

Local Trust
trusting
local
people

A year of the pandemic:

Reflections from communities
on the front line

Local Trust

About this report

Throughout the first lockdown and into early autumn 2020, Local Trust spoke to workers and volunteers leading COVID-19 response work on the ground. This report draws on their first-hand accounts and reveals the experiences of people who stepped up to help their communities. Their responses indicate real concern about what will happen next to the local organisations and community spaces that were crucial during the first year of the pandemic. The report was prepared by freelance writer Sharon Telfer, with contributions from Local Trust policy assistant Millie Dessent.

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Cover photo: Local resident Jacqui with her plants delivered by Noel Park Big Local.
Photo credit: James O Jenkins



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Introduction



COVID-19 has potentially changed our community forever, but – if we get this right – it will be for the better."

Anna Hunter, Tang Hall Big Local, York

In 2020, throughout the first lockdown and into early autumn, Local Trust spoke to workers and volunteers in England who had stepped up to lead COVID-19 response work in their communities. All those interviewed were working in areas ranking in the 20 per cent most deprived in the country on the Index of Multiple Deprivation – areas often considered 'left behind'.

A year on from the start of the pandemic, this report tells their stories, and draws on insights from Local Trust's policy panel and submissions to government, to explore the incredible work that has taken place. The communities we spoke to are all part of the Big Local programme, where residents manage a long-term grant of £1.15m to improve their neighbourhoods based on what they determine to be local priorities.

At the start of the first lockdown, government asked Local Trust to provide regular briefings on the impact that the virus was having on these communities. In response, Local Trust routinely interviewed Big Local reps, who provide support to residents as part of the programme. Briefings were sent directly to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), providing vital insight into the challenges communities were facing and the actions they were taking in response.

Our research shows that many of the issues these communities have faced are not new, but they have been exacerbated by

Our sources

This report draws on:

- in-depth conversations with local reps who support Big Local areas, which took place throughout the first lockdown
- interviews with residents carried out over the summer by Dannie Grufferty
- a Local Trust Learning Network discussion highlighting the challenges facing community hubs, held in June 2020
- a meeting of Local Trust's policy panel, held via Zoom in July 2020
- Local Trust submissions to government.

the pandemic. Some issues, like digital inclusion, have been thrown into sharper focus. And, in communities already affected by unemployment, the long-term impact of coronavirus threatens to further weaken local economies.

Residents in these neighbourhoods did not fall through the cracks because local people were organised, imaginative and resourced. Among all the uncertainty and anxiety, one common theme rose to the top: the significance of community.

But communities have been stretched, and individuals have felt the strain. The COVID-19 lockdowns so far have been a test of resilience, and this continues. No matter how hard the pandemic hits or for how long, communities – especially where they lack long-term investment – cannot be expected to weather the storm without support.

In July, Local Trust invited its policy panel – community activists from Big Local and [Creative Civic Change](#) areas – to discuss the wider implications of the COVID-19 crisis. The panel met via Zoom to discuss how the government should support communities through the pandemic and towards recovery. One of the priorities

identified was capturing data on the impact of the crisis in these areas to tell the stories of how communities responded.

There was a consensus that, as we start to look beyond the pandemic, the voices of communities need to be heard if there is to be any hope of things being different; of them not simply going back to the way they were before.

For this reason, Local Trust has gathered input from discussions and interviews with Big Local residents and volunteers so that funders and policymakers can learn from the expertise communities have built up over the course of a year on the front line of the pandemic. In this report, they describe what they have achieved, the initial challenges they faced and, as further local restrictions followed by another national lockdown were announced, their fears for the future – as well as their recommendations for what needs to change.

About Big Local

Funded by the largest single endowment ever made by the National Lottery Community Fund, Big Local is a £200m programme that puts communities in control of decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods. In terms of scale, time horizon and ethos, nothing like it has ever existed. Designed from the outset to be radically different from other funding programmes, at the heart of Big Local is a vision of empowered, resilient, dynamic, asset-rich communities making their own decisions on what is best for their area.

Local Trust works nationally with a range of partners to deliver the Big Local programme, providing at least £1m to each of 150 communities in England. The areas were selected in 2010-12 on the basis that they suffered from higher-than-average levels of deprivation, and had previously missed out on lottery or other public funding – often because of low levels of pre-existing social infrastructure and civic activity.

In contrast to conventional top down, time-limited, project-led funding, the funding awarded to each Big Local area was provided on the basis that it can be spent over 10-15 years at the communities' own chosen pace, and on their own plans and priorities.

What helped communities respond effectively?



Scrubs for NHS staff sewn by residents of Wormley and Turnford at their community hub, as part of a socially distanced sewing club held during COVID-19 lockdown.

Kiran Rajani



You realise what a community can achieve with a little support. That absolute camaraderie and effort during the lockdown was amazing."

Shaun O'Hare, Keighley Big Local, West Yorkshire

Established relationships make all the difference

Within days of the first lockdown, many community and mutual aid groups organised to provide support for the most vulnerable, those shielding, and those who were already facing problems before COVID-19 struck. This support was founded on connection.

Local groups of volunteers mobilised quickly, conducting socially distanced check-ins between residents. As these networks grew, more conversations were had and more connections formed.

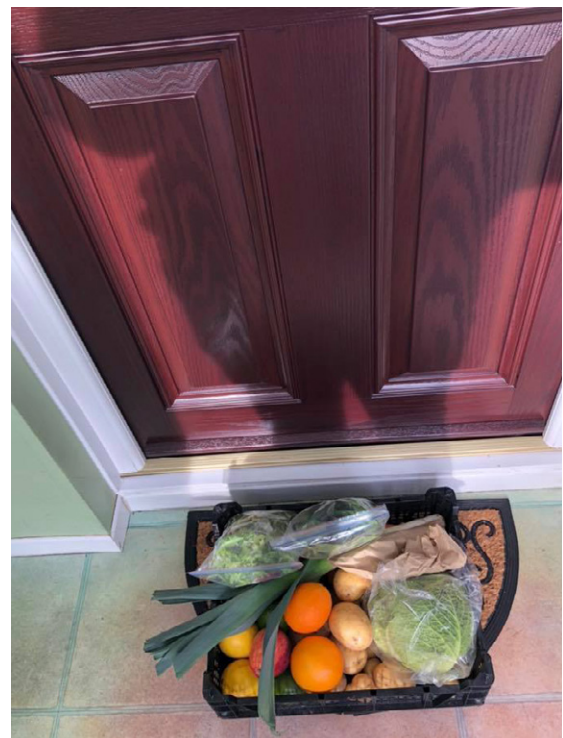
Big Local partnerships have been working in their neighbourhoods for a number of years, and provided one such anchor point and resource around which to organise. As community-level institutions that have been supported for six to seven years to grow and develop (often in places that previously had no such capacity), they have built deep knowledge of their communities, know which residents are most likely to fall through the cracks of official schemes, and already had supportive infrastructure in place. They have also built a local name for themselves that the community trusts.



I met a woman who had not eaten in three days. It was then that I realised we needed to get to work."

Sue Merriman, Brereton Million Big Local, Staffordshire

The most effective responses developed where local government had already been working alongside Big Local areas and other social-sector organisations before the crisis struck, and continued to focus on collaboration and involvement in developing a neighbourhood-level response. Here, local authorities relied on communities' local knowledge, expertise and skill to implement the response within their neighbourhoods.



Brereton Million Big Local

A food package being delivered to an older resident.

When crisis hit, interaction with local authorities was contingent on pre-COVID relationships, but these were often very different depending on the location. Tang Hall Big Local in York, for example, was already part of York Council's hub network and a trusted local partner (see [Frontline voice 1](#)). The council understood that the Big Local partnership had expertise in local issues, and thus could solve them more efficiently than any outside body. In Solihull, the local authority implemented a strategic response plan, setting up "a network of key voluntary network providers and communicating through weekly Zoom calls and follow-up emails". Other strong collaborations developed during lockdown. Chesterfield Borough Council, for example, coordinated around 30 community groups to support residents.

