Rapid Research COVID-19

Blending formal and informal community responses

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SYNOPSIS: In Briefing 3: Grassroots Action, Rob Macmillan explored the literature on the value of informal community activity in conditions of crisis. This included a classification of responses (Whittaker et al, 2015) from *established* crisis response organisations to *expanding* organisations meeting the demands of the moment as well as *extending* organisations (taking on new roles) and *emergent* organisations (new groups carrying out new tasks, often responding to unmet needs). In this briefing, we examine community contributions, collaborations and connections in the 26 research areas, and where and how they might fit along a spectrum of formal and informal ways of working.

Key points

- Informality has assisted the speed and flexibility of responses to COVID-19, but has not necessarily been able to address the scale of the pandemic's impact.

- Access to flexible- long-term funding has enabled some community organisations to engage more effectively in responses to COVID-19.

- Informality and formality are not binary opposites. As the pandemic has evolved, there is evidence that some formal organisations have adopted more informal ways of working, whilst some informal community groups have moved towards more formal structures and eligibility criteria for access to services.

- Pre-existing community infrastructure and established networks have facilitated the co-ordination of responses to COVID-19 and enabled some services to extend and expand their interventions.

This briefing is the fourth in a new series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Future briefings will be published throughout 2020 and 2021 to share early findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

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Introduction

A recent report from New Local Government Network notes that *'in the early days of lockdown, neither councils nor the conventional voluntary sector were agile enough to get the right help to the right people straight away. Only the community could respond with the flexibility and immediacy required, and this informal effort has proved to be vital,'* (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020: 28-29). Across the 26 case study areas involved in the study on community responses to COVID-19 there are examples of community-based groups *expanding* or *extending* their work, and also of new, emerging groups where members may feel there are gaps in provision or feel excluded from formal volunteering opportunities. The learning to date illustrates that a range of approaches have been adopted at the local level – from very informal to the more formal, and a 'blending' of both (Gilchrist, 2016). In this we see a range of community contributions, collaborations and connections.

Community contributions – role and value of informal approaches

Across most of the case study areas, the immediate responses to COVID-19 and the subsequent 'lockdown' were highly informal and between neighbours; for example, sharing food, offering to pick up prescriptions or looking after a shielding friend's allotment.

Amongst community groups, as opposed to individuals, there are many examples of food-based activity. This has ranged from 'shop and drop' to community fridges and freezers, food banks and hot meals services. Those providing food were expanding or extending existing activities into a new form of delivery. Closed community centres and hubs have been repurposed for food storage. In one area, for example, a group had already created an integrated food project and was in a good position to use its community café as a base for preparing meals that could be distributed in the community.

Similarly, many of the existing food banks have extended their provision during the lockdown. The offer of shopping – either through free food bags of essentials or through offers of doing people's shopping whilst they are isolating – is an example of a new role mostly carried out within existing community structures. In other areas new responses emerged; for example 'bring and share' food tables in gardens or on the street, or surplus fruit and vegetables being left at the gate of local allotments.

Other common responses have involved delivering activity packs to children or to older people, and offering online activities – whether play and youth groups, 'virtual' coffee mornings or other arts, creative and social activities. These, again, have tended to be organised through existing community groups, but transferred in the current circumstances to a range of platforms: Zoom, WhatsApp and others. However, new, more informal, often street-based forums have also emerged, offering, amongst other things, skills-swaps and equipment loans.

Not all activity has moved online. Socially distanced street parties (for example for VE Day) have happened. In some cases, an existing community organisation has taken the lead on this; in others, as one community member commented: "*Nobody really organised it, everyone just chucked in food and drink*".

There are also examples of emergent organisations and networks built around identification of unmet need, as in the case of this support group (see right). In two case study areas, local volunteers teamed up with a commercial café to set up the distribution of hot meals to vulnerable individuals and families who were not receiving statutory support.

