick. She immediately got up, put on the lights and lit the fires, and the flat became a first refuge for those who were injured and homeless. “The rescued, and those who could make their own way, arrived wet, cold, and clad only in soaked nightclothes at Mrs Allard’s flat.” With a few helpers, Mrs Allard welcomed them with tea and warm clothes. She later wrote: “Soon my home was full. Some of these poor things had to be carried up twelve steps to my flat. How everyone worked, including the police. There is no resident doctor at Jaywick, the lights failed at 1.00am and the telephones were no use. Undaunted, we worked on by candlelight.”<sup>35</sup>

The local emergency services, community volunteers and local businesses worked together throughout the crisis. The Clacton hotels reacted “without hesitation” in offering accommodation to the homeless. In Jaywick, at the Morocco café, after the rescued had been fed and cared for by Mrs Allard and her band of helpers, the police and rescue workers were given hot meals for a week.<sup>36</sup>

Some Foulness survivors were taken to Great Wakering. A register was made of village people willing to house them, and years later, Foulness islander David Rippengale, “still

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<sup>33</sup> Rennoldson Smith, Patricia. (2012) *The 1953 Essex Flood Disaster: The People’s Story*, 20–21.

<sup>34</sup> Rennoldson Smith, Patricia. (2012), 115.

<sup>35</sup> Rennoldson Smith, Patricia. (2012), 35–36.

<sup>36</sup> Rennoldson Smith, Patricia. (2012), 49.

remembered the kindness of the Great Wakering people who took them unhesitatingly into their homes.”<sup>37</sup>

The local community efforts were supported by people far and wide. “Individuals, companies, charities and fellow-feeling local authorities flooded Whitehall with offers of help—including, touchingly, lots of not-so-well-off Britons and very precariously situated companies, who offered cars, vans, trucks, blankets, clothes, toys, shelter and (perhaps just as important) plain old sympathy. In the end, the Lord Mayor’s Appeal alone raised over £5m—perhaps over £130m today.”<sup>38</sup>

People came to help from surrounding districts and from London, and the local communities provided whatever hospitality they could. The sea wall was breached at Althorne and sixty men came from London to repair it, working in “dreadful conditions in all hours.” The women of Althorne organised themselves to provide hot daily soup for the workers, borrowing kitchen equipment from the local school. Vegetables for the soup came from their gardens, supplemented by local rabbits as well as donations from commercial operators: “Dunmow bacon factory gave us bones and pigs’ trotters ... and Poultry Packers Ltd of Wickford gave second class chickens.” It was claimed, perhaps optimistically, given the ingredients, that, “The men were as grateful for the food as we were to them for mending the breach.”<sup>39</sup>

So, if community spirit was alive and well in the Great Flood of 1953, was that still the case sixty and seventy years on? Was there a similar response at the time of the 2013-14 Somerset Level floods, or the flooding that accompanied Storm Desmond and Storm Eva in 2015, and Storm Ciara in 2019 and Storm

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<sup>37</sup> Rennoldson Smith, Patricia. (2012), 102.

<sup>38</sup> Public policy and the past (2016). What does the history of flooding tell us about Britain?

<sup>39</sup> Rennoldson Smith, Patricia. (2012), 76-77.



Dennis in 2020, and caused devastation in many parts of the country?

By many accounts, it seems that, yes, there was. In January 2016 the Guardian newspaper reported that in Hebden Bridge local voluntary efforts provided ‘an anchor’ for victims:

‘Since the day after Boxing Day, the hub [a former town hall now run by the Hebden Bridge Community Association] has co-ordinated hundreds of volunteers, with queues forming outside the building early each morning. Many were locals but help came from all parts of the UK and from charities such as Khalsa Aid, the Red Cross and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association.’<sup>40</sup>

The volunteers provided a food bank, hot meals and cups of tea. They also helped people with applying for grants, and provided legal advice, counselling, and other therapies. Throughout the floods, the community hub served as a safe place for flood victims to come “and simply be”.

One thing was especially noticeable. As Hebden Bridge volunteer Jason Elliott put it: “Nobody was in charge, we just all realised the gravity of the situation and played to our strengths. It has worked so well because we all left our egos at the door and got on with it.”

That doesn’t mean that efforts were necessarily disorganised. Voluntary co-ordination was, in some places, highly developed. In Somerset, SEVAG (the Somerset Emergency Voluntary Agency Group) comprised 20 organisations, ranging from the British Red Cross to the Burnham Area Rescue Boat, and was on permanent standby, ready to be called out by the Local Authorities Civil Contingencies Partnership at a moment’s notice. This

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<sup>40</sup> Ashworth, Sally. (2016) How Hebden Bridge flood volunteers ‘became an anchor’ for victims, Guardian 11 January 2016.



coalition of community effort played an important role in the 82-day winter floods of the Somerset Levels in 2013-14, across a multitude of activities, including aerial photography, door-knocking and welfare checks; evacuating residents from flooded homes in boats and 4x4 vehicles; providing information and refreshments at flood assistance centres; deploying sandbags, laying pipelines and protecting properties; providing first-aid training and medical help; and assisting in the rescue and rehoming of pets and farm animals.<sup>41</sup>

There were also times when communities reached out to other communities in acts of friendship and solidarity. In 2019, a delegation from the Muslim Charities Forum visited some of the areas worst hit that year by the floods. In Fishlake in South Yorkshire, they “witnessed the amazing response from the local community where a historic church was turned into a community comfort space and was storing a warehouse full of donations such as food, water, clothes and blankets given to local residents.” As a result of their visit, they raised £16,500 to provide aid through the local Community Foundation to communities suffering from flooding.