In contrast, early in the first lockdown, there were instances of local authorities designating support roles to local borough-level charities (sometimes with limited connections to or understanding of the local community) without consultation, which caused friction. In at least one area, the Big Local partnership felt it had been left to itself to deal with the crisis, after some initial interaction with the council.

It's who you know

Research for the [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) \(2020\)](#) for 'left behind' neighbourhoods has shown that where areas lacked the basic building blocks of community – places to meet, a culture of community action and organisation, digital and physical connectedness – it was much harder to get things going in response to the crisis. Experience in Big Local areas explains why this is the case: support is most effective when it is founded on existing community-level institutions and networks of trust.

Another Big Local area felt the local authority did "not trust them to deliver" – so they just got on with it by themselves, while continuing to foster the relationship with the local authority to link up services. There was also evidence of local authorities simply referring people to community organisations, without sufficient support or recognition, particularly when food was the issue.

Volunteers sorting donations in the food distribution centre.



Tang Hall Big Local



Joan from Welsh House Farm Big Local in Birmingham.

Importantly, the flow of support and expertise worked in both directions. In Birmingham, Welsh House Farm Big Local found that a lot of older people were left anxious and afraid by the virus. As Welsh House Farm had worked with the older community in the past, they quickly got a 'befriending' line up and running, and were able to map out those most in need of support. When the Haven Centre (their then locally trusted organisation – with a treasury function for the Big Local partnership) began to work with the council as part of the city's Mutual Aid Programme, Welsh House Farm provided essential information about who needed what and where to find them in the community.

As time went on, there were examples of 'triage' structures working well, with Big Local areas helping to coordinate volunteers for local authority projects. And by late summer – despite early teething problems – a consensus emerged that relationships with local authorities had strengthened as a result of the pandemic. The challenge was to build on the gains that had been made.

Strong relationships with business also brought fast, practical results. At the outset of lockdown, St Peter's and the Moors Big Local in Cheltenham telephoned vulnerable residents to offer support. This helped them better understand community need for food deliveries. The partnership's existing relationships with the local Tesco and Waitrose supermarkets meant that they were already collecting and distributing fresh food to minimise food waste. This allowed them to meet the increased demand from residents during the crisis. Gannow Foodbank also reported enjoying a successful relationship with their local Morrisons. Similarly, early in lockdown, North West Ipswich Big Local placed orders with a local greengrocer to supply weekly fresh fruit-and-veg boxes to families in need.

Such partnerships met broader needs too. In Solihull, for example, Cars Big Local were able to continue their existing work with Birmingham City Football Club, keeping teenagers active and playing sport rather than becoming isolated.



Teresa from Dyke House Big Local delivers food to a local resident.

Existing assets enable rapid responses

Neighbourhoods that already had social infrastructure and civic assets had the tools and resources to provide robust responses (Locality, 2020, p. 64). Many Big Local areas highlighted that their access to good transport links or to a building, for instance, were the first steps to being able to take action.

In Whitleigh Big Local, Plymouth (see [Frontline voice 2](#)), the resident-led community organisation had already set up a triage network before COVID-19 hit. This network brought together various civil-society groups in the area to address shared local priorities. During the first lockdown, Whitleigh Big Local used this system to work with both the Salvation Army and the local church. They offered a range of services – from co-op stamps and food boxes to financial advice and pastoral care – providing a fast response for local people while reducing strain on a local authority whose resources were overstretched across the whole city.

People themselves were also essential assets over the first year of the pandemic. Dyke House in Hartlepool was able to respond quickly to lockdown because it had already invested in training local residents as community organisers. Some areas benefited from experienced council and voluntary-sector staff volunteering while on furlough. In many areas, new volunteers stepped forward, learning as they went.



From the outside we are not an abundantly rich neighbourhood – perhaps not financially anyway. But we are very generous. Very kind-hearted. We don't want anyone in our neighbourhood to go hungry or be lonely."

Paul Wright, Firs and Bromford Big Local, Birmingham

Practical support unlocks broader conversations

Responding to practical needs within communities can slowly shine a light on needs that may be less obvious and tangible – even hidden entirely. Responses to immediate requirements (especially providing food) often proved to be a way to connect with people who were vulnerable in other ways (see [Frontline voice 3](#))

For example, in Gannow, Burnley, supportive conversations between recipients and volunteers often took place alongside food distribution. In Newington, Thanet, providing food parcels slowly enabled volunteers and residents to build connections and organically strengthen their community.



I think you can look at it in terms of the timescale. So in week one – it would be a short check-in and chat to check someone got their hamper. By week six – people are beginning to open up. The deliveries were taking much longer but we saw this as a positive thing! As a result, our networks and connections in the community are now stronger than before.”

Maddy Pritchard, Warsop Parish Big Local

However, it is worth noting that, by July, there were concerns that this work could not continue at the same level if the situation were to worsen. Along with there not being sufficient resources to provide the vulnerable with essential items over the long term, volunteers were also feeling the pressure and beginning to show signs of fatigue.



Zule Lightfoot

Volunteers from Elthorne Pride distribute 'complimentary store cupboard basics' to members of the community at St Johns Community Centre on the Elthorne Estate in N19, London.

Local experts have the best local knowledge

Many Big Local areas drew on detailed groundwork already laid before the crisis. In the early days of lockdown, for example, food packages supplied by local authorities were often not appropriate for a proportion of people receiving them. This included very old people who no longer cooked for themselves, people on restricted diets, and communities that required culturally specific ingredients. With their expert local knowledge, Big Local areas were able to supply hot or oven-ready meals and items that met residents' needs right down to the individual level. In Barrowcliff, Scarborough, for example, volunteers knew that one resident required gluten-free food; something the council were unaware of and which their standard food parcels didn't include.

This knowledge has only grown and deepened during lockdown, and it has proved to be a vital resource. Big Local areas have begun to map individual needs comprehensively across their entire wards. Through this, they have started to truly know their communities, and many communities felt that they emerged from the first lockdown understanding more about the individuals who live there.



The experience of phoning people and giving support has been an eye-opener for volunteers and workers. People now see the local community. And in turn, people feel seen."

Maddy Pritchard, Warsop Parish Big Local, Mansfield

Simple local funding is invaluable

Funding for Big Local partnerships is secure and ringfenced to 2026. This allowed partnerships to provide immediate crisis support to vulnerable residents and to plan how best to support the community as a whole over the longer term. Some partnerships set up local funding initiatives, such as community chests. These proved invaluable, particularly for residents with no recourse to public funds, such as some asylum seekers. For example, in Rochdale, Kirkholt Big Local devised a strategy to help those accessing Universal Credit for the first time and who faced a delay in payment. They also agreed to continue funding all their current external partners, even where that partner was unable to provide the project they had originally intended.

The security of Big Local funding allowed W12 Together in Hammersmith & Fulham to commit six months' worth of funding to respond to the crisis. They shifted their entire spending plan for the following six months to provide food aid, flexible small grants to community groups in need, publish information and run services online, including financial advice and health information in a variety of languages (see [Frontline voice 4](#)). The quick release of funds was key to this scheme – and trust was a crucial element. Somers Town Big Local in Camden appointed a community support worker specifically to build connections with other organisations and community groups. This role was designed to plan how best the community could respond to COVID-19 over the long term, not just in the immediate crisis.

Zule Lightfoot



St Michael's Church, White City Estate, W12 Together Big Local.

The power to make decisions shifted

During the crisis, power rapidly devolved. The pandemic has been a story of changing relationships, including those between communities and local authorities. Mutual aid and community groups were quick to organise and often the first responders on the ground.