Evidence from the research suggests that the combination of meeting basic food needs and offering social

(East Cleveland Good Neighbours Support Group)

The Greatest Strength is the Community

- This group was formed from within the community by the community
- This is not someone else's agenda or created by service deliverers with their own remit
- Its a "Bottom Up" approach that has connected communities
- Villages are supporting each other and barriers have been broken down
- Many of the volunteers have never engaged with pre existing community groups

interaction has been particularly important; according to one community member: "*People appreciated the meals, but what they really valued was the chance to talk with someone – even if that was only in the front garden or at the doorstep*". The ability of community groups to harness a team of local residents to offer this service rather than through 'outside' volunteers has been significant. In at least three areas, however, community groups which started out as informal networks of activists are in a process of transition, either by formalising their structures to apply for funding, or developing much tighter eligibility criteria for access to food and services as the crisis has evolved.

Community collaborations – relationships with more formal response systems

Formal and informal ways of working are often contrasted as binary opposites – top down versus bottom up – with informal community action characterised as well-intentioned but amateurish at best, or even obstructive to achieving strategic objectives. Highly formalised responses are often seen as 'one size fits all', and insufficiently flexible to meet diverse community needs.

It is more useful to understand that there is a spectrum across degrees of formality and informality. '*Blending and braiding*' these approaches (Gilchrist, 2016) can be challenging, and mis-communication and lack of trust commonplace (McCabe and Phillimore, 2017). Yet examples are emerging in terms of the current findings on community responses to COVID-19.

Community groups have been able to tailor generic central and local government public service information to reflect the local organisational landscape and community needs. In addition, some local authorities have found that the local knowledge of informal community groups has enabled statutory interventions (e.g. emergency food aid) to operate more flexibly and reach a broader range of vulnerable people. For example, in one case study area, a community organisation has extended its role to coordinate mutual aid activity across three estates to support the local authority's food distribution strategy, and thereby provide a link to previously unreached BAME communities. In other areas informality has facilitated greater flexibility in the delivery of services which prevents them being slowed down by inappropriate red tape. Different ways of delivering food that do not require detailed safeguarding procedures or DBS checks have evolved embedding an ethos of proactivity and pragmatism.

Furthermore, gaps in services arising as a result of furloughed workers in larger voluntary organisations have been picked up in many instances at a community level. However, this is tempered by a recognition that, in the move towards 'recovery', a series of specialist

interventions – which might not be within the remit or capacity of smaller community groups, such as benefits/money advice and mental health support – will be required.

Community connections – combining formal and informal approaches and structures

In areas with well-established community-based infrastructure, groups such as a Big Local or a grassroots anchor organisation were quick-off-the-mark in creating mechanisms in partnership with other agencies to meet residents' needs during the lockdown. These groups were the 'first responders'.

In some areas such groups were 'waiting to see' what others were putting in place before 'jumping in'. In these, pre-existing community infrastructure and networks have been ideally suited to provide a co-ordinated response with local authorities and other statutory and voluntary sector agencies. Some groups were frustrated by the wait, but came into their own quite quickly because they knew where support was required and how it could best be delivered; as a Big Local rep commented:

"They know who to call and which doors to knock on".

In several areas, the community group has become the 'anchor', or conduit, for external and more formal responses linking residents into a wider range of statutory and voluntary services where those did not exist at the neighbourhood level (e.g. in benefits and money advice).

The 26 communities in this research provide a range of different contexts. Most have a short history of community-building through the Big Local programme, and others have had much more limited investment. The added value that the Big Local groups have brought to the table is resources, and crucially the power to determine their use and deploy them quickly where needed. As one Big Local rep commented, their *"resources are flexible and* [their] *plans are adaptable".* It enables community groups to add to the often more constrained response of larger agencies. In one area, the community-based partnership was concerned about the financial hardship of families not normally entitled to free school meals and so it made a donation to the local primary school to ensure these children were properly fed. As the head teacher commented: "*People are getting into debt, having the rug pulled from under their feet. The injection of money from [Big Local] was timely".*

In other areas, Big Locals that have supported local youth work have allocated resources so that young people can benefit from additional services during the lockdown period, such as hot lunches, counselling services and more detached outreach work. In others, a community member commented that small-scale funding has facilitated individuals "*with a good idea and wanting to respond quickly"* to act – for example, mask making and PPE, the distribution of clothing to families with pre-school children, business support for struggling local enterprises or targeted interventions with homeless people.