But this is not to say that the community response everywhere was equally impressive. Not every locality had a well-established and trusted community hub able to act as a focal point for flood relief efforts. Co-ordination among local charities and community groups was not always so well organised. And appeals for finance to support the efforts of community-led action were met, it seems, with a patchy response. In response to the most recent 2019-20 floods, community foundations launched appeals in

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<sup>41</sup> Voluntary Agencies Group gets official ‘thank you’ for Somerset Floods response, Somerset County Council, 17 December 2014, at <https://somersetnewsroom.com/2014/12/17/voluntary-agencies-group-gets-official-thank-you-for-somerset-floods-response/>.

Calderdale, Shropshire, Lancashire, Herefordshire, Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. By end of March 2020, South Yorkshire had raised £609k and Calderdale had raised £367k. Elsewhere, amounts were much lower: Derbyshire £71k, Herefordshire £67k, Nottinghamshire £36k and Shropshire just £9k (although it may be that in some of these areas other local appeals were more successful).<sup>42</sup>

One thing was strikingly different from the 1953 responses. There was now an ability to make information available online, in real time, and this meant (at least in theory) that relief efforts could be co-ordinated more easily and more quickly than had been possible in the past:

“One volunteer’s IT expertise proved crucial. They created an online database to match people in need of support with those willing to give up their time to aid the town’s recovery. The system successfully matched hundreds of distressed home and business owners with skilled people willing to give up their Christmas holidays. At one point, there were six structural engineers working for free, along with electricians, plumbers, builders, van drivers and other tradespeople.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Source <https://www.ukcommunityfoundations.org/our-programmes/floods>.

<sup>43</sup> Ashworth, Sally. (2016).





Deliveries at Whitley CDA

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# Glimpses into the present

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SO, I HAVE LOOKED BACK and have been able to discover something about the very varied community responses at times of previous national crisis: the plague of 1665; the food crisis of the 1790s; the Great Depression of the 1930s, the 1918/18 Spanish flu pandemic; the Great Flood of 1953; and the more recent floods. And I have seen how, at their best, community efforts can make a vital difference to a national crisis response, ameliorating some of the worst impacts, especially among the poorest and the most vulnerable, and helping people rediscover their common humanity.

But what about now? How are communities responding today to the COVID-19 crisis, especially in the least affluent places where life is generally harder? Is it true, as has often been suggested in recent years, that community spirit is much weaker now than it has been in the past?

Local Trust has commissioned in-depth research over 12 months into how communities across the country respond to

the crisis, and how they recover.<sup>44</sup> In the meantime, I have been able to gain some insights through interviews (held on-line, of course) with people from Big Local areas in four parts of England.

## Whitley, Reading

Maria Cox has lived in Whitley, in Reading, for 18 years. When she arrived, she really didn't want to be there. If you were 'a Whitleyite', it was said, you weren't much good—into drugs, anti-social behaviour, all the rest.

"But hand on heart," says Maria, "I wouldn't want to leave Whitley now." Of course there are problems, but the community here is fantastic, she says. "Where else do people smile at people they don't know? Yes, there are young people hanging around on bikes. But why are we so quick to label a group of children as a gang? What else do you expect them to do, they have nowhere else to go."

Maria is a community development worker at the Whitley Community Development Association (CDA), part of the Big Local network. She became involved in the work of Whitley CDA soon after coming for breakfast to the community café with a group of other mums. She got to know the people working there and one day asked if there was anything she could do to help out. Later on, she was offered a £200 grant to kick-start a school fundraising team, and this team raised £6,000 for a Reading Shed and other outdoor equipment, because those were the things which the school children themselves decided were needed.

In normal times, the community cafe is open every day.

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<sup>44</sup> This research, by a coalition of organisations, is led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

Specialists come in to offer advice on benefits. There is a Conversation Café for people whose first language is not English. And the centre is used by social services staff and by family workers from local schools, as an informal place to meet the residents they are working with. “It is all very relaxed,” says Maria, “We do have a laugh.”

In recent weeks, relationships built up over time have really paid off. A year ago, Whitley CDA started a surplus food project, with Bidfood and Morrisons to start with, then Marks and Spencer and Aldi as well. So, when the coronavirus crisis started, the local community was quick off the mark. Before the lockdown, other local shops and restaurants were also asked if they had any surplus stock that could be donated for vulnerable people in the community. Many, including branches of Nando’s and Costa, said yes. Pasta and sauces, rice and coffee and a great deal more came flooding in.