It took the council four weeks to get set up as a community hub; we were up and running already."

Shaun O'Hare, Keighley Big Local

In some areas, this meant councils could divert resources elsewhere because communities were able to provide more tailored support based on their hyperlocal knowledge. In other areas, however, there was a danger that vulnerable residents were left dependent on the goodwill and (often limited) capacity of a community group.

Resident-led groups were also devolving power to volunteers. For example, in Scarborough, Barrowcliff Big Local created a £500 tab with the local shop for registered volunteers. This meant each volunteer could collect food and essentials for vulnerable, self-isolating residents, drawing on their hyperlocal knowledge of what each individual needed.



What volunteers were willing to take on was astounding. We had so many people come forward, the projects began to snowball. There was barely any red tape, a problem was identified, so a person was recruited to go find a solution and run with it!"

Sue Merriman, Brereton Million Big Local

Community groups have grown in confidence

As the first lockdown went on, a number of areas began to adapt and expand from a crisis response (see [Frontline voice 5](#)). Selby Town, for example, moved from delivering food parcels to providing hampers and cooked meals as part of 'community kitchen' schemes, where residents made a small contribution towards costs. By July, Dover Big Local was also moving from emergency food deliveries to setting up a 'people's supermarket', with funding from Southern Housing. The supermarket is by now well-established, with a membership system that provides residents with access to cheap, donated and surplus food largely from FareShare, a charitable network of food redistributors (MHCLG briefing, July 2020).

Brereton Million Big Local established a network of local volunteers who led on different aspects of work to support the community through lockdown, including arts and crafts, social events, among others. This allowed them to pool resources and continue activities despite a drop-off in volunteer numbers as formal lockdown lifted. Having made contact with every resident in the ward, by August they felt that the relationships they had developed would enable an effective response in any further lockdowns.

Residents in Allenton, Derby, felt empowered because they were able to organise an effective local response to the pandemic. They drew on skills and expertise gained with Big Local over the years, as well as a deep understanding of the challenges facing those who were vulnerable, many of whom they had been supporting long before COVID struck. By the end of lockdown, they had grown in confidence – strengthening their focus on worklessness and employment, as well as support for families with children, especially those with special educational needs.

In Cars, Solihull, one resident said that Big Local had “come into its own”, having “built confidence in what they [were] doing”. Operating remotely could also help partnerships think more strategically. As early as May, Warsop Parish in Mansfield had finalised a new one-year plan, requesting an extra £10,000 in funding for a new community hub to help support and coordinate local activity.

Lockdown saw a general revival of community spirit and neighbourliness, with any old feuds set aside. One volunteer leader in Plymouth said, “This is what Whitleigh used to be like”. During lockdown, partnerships acted as an anchor in communities, bringing people together to discuss priorities, share and reflect, ready to move onto the new environment after the first lockdown ended.

Communities responded with imagination

- In the first month of lockdown, Devonshire West Big Local transformed their Friday Lunch Club into a daily soup-and-rolls service for vulnerable households.
- In Brereton, residents made a range of PPE for frontline workers in local hospital and care homes. Corby used a volunteer’s 3D printer to make face masks.
- In Birmingham, a garden project moved online, becoming a seed distribution service. During lockdown, the community garden project in Islington gave residents a plant to look after, and the opportunity to connect with others online to share gardening tips.
- In Mansfield, Warsop Parish organised a fish-and-chips voucher scheme in July as a way of thanking staff from local businesses that had kept working through lockdown. These staff were deeply moved by this initiative.
- Thurnscoe Big Local, Barnsley, established a relief fund for groups responding directly to COVID. Any group of any size could apply for up to £500 in one application. The first applications came from the local school to provide internet dongles for children unable to access online learning.
- Radstock and Westfield, in Somerset, provided new families with a ‘baby box’ of essentials.
- Keighley Valley, Bradford, developed a community radio station and an online community store to raise income and make use of donations.

What challenges have communities faced?

A food delivery for local residents at the Annexe, a recently refurbished community and resource centre in Dyke House Big Local, Hartlepool.

Michael Grant





It felt like a light was being shined on issues that were there long before COVID-19."

Sue Merriman, Brereton Million Big Local

A survey of Big Local areas in the first month of the first lockdown suggested that many of the issues that communities were dealing with were those they were already facing prior to the pandemic and lockdown measures, albeit now more acutely and obviously. Their experiences, revealed in telephone interviews with a sample of Big Local reps – who support programme areas – throughout lockdown, confirmed this.

The food crisis many faced was already there

COVID-19 has exacerbated a food crisis that was already there. Over the past 10 years, food poverty and food banks have increasingly become a feature of national life. From April to September 2019, the Trussell Trust (2019) witnessed a 23 per cent increase in need versus the same period in the previous year – the sharpest rate of increase the charity had seen for five years.

The social and economic pressures on communities caused by the pandemic led to significantly increased demand – and this continues to show no sign of easing. On a national level, the Trussell Trust reported an 89 per cent increase in need for emergency food parcels during April 2020 compared with the same month in the previous year. This included a 107 per cent rise in parcels given to children (Trussell Trust, 2020).

The situation was particularly severe in suburban areas and neighbourhoods on the fringes of towns. Research showed that these areas were most likely to have limited food supplies in local shops, a dearth of big supermarkets with more affordable food, and limited transport

opportunities to shops in larger towns. They were also home to a higher proportion of residents unable to go out during lockdown because they were self-isolating, especially elderly and disabled people (Food Foundation, 2020).

At a household level, Big Local partnerships witnessed a sustained high demand for food throughout the first lockdown. As restrictions eased in summer and early autumn, this demand continued. 53 per cent of Big Local areas provided food parcels, while 50 per cent delivered food for vulnerable people in isolation. At times, Big Local funding proved vital to maintaining local food bank services; in June, for example, the local food bank had to request £15,000 a month from Somers Town just to stay open. Even with its secure funding, this was not sustainable for the Big Local partnership over the long term.



Some families were eligible for free school meal vouchers but found it hard to use them because they couldn't find supermarket delivery slots or were unable to print vouchers out at home."


Many families also struggled to feed children but did not qualify for free school meals. The Big Local partnership in Leigh West, Wigan, was able to provide extra funding for these families. Other families were eligible for free school meal vouchers but found it hard to use them because they couldn't find supermarket delivery slots or were unable to print vouchers out at home.

Many Big Local areas that previously did not have plans for food provision adapted and repurposed projects to source and distribute food. In Thurnscoe, emergency food box deliveries from initial months of the pandemic developed into holiday hampers over the course of the summer, with over 97 hampers were given out to families in need over the four weeks. Although this was in direct response to community need, there were early concerns that other vital community activity would suffer as a result.

The digital divide was severe in the worst-off communities

Lack of digital access was often a major challenge for Big Local partnerships. Many communities were digitally excluded, and many of those lacking access to the internet and/or suitable devices on which they could access it were already the most vulnerable.

Many households in Big Local areas were found to lack computers, other devices or access to enough broadband to connect and engage with others during lockdown. Not everyone had access to wifi. There seemed to be an assumption that school education for children and young people had moved smoothly online, and that those short of devices could easily print out exercises and activities to cover multiple learners in one household- but most people didn't have the right equipment.


 **Anything past the top end of London doesn't matter to government. They don't seem to realise we don't even get good reception, even if we could afford a phone."**

Local Trust policy panel member

Those advised or required to shield were some of those most likely to be digitally 'locked out' in this way. The NHS advised 1.2 million people to shield, but around 25 per cent had no access to the internet (Good Things Foundation, 2020, p. 3).

Lack of online access became more problematic during the pandemic as many essential activities – such as free school meal vouchers, Universal Credit applications, and schooling – moved to digital as the default.

