

August 2020

A NEW STORY OF US: what role can communities play in shaping the post-COVID future?

During April and May 2020, The Alternative UK held three remote sessions with a group of 30 residents from Plymouth in Devon to hear about the experiences of COVID-19 in the local community and where the group saw themselves in a post-pandemic world, asking 'what role can communities play in shaping the post-COVID future?'

This report gives an insight into these discussions and how the group felt about a world beyond the pandemic. It traces the trajectory of how the group felt at the beginning and end of the three sessions, highlighting the role that group discussion can play in forming hopes and ideas about the future and the power of collective action.

Local Trust asked The Alternative UK to relate the group's discussions to the Long Crisis Scenarios report, which sets out four possible futures following the pandemic.

Key points

- Community responses to COVID-19 have revitalised the language of local autonomy and self-reliance
- There is optimism coupled with apprehension at the scale of change already happening and the prospect of shaping a different future
- A renewed belief that communities have the ability to make change happen and an opportunity for a narrative shift around community power
- Greater willingness to become actively involved with local groups in Plymouth that have a say over neighbourhood changes

Introduction

When COVID-19 struck Britain, it was a country already divided along multiple axes, highlighted by the Brexit vote. Plymouth voted strongly to leave the European Union, a move explained by local residents as wanting to regain what felt like a loss of power and control over decisions that affect their everyday life. This chimes strongly with the experience of communities around the country during COVID-19 who demonstrated collective action and the ability to make things happen – particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, before local authorities had formulated their response.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was a brief sense that the crisis might level the playing field. Instead, it amplified existing inequalities and exposed the fragility of much of the social fabric of England: food banks mobilised on an unprecedented scale; demand for government loans soared and a lack of access to basic services highlighted glaring holes in our infrastructure.

The impressive resident-led initiatives that arose during coronavirus responded to these needs. Talking to residents of Plymouth, it is possible that communities may feel able to regain the power they felt had been lost. Indeed, could this be the beginning of a new way for communities and authorities to work together where local voices have higher value and community networks are included in plans for the future? Or will the state seek to regain control of local and national policy in a bid to rebuild the country under its influence?

About this research

The Alternative UK has existing knowledge of the city of Plymouth and its social infrastructure, having previously worked on a series of events and collaborations with local civil society actors between 2017 and 2019.

The group convened for this conversation consisted of eight men and 22 women, was majority white with two BAME members and was drawn from a range of occupations including teaching, retired academic, student, self-employed, healthcare professional, community development, entrepreneur, business owner and social worker. The group was selected carefully to represent the widest possible range of the city's different micro-communities, including residents who have previously been overlooked or detached from civic action.

This document gives a flavour of the discussions, using verbatim quotes (including some from written notes in the sessions) from the participants. It then explores these conversations using the Long Crisis scenarios, developed by the Long Crisis Network for Local Trust to explore alternative futures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, it offers some reflections on the value of the process.

Session 1: How have you been doing during the COVID Crisis? What has changed during lockdown?

This first session invited storytelling – sharing both personal, subjective experience and, later, more objective observations of the world around them.

Some are enjoying the time to get back to nature, grow their own food and teach others:

"Lime trees so beautiful, smells I have never smelled before. Massive reset. Streets so nice to walk and cycle. Nice to smell sea."

"All our perspectives have slightly shifted and what's valuable is standing out clearer. Food, growing food, exercise and looking after each other, have all come to the fore"

"Even in our Facebook group bubble we think differently. It's valid to be able to listen to each other, to challenge thoughts that make us less compassionate"

Others are afraid of the forgotten people: young people on the streets, drug dealers, those struggling with mental health problems. There's a sense of a loss of control:

"In my mind there's not enough support for the teenagers. Perhaps they're isolating together. We don't know"

"Mental health so important... How can you make positive decisions for yourself when your head is in a mess?"