There is now a core team of ten volunteers helping to sort and distribute all the donations. But do they know whether the people receiving the help really need it? “We don’t,” says Maria, “that’s the point. Everything is built on trust. We get a phone call, perhaps about a 90-year-old neighbour. We are asked if we can help and we do. We don’t check people out, we are not an authority. Sometimes people will open up about themselves, when they are ready to do so, but we don’t require it.”

In two weeks they have helped 700 people in this way, operating on goodwill and trust. It seems to be working well. It is true that, the other day, someone phoned to say a food parcel had gone to someone who really didn’t need it. But that was one case, only one, out of seven hundred.

Trust, they believe, is the only way to operate. It certainly helps that most of the staff and volunteers, and the trustees of the charity, are also local residents, with children going to





Police officers help at Whitley CDA

the same schools, shopping in the same shops, facing the same pressures in their lives as everyone else.

The level of generosity can, on occasion, take your breath away. Marks and Spencer donated £3,000 of flowers. It required three cars to collect them. The flowers were distributed across the neighbourhood and left on doorsteps with a card bearing the motto ‘#the beating heart of Whitley’. Smyths Toys donated 320 Easter eggs after members of the public nominated Whitley CDA as the most suitable local agency to receive and distribute the gifts. John Lewis donated £7,000 of luxury chocolate. Initially this was to go to a homeless charity, but that charity couldn’t manage the donation, so instead passed the opportunity to Whitley CDA.

So, here at least, we are seeing examples of companies (including local branches of national brands) stepping forward to help the communities in which they operate, and local charities setting aside self-interest in pursuit of a common task.

There has long been a positive relationship with the statutory agencies. Whitley CDA was quickly appointed a distribution hub for the neighbourhood, part of a city-wide scheme rapidly put in place by the local charity umbrella body, Reading Voluntary Action, with help from the local council. Whitley CDA has representatives on its board of trustees from both the council and the local NHS, and this probably helped things to run a bit more smoothly at this time of emergency, although the speed and scale of events has stretched everyone. The council arranged for a week’s supply of food to arrive for food parcels for the most vulnerable, and this was all gone in four days. But with the combined efforts of Whitley CDA, the local volunteers, generous donors, the council, even the local midwives, at least 79 parcels a day are going out to the most vulnerable. The PCSOs (Police Community Support Officers)

have been fantastic, says Maria. “They’ve really helped us get supplies to the people who might otherwise have been left out.”

This is a collective effort. “We are doing things with people, rather than for them,” says Maria. I asked her what has been disappointing in the recent weeks. She thought hard. “Nothing,” she said. “Despite the long days we are all still smiling.”

## Brinnington, Stockport

Brinnington is a suburb of Stockport in greater Manchester, sandwiched between the Reddish Vale country park and the M60 motorway. Last year, the Guardian newspaper ran a story with the headline ‘Is this the most depressed place in England?’ citing data that suggested that levels of depression here were much higher than the national average. The article included interviews with several residents and a local GP, and linked the depression to a variety of factors, including poor physical health, poverty, unemployment, poor transport links and widespread abuse.<sup>45</sup>

This article didn’t go down at all well with local people. Wendy Edgerton, vice-chair of the Brinnington Big Local, says that it failed to represent the spirit, passion and drive of the community. “The journalist misrepresented residents,” she says, “and twisted everything to fit the story she wanted to write.” There is a completely different story about this place, she says, that no-one wants to tell. “The community always pulls together, always. The spirit up here is amazing.”

Mark Mitchell, the Big Local community marketing officer and administrator, agrees. “I’ve never lived anywhere else like this. It’s a community with the old-fashioned values and spirit

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<sup>45</sup> Pidd, Helen. Is this the most depressed place in England? Guardian newspaper, 6th May 2019.



Donations at Brinnington's Hub



that were commonplace many years ago, but you don't see them so often anymore. People up here have a habit. If they want something, they don't wait for somebody to create it for them, they'll go and create it themselves." And that does indeed seem to be the case. In this small neighbourhood there are, at any one time, some 35 different community groups and associations, set up and run by local people.

In the coronavirus crisis, the community responded "before any form of officialdom". Even before the lockdown, the volunteer Big Local committee had set up the Hub community centre as a donation centre and arranged the delivery of 90 food parcels over three days. These people had their own struggles and health concerns but, as usual, they put these on the back burner to support their much-loved community. The attitude was, "We will carry on until we are told to stop. And even then, as volunteers, you can't tell us to stop." They were out and about from nine in the morning till five or six o'clock at night, with bags of shopping, knocking on doors, dropping off supplies.

Where did the food come from? Residents started to bring small donations to the Hub. Wendy says, "It's often the case that those who have less give more." The owner and his staff at the Go Local convenience store, which has been on the estate for 20 years, stepped forward. They put their own wages together and went to the cash-and-carry and bought food and other goods worth £1,500, delivering it in three large trolley-loads to the Hub. They bought "everything you can think of to make a good meal," say Wendy and Mark. And a large consignment of tea, coffee and biscuits, because, "What's the point of tea and coffee if you can't have a biscuit?" as the store owner said. And they were not the only shop to help out. Another store, on the other side of the estate, brought supplies over as well.