Welsh House Farm in Birmingham identified digital exclusion as the main issue for many residents. They worked with schools to print out free school-meal vouchers for parents. They also liaised with the housing department to provide residents with printed information about rent payments and utilities. The council had emailed all residents about this, but many were simply not able to be online at home. Lockdown was problematic for families who would usually go to the library to access these resources.

 **Lack of online access became more problematic during the pandemic as many essential activities – such as free school meal vouchers, Universal Credit applications, and schooling – moved to digital as the default."**

In Lewisham's Chinbrook Estate, it was also difficult for many families to get online to access home-schooling material, such as exercise books and textbooks. The Chinbrook Resident Action Team worked closely with the local primary school to provide resource packs for those who were locked out from digital platforms, meaning that local children were able to keep learning throughout the pandemic and that their parents were sufficiently equipped to support them.

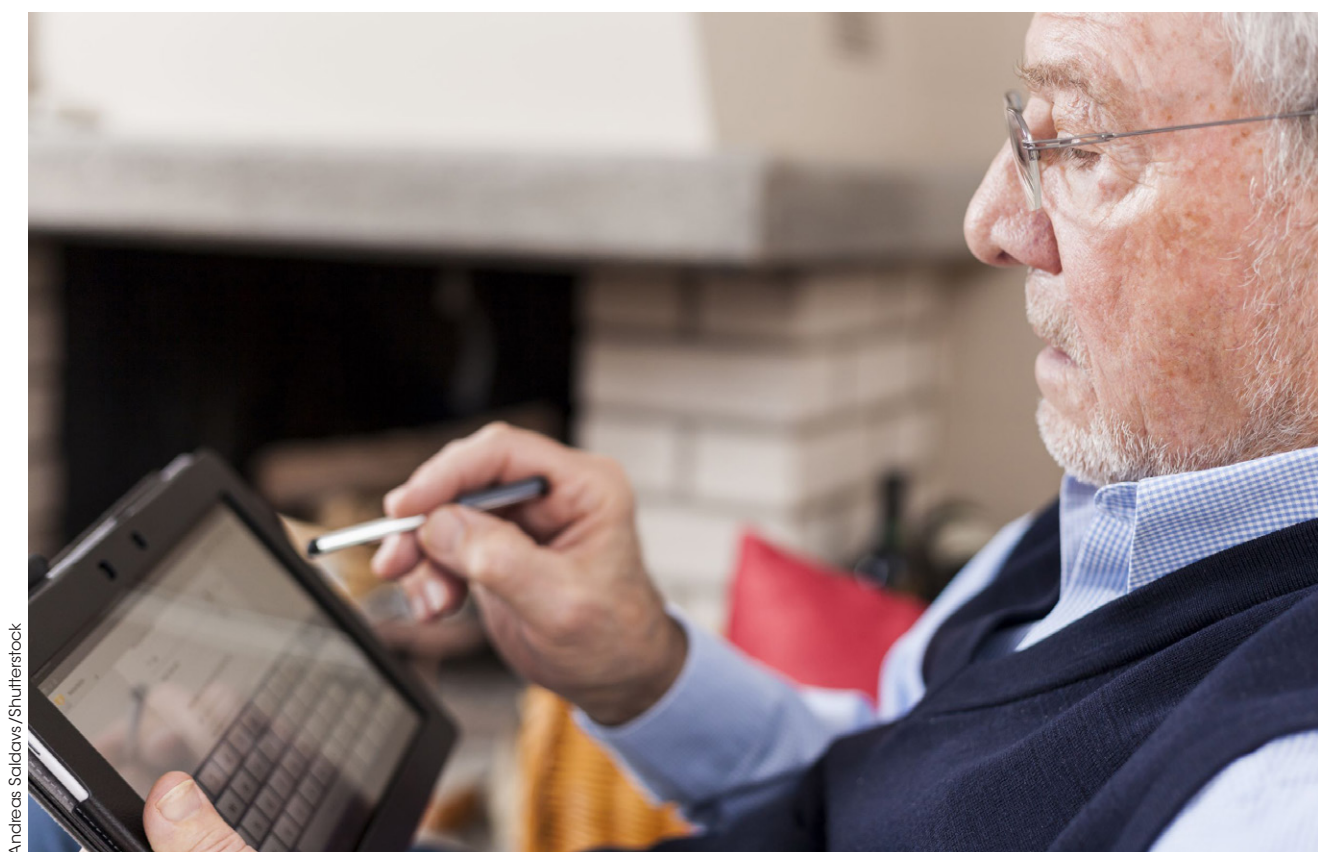
Another problem was with the internet data itself. Camden Working Men's College worked with the Big Local to establish a lease scheme for electronic devices to get people connected. Many families accessed the internet through their mobile. Consequently, residents reliant on mobile data were running out regularly as demand for online services increased in the spring.

Families are choosing between food and data on their phone – meanwhile government are sanctioning people for not looking for work when they can't get online."

Policy panel member

One obvious related concern during the pandemic was that this lack of internet access also made it hard for people to keep up with information about coronavirus, and frequent changes in rules and restrictions around lockdown, social distancing and shopping guidance.

Digital exclusion particularly impacted the ability of Big Local areas to continue to provide activities addressing loneliness and isolation – a priority in areas where residents faced existing challenges around mental health and wellbeing.



Andreas Saldavs/Shutterstock

Lack of familiarity with the technology also meant that, in some areas, key volunteers chose not to engage with increasingly vital new ways of working, such as group video calling. For example, some groups in Birmingham were slow to digitise their networks and ways of working together. In early summer, these community groups were no longer meeting and there were concerns about whether they would regroup after lockdown. But most volunteers were willing to adapt. By the end of summer, people who had previously felt nervous about technology were becoming more comfortable engaging online.



Volunteers who avoided computers and anything tech-related have become experts in Google surveys and spreadsheets! Databases have been vital!"

Sue Merriman, Brereton Million Big Local

Nevertheless, there were signs that organisations were running out of steam after months operating via Zoom.

Over the first three months of lockdown, Local Trust invested significantly in training residents in Big Local areas to make the most of online tools for communicating and engaging. This proved hugely popular.

The strain on communities meant severe strain on key individuals

Many Big Local areas relied on one or two key players. St Matthew's, Leicester was reliant on one worker, which made the whole operation incredibly fragile. Sometimes these workers were people with a particular necessary skill (for example, the correct food hygiene qualifications to prepare hot food); if that individual became incapacitated during the crisis, the whole network buckled.

In some areas, members of the partnership were older and therefore more vulnerable. Their activity was limited to what they could do from home. It was a struggle for Big Local workers not to have their normal hub environment to work in, with people around them to offer support. The isolation in these roles proved to be extremely challenging over the course of the year.



The community hub in My Clubmoor, Liverpool.

Many of the organisations that Big Local areas partner with continued their pre-COVID activity while simultaneously responding to the impact of the pandemic. This placed significant strain on staff and volunteers. Furloughing staff often placed more pressure on those individuals left to maintain pre-COVID activities that were transferred online. Staff were concerned about the effect of moving to a volunteer-led system and about how long they were going to have to continue emergency response work. In addition, there were concerns about how long they could keep community groups, social events and community-led services running without face-to-face contact with residents.

Conversely, in Corby, many of those volunteering during lockdown were on furlough from the local council; this raised questions about how sustainable emergency COVID responses could be after formal lockdown ended and these staff returned to work.

By June, there were reports that lead volunteers and workers were feeling the stress of keeping their communities safe. Warsop Parish, Mansfield, maintained the services they were providing before lockdown. Resources were under pressure and the situation unsustainable. Mansfield Community and Voluntary Services (CVS), the locally trusted organisation (LTO), described the ever-increasing number of referrals as a “pressure cooker”.