There is some recognition, however, that this access to a flexible resource is not the case in most communities, and it is not taken for granted. A community member said: "*We've got to accept our privilege with this money… It's not going to be pulled out from beneath us because of this or anything else, you know, and that's just so unique".*

The complexity of the informal and formal

The research to date illustrates that communities have responded through direct contributions, engaging in collaborations and building connections. The last two of these are notable in the areas that have some form of (often long-term) investment in community infrastructure. These areas have, over time, developed relationships with other agencies and groups, which have been cemented or strengthened though the COVID-19 crisis. Some of these relationships, or ways of working, might be located just on the informal side of a spectrum, but equally others may fall just on the formal side. Some community groups are 'moving across' the spectrum by formalising their structures and operations.

However, most organisations blend formal and informal practices. There is no necessary correspondence between community groups providing an informal response, and more established structures providing a formal response. The reverse has been observed, for example; an individual set up a food distribution project early in the crisis, but felt it was important for volunteers to be trained to check that people were in need, and able to handle situations where people were deemed to not be so.

This contrasts with someone in another area, who felt strongly that people should not have to prove need. "*You don't ask why someone is homeless – you just help,*" said one community member; and therefore "*you don't ask why someone needs food, you just give them food.*"

Another community member from a formal agency reports that:

> *"We have distributed food parcels to 100 (individuals and families) every week – and that has been abused by maybe two people. So, it's a trade-off – we could have criteria and need proof – but that would put off more vulnerable people than the two abusing the system".*

In another area the informal is demonstrated through a resident's personal relationships across the city in terms of linking with and learning from other projects. Then more formally, the resident quickly set up a befriending service by drawing on that informal learning.

As well as blending formal and informal approaches and moving back and forth between the two over time, the evidence raises questions about the assumptions underpinning the informal and the formal. Whilst some community groups responded nimbly in the face of slower, bureaucratic organisations, others waited to see what else was being put in place first or demonstrated a fairly risk-averse response.

We have observed, however, that local knowledge and trust at a community level is significant. A key strength is the reduction of the transaction costs (Allen *et al,* 2014) associated with structured, formal, agency responses – and the (re)emergence of relationships (the exchange of food) based on trust. This has undoubtedly facilitated the speed of responses at a community level as evidenced through this and recent research on community organising in the crisis (Taylor and Wilson, 2020). As one community member reported:

> *"It's really the connection – we operate in a space that statutory partners can't work in because there's no trust there between the population and the statutory partners".*

However, there are limitations to informality. Such approaches tend to be small-scale, and possibly insufficient in the face of an all-encompassing crisis. They may rely on pre-existing networks rather than seeking out new connections, and lack reach into particularly vulnerable groups. There can also be questions about representation, accountability, and duplication. In one case-study area a plethora of informal foodbanks and food distribution systems sprang up very quickly to respond to need. However, without coordination these groups also closed rapidly, when food supplies outstripped apparent demand.

The rapid mobilisation of informal crisis responses can also dissipate very quickly as energy wanes and the sense of emergency fades, even though the need for support may continue or new needs may develop; or – *as one community member suggested* – as the crisis continues, key activists "*become tired, burn out…or hit rock bottom with no end in sight.*"

Conclusions

What has emerged from the research to date is the opportunities that 'blending and braiding' the informal and formal can offer. Informal community groups have been able to 'scale up' activities by linking with large, formal statutory agencies with whom, in some instances, there had been no real connections. And, vice-versa, formal structures have been able to gain community intelligence and develop more tailored responses by operating with greater informality and through community networks. The challenge will be to sustain these blended and braided approaches that will enable responses to meet growing and changing needs – even in what will be financially uncertain and difficult times.

We suggest that in terms of responding to crises it is essential to move on from a conventional binary idea of 'top down' versus 'bottom up'. This would help generate greater flexibility in ways of working and the development of new alliances and collaborations. The next briefing will extend this discussion by focusing on questions about the role of volunteering in crisis:

- What does volunteering 'look like' in times of crisis?
- In the context of COVID-19, who volunteers; why and where?
- What is the relationship between informal social action and formal volunteering schemes, such as NHS Volunteer Responders?
- Are the boundaries between paid work and volunteering changing?
- How might volunteering change post COVID-19?

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