Mobile phone numbers to reach a team of volunteers were given out, and when the calls started coming in, the voluntary effort “shifted into high gear”. Following the government’s public health advice, the Hub had no option but to close, but that didn’t stop the relief efforts. With the help of the local PCSOs, the volunteers transferred all the donated food to a local church, which also runs a foodbank. And a local window-cleaning company volunteered its vans to distribute food around the estate.

In most cases, the Big Local Committee members have lived here for their whole lives and they know where help is most needed. Many volunteers themselves have health problems and some have now been told to self-isolate for three months. In those cases, they continue to help, “as the gears in the background to make sure everything runs smoothly,” sharing ideas, providing advice and passing on information, even though they can’t leave their houses.

As local residents, the committee members are also well placed to determine where Big Local Funds should be applied. Working with Stockport Credit Union, they quickly established an emergency loan facility of up to £100, and, while regulatory guidelines have to be followed and safeguards maintained, the scheme also relies as far as possible on trust.

At the beginning, the Big Local volunteers got in touch with a local councillor to say, “We are here and are ready to help and have already made a start.” The councillor explained that the council and, indeed, national government had plans for food distribution and helplines but that these would take some days to put into operation and it wasn’t clear how—or even whether—local volunteers could take part. Eventually, a council emergency number was set up, and also a food parcels programme with a volunteering scheme. But without the local

relationships and local knowledge it's not the same, say Wendy and Mark, and people are slipping through the net—families with no income and no money having to ration their food, and the formal help often just not getting through.

The community response has been wonderful, they say, but it's not down to just one or two people. It's all the volunteers in Brinnington who are making the difference. Sometimes in the past it has been the “last person riding in with a big flag” who gets all the credit, they say, but they hope that won't happen this time. Most people who help are not seeking recognition, they don't want to be in the spotlight, although they do want to be appreciated.

Wendy and Mark hope that the abiding story of these times will be that, when the community of Brinnington came together, true people power was revealed. More can and has been achieved by volunteers, by people in their community helping each other, than by the formal services, they believe. As Wendy says, “Never underestimate the power of people.”

And that's because people in Brinnington really don't want others to come to their rescue if they can help themselves. Local people can move fast when it's needed and are happiest operating according to the principle that, “It's easier to seek forgiveness than to ask permission.” As Wendy and Mark see it, residents have demonstrated a willingness in this crisis to give more of their time than anyone might have thought possible. “It's our community,” they say, “why wouldn't we?”

And, national journalists please take note, that doesn't sound like a depressed community to me.

## Firs & Bromford, Birmingham

When Paul Wright, local resident and Street Connector in Firs and Bromford, went for a Sunday afternoon walk with his family





Paul Wright from Firs & Bromford

in a nearby strip of woodland known as the Bluebell Wood Walk, he came across a strange sight—a dining table and a set of six chairs set out in the open air. When Paul arrived home, he posted a photo on the community Facebook site, describing it as, “possibly the most scary and creative thing I’ve ever seen.”

Soon others came to see for themselves. Someone left a glass jar with paper and pens and a notice asking people to write down what they are thankful for. Then other things were placed there as more and more people visited this curious scene. Artwork by children, a candlestick holder, painted stones, a chandelier, teddies in trees, two owls, an empty bottle of wine, knives, forks and plates, a bird feeder, Easter decorations...

This happened in the coronavirus lockdown, at a time of social distancing. What was it all about? Paul says, “It became a way that we could be together, whilst being apart.” It was a way “to be present in each other’s lives, both friends and strangers, and enjoy something together. It became a connection to what we have temporarily lost, and a symbol of joy, creativity, thankfulness, and hope.”

As I spoke to Paul, I realised that yes, this was odd, and strangely moving, but perhaps not so surprising after all.

Firs and Bromford is not a place that many outsiders come to visit or even pass through. It is a community of two adjacent but distinctive neighbourhoods, hemmed in by motorways and the Spaghetti Junction on the east side of Birmingham, part of a wave of low-cost council estates built in the 1960s. It soon acquired a reputation as a tough area, associated with all the usual labels of crime, drugs, deprivation. A forgotten, neglected place. No new housing, no upgrades to the shopping parades. Some tower blocks were demolished but nothing rose in their place, only wasteland remained. People who could, left. Others came in—a social dumping ground, it was felt.

But there was always another story—there always is—in this case characterised, I think, by a defiant local pride. When, a few years ago, residents decided to use lottery money to make a film, they chose to make a zombie movie. You see us as the living dead on the margins, was the message. You think we are a threat, the film seems to say, but (like all the best zombie films) it turns out that the undead have more reality, more morality even, than the so-called living.

And perhaps that really is true. This is a place where many residents like Paul refuse or subvert the negative labels that others apply so lazily. They know that among themselves there are plenty of gifts and skills just waiting to be unearthed. The Bromford Theatre Group, for example, refuses to take itself too seriously, but has become an excuse for people to dress up and have a laugh together, and its annual pantomime is now part of a distinctive community tradition. As are the street parties, held a dozen times a year in different places across the two neighbourhoods, with up to 100 people at a time sharing food, running open-air Zumba classes and all culminating in a Christmas switching-on party, when a resident decorates their house with mock extravagance and the lights come on.