Reaching vulnerable groups

There was a general feeling in communities that if it wasn't for Big Local areas and the funding they provided, many vulnerable people would have fallen through the cracks. Many organisations struggled to reach people they normally support; for example, dementia support groups and youth groups struggled to engage people online. There were groups that did not get flagged by official systems, but for which the disruption to daily life brought by lockdown was potentially disastrous (see [Frontline voice 6](#)).



It made us think about whose voices are lost and not heard."

Jenny Chigwende, W12 Big Local, West London

Language barriers were a major challenge

Government information was inaccessible to many communities where English is a second language (ESOL). Big Local partnerships pointed to the responsibility of government and providers to make information and services accessible.



They're saying 'the people of Leicester didn't understand' – well why didn't they? Whose responsibility is that?"

Policy panel member



To be honest the issue is simple: we are not using the language they understand. This is only heightened during a global pandemic."

Jenny Chigwende, W12 Big Local

Community groups worked hard to provide translations for their neighbourhoods wherever possible (MHCLG briefing, May 2020). In Lewisham, there was a boost in uptake of free online ESOL classes, with 11 people regularly attending classes at the height of lockdown.

Unemployment spread quickly

By late spring, the economic lockdown had begun to affect residents who were financially secure before the crisis began. Big Local areas began to see more and more people struggling, such as parents who had previously been financially stable, but now with jobs lost were forced to use their savings to support their families during the crisis. Long waits were being reported for Universal Credit payments as a result.

In other areas – North Ormesby, Middlesbrough, and St Matthew's Big Local in Leicester, for example – many residents who lost work were self-employed and they fell through gaps in government support. On top of the real economic hardship, this had significant mental health implications.

You can't assume that someone that has a house and fancy car won't need a food bank – they may have been running a business that has collapsed. There will be a lot of shame wrapped up in this – people's pride is going to be affected by having to go to a food bank for the first time."

Policy panel member

As summer drew on, St Matthew's Big Local in Leicester (where restrictions lasted longer than elsewhere in the country) established a new partnership with the local community advice and law service, providing free confidential advice to local people. There was a lot of demand, particularly for debt and employment advice.

Tim Morton



Food parcel deliveries for vulnerable households being sorted at the community hub, St Matthew's House, April 2020.

People shielding were often left without support

Many Big Local areas saw examples of people whose circumstances meant they were at special risk to the virus but who were not flagged on systems or a recipient of official support. In Solihull, community groups had to approach the City Council on behalf of vulnerable people who were shielding. Many were not on the public sector lists for food packages, and would not otherwise have accessed urgent supplies. In Mansfield, the view was that, if Warsop Parish had not been doing much of the frontline work and providing funding quickly, many shielding people would have gone without.

Meeting the needs of people in temporary accommodation

In Whitley Bay, the Big Local partnership found that lots of people were being housed in multiple occupancy spaces, such as in former B&Bs. Although they had been aware of this before COVID, the pandemic made the scale more evident. The Big Local distributed over 3,000 hot meals to the B&B residents during lockdown (see [Frontline voice 7](#)).

Boston Big Local, in Lincolnshire, allocated Centrepont Outreach £750 from their quick-response Community Chest. This grant helped Centrepont provide breakfasts on Monday to Saturday each week for up to 20 former rough sleepers who were being accommodated in a hotel. In three months alone, Centrepont supplied over 1,200 breakfasts, 210 'kettle packs' for Sundays, plus essential items such as clothing and toiletries when required (see [Frontline voice 8](#)).

People with learning difficulties or special needs were unable to access support

Many people with mild learning difficulties were unable to access their usual support or coping mechanisms and were struggling in the first weeks of the first lockdown. In North Ormesby, Middlesbrough, the partnership used its intimate knowledge of residents' needs to help those with learning difficulties deal with the changes in their lives. It also supported residents who were not necessarily vulnerable enough to coronavirus to receive support from the Council but who were still struggling.

In Newham, the Big Local partnership identified 29 families looking after children with special educational needs who did not receive any additional help from local or national government during lockdown.

What are communities' concerns for the future?

Local residents at the launch event of the North West Ipswich's Friendly Bench, August 2020.
Glen Farthing





We are worried for the future. This was an amazing feat but it was because of the huge upswell in civic spirit felt across the country. How much longer this will continue for, who knows."

Pippa St John Cooper, Whitleigh Big Local, Plymouth

By July, Big Local partnerships were already planning for the post-lockdown environment. Many were adjusting their pre-pandemic plans and refocusing resources and volunteers to support communities with worklessness, loneliness and mental health. There were concerns over the likelihood of a 'perfect storm' after lockdown, with higher demands for support owing to redundancies, fewer volunteers being available, and the probability of 'holiday hunger' over the summer. As time went on, partnerships found it difficult to plan while the prospect of another lockdown loomed over them.

Communities fear their networks won't survive

From early in lockdown, surveyed groups shared a fear that foundational networks may not survive. With everything focused on ensuring access to food and medicine, there were concerns that the broader needs of the community would not be met. As lockdown eased, partnerships were worried that less readily apparent but fundamental problems such as loneliness that had surfaced during lockdown might be forgotten about.



The pandemic helped us see that loneliness is one of the biggest problems our community faces."

Sue Merriman, Brereton Big Local

During the summer, Big Local areas didn't know how many community groups were still running and whether they would be

coming back to community hubs. They anticipated a trickle doing so over some months. Some groups were at risk of collapse and Big Local areas voiced worry that this would further affect the purpose and use of the community hub.

Policy panel members were concerned that local efforts would just be pushed to one side when the immediate crisis passed:



Voluntary doesn't mean amateur. It boils my blood that we're there to pick up the pieces and then the professionals come back and push us aside – like women in the war!"

Policy panel member

A very strong theme in the policy panel discussion was the need to build on the new ways of working that had sprung up during lockdown, and, in particular, the new relationship between local government and the voluntary and community sector.

Many community organisations are struggling

Big Local partnerships have long-term unrestricted funding. However, their partner organisations had undoubtedly suffered financially because of COVID. The pandemic threatened the viability of some of the already financially fragile voluntary and community organisations that Big Local areas work with to support their communities.

Organisations reliant on income from things like room hire, nurseries, after-school and other facilities that could not be moved online struggled the most, and as early as May. These grassroots level organisations are critical to the maintenance of social infrastructure at a community level. But the cancellation of fundraising events and reduced income, such as that from venue hire and cafés, because of lockdown, had a marked effect.

In Kirk Hallam, Derbyshire, for example, the community café had not reopened by the end of July and they had to make the café manager redundant. One Big Local area lost thousands of pounds in revenue during lockdown but was unable to claim from anyone. Fortunately, in this case, Big Local funding met the shortfall. Most organisations had small reserve funds but COVID had depleted these by August. A number of organisations projected deficits as they moved into the autumn.

These anxieties compounded more general ones. At the time of the lockdown, Hainsley Community Centre, for example, was funded by council and EU schemes. As council budgets were increasingly stretched, and with the UK to leave the EU at the end of 2020, significant constraints on the centre's ability to meet the community's long-term needs loomed on the horizon.

Can community centres remain viable?

Big Local partnership members were also worried about the difficulty of adapting community centres and hubs to meet social distancing guidelines. Most community hubs were not reopened after the first lockdown, owing to the costs associated with risk assessments, enhanced hygiene rules and often a lack of physical space.

Community hubs come in all shapes and sizes. Many have structural limitations – such as low ceilings, lack of space or no windows – that make social distancing all but impossible. Some community hubs had in effect become food storage spaces during the first lockdown, so reopening was not straightforward. Social distancing restrictions were very challenging for hubs that operate as businesses: community cafés were often unable to reopen, as they couldn't cover the lower customer numbers.

During lockdowns, Big Local areas delivered as much as they could outside. Many community gardens and outdoor spaces became community hubs.

