

February 2021 **BRIEFING 9**

# Rapid research COVID-19

## Community responses to COVID-19: communities and local authorities

Rob Macmillan, Sheffield Hallam University

**SYNOPSIS:** The varied ways in which local authorities have worked with communities in response to COVID-19 is of great interest for policymakers, researchers and practitioners at the local level. Earlier research on this topic can provide helpful frameworks and insights to inform current debates. This briefing looks at literature on the relationships between local authorities and communities. It revisits the idea of social capital, considers models of relationships at local level, and examines research on the dilemmas of community participation programmes and the local impact of austerity. It concludes with ongoing questions for further investigation.

### Key points

- Community responses to crises are not simply a spontaneous upsurge of local residents, volunteers and community spirit. They also relate to the socio-economic and institutional contexts within which they have arisen, including the relationships between local authorities and communities.
- Social capital approaches can underplay the importance of political and institutional contexts; comparative research in UK cities emphasises the importance of public bodies in mobilising resources.
- A range of typologies have been developed to map variations in relationships between local authorities and communities, including those that highlight more proactive approaches to community governance, and more recently, the idea of community power.
- Research on community participation indicates the complex power dynamics involved in partnership relationships between community-led groups and representatives, local authorities and central government.
- Austerity has had an impact not only on the level and nature of local services, but also on the quality of relationships between the voluntary and community sector and local government, although the picture varies.

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

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

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# Introduction

After 10 months of public health restrictions in response to COVID-19, local community responses to the pandemic continue to be recognised and valued, in the media and amongst commentators and policymakers. Community groups and community businesses, mutual aid groups, community-led infrastructure and the mobilisation of volunteers have all been praised as welcome signs of an upsurge in community spirit (Alakeson and Brett, 2020; Locality, 2020). An early report pointed towards a possible shift “from a Me to a We society” (Robinson, 2020: 4); a sign, [according to the prime minister](#), that “there is such a thing as society”. A review was established to consider ways of sustaining and building on the good-will represented by “awe-inspiring acts of generosity, public spirit and neighbourliness” (Johnson, 2020). The subsequent report by Danny Kruger MP, published in September 2020, set out a raft of proposals for ‘a new social covenant’, comprising “the mutual commitment by citizens, civil society and the state, each to fulfil their discrete responsibilities and to work together for the common good of all” (Kruger, 2020, p. 14).

It would be tempting to think that community responses to crises are an immediate and independent matter of proactive and well-minded people mobilising quickly and getting things done in the face of pressing needs. The word ‘spontaneous’ has been used frequently over the last 10 months to describe community responses to the pandemic, and perhaps overused. Community responses also relate to the socio-economic and institutional contexts within which they have arisen. Of particular significance here has been the quality of relationships between local authorities and communities. For example, research during COVID-19 on the emergence and work of mutual-aid support groups highlights varied relationships with councils. Some have sought to micro-manage mutual aid groups, others have been disinterested and hands-off, whereas some have been “creating the space, and offering the operational support needed, for groups to flourish” (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020, p. 8). The study refers to the ‘make-or-break power’ of local government over community initiatives.

To help explore this dimension of community responses further, this briefing considers literature on the nature of relationships between local authorities and communities. It pays particular attention to how these relationships vary across authorities, how they change over time, and their consequences. The discussion covers four areas:

- 1. Revisiting social capital**
- 2. Models of relationships at local level**
- 3. Community participation and power dynamics**
- 4. Austerity localism.**

## 1. Revisiting social capital

One of the commonest ways of discussing and accounting for community responses to COVID-19 is the concept of ‘social capital’. The formulation developed and popularised by US political scientist Robert Putnam tends to prevail. In his words, social capital “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). These “dense networks of reciprocal social relations” are thought to be both at the root of the upsurge in community spirit and an explanation of varied responses in different communities, for example in relation to the geography of mutual aid groups (Felici, 2020; see also Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). Often this geography is overlaid on a longstanding pattern of socio-economic inequalities. The most remarkable feature of this formulation, however, is that the political

and institutional context in which connections and social relations are brought to the fore appears to be written out.