These are White working-class estates and, as with so many others, they are becoming more mixed, with a steady influx of people from Asian and other immigrant communities. These events create an opportunity for people to discover each other, to come together a little more easily.

Much community life in recent years in Firs and Bromford has been organised, Paul tells me, in accordance with ABCD principles: asset-based community development. Focusing on strengths, not on weaknesses, on what people can do, not on what they can't. A preference to talk about removing barriers, rather than supporting people.





Table and chairs in the woods in Firs & Bromford

So, when the coronavirus outbreak arrived, people here were, in some ways at least, better prepared than elsewhere. They already knew one another; they were used to looking out for each other. Several organisations—Neighbours Together (the Big Local partnership), Open Door (a local community development agency), Worth Unlimited (a youth charity), Hodge Hill church, Spurgeons children's centre, as well the CAFLO and St Wildred's community centres—were already working together, and between them had relationships with most people across the two neighbourhoods. Indeed, many of the staff of these organisations are themselves residents.

People hereabouts tend not to use the term volunteering—it has too many us-and-them associations (the well-off doing things for the badly-off). They prefer to see themselves as neighbours, doing what comes naturally, pleased if they are able to make a contribution.

Of course, many things have had to change in the last few weeks, and change fast. The community hub has had to close and there can be no more business as usual. Everyone was redeployed to new activities. A hardship fund was established, alongside distribution of food parcels as well as seeds and plants. A phone line was set up, with benefits advice on tap, and those who were most vulnerable were quickly identified.

At times like this, the ABCD model comes under stress. There is an immediate need to do things for people and suddenly there are daily team meetings and action plans and lists. But ABCD has not been abandoned and, in fact, continues to flourish, through ever more neighbour-to-neighbour support and through new and often imaginative activities run by local people with and for each other, not least an online cooking club.

Facebook, Zoom and WhatsApp have all become ways to keep in touch, as everywhere else. Most people here do have

some level of access to the internet, says Paul, although not all have broadband and those who don't are fast running out of phone data and can't afford the top-up payments. And in many families, with children at home and home schooling and only one laptop or tablet, it is nigh- on impossible to get enough time online.

Many local shops have been fantastic, arranging home deliveries, going the extra mile, adding extra milk and bread for people who would otherwise go short. Of course, there is the occasional exception, and a local branch of a pharmacy chain started to charge £19.99 for 200ml of Calpol and £9.99 for 32 paracetamol. This was quickly called out on social media, and the business was forced to apologise and offer refunds. But Paul hopes that it won't only be the rare negative stories that are remembered. There are so many more positive stories, and it would be good to think that, when the crisis is over, people won't forget who stood by them in a time of need and will shop locally more often.

The public institutions have been slow to respond, and in Firs and Bromford they still feel largely absent in this crisis. But it was like that before, says Paul, so why would it be any different now? Birmingham City Council is no doubt doing its best to help and has, for example, encouraged and supported a city-wide food distribution scheme, but everything at that level seems simply too big and too slow. At least, says Paul, this means that the community can get on with things itself, without interference from outside intervention. And we are discovering, he believes, that a local street is the primary base for a good community, not a local authority.

And what about the woodland shrine? Well, it was vandalised. A fire was set, the table knocked over, the offerings scattered. A reminder that nothing is ever easy or

straightforward, in any community, least of all where so many people are living on the edge.

There was, of course, an outpouring of frustration, anger and hurt on the local Facebook page. But that wasn't the end of it. "We are such an awesome community that someone's selfish behaviour isn't gonna take away our happiness," one neighbour said.<sup>46</sup> And already a new woodland space has been created, different from before, with a tree house, bird feeders, even a fairy grotto. It's a certain kind of community spirit, defiant and proud, which seems hard to crush for long.

## Tang Hall, York

Tang Hall is a suburb on the eastern side of York, within walking distance of the city centre. This neighbourhood is not afflicted with poverty to the same extent as some other Big Local areas, although there are, nevertheless, smaller and often hidden pockets of deprivation here too.

Approval for Big Local funding came in December 2012 and a Tang Hall Big Local steering group was formed in May the following year. In 2014, after a series of community consultation events, the first projects were launched. Over the years, the work of Tang Hall Big Local here has included festivals and film screenings as well as food-based activities, with support for the launch of a food co-operative.

The biggest challenge, according to Anna Hunter, formerly chair of Tang Hall Big Local and now employed as project lead, has been a historic lack of engagement by local people in

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<sup>46</sup> Wright, Paul. (8th April 2020) How a table and chairs became a symbol of unity, joy, resilience and hope during Covid-19. On The Street Connectors website, <https://streetconnector.com/2020/04/08/how-a-table-and-chairs-becomes-a-symbol-of-unity-joy-resilience-and-hope-during-covid19/>





Sorting donations in Tang Hall Big Local'

community activities. As a result of this, Tang Hall, compared to some other places, has lacked a strong sense of shared identity and personality, Anna feels, but that is slowly changing. There are positive things to build on, not least that local residents do know each other and by and large are friendly and get on with one another.