There is also fear of the dangers of vigilantism – people taking things into their own hands:

"People at activist edge, outlying groups, that have gone very extreme... Doing New World Order talk, or they're hiding in the woods, afraid that 5G is having a controlling effect on them"

"Online photos of people living in campervans being posted: 'Burn them - don't let them into Devon'"

The legacy of Brexit is disillusion with party politics and the state. But there is energy around the language of autonomy and self-reliance:

"Class barriers are real...yet people are innovating. Lots of self-organising. There's a mixture. When people call for help it's quickly given. People won't want to give back that power"

"Neighbourhood forums a great way of empowering communities. If we can build networks of them, we can perhaps share both the knowledge and the load"

"Find a way to work and communicate with people who have opposing views (more conservative/right wing), so that we can achieve positive outcomes for a shared community"

"Where there are stronger family networks only a small number of residents fall through the net, happening far less"

Frustration lies around not being able to help each other more:

"People who've died who haven't had a proper send-off - families can't grieve and can't meet. People are not getting the honouring they should be having"

Session 2: How do you feel about the future?

In the second session, the group was asked two questions:

1. In this strange in-between moment where lockdown is being significantly eased but restrictions are still in place, what are your thoughts / dreams about the future? This invites blue-sky thinking – both around what you yearn for and what you most fear.
2. What is a) necessary and b) possible for the future?

There is very little indication that the group is depending upon local and national authorities to deliver their vision of a better life for them. 'People' is their most commonly quoted semantic reference and resource:

"People not judged by the zeros after their name, but who can actually communicate and co-operate".

"I want to see more people from professions and artisans into public domain to talk and advise and share"

"But the nightmare is all the people who have been thrown out by this - it's a disaster they're worried will blight the rest of their lives."

"Being led by nasties has exposed why it's not useful. Hope this damages populism. Back to capable, boring people would be better"

The group showed interest in their own power to get things done. There were some reserves of confidence, tempered with long-term disillusion that anything can change. COVID-19 presents a window of opportunity for shifting the narrative but there is no guarantee that this will happen in reality:

"We need a big coming together in a wider council, where people will really get together, beyond prejudice and division"

"I don't have much faith in a lot of the structures holding up society. Been eroding for a long time"

"How do we get rid of that 'pushing the boulder up the hill' that confronts communities when they want to make stuff happen?"

"I imagine the post COVID future - and I'm torn. Torn between how a lot of people have done a lot of work, and then suddenly COVID's come and whoosh, overturned the apple cart. How do we work with that?"

Their interest is equally around the question of democracy, learning from and convening with people, as well as solutions they are generating themselves:

"Working with my brother, he's ten years younger, reveals to me new ways of thinking. Have to unlearn stuff. All my knowledge feels suspect. This is what I know - but I would not bet my house on it".

"Local government decisions are based on votes, not reality. How can we change this?"

"I'm yearning for new structures, on a small level. I own café business - we can be flexible. If staff want a 4 weeks sabbatical, that is fine. Can't do that in other rigid structures".

"Don't conflate the person with the position. Get people from different backgrounds together to have dialogue. Get rid of language like 'brexiteers', 'snowflake'".

"A more equitable relationship between citizens, government and the market... how does that happen? A local government that doesn't get perverted in the way national government has?"

Session 3: Next Level Thinking

In preparation for the third session, the group was invited to choose one of four topics to discuss with others and develop their thoughts on. They were, Democracy, Co-creation & Building, The Bigger Conversation and What We Need To Learn

- 1. Democracy – exploring where the power lies, now and in the future**
 - Governance / power sharing / independence
 - Citizen action networks
 - Media narratives, building identity
 - Bringing everyone to the process
 - Circles, listening cafes, empathy
- 2. Acts of Co-Creation & Building – projects we'd like to initiate**
 - Economy, credit, mutualism
 - Designing our lives
 - Planning, food, energy, spaces, partnerships
 - Enterprise, social and small trading, constraints
- 3. The Bigger Conversation – what still needs discussing, by whom and how**
 - Freedom, autonomy, agency
 - A new story about Us
 - Common sense
 - Mental health, isolation, grief
 - New ways of working and caring
 - Relationship with nature
- 4. Learnings We Need – what we need to know to go forward**
 - Self and social development
 - New economic systems
 - Psycho-social health
 - Emotional resilience
 - Training, tools, practices

