

Researching community responses to COVID-19: a methodological note

Written by the COVID-19 community response research team, led by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC), at the University of Birmingham

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Summary

Local Trust has commissioned a team of researchers to undertake a study exploring community responses to COVID-19. The research was originally divided into two main phases. **Phase one** focused on the initial response of communities to the pandemic. **Phase two** was initially planned to focus on recovery, but given the ongoing nature of the crisis, focused instead on the evolving nature of community responses. A **third phase** has now been commissioned which, between April 2021 and March 2022, will focus on how communities are moving on from the pandemic. The research involves two main elements: a **literature review**; and **primary fieldwork in 26 community study areas**, involving learning conversations, observations, a **review of social media** feed, and (in phase three) a series of thematic, **participatory workshops**. Thematic analysis is being employed. The study is reporting in 'real time', with a focus on distilling emerging learning about community responses. This methodological note is an updated version of one originally produced in 2020, reflecting the additions to the research associated with the third phase of the study.

Introduction

Local Trust commissioned a team of researchers, led by the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham, to undertake a study exploring how communities react to, cope with and recover from COVID-19. The aim of the study is to learn, in real time, how different communities have and are continuing to respond to the impact of COVID-19, how they make this happen and how they might be best supported. It is hoped that the findings will help Local Trust understand what communities might need to reboot once the crisis has passed; insight which might inform future support and investment.

The research was originally divided into two phases. Phase one focused on the initial response of communities to the pandemic and ran from April through to September 2020. Phase two, which ran from October 2020 to March 2021, was initially planned to explore recovery. However, given the ongoing nature of the crisis, research focused instead on the evolving nature of community responses. A third phase has now been commissioned by Local Trust, running from April 2021 to March 2022, exploring how communities move on from the pandemic, learning over time, and how best communities can be supported in the future.

In this note we describe the approach we have adopted, the different research methods and processes involved, before concluding with some reflections on our experiences of conducting community-based

research during COVID-19. It has been written as a companion to the set of publications which we are producing as the research unfolds (as outlined below).

Literature review

In recognition that there is much to learn from existing studies to inform responses to the current crisis, the first research element involved a review of literature. The focus was on how communities have reacted to and recovered from major crises in the past, such as epidemics, war, fire, flood or other disasters. While we concentrated primarily on England, we also include some international evidence. As well as reviewing extant literature, we are also gathering published evidence as it emerges from the current crisis.

Given the compressed time for the study as a whole and the importance of early and real time learning, the search strategy for relevant literature has developed incrementally and iteratively as the study proceeded. It has not tried to follow the full guidelines of a 'systematic review' - setting strict inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g., date, location, type of research, focus) - and search terms did not seem suitable in this context. Inclusion/exclusion criteria are developing organically as the review unfolds.

We began with targeted search terms, including, for example, 'disaster response', 'community resilience', 'spontaneous volunteering', and 'mutual aid'. This was followed by snowball searches for further items referencing or referenced by a particular piece of literature (e.g. 'resourcefulness', 'social infrastructure'). As time has gone on, the search strategy has been adapted to capture an increasing amount of literature that is published relating to the current crisis.

Our focus when reviewing the literature has been on the themes emerging from existing evidence, rather than a critique of the quality of that evidence. Findings which build on the initial scoping literature review have been published through a series of Briefing papers (see below) with more to follow over 2021-2022. They are also used to inform fieldwork topics in the study and provide a basis against which we can assess how well responses fit with reactions to previous crises and draw out learning for current and future practice.

Study areas

The second, and most substantial element of the research, involves qualitative fieldwork in 26 study areas. The focus is on exploring how these communities are responding to and plan to move on from the COVID-19 pandemic.

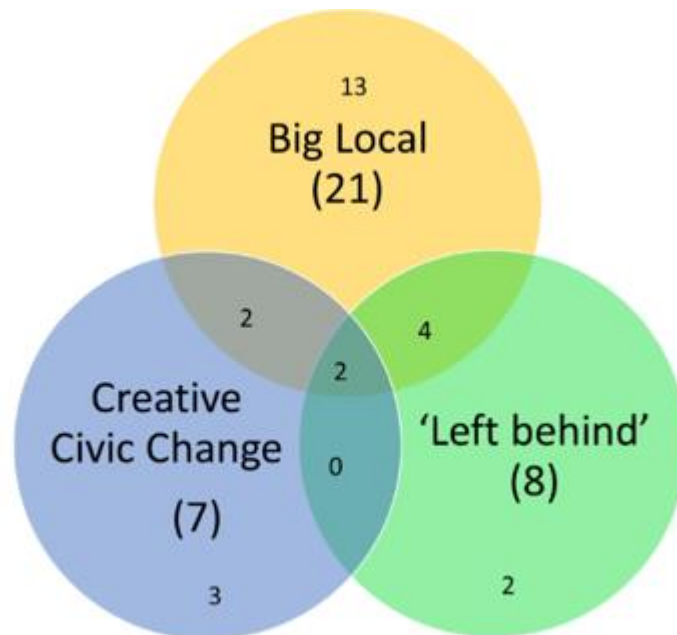
Selection

The starting point was that members of the research team already had trusted relationships with people in the selected communities. This was important when attempting to engage with and provide support to communities during a time of crisis: a period when resources (including time and emotion) are already stretched. In practice, the breadth and depth of those relationships varied across the 26 communities.