The food projects have been the centrepiece of Tang Hall Big Local's work up to now. "The idea of sharing good-quality food has been a driving force behind our plans," says Anna, whose Polish background has given her a deep appreciation of good community and good food. The co-operative food business, based at and initially funded by a local community centre, aims to provide high-quality wholefoods, fresh vegetables and organic dairy and meat for people in Tang Hall. As well as a food truck and canteen and breakfasts and lunches, there are cooking classes and an allotment—growing and cooking good food, eating well together and building local relationships at one and the same time.

In a place like Tang Hall, people do know what they want. But, says Anna, they are not always confident and articulate, and when they do speak they can get angry and can be easily dismissed. People become used to being ignored, belittled and not believing in themselves. Overcoming this takes time, and under pressure these difficulties can be exacerbated.

But in this coronavirus crisis, the best aspects of the community seem to be most in evidence. Although the community centre has had to close for normal activities, it has been designated by the council as a food distribution hub. Tang Hall Big Local has redeployed its resources to help and its volunteer co-ordinator is now attached to the community centre, supporting a team of 50 volunteers who have stepped forward where there were none before. They are helping day in

and day out with shopping, delivering medicines and checking in with isolated or vulnerable people. The Tang Hall Big Local van (Barry the Van) is busy ferrying food around the estate, and the canteen project is providing a stream of ready meals.

The relationships and trust that has been built up over the years with the council and with local people have now come in to their own. After all, this is not the first time in recent years that the Tang Hall community has been hit by crisis. The 2015 Boxing Day floods were devastating here after the Foss flood barrier went down and the waters swept in. One thing that Anna learned from that earlier experience was that expectations of the local authorities and the local community are inevitably different. The council and other emergency and care services have specific statutory responsibilities to make people safe. Residents, on the other hand, have a need to know what is going on, how they can help and where they can get help from; and their needs, and indeed what they can do in a crisis, often extend beyond the services the council can provide.

Today, Tang Hall Big Local funding, controlled by local people, is on hand to supplement or even substitute for the efforts by the local authority and others, ready to be deployed if and when needed. If someone needs immediate assistance, as happened the other day when a washing machine broke down and there wasn't the money to fix it quickly, Tang Hall Big Local is able to step in. Anna is careful to do this properly, in a business-like way, with due regard to charity good practice. After all, the Tang Hall Big Local funds are a precious resource for the whole community. If financial assistance is needed for a particular purpose, then it is paid for directly online, to avoid giving cash to residents.

There is a lot of pressure, nine to five, seven days a week, keeping on top of everything. Anna feels it is important that all

the staff and volunteers who are working so hard to help others are encouraged to look after themselves. “After all,” she says, “you are no good to anyone unless you know how to look after yourself.”

Will things change as a result of the crisis? Anna hopes so. Some while ago there had been talk about a closer relationship between the community centre and Tang Hall Big Local. After all, they share essentially the same aims. Perhaps, encouraged by co-operation in this crisis, a fresh effort in this direction might now be possible. And it would also be wonderful, Anna feels, if the recent enthusiasm for volunteering were to really take hold and were sustained into more normal times.

This year is the 100-year anniversary of the building of the Tang Hall estate. Perhaps, says Anna, this anniversary year can become a turning point. “The moment when we all realise that some things, like the NHS and a community spirit, really matter and must not be lost, and that we will feel a lot better as a society when we find ways to help each other, rather than only looking out for ourselves.”





A volunteer in Whitley

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# Glimpses into the future

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## What have I learned?

I HAVE MADE A RAPID INCURSION into the past, and also gained some sense of what is happening here and now in a few places around the country, and while I know there is so much more to be discovered, I feel I have learned a few things.

- Great national calamities usually, maybe always, bear down most heavily on the poorest, and those who find themselves on the margins of society. Community responses can be fast, generous and compassionate, and reach people who would otherwise be forgotten or neglected, in ways which are very much more difficult for more formal public, private or even voluntary institutions to achieve.
- This is especially the case if, over time, trust and relationships have been built widely and repeatedly across a neighbourhood. And even more so, where there has been a culture and practice of seeking out local strengths and encouraging people to contribute in their own right, rather

than approaching people in ways that degrade them as social problems or objects of compassion.

- There will always be some conflict or tension between those in authority and independent community action. This can temporarily reduce at times of crisis because all hands on deck are needed and there is more recognition and respect for the contribution everyone can bring. But where trust is lacking, the opposite can happen and conflicts can become worse. Community anchor organisations or partnerships can make a difference here, as in the case of some of the Big Local partnerships I have spoken to, as they are well placed to build trust and achieve concerted action.
- We should beware of romanticising community life. People in their neighbourhoods—and this includes people from local businesses and public sector agencies—can sometimes behave with extraordinary generosity, creativity, determination and courage. But this does not mean that we should be searching out and celebrating heroes or saints, who rarely exist, if at all. Rather, our focus of attention should be on the large numbers of people who are, no doubt, imperfect human beings, but who discover their better selves in collective action.