The facilitators created the following statements to highlight what the groups discussed, with direct quotations underneath:

It is unlikely that the government will be able to co-opt the spirit and practices of self-reliance in the communities now rising. Particularly in the wake of the divide between government and the people that has opened up (or perhaps widened) during COVID-19:

"[Democracy] doesn't work fast enough... what's its goal, what does it mean, what do we understand it as...can it be more deliberative... like Flatpack" [referring to [Flatpack Democracy](#), a book about citizen take-over of the local council].

"Independence for Plymouth?"

"Authorities could not have responded in the way streets and neighbourhoods have"

"Communities taking control of their own resources"

"Small scaling-up... highlighting what we have in common, a communal approach"

"Mindful people have to give up power to do this – have to be kind"

"Keep our power - don't give ground - how can we hold our power?"

There is an appetite for the uphill task of doing things better and more creatively:

"Educators don't see themselves as part of this ecosystem"

"Communities can self-educate, with grassroots programmes of regular workshops, in every neighbourhood"

"People are part of nature... Bringing the garden in... sharing potted greens... eat what we grow"

"Empathise, define the problem, design ideas, test them... Observation, and good design & collaboration... Redesign what success looks like"

"Local enablers bridging tech gap"

“Re-evaluate needs... less is more... a simpler life... be upstanding”

Most of them are aware – to a greater or lesser degree – of the work done by local and leading initiatives, like Neighbourhood Forums, POP Plymouth, Real Ideas Organisation. There is some pride and trust in them and their achievements. However, there is also the danger of a growing split between those that get paid through funding and the volunteers they rely upon to get things done:

“Neighbourhood forums create neighbourhood plans - to help inform local developments”

“Community and green spaces are not considered in planning new builds”

“Time is crucial for people to become involved, rather than a project being done to them”

“Each community needs to design their own way, with their own needs and originality”

“We get side-lined, how can we strengthen our lobbying”

“We should be valuing voices... we’re just talking to the same people”

The groups welcomed neutral, trusted players to help overcome these divisions, as they need to move on and collaborate more:

“More online platforms - like Iceland’s citizens.is”

“Citizens assemblies - people becoming literate in policy areas”

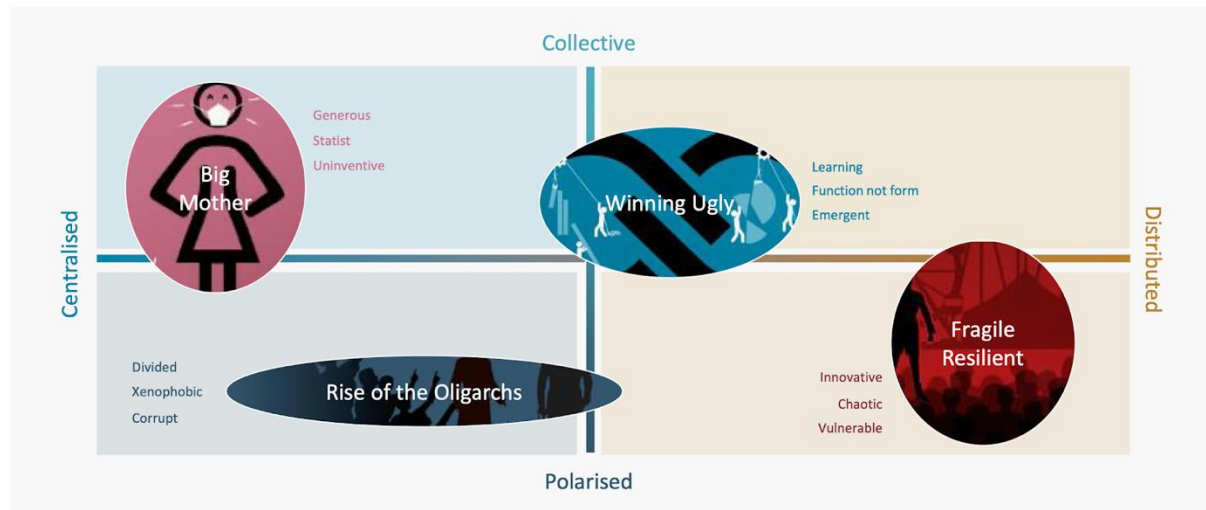
“Can we learn how to be better dreamers, through festivals, assemblies?”

