

# Lessons from the pandemic

In September 2020 Support Cambridgeshire were commissioned to carry out some quantitative research into how the sector and statutory partners had adapted and worked together during the period of lockdown as part of this we talked with:

- 19 groups made up from a range of countywide, small and newly formed community groups and charities;
- representatives from 6 district/city hubs and the county hub.

We carried out some basic desk research into reports and research carried out by other local and national bodies, we combined these findings with our first-hand experience in working with organisations<sup>1</sup> during the period March to September 2020. This included learning from networking events, from requests for support and from catch up calls with colleagues. The report forms part of a wider document [that is available here](#).

We have witnessed thousands of individual acts of kindness, some small some big, but all important, and all of which have contributed to the fact that people and communities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have weathered the crisis up to this stage as best as possible.

## The Surprises

It has been a surprise the number of bridges we have seen built. Organisations and statutory partners have reacted in ways that would not have been envisaged without the catalyst of a global pandemic.

**Adaption** – By the time local government looked up, activity was happening on the ground. Organisations, communities and individuals were the first and the quickest to react to the needs of people across the county. In the main everyone recognised this and went along with it. Statutory partners were able to adapt as they developed their own services and what emerged was a set of co-produced solutions that were different in each area and that built on the infrastructure that existed locally.

**Relationships** – These have proved vital and are the oil that allowed the machine to function. Where they were better and stronger we often saw better and more co-ordinated responses, but we have also seen new relationships formed and new partnerships entered into.

Very often how well things worked was down to who knew who. This highlighted the importance of

“No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted”

“In the moment of crisis, the wise build bridges and the foolish build dams”

connectors - individuals who bridge communities and organisations and can bring people together. It also highlighted the fact that it is essential for statutory partners to engage with local organisations and to build connections and trust.

**Equality** – Not everyone has been impacted by the pandemic in the same way. The virus has shone a light on issues of inequality; it has amplified inequalities of all type including digital, health, ethnicity, income or any other indicator. We have seen those suffering these inequalities facing additional pressures and barriers to staying safe or healthy, or access services. Much of the work of organisations has been to look at how they can reduce these barriers with their client groups to ensure people are best able to ride out lockdown or other restrictions.

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<sup>1</sup> When we are talking about organisations, we are referring to charities, community groups and mutual aid groups. We will use this shorthand throughout this report.

# What we learnt

Our overriding lesson was that there was no one correct response to the pandemic. Responses were not perfect, they were sometimes messy, confused and complicated, but organisations and statutory partners innovated, adapted and worked tirelessly to help and support people. Errors were made and these were addressed in positive ways as all organisations found ways to adapt and survive.

On the whole organisations in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have fared reasonably well. Whilst both CCVS and Hunts Forum have had to help organisations find solutions to difficult problems brought on by loss of funding or other areas, we have not seen large numbers of closures and the groups we work with have avoided large scale redundancies. Whilst organisations have lost funding, seen demand increase and had issues with volunteers not being available, we have not seen the large scale issues reported by [Groundwork in their national research](#).

## **Organisations are worried.**

We asked organisations whether they could continue to deliver essential services, especially during periods of further lockdown. The overriding answer was yes, but not with the capacity of first-time round, burnout is an issue as are availability of resources and volunteers with the right skills and experience.

Funding is a crucial issue. In an immediate and short-term response funders and councils have stepped in coupled with government grants or furlough payments to enable organisations to adapt services and meet demand. However, there is a growing concern about future funding. There is acknowledgement that many funders have overspent in the crisis, that local councils will be even more cash strapped than before the crisis, and that we are entering into a protracted recession. In addition the restrictions necessitated by the crisis have severely impacted on organisations ability to fund raise. We will never know if locally the sector has lost the £34.5 million predicted. But numerous [national research reports](#) say that the sector has lost anything up to £10 billion nationally.

## **Local is good...**

Each district responded differently in response to the very different characteristics of their area and to the organisations active in the location, to geography and to the relationships that were in place and that developed. This tailored response from the local authority was welcomed by all organisations; but it did



“An error doesn’t become a mistake until you refuse to correct it”

make it harder for those working across multiple districts to ensure they were plugged in to all the right places.

However, this approach has meant that not all communities have had the same support or services, resulting in a bit of a postcode lottery. Often, we have seen more activity in more deprived areas and this is born out by the groundwork report nationally.

Centralisation nationally probably caused as many problems as it solved, this included ‘Boris boxes’ and the national volunteer scheme. We did not see these issues replicated between county and district functions and organisations working at the different tiers. Essentially things worked well between local partners from all sectors.

## **Embrace change but maintain the focus**

Client services will look different going forward even once the pandemic is behind us. Much of the move to digital delivery will be combined with a return to face to face work for many charities. There is likely to be changes to where and how people work and there is a universal desire from many statutory partners to continue to use video for many of the meetings they convene.

Communication has been key, and especially social media. Facebook and WhatsApp have been pivotal in the setting up and development of groups; they have also played a key role in allowing communities to keep in touch. This change from one central communication path to many creates a challenge in the future for organisations and statutory bodies communicating key messages. They must also ensure they meet the needs of those not able to access digital communications.

Organisations have faced challenges in maintaining the day to day functions of service delivery and not moving away from their mission. This is a particular issue for small organisations who have had to alter their services but who have few resources and little time to spend on this. These organisations will need support to enable them to embed essential changes to meet the demands of the new normal.

# Moving Forward

Much can be learnt from the pandemic, from the impact it has had on organisations, and from the way that we have seen the best and the worst of society. Locally we would like to see the best of this practice encouraged and built on. This will allow real change to come from relationships and partnerships that have flourished due to Covid 19.

## Keep reducing bureaucracy

There has been a significant reduction in bureaucracy during the pandemic. Organisations, funders and statutory partners have worked together to implement new services to ensure that people have been given the support they need. We want to keep this new way of working that has seen a more outcome focused rather than output focused partnership. It has been recognised that this is already starting to slip as partners regress back into their old ways of working.

## A more equal partnership

We want to continue, and build on, our journey shoulder to shoulder. This means continuing to develop a more equal partnership built around common values, trust and transparency, and an investment into co-produced solutions.

## Local is good

Communities have stepped up. They have recognised their needs and have worked with new or existing organisations and structures to ensure the needs were met in the most appropriate way. We want to see more weight given to local knowledge, to social value and to community investment when deciding on how to deliver services.

## Empower and invest in communities

We want to see investment into communities and the organisations that sustain and nourish them. This will help to build skills and strengths and ensure truly community led, co-produced solutions. We also need to see real power divested into local communities to ensure they are at the heart of delivering solutions and services.

## Support is important

Communities and the organisations that work in them have many strengths and skills, but for them to continue to deliver they will need ongoing support and the opportunity to learn and develop - well-resourced and effective support organisations are crucial to deliver this.

# Thank you

Our thanks go to all the organisations we interviewed and to the representatives from the district/city hubs and from the county hub. We have not named the organisations interviewed as we wanted to maintain full anonymity.

We would also like to thank the staff from Hunts Forum, Cambridge Council for Voluntary Service, Peterborough CVS and Living Sport who carried out the research interviews, and to C CVS for collating the results.

You can read more about the impact of COVID-19 on the sector, including additional information on this report on [this Sway page](#). We will be adding to this as new research is published and as we develop further case studies.

“We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

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## Our partnership

Support Cambridgeshire is a partnership between Hunts Forum, Cambridge Council for Voluntary Service and Cambridgeshire ACRE.

## General enquires

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