## So, what might the future hold?

Immersed in the current situation, it is impossible for any of us to stand aside sufficiently to know with any degree of confidence what the future will look like. Unlike the witches in Macbeth, we cannot see into the seeds of time and know which grain will grow and which will not. But we can be confident that some grains *will* grow and some may possibly produce a great harvest.



That does seem to have been the case at times of national calamity before:

- The self-sacrifice of the villagers of Eyam in 1665 still stands as an emblem of community spirit at its noblest.
- The community-controlled union mills of the 1790s laid the foundation for the worldwide co-operative and trades union movements.
- The shortcomings of the Local Government Board in the 1918-19 Spanish flu paved the way for the creation of the NHS and the World Health Organisation.
- The Brynmawr Experiment in the 1930s was a forerunner of the community enterprise movement which has flourished in recent years, with community pubs and shops and a myriad of other community businesses around the country.

So, what about now? What are the possibilities we can already sense? There are four big questions in my mind, and I share them in the hope that they will resonate with others and that we will be able to explore them together. It seems to me that, in respect of all four, the future hangs in the balance and it wouldn't take that much to push things one way or the other.

## Beyond the crisis, what kind of leadership will prevail?

In the broadest terms, two dominant responses to the coronavirus crisis have already emerged, and I don't think they are easily compatible.

- In recent weeks, at national and sometimes at local level as well, we have seen that decision-making and action have become ever more highly centralised, with command-and-control methods (instructions, targets, deadlines)

reigning supreme.

- But at community level, the opposite is often the case and, as we have noted, there has been a huge up-swelling of informal neighbourhood action, with no-one formally in command, but rather an extraordinarily distributed and shared system of design and decision making, with everyone who steps forward contributing their bit, and an underlying assumption of trust.

There is a case to say that both are needed at a time of national crisis, and that it is the uneasy combination of the two that can help us deal best with the challenges that confront us right now. But in the aftermath, will that uneasy combination continue, or will one type of leadership become dominant and, if so, which: the command-and-control model driven from the centre or a much-distributed model, where power and decision making is shared and more often localised?

## Will our relationship with the state change?

In a crisis we need the state more than ever to keep us safe, to provide a safety net if we can no longer pay our way through life, to guard against those who would cheat and exploit us. But the state also needs us, ordinary people in our communities, to step in when it falters, to reach out where it cannot and to relieve the pressures on the state by helping each other where we can.

The willingness of people to help the state out at times of crisis cannot be doubted. We saw this in the responses to the Great Flood of 1953 and we see it now in many places today, in Whitley and Tang Hall, to take just two examples. And across the country we have seen initiatives like Scrub Hubs, where

people in 85 areas have organised themselves to sew protective garments for the NHS and care agencies.<sup>47</sup>

This willingness to come forward in support of the efforts of the state is most likely to happen if people are treated with respect and feel they are being told an honest story; not so much if they are lied to, or information is withheld, as happened in 1918 with the outbreak of Spanish Flu; or, worse still, if the state is held responsible for a disaster and where trust has broken down completely, as happened for example in the Grenfell Tower fire. In such situations, community responses may still be rapid, vigorous and compassionate, but they find themselves in opposition to governmental responses rather than in harmony with them.

So, in the months and years ahead, will the state come to expect more from its citizens? Will we start to see a shift from service delivery to the building of communities, as a method of helping people flourish on their own terms, so they are more able to overcome any difficulties they encounter? At a local level, we have been seeing experiments in that direction even before the current emergency, as illustrated for example in a recent report by the New Local Government Network.<sup>48</sup> I sense, however, that this crisis is stimulating an appetite to consider even more fundamental changes, for example, in the form of universal basic services, or a universal basic income, as a means to establish the conditions for everyone to participate fully in community life.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See <https://scrubhub.org.uk/>.

<sup>48</sup> Lent, Adam and Studdert, Jessica. (2019) *The Community Paradigm: why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved*.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example: Coote, Anna, and Percy, Andrew (2020) *The case for universal basic services; and Universal Basic Income Sheffield*, at [ubilabssheffield.org](http://ubilabssheffield.org).

## Who will bear the brunt of this disaster now and in the aftermath?

It is already clear that the experience for some people in the coronavirus lockdown is very much worse than for others. For those without online access, and for those in abusive situations, the experience of lockdown can be appalling. As Laura Seebohm from Changing Lives has said,

“While there is much discussion in the media about the positive and surprising consequences of lock down—a new community spirit, lower pollution and the re-emergence of wildlife, this is only reality for a few in the most luxurious positions. Once we can venture out of our closed doors, I believe that a light will shine on the shocking inequality that has always existed and is being significantly exacerbated under these conditions.”<sup>50</sup>

There is already evidence that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) populations are suffering disproportionately high levels of COVID-19 infection. This is likely to be connected to profound underlying health inequalities, as well as to the high proportion (44% in London) of BAME people working in front-line health and social care roles who are particularly exposed to the virus.<sup>51</sup> Is it reasonable to draw some parallels with the plight of the urban poor at the time of the Black Death, where in order to make a living the most marginalised sections of society became the care workers, placing themselves most at risk? I think it probably is.