Research on community participation and the voluntary and community sector in different UK cities, however, disrupts the idea that stocks of social capital exist or can be mobilised independently of the institutional context. A study of the voluntary activity in Birmingham, for example, argues that public authorities have been neglected in Putnam's analysis and can make a difference to social capital, by shaping the context of associational activity, including local and neighbourhood community-based associations (Maloney et al, 2000). An alternative model is articulated, highlighting the interpenetration of state and civil society: "Public authorities are deeply implicated in the shape and activities of voluntary associations, whether it be in the terms of the institutions created to encourage engagement and participation, the form of grants and service level agreements, or the nature of capacity building programmes" (p. 803).

A later study in the same vein by Lowndes et al (2006) extends the argument by comparing political participation across different localities. Variations in local political participation are partly explained by the work of local government, but also by the strength of civic infrastructure, seen as "the formal and informal mechanisms that linked different local organisations and their activities, and provided channels for communication with local policymakers" (Lowndes et al, 2016, p. 552).

The research hinges on the difference in civic infrastructure in the otherwise comparable cities of Hull and Middlesbrough, stating that "it is in their overall level of co-ordination, their approach to engagement and their relationship with the local authority, that substantial differences emerge" (p. 557). In Hull there were few mechanisms for bringing the voluntary and community sector together, and council funding for VCOs was piecemeal, uncoordinated and based on historic connections with political leaders. The relationship between the council and the voluntary and community sector was frequently confrontational and marked by mutual mistrust. A strong umbrella organisation in Middlesbrough formed the basis for a more engaged and diverse sector acting with more of a common purpose in relation to the local authority, reinforced by a clear funding programme.

The research argues that social capital can be affected by local government through a variety of mechanisms, including "citizen education and the provision of community facilities; capacity building and the support of voluntary associations; the design of public places; approaches to community cohesion and social inclusion; and, crucially, through the openness and responsiveness of their own decision-making machinery" (Lowndes et al, 2016, p. 545).

These studies show that the extent, depth and quality of institutional relationships makes a difference to community and political participation. A sense is gained of the variation across different localities, depending on the array of political institutions, cultures, structures and civic infrastructure. Social capital maybe related to trust and networks, but these are contingent on wider structures, processes and orientations. The upshot of this stream of research is that the local authority and community relationships matter.

## 2. Models of relationships at local level

How then, should variations between localities be conceptualised? What models or typologies can help map the terrain of different sets of relationships? Research in the Swedish cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo developed the idea of 'local civil society regimes' to explore and explain different municipal approaches to civil society organisations (CSOs) (Arvidson, et al, 2018). A local civil society regime is based on three pillars: the political and ideological orientation of local government in relation to CSOs;

structures for collaboration and dialogue with CSOs; and arrangements for public funding for CSOs. Stockholm exemplified a liberal local civil society regime, where CSOs sit alongside other organisations in a competitive welfare market. Gothenburg demonstrated a corporatist local civil society regime, based on linkages between CSOs and the municipality in a social economy partnership. And Malmö exhibited a social democratic local civil society regime, where CSOs are in a subordinate position and the public sector dominates service delivery.

Similar typologies can be found in research in the UK. Writing in the early days of the New Labour government, Leach and Wilson (1998) suggest the existence of three typical models to identify local authority/voluntary sector relationships: 'traditional', where the sector is usually marginal to local services and there is no explicit view of its value, with relationships based on tradition and precedent; 'instrumentalist', where voluntary and community organisations are seen potentially as efficient alternative service providers; and 'participative-democratic', where voluntary and community organisations are valued for their contribution to community development, not just as providers of services.