I've spent most of my time in the community garden growing and sharing plans... so the hub has been temporarily moved outdoors."

Big Local representative

By summer, many were waiting on government guidance on how to operate indoors. There was a sense of unfairness that businesses and schools had had a longer time to prepare for reopening after lockdown, while community centres were still in the dark.

Planning to reopen hubs was a daunting prospect for many because, for example, of the need to train volunteers. Reference was made to the importance of not underestimating both the time required and the responsibility to ensure safety as well as navigate complex practicalities and logistics such as buying PPE.

One very basic issue was that community groups didn't necessarily have the resources to carry out the necessary levels of cleaning. They would have found support with risk assessments helpful, as they weren't sure what they should cover. Navigating insurance was also proving tricky, with companies taking a hard line. Not all organisations had the power to decide. In one area, the three buildings housing community centres were all owned by different bodies. In Allenton, it was the church that took the decision not to reopen the building:

There is a lack of appreciation about the impact on community buildings."

Big Local representative

Zurie Lightfoot



St Johns Community Centre, on the Elthorne Estate, Archway.

What are communities' priorities for the future?



Selby Big Local drop-in session in the new community-run space on the high street, October 2020.

Jonathan Pow



It is a journey requiring time and commitment and the ability of people to sit back and listen. Above all it is about “holding the space for people” to feel they can share their own story.”

Maddy Pritchard, Warsop Parish Big Local

Local Trust asked its policy panel how government should support communities during the recovery from COVID-19. The panel identified two overwhelming priorities: health and digital exclusion.

Mental health

The top priority identified for government action was support for mental and physical health. This was not only the view of the panel; health was also primary concern in a Survation poll of those living in ‘left behind’ areas, carried out for Local Trust in September. If more money were forthcoming for these ‘left behind’ areas, 79 per cent of people surveyed felt it should be targeted first on projects to tackle mental and physical health issues.

Declining mental health in particular was a common concern in these discussions. Panel members were deeply concerned about the impact COVID-19 was having on people’s mental state and resilience, without sufficient or consistent support available to help them (policy panel, July 2020). During the first lockdown, residents’ mental health became an increasing priority for Big Local partnerships, with two-thirds of those surveyed at the time stating that they were actively focusing attention on how to improve it. Areas set

Khartoum Road, Plaistow South.



Zufte Lightfoot

up online clubs and virtual gatherings like coffee mornings to combat loneliness (policy panel, July 2020) Tang Hall York was operating a social prescribing service in partnership with the local Clinical Commissioning Group. Arts packs had a huge positive response in Corby, with a vibrant WhatsApp group sharing the art they were making.

At the peak of the first wave, some areas were increasingly struggling with bereavement as the virus brought overwhelming numbers of deaths within communities. North Ormesby in Middlesbrough and Bamfield Big Local Greenwich were both very badly affected. There was also more general concern that some adults had become accustomed to being at home and become too afraid to go out.



There are families for whom we just simply can't get past the doorstep and we're really worried about them – they're simply too scared to come out."

Policy panel member

The mental health needs of children were a particular worry for many. They had to adapt to a frightening atmosphere and completely new routine, with varying levels of support from schools. Some were largely left to their own devices at a time when a crisis in adolescent mental health had already taken root (adolescent mental health services were already incredibly stretched before COVID). Schools are felt not to have had the resources to provide the necessary support.

Digital exclusion

The second clear priority for government was to address digital capacity, capability and connectivity. The internet kept people in work and in touch during the pandemic – and yet, as outlined in [the earlier section on challenges](#), the pandemic compounded and extended problems of digital exclusion that were already there. Furthermore, the demands of trying to conduct work and social lives online, particularly for those without the necessary kit, cash or know-how, only added to the pressures on people's health.



Stephen Curry

Boarded up shops and businesses in Kidderminster, Worcestershire.

Employment and economic revival

Some government measures – such as the Future Fund and furlough payment scheme (now extended to April 2021) – have been effective in the short term. Throughout lockdowns, local authorities have made prompter payments to community organisations, cutting through by necessity some of the red tape that can often hold things up. However, the high levels of redundancy remained a pressing concern. For small businesses and other organisations, there was – and still is – a real question mark about future viability of their businesses. Self-employed residents have also faced enormous pressures from similar uncertainty, as well as often a lack of universally available support akin to the furlough scheme.

With more people expected to be on Universal Credit in the future, panel members expressed fear of sanctions growing – with so few jobs vacancies, it would become much harder to meet targets for applications. Digital exclusion, together with libraries and job centres being closed, also made it harder to comply with job search requirements. Panel members felt that “sanctions were not the answer to this” and that “we needed a kinder, more human approach to employment and social security”.

There was general recognition that, ultimately, many people will need to retrain. Some Big Local areas were already taking steps to help residents address this. The panel recommended that rapid, short-term and flexible training be made available, with additional support for travel and lost income.

Support for local organisations

Panel members talked about the need to keep supporting local organisations that can design and deliver solutions that local people need across a range of areas – for example, youth employment, mental health, food poverty, isolation, elder support. Many talked about the vital role volunteers and local organisations had been playing delivering services, from food banks and help with accessing tech to befriending support and helping with transport and errands.

But they were also aware of the stress that sustaining this level of support had brought. While panel members were clear that the community may have had the ability and initiative to take on this role, they felt this wasn't always recognised by statutory services (see [Frontline voice 9](#)). It is important that government, both local and national, note the role of grassroots groups throughout this year and in future recognise that local responses to crisis need to proceed with an 'asset based' approach, drawing on local people and networks. More local infrastructure is also needed to meet increased demand.

Such support, alongside more access to welfare and crisis intervention, will remain necessary – and likely at even higher levels as the impact of COVID deepens. Including volunteers in hyperlocal decision-making – as many Big Local areas did to great effect during lockdown – could play a crucial part in retaining these new volunteers as we move into the 'new normal'.



We're not problems to be fixed – work with us to solve issues, see us as an asset that can be enabled."

Policy panel member

Education

Panel members expressed concern that inequalities have been exacerbated by school closures, especially for children and young people without resources and networks. There is uncertainty as to whether schools were able to provide the full range of academic and pastoral support needed in challenging circumstances and with already stretched budgets.



We need a 'catch up premium' to help them close the gap."

Policy panel member

Local government

Overall, the way in which statutory and community organisations have worked together during the pandemic has been widely praised. Community organisations were keen to see this become the norm in the future. Panel members also asked if local government would encourage more collaboration by lifting red tape. One member gave the example of primary and secondary schools in their area not being allowed to collaborate because they're in different trusts. Similarly, panel members talked about local government not having enough power – with too much held at the centre. Others were concerned about a lack of representation at local level – particularly following changes to local government structures.

Some talked about it being difficult to contact local government during lockdown and asked: "Is there a mode they can go into to be more flexible and responsive?" (policy panel member).

If COVID-19 has shown what can happen when communities and local authorities work in partnership, it has also provided an opportunity to explore a new kind of relationship for the future.



We describe the network as an ecology of relationships. They were there before COVID, during COVID and they'll be there after it too."

Paul Wright, Firs and Bromford Big Local

Rachael Maskell, local MP for York, at the Tang Hall food co-op cafe before the start of the pandemic. The co-op played an important role in the community during lockdown.



Tang Hall Big Local

Six months on: Communities keep on going, but need more support

Six months on from our first interviews, Local Trust convened its policy panel once more to find out how the communities we spoke to in the early months of the pandemic are managing now. With the announcement in January 2021 of the third lockdown, communities once again geared up to make sure support was available to those who were vulnerable, frail and shielding. But the enduring crisis has not come without a cost to those support systems; communities are feeling the pressure, some are close to burning out, and most are reporting high levels of fatigue among staff and volunteers.