People who are homeless, those suffering from mental

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<sup>50</sup> Seebohm, Laura. ‘The biggest chance we will probably ever get’. Better Way blog, 17 April 2020, at <https://www.betterway.network/the-biggest-chance-we-will-probably-ever-get-laura-seebohm>.

<sup>51</sup> Charity So White. The impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities: why we must focus on this now, April 2020. At <https://charitysowhite.org/impact-on-bame-communities>.

health problems, those with learning disability, those in care homes, and isolated elderly people are also among those who are most in danger in the current crisis. And more generally, while the virus can infect everyone, regardless of wealth and privilege, those living in neighbourhoods where incomes are low, where public services and social infrastructure are weakest, are likely to be especially at risk, if past experience is anything to go by.

Moreover, the price to be paid will not end once the pandemic subsides. The state has made enormous quantities of funding available to help individuals and businesses stay afloat at this time of emergency, as well as providing extra funding for charities, but payback time will come. And when it does, who will do the paying? Will the brunt be borne by people on low incomes, as happened in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash?

Or will we, as a country, appreciate better the true strengths of people in poorer and left-behind communities and create the conditions for them to recover, and benefit from the recovery, on their own terms?

## Can we continue to take community for granted?

Some people I have spoken to have implied that neighbourhood action in this current crisis, which has impressed so many, is something entirely spontaneous and natural. “It’s our community, why wouldn’t we?” as one person said.

And indeed, many national commentators have noticed that people have self-organised, using social media platforms in particular, without, it seems, waiting for governmental bodies, or even local charities and voluntary organisations, to tell them

what to do, or to organise things for them.

But I am not at all sure that this is the whole story. When I have spoken to people immersed in the community responses, I have been struck by the significance of local relationships which have been built up over time—long-standing relationships between residents and also between organisations and with the public and private sectors as well. And how valuable these are proving in the current crisis.

And I don't think that such community relationships can be taken for granted. As has often been pointed out, most people in the modern world are no longer bound by a so-called 'community of fate', in which social position, employment and place is inherited and fixed for their lifetime. Individuals are much more likely nowadays to have multiple and overlapping bonds to a variety of different communities, which change over time, and which are not always connected to the place in which they live. So, it has been suggested, local communities cannot be assumed to exist of their own accord, but rather, where they are desired they "must be constructed, symbolically and socially, by residents themselves."<sup>52</sup>

If this is the case, then the existence of local community organisations, or partnerships or networks, which are able to perform a community anchor role, seems critical; but only if these are effective at connecting people to each other, building solidarity and mutual aid, and working carefully over time to ensure that no sections of the community are left out or left behind. And also, if they are connecting those who are often ignored, or who don't feel they have a voice, to those in authority, so that more voices can be heard and can make a difference when decisions are being made.

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<sup>52</sup> Coates, Tracey. (2010) *Conscious Community: Belonging, identities and networks in local communities' response to flooding, 197-198.*

In times of crisis, and in more normal times, it is surely unwise to hope and expect that informal community responses will simply arise of their own accord. If we really want to harness the ‘renewable energy of communities’<sup>53</sup> we need to understand better what the necessary conditions are for a shared sense of community to emerge, for self-organisation to flourish and for all residents to benefit.

So, let’s by all means celebrate and give thanks for the magnificent community responses, in many places, across the whole country, at a time of great crisis. But, as we move beyond the immediate emergency, out of lockdown, and into a new phase, will that community spirit, taken for granted, start to fade, and become no more than a memory, somewhere in the back of our minds, as we start to return to our busy lives?

Or perhaps not. As we have seen before, national crisis can often produce lasting change. What will change this time? Is it possible that the coming months and years might see renewed efforts to nurture and invest in community life, on a scale capable of laying the foundations for a more resilient nation, one that is better able to recover from this crisis, and better prepared to withstand future shocks? And if that is what we want, and what we believe is needed, how can we best make that happen?

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<sup>53</sup> A phrase first used in the NHS Five Year Forward View, 2014, 9.





Local MP Rachael Maskell visits the local co-operative food business

“Was it always like this, at a time of national crisis? And are there things we might be able to learn from the past, that could help to guide our responses now and for the future?”

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Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as ‘perhaps’ the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK.

These communities have developed networks and relationships; they know one another, understand each other’s needs and are often best placed to help during challenging times. When COVID-19 reached the UK in 2020 it highlighted these community networks, many of which were able to mobilise with great efficiency at a time of uncertainty.

Speaking to people from York to Reading, Steve Wyler looks at how these communities ensured that the wellbeing of local residents was the top priority during lockdown. He looks back to events from the Great Plague to the devastating floods of 2019 to better understand what makes communities resilient and what must be done to foster and support their grassroots action beyond COVID-19.

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This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.



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