Ross and Osborne (1999) extend this model by suggesting three distinct patterns and roles for voluntary organisations and community groups – paternalist, service agency and community governance. In a paternalist framework a traditional marginal view of the sector is taken, along with a prevalence of hierarchical relationships. Here "the local authority allocates annual grants through a hierarchical planning system. The voluntary sector is well thought of, but has little voice in planning and only a marginal role in the implementation of local policy" (Ross and Osborne 1999, p. 56). In the service agency relationship, an instrumental view of the sector is taken, where "VCOs are viewed primarily as service providers with the market, on a competitive or negotiated basis, governing the relationship" (p. 56). In the community governance framework, network relationships prevail and "Local government sees the VCO sector as an important source of democratic development and participation and relies on interpersonal contacts and trust to govern the relationship" (p. 56).

The 'participative-democratic' model is likely to be of most interest to those concerned specifically with community responses to COVID-19 and community-led infrastructure. Even prior to the pandemic, a movement promoting 'community power' was gaining some momentum, and drawing on these earlier wellsprings. Based on the principle that the design and delivery of public services should be placed in the hands of the communities they serve, the idea of a 'community paradigm' in response to rising demand for public services seeks to transcend earlier periods dominated by civic, state and market paradigms (Lent and Studdert, 2019).

Gaster and Deakin (1999) strike a slightly different note in seeing a more complex and fluid series of relationships between highly diverse local authorities and a similarly diverse voluntary sector, all seeming to defy categorisation. Different perceptions of 'the other side' were significant, however. The voluntary and community sector viewed partnership with local government as a potentially reliable source of resources and as a way to establish legitimacy in the eyes of other players. Meanwhile local government saw partnership with the sector as an important route to local people and community capacity; as a means to work on cross-cutting issues and with whom to share responsibility; as a complementary provider; and as value for money and a cost-effective way of achieving certain objectives. The study highlights a significant problem with voluntary sector/local government relationships, that there was a "lack of strategic thinking about what the respective roles and relationships could or ought to be... The environment is very turbulent and complex, and it is not surprising that within the range of preoccupations facing both sectors a long-term view of the mutual relationship had not yet emerged" (Gaster and Deakin 1999, pp. 188-9).

### 3. Community participation and power dynamics

Much of this literature emerged at the very beginnings of the development and implementation of both New Labour's programme of local government modernisation (Stoker and Wilson, 2004) and its 'community turn' (Macmillan and Townsend, 2006; Taylor, 2000), wherein "the renewal of community" was said to be "the answer to the challenges of a changing world" (Blair, 2000).

In the new era many sought to promote an idea of community governance, involving "a much closer and deeper connection between the traditional governing instrument – the local authority – and key local stakeholders, including the public" (Sullivan, 2004, p. 183). In this vision, local authorities would increasingly take on a strategic and enabling role, focusing on the supposed wellbeing of communities as a whole, embracing partnership with other stakeholders, and finding new ways to support public participation. There were tensions within these debates, for example, over the extent to which local authorities should be considered 'first among equals' amongst local stakeholders, or whether communities ever could or should be at the centre of decision making. These are perennial dilemmas, and still play out today, for example in the language of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to local governance.

The New Labour government devised and introduced a bewildering array of new community-based regeneration and social inclusion programmes, including the Community Participation Programmes, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and the New Deal for Communities. These were underpinned by a new architecture of integrated Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), along with Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) in the most deprived areas, accompanied by an extensive framework of centrally driven targets, performance monitoring, inspections and audits.

Evaluations of successive community-focused programmes during New Labour consistently highlight some of the gains made for the community governance agenda, but also some of the dilemmas involved. The evaluation of the community participation programmes, for instance, noted variable progress in the development, engagement and legitimacy of CENs, depending on "the history of activity in the area and on relationships between the sectors" (Taylor et al, 2005, p. 89). CENs were intended to bring a diverse array of primarily community sector voices together, with resources and training, to participate in strategic decision making locally. Despite this, most CENs felt they were treated as 'junior partners' in LSPs (p. 66). Somewhat ironically