Beyond that, study areas were chosen to ensure the inclusion of:

- Communities involved in different Local Trust initiatives - principally [Big Local](#) and [Creative Civic Change](#) areas, and two not involved in any Local Trust programmes at all
- Communities identified as '[left behind](#)' in that Local Trust recognise that they have 'tended not to receive a fair share of the investment available and therefore lack the services and facilities that many of us take for granted'
- A diversity of demography and geographical locations.

There is some deliberate overlap between these different groupings.



Data collection

There have been three aspects to the data collection within the study areas.

First, 'learning conversations' are regularly held between the research team and key community stakeholders. These are an adapted version of semi-structured interviews: they are more informal, flexible, conversational, developmental and supportive than standard semi-structured interviews, reflective of the engaged nature of the relationships between the researchers and the participants involved in the study. They provide a space for mutual learning, with both the interviewer and interviewee sharing insights and reflections. Although informal, the learning conversations were guided by a set of topics, derived from the research questions being addressed through the study. These topic guides were adapted for as time went on, with new questions added in, both to reflect the evolving context and to enable themes emerging from earlier stages of the research to be explored further in subsequent interviews.

In the first phase of the research – between April and September 2020 – over 300 learning conversations took place across the 26 study areas. During the second phase (October 2020 to March 2021) a further 235 learning conversations were undertaken. These were held with community workers, volunteers, residents, and Big Local Reps or Creative Civic Change Critical Friends (representatives of Local Trust who play a facilitative role in Big Local and Creative Civic Change areas respectively). They took place online, often via Zoom, or by telephone, and, where possible, were digitally recorded. Many were with individual participants, but some were with groups. Some were one off conversations, others were repeats (we spoke to some respondents up to four times within the first phase).

Learning conversations will continue during phase three of the research, 2021-2022. Given the levels of exhaustion expressed by participants in the early months of 2021, however, these learning conversations will be less frequent than they have been in previous phases, taking place in two waves in spring and autumn of 2021.

Second, we have been observing relevant meetings and events in the study areas. To date, these have tended to be [Big Local Partnership](#) meetings (resident led decision making forums established in each Big Local Area to guide the overall direction of Big Local within communities) and /or their working groups, such as health and wellbeing groups. They have all been virtual, again mainly via Zoom. In communities that are not part of the Big Local programme we have explored other equivalent forums and meetings to observe. This will continue in phase three of the research with an emphasis on observing a wider range of groups and meeting, in order to include greater diversity of experiences.

Third, we have been monitoring the social media feed emerging from all the study areas. To date we have reviewed over 3,500 posts, mainly on Facebook and Twitter. This will continue throughout the study. The aim

is to review key themes being discussed. We have, for example, been able to identify key types of response (e.g., food provision, befriending, activity packs) within the study area communities, and how these have shifted over time. Short films have been produced using this material (see below).

Fourthly, in the third phase of the research, the above methods will be supplemented by a series of thematic online, participatory workshops, which will bring members of the 26 communities together to explore certain themes emerging from the research. The workshops aim to open up debate on particular aspects of community responses to COVID-19 including, for example, how community action has been sustained during the pandemic, changing community needs and the role played by community hubs as both physical and virtual 'spaces of care'. Emerging research findings will be used to stimulate discussion, with the aim of exploring the extent to which the emerging findings resonate with participants, how their experiences might be similar or different, and what the implications might be for their own communities and others.

Study area analysis

Where possible, learning conversations are digitally recorded and either transcribed verbatim or in detailed note form. Notes are written up from observation sessions. Thematic analysis is being employed. Early themes identified included those developed from an initial starting point of the research questions raised, concepts from the literature, and discussions amongst the research team about the data as fieldwork progressed. The study team includes ten researchers with responsibility for the study areas fieldwork and analysis, regular team meetings were a vital part of the analysis process, enabling the sharing of reflections on emerging themes and the coproduction of an associated coding frame. These initial themes were refined and grouped as analysis progressed. The data from each study area was analysed individually by the member of the research team with responsibility for that area: this involved manually coding interview transcripts and observation, in line with the agreed themes and coding frame. Summary reports are then produced for each of the study areas, organised according to the key themes, but also including space for additional reflections and so the emergence of new themes. Once the within case analysis is completed, cross-case analysis is undertaken, by bringing together each of the individual study area report summaries and focusing on identifying points of similarity and difference across the cases and the distilling factors which may explain this, revisiting transcripts when and where necessary. Analysis continues throughout the research period, with new themes regularly added, enabling real time reporting and learning.