The main challenges that communities were grappling with back in the summer have not gone away, but rather intensified and developed as the pandemic has worn on. By now, people are feeling increasingly disconnected; the days of being able to knock on doors and meet outside have passed, and so many of those vulnerable are spending the long winter stuck indoors. The Portland Inn Project in Stoke-on-Trent are still developing new and exciting ways for people to stay in touch – the new Women’s Group have started meeting once weekly – but are faced with the continued challenge of those who, without the devices, data, or skills and confidence to get online, face both physical and digital disconnection.

Communities report that digital exclusion is a burning issue for them, something that requires targeted, long-term investment to address. In Bishop Auckland, Gaunless Gateway Big Local explained that community buildings have become an untapped resource – they could be used to provide digital access to those lacking it – but which, due to being disconnected and often unable to foot the bill for broadband, are left empty and underused. Lessons from the pandemic about the importance of digital access could be the boost needed to link these community buildings up for the future.



Hackney Wick resident Sharon in July 2020, taken as part of photographer Polly Mann's project talking to local residents about their lives under lockdown.

Concerns were also voiced about continued need for food: Sale West in Manchester have kept on supporting those who fall through the gaps in formal networks, distributing weekly donations of surplus food from local supermarkets. But communities' efforts have now long surpassed a short-term, emergency response, and something more sustainable needs to be put in place if demand does not ease up soon.

Despite it all, the panel also talked about the glimmers of hope that have started to reignite plans for life beyond the pandemic. It is coming in the form of the vaccine, with communities reporting high uptake amongst those eligible in their areas. But it is also coming in a renewed sense of confidence and

value. In the Cars Area of Smith's Wood in Birmingham, those involved in the Big Local partnership now feel like they are firmly on the map and won't be forgotten or overlooked in future. In particular, the Local Authority is looking to them for their wealth of local knowledge, learning from their skills and experience in direct, neighbourhood-level engagement.

For the panel, it is now over to policy-makers and funders to reflect upon what this pandemic has taught us about the strength and expertise of communities, and to give them the support and resources they need to be ready for whatever the future may hold.

Conclusion

At the beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic was commonly referred to as a 'great leveller', supposedly bringing people and communities together in a universal experience of one hardship. However, people's experience has varied.

It is clear that communities with access to resources and social infrastructure have been more able to work collaboratively and respond to the multiple obstacles that they faced. In those places without these assets, the situation was different and the challenge more severe. As we move into recovery, there is a risk this gap will only widen.

Communities that might be described as the most 'left behind' lack neither community spirit nor civic pride. Rather, they lack the resources and infrastructure that are vital for bringing people together, brokering solutions and targeting community need. Without these, they have been far less equipped to respond to the crisis.

Andrew Atchison



North Ormesby Big Local, Middlesbrough.

In July, early impact research from the APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods (2020) found less evidence of a strong response from the voluntary and community sector in these communities. Despite having a higher concentration of vulnerable groups, 'left behind' neighbourhoods saw "lower levels of charitable grants awarded by UK foundations in response to the pandemic, and relatively fewer local self-help mutual aid groups established" (APPG for 'left behind' neighbourhoods, 2020).

To fulfil its intention to 'build back better' from the COVID crisis, the government must place trust in the people who live and work in 'left behind' neighbourhoods, enabling them to take responsibility for their local areas, improve the quality of life for their families and communities, and build resilience to future challenges. For areas that were already 'left behind' pre-COVID, there will be a need to match investment in economic infrastructure with investment

in rebuilding social infrastructure. This will not only help communities to cope with immediate pressures, but also ensure they have the resilience to cope with future crises, at a time when COVID has significantly increased the vulnerability of our systems and economy.

The first steps of this community agenda would be to provide these neighbourhoods with relatively small-scale but long-term investment in social infrastructure, coupled with a programme of patient, responsive support. This would help to develop the skills and capacity necessary to harness that growing infrastructure and improve local social and economic outcomes. The [Community Wealth Fund](#), proposed by the [Community Wealth Alliance](#), offers a costed and structured framework for doing this – one that can be put in place quickly and got up and running as a matter of urgency.

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Appendix: Voices from the front line

This section contains stories taken from nine interviews with Big Local residents, which took place over the summer in 2020 and were carried out for Local Trust by Dannie Grufferty.

1: 'We can work in partnership with the state'

Anna Hunter (Part 1), project Lead, Tang Hall Big Local, York

While the council own the lease on the building and a local charity runs the building, it was us that provided a coordinator for volunteers. This was a full-time role; we had the resources to provide that. Crucially, one of the council workers is on the Big Local partnership board, so the communication was there long before COVID-19; our relationship has always been good. Three council staff have been regular volunteers in the hub too, that has been of huge value.

By its nature, COVID-19 meant we had to work even more closely together; it was a global pandemic, we didn't really have any other choice but to work together and ensure there was no duplication!

Our ward has felt the hard effects of austerity. This is about us filling the gaps; this is about how we add value. The state has a core role to play and we add value to that. They can't do what we are doing, we can't do what they are doing. But we can work in partnership together.

It's important that Tang Hall Big Local feels independent from the council and resident-led. But that doesn't mean we are slagging the council off – they have a role to play and so do we. The key thing is we treat one another with respect and ensure we have open dialogue. We don't want a crisis to go to waste for the sake of scoring political points. We need to sustain the good intentions that have come from people in our communities.

2: 'It was a local solution – fast and effective'

Pippa St John Cooper, community development manager, Whitleigh Big Local, Plymouth

There were two assets that were crucial. We had access to a building and partnerships already established. Without them, we just could not have got to work.

In the run-up to lockdown, we had brought together a variety of key players in the community. We'd been holding a series of workers' lunches. In the space of a few hours we set up the Whitleigh Help Hub which also turned into a food distribution centre, accepting donations and taking referrals from the local community and the council for people in urgent need of food and support.

We're in the highest 10 per cent in the country in terms of deprivation, yet we managed to respond faster than the local authority! By the time they got organised with the shielding parcels, we were doing the job well, so why replicate? So the local authority let us "get on with it", and were able to divert their resources to other areas in need.

Once a person knows a person and trusts that person – it's much easier to just carry that on. The council knew us. Residents knew us. Different charities, community organisations knew us, and each other. It was a local solution – which was fast and effective. We supported anybody who was in trouble – whether via stress, anxiety, financial, childcare, food poverty.

3: 'We knocked on every door'

**Sue Merriman, community worker,
Brereton Million Big Local, Staffordshire**

We have been delivering community projects for a good few years now. So we had the people and the experience to be able to get to work quickly once lockdown started. The first thing we did was set up a big support group with coordinators. What we needed was an organised structure so people knew what they were doing and who was in charge.

Over nine weeks around eight of us knocked on every door in Brereton village.

It started simple enough. The local Coop donated bread, fruit and veg. We were taking that round and leaving our contact details if no one answered.

Huge numbers of residents were getting in touch to thank us. But then something else was happening, these were opportunities to have deeper chats. We would also ask if there was someone else they thought might need help. It turned out that many people *did* know someone.

With every street we began to find new problems. Over time we began to get a picture of exactly what the issues were in our communities. The many ways in which residents are struggling day-to-day. It felt like a light was being shined on issues that were there long before COVID-19.

Food was a big one, people who had been made redundant or were self-employed. Large families who could not stretch their tight budgets.

And then there were the mental health issues. It was bad. It is bad. I knocked on one door and found a man who was contemplating suicide.

It has been tough, we have felt the strain but we are emerging from this pandemic more connected as a community than ever. We had made the connections. That's the most important thing. Without the connections, we would not have had the knowledge base upon which to take action.