“Show off good examples of what we have”

“Some people like this and some people think it’s not for them... what are the obstacles to this happening?”

Mapping the group's responses to The Long Crisis Scenarios

The [Long Crisis Scenarios](#) imagine four scenarios that could arise as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The scenarios are situated along the horizontal axis of how we make decisions (centralised/distributed) and the vertical axis of how we see ourselves (collective/polarised).



- In **Rise of the Oligarchs**, power and prosperity are centralised and monopolised by elites, who adopt classic tactics from the populist playbook. Inequality is high, civil society is browbeaten, and communities are under pressure.
- **Big Mother** centralises power and prosperity, but in the public interest. Society is regulated and rewards conformity. Inequality declines, as the poorest are looked after. But few have influence over the country's direction, making people less willing to take action in their communities.
- In a future that is **Fragile but Resilient**, islands of innovation emerge from a tempestuous sea. Power is diffuse and often illusory. Society as a whole is poorer, even if some are richer.
- The pandemic creates a willingness to consider radical change and big ideas – but also to take on the hard work of building alliances capable of solving the hardest problems. **Winning Ugly** means being ambitious, but pragmatic – and doing whatever it takes to achieve a result.

After the Long Crisis Scenarios were published, the group's responses to the questions; 'What are your concerns for the future' asked in the first session and 'How do you feel about the future now' in the third session, were mapped onto the scenarios framework. This was to get a sense of which scenario had the closest correlation to how the group felt about a post-COVID world and whether one of the scenarios stood out as most likely or most feared based on their answers.

How does the group's mapping change?

During the first session, the group were asked what their concerns were for the future. The participants' responses **filled all four quadrants of the scenarios framework evenly**,

indicating that at this stage of the process, none of the scenarios struck a particular chord with how the group was feeling about the future. A high definition version of axes with the answers [can be found here](#).

- People were worried about far-off power and its uncaring, punitive attitude (Rise of the Oligarchs). They also believed that national government could and should do better to serve the people, as they struggle against the restrictions and limitations to everyday life dictated by COVID-19 guidelines. (Big Mother)
- But on the right-hand side of the matrix, where the power to change things is (or is seen to be) more distributed, there was an equal amount of interest. Some of it was about atomisation and isolation (Fragile Resilient), manifesting itself in phenomena like othering, scapegoating, paranoia and racism
- Yet there were just as many statements suggesting a strong desire for autonomy within Plymouth, conscious that a positive story for the city is emerging (Winning Ugly)

After the third and final session, the group were asked how they felt about the future after COVID-19. Their responses were once again mapped onto the four quadrants of the Long Crisis Scenarios to see which scenario most closely resembled the group's view of a post-COVID world. A high definition version of axes with these answers [can be found here](#).

This time around, there was a significant shift with majority of the answers **heavily clustered in the top-right quadrant**, where "winning ugly" skims the 'collective' and 'distributed' axes.

As the group practised their storytelling and futuring (both blue-sky and practical) and addressed themselves to the topics and concerns that arose from the facilitation, their closing content concerned itself much more with the challenge of "**winning**" locally.