Additional interviews

A third element of the research is a series of interviews to broaden the scope of the research, beyond the study area communities.

Big Local reps, covering an additional 57 areas:

- 15 Big Local reps who between them cover an additional 42 areas have been interviewed at two points during the research: once in phase one and once in phase two. Although some of the reps may be responsible for communities within the case studies, the interviews have focused on their perceptions of responses outside of our study areas, bringing a wider understanding of community responses to bear. The interviews focused on exploring perceptions of different response between communities, particularly between those designated as 'left behind' and other areas.
- five Big Local reps who between them cover an additional 15 areas were interviewed by Local Trust during phase one, and the findings were shared with the TSRC team for analysis.

Local authorities:

- 19 members and officers from five local authorities that have been identified (either through our own or other research) as working proactively with communities were interviewed during the second phase of the research. In each of the five local authorities, the focus was on the approach adopted by local

authorities to working with community groups during the crisis, and perceptions of what enabled proactive engagement and effective working relationships.

Synthesis

As well as ensuring each element of the study is both reported on in real time and informs the next phase of research as the study progresses, we will also bring together and synthesise findings from across the study as a whole in early 2022. This will be achieved through an iterative process of moving between the analysis from each of the research elements, identifying points of consensus and difference and, where necessary, revisiting the analysis to understand more about underlying factors. By comparing and combining findings from the literature, case studies, and stakeholder interviews we will be able to identify key learning from the study in terms of how communities have responded to and moved on from COVID-19, how this compares to community responses to previous crises, and how it might inform responses to crises in the future.

Reporting

A key principle underpinning the research design is the sharing of emerging findings as the study progresses. This is being enabled through a comprehensive programme of publications and events, including:

- **Blogs:** the [first one](#) focused on the variety of responses emerging from communities in the initial stages of the pandemic with a [second reviewing those responses after nine months](#) of the crisis; more will follow in phase three;
- **Reports:** the [first focused on findings from phase one](#) of the research to September 2020, with [the second report](#) drawing out the key lessons from the second phase of the research, from October 2020 to March 2021 as the pandemic evolved;
- **Briefings:** [12 research briefings have been produced](#) from the first two phases of the research, with a further six due within phase three. While the briefings in phase one and two were written in themed pairs – one drawing on the literature, one on the primary fieldwork – those associated with phase three will combine the literature and the primary findings, to enable a better integration of the two. The final two briefings will look back across all the research evidence gathered throughout the study: one will provide a longitudinal perspective on community responses to COVID-19, the other will draw comparisons across the 26 communities to identify what has been similar and different in their responses and how this might be explained.
- **Short films:** a series of short [films](#) have been produced, drawing on social media content from Big Local areas

Some reflections on doing community research during COVID-19

The methods and processes that researchers usually rely on have had to shift, along with those of the community activists involved in the research. The most significant change has been from face to face meetings and interviews, to being online. Some things have worked well, others have been more challenging. Reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the approaches we have adopted, three aspects have emerged as being particularly striking:

- **Engaged research in communities within which we had existing relationships.** A key strength of this approach is that it has enabled us to research communities that would otherwise have proved very difficult to access during this time of crisis. Further, it has helped ensure that the research is developmental, building on existing working relationships. This has been facilitated through the learning conversations, which have proved to be a useful adaptation of semi-structured interviews in this context, allowing for a more conversational based approach with an emphasis on a mutual sharing of insights and the creation of a supportive space for reflection for community members. While these have been more time consuming and arguably more emotionally demanding (particularly during the period of the third lockdown) than standard interviews, it is questionable whether the research would have been possible if

reliant on traditional methods in such a challenging context and it has unquestionably made the research richer and more impactful.

- **Virtual research:** Conducting interviews and observing meetings online has enabled the research to go ahead when face to face interactions have not been possible. It has proved to have some advantages over face to face methods. We have found that some people have been more willing to speak to us online than had previously been the case in face to face interactions. And less time travelling, means more time for interviews. But there are also drawbacks. We have missed out on many of the wider clues that we would usually take from face to face interactions – the look, feel and smell of places we would otherwise have visited and that would have told us so much more about what is going on than words alone. We have also missed out on the more informal conversations with wider community members that usually come from just being there. And it can be hard to read what is going on in meetings – to get a sense of the dynamics between group members, especially when not everyone fits on the screen at once or choose to have their videos on.
- **Maintaining engagement:** As the research has progressed, along with the pandemic, it has become increasingly clear that energies are waning, leaving little capacity to engage in research processes. During a round of learning conversations in early 2021 a number of participants reported feeling ‘tired, exhausted, worn out’. As a result, the decision was made to reduce the demands placed on communities from the research by reducing the frequency of the learning conversation within the third phase of the study. The on-line thematic, participatory workshops were added as a way of opening up other ways of being involved in the research, while also providing valuable opportunities for communities to come together to share their experiences and learning with each other and with the research team. The importance of flexible and responsive research methodologies has thus been highlighted when working within challenging and changing crisis contexts.

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

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