4: 'Our main priority was quick financial support'

**Jenny Chigwende, health lead,
W12 Big Local, West London**

Our community is often labelled 'hard to reach', in terms of our demographic population, a lot of communities where English is a second-language, migrant communities etc. At W12 Big Local, we try not to see people and communities as 'hard to reach' – the challenge is on us, to shine a light on the lived experience of these communities. To be honest the issue is simple, we are not using the language they understand.

We are a huge network of relationships; these communities lean on their own leaders who they trust, and in turn we can reach out and work with those leaders. COVID brought new challenges but, in a way, it just heightened those already there.

We already had a plan focused on making the community more cohesive, supporting elderly people and tackling loneliness. As we were already so connected to different organisations because of the work of Big Local, we felt the best way to support communities was to provide funds to the groups and charities that communities lean on. Our main priority was giving out emergency funds to those who needed quick financial support.

We've given out grants, we've forged new connections over Zoom. And once we give out grants, we don't simply wave farewell – we continue that relationship. Our board members are 'champions' for grantees and mentor them going forward.

Many of the families in our area have no recourse to public funds. We gave a grant to a group that works with refugees. We worked with other organisations – giving out phone cards and dongles, laptops, supporting families who traditionally rely on their local library. We gave a grant to a local sports organisation supporting young people with very little social contact. We gave the food bank a large grant – to bulk buy dry goods, for example. We worked with local charities to ensure meals were getting to the elderly and that there was culturally specific food for communities.

The community feels more connected than ever. A lot of the relationships we have now were forged during COVID.

5: 'We worked to harness and focus the goodwill'

**Shaun O'Hare, development worker,
Keighley Valley Big Local, West Yorkshire**

When lockdown was announced, many were in panic mode, so we agreed a priority was to keep the food bank going.

But that was just the start. The Big Local partnership promoted the idea of having a presence on the streets and responding to requests from residents. In just two to three days, we realised there was a huge need for this practical 'doorstep support'. We started a regular patrol two days a week in an area where there's a lot of social housing and elderly residents.

There was so much anxiety about. No one really knew what they were doing, back in March. We were trying out the untested. One key thing was we worked to harness and focus the goodwill. Supermarkets were saying they had surplus food but people and organisations were not communicating with one another. We encouraged those distributing the food parcels to take that food, and use the community centre kitchen to make hot meals for the community!

We thought the volunteers would be doing 30-40 meals a day at most. In the end our doorstep dinner ladies were making 120-150 meals each day, twice a week, for people who couldn't get out of the house. A local Chinese restaurant donated tin foil cartons, a pizza takeaway donated boxes, supermarkets and local shops donated goods, and residents donated money. Over time the meals just got better and better! Three course meals in the end!

The core support was working well so we could promote more fun stuff, just to put a smile on people's faces. Even though it has been a horrendous time, it has helped us in building up rapport with residents and help them to come together. We really think the social capital has been strengthened in parts of the Big Local area.

6: 'We'd spent years building these networks up'

**Paul Wright, development worker,
Firs and Bromford Big Local, Birmingham**

Food delivery was way more than feeding people, it was about supporting people. We wanted to encourage people to share and talk and engage with each other. I feel like if we had not been there, it would have been strangers, parachuting in, dropping in a parcel, maybe a quick hello, then leaving. That would feed somebody, but it would not have made them feel connected, and part of the neighbourhood even though they are stuck in the house.

A lot of 'hidden' people would be lost in a large system. So, there are a group of older men who generally just about function. They have some alcohol and drug problems, self-esteem and confidence issues. You might say they live 'on the edge'; they might access a doctor and have housing, but they would not show up on any other system.

As soon as the shops started closing, the normal pattern of life for these guys was immediately disrupted. We have relationships with a couple of the key characters in that group, so we were able to put out a call. Suddenly they, and we, were in what we would call our neighbourhood support structure. General state services would know something about it, but it is intrinsically local, so they would not understand it. As the services stepped back, those networks were all we had. That 'neighbourhood ecology', the relationships. We'd spent years building this up, these networks, so when the pandemic hit we were able to act.

COVID highlighted more intensely all the deeper issues our communities are struggling with. They were in your face and impossible to ignore. We need to find solutions for those suffering food poverty, unstable temporary housing, poor quality housing, overcrowding, low-income and unstable employment, and other issues. We continue to listen and learn by having those doorstep conversations, get to know people and begin to find solutions with people, not for them.

7: 'Daily contact is so important'

**Sarah Sutton, community involvement
coordinator, Whitley Bay Big Local, Tyne
and Wear**

It's about never giving up on people. Big Local was able to be there for some of the most vulnerable – people that had not eaten in days. One man we found in the local B&Bs where the council had put the most vulnerable, had Alzheimer's. He was having his landlord administer his medication; he simply did not have anyone else. It was awful.

We found lots of people were being housed in former B&Bs. We had been aware of this before COVID, but what the pandemic did was make more evident the scale of the problem in our community. One landlord had closed the kitchen. Some people did not even have a fridge or microwave. So we got to work, distributing hot meals to the B&Bs. We ensured we had a small group of volunteers, so that people got used to seeing each other and relationships could be built up.

That daily contact is so important, especially in a pandemic! Sometimes it felt like people were getting more contact than they were used to. One gentleman we delivered to is a 93-year-old, living alone. We would check in with him that he was wearing his care call button, as he'd had a few falls recently.

I think one of the key things is that we don't try and fix people. It's just about building relationships and helping people feel some kind of connection.

Our building has been closed but we plan to reopen early in September. We want to make the space as warm, inclusive and welcoming as it always was, while working within the guidelines to ensure that everyone is safe. We're committed to making it whatever the community wants it to be. It's a shared space and in these times ahead that will be so vital. Communities need those spaces to come together, now more than ever.

8: 'Decisions are very much resident-led'

**Katy Roberts, coordinator,
Boston Big Local, Lincolnshire**

Many community groups are put off by long forms and funding applications that ask for lots of supporting information. We've been running a community chest for a few years now, generally speaking it's three rounds a year and groups can apply for up to £1,500.

I think one of the things with the way we do our Community Chest is how simple the form is. It's pretty straightforward, and we don't ask for supplementary information until the panel approves the bid. So the turnover can be quick. Centrepont Outreach, a local homeless charity, applied to us on 1 May for urgent funds to help rough sleepers moved into emergency accommodation. By 8 May the panel had met and by the following week they had the funds. Centrepont actually applied for £500 but we thought they probably needed a bit more and residents were keen to acknowledge the work that the organisation was doing in the town so we gave them a bit extra.

It is something that makes us at Big Local unique: we have that ability to tap into funds and resources, to meet the needs of our local communities. Our Locally Trusted Organisation, Age UK Lincoln and South Lincolnshire, support with the administrative and legal side, but the decisions are very much resident-led. I am the coordinator of Boston Big Local, but I am led by what the residents want to support and do.

Feedback from our local groups and organisations suggest there is a lot of nervousness out there about the coming months, so we're doing another round in addition to our normal Community Chest specifically for COVID-related work. Some community groups are having to look at renting other spaces, to comply with social distancing. There's definitely challenges ahead.

9: 'Volunteers need to be at the heart of decision-making'

**Anna Hunter (Part 2), project lead,
Tang Hall Big Local**

Are people resilient? Yes they are, but we have been tested. We can only be pushed so much. There is a big concern about mental health deterioration the longer this goes on.

Our volunteers are starting to return to work – a key challenge is retaining them. Consultation is at the heart of what we do – asking them about training, getting them back into work. More flexible working, home-based working would be an amazing thing for building stronger communities.

We can't take volunteers for granted. That's why volunteers need to be at the heart of decision-making. We're asking them why they started volunteering – we suspect many wanted an element of social contact.

We hope that going forward that need continues even as we move to the 'new normal' and begin to open up again.

About Local Trust

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

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding, and to draw on the learning from our work delivering the Big Local programme to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

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Local Trust

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