If this was not quite in an "**ugly**" manner, as the scenario for the quadrant is titled, then it was certainly focussing on robust practices and initiatives. The group drew pragmatically from every available knowledge and skill source. From local and "traditional, simpler ways" of self-provisioning to global, in seeking to use Iceland's *citizens.is* e-democracy system. Education mixed with design was heavily stressed and was imagined as being deeply rooted in community life.

There was much less anxiety expressed in the lower left, **Rise of the Oligarchs** than in the opening matrix – the earlier concern about top-down power (and the weakness or brokenness of those beneath) seemed to have transformed its energy into can-do distributed enterprise.

And if the **Big Mother** quadrant is given any regard at all, it's as a state which must listen and respond to the confident community/civic power of these Plymouth agents – whether that state be far-off national government, or a negligent local government. A partner state, in essence.

What next?

The COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to re-think the relationship between communities and local and national authorities. For communities like this one in Plymouth, the opportunity can seem both within grasp and just beyond reach.

Two things have become clear following these discussions:

- the belief that communities can and should make things happen on their own terms: the pandemic allowed for residents across the country to wield power and utilise it in a positive, valuable way
- communities want to maintain the momentum of this collective action and harness it to rebuild civic life in the COVID-19 recovery

By the end of the three discussions, the Plymouth group had **significantly shifted** their position on the axes of future scenarios to the **upper-right quadrant**, where **Winning Ugly** grazes the 'Collective' and 'Distributed' axes. This suggests that throughout the discussions, the participants gained a sense that their community responses to COVID-19 demonstrated that pockets of localised power exist across a city like Plymouth - in communities, local organisations and wider networks - and not just in the hands of local authorities. There was a strong sense that communities should have the resources to make a difference where they live and that change should come from within, not simply be received from above.

The sessions also demonstrated that having the space to come together, reflect and discuss is in itself an act of creating change. The conversations show a gradual strengthening of resolve and decrease in anxiety about the future, possibly through the reassurance of being connected to others in the same situation. The shift towards "Winning Ugly" suggests that this process of self-identifying and locating oneself within a bigger picture may help a coming-together, a 'larger us' mindset. It envisages a new kind of state which acts as a platform for 'enabling, connecting, collaborating, and catalysing' a power network shared between communities, organisations and government.

A future where communities are given the power and resources they need to become resilient and make a difference where they live is possible. The response to COVID-19 at a local level has demonstrated once again how important strong local communities are to the functioning of our society. This was a rare opportunity for people to reflect together on what is happening in the world around them, and the resulting outputs make a fascinating and reaffirming record of a shift from anxiety and fear into determined hope.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

localtrust.org.uk

About The Alternative UK

The Alternative UK is a political platform based in the United Kingdom. Through curation, editorial, public events, commissioning and research, we aim to transform the language and practice of politics on these islands. Inspired by and associated with [Alternativet](#) in Denmark, we are trying to bring about "a friendly revolution".

thealternative.org.uk

Occupations of the Plymouth group

Hoe Neighbourhood Forum Covid-19 Coordinator / Photographer, Founder, Co-Director Fotonow CIC / Retired Associate Professor of Art History / Plymouth & Devon Racial Equality Council / Co-director of Food Plymouth CIC / Mother, wife, yoga teacher, tutor, carer, community developer, volunteer / Self-employed artist, runs WonderZoo / Architect / Carer / Founder Hoe Neighbourhood Forum / Consultant, New Prosperity Devon / Community Dentist / Social Worker / Company Secretary / Community artist and coordinator / Permaculture teacher and edible landscape designer / Community Development Manager, Whitleigh Big Local / Social entrepreneur / Ocean scientist / Environmental campaigner / Editor Client Culture 'zine / Musician and bar owner / Psychotherapist / Writer / Project Manager / Student / Teacher / Volunteer / Community renovator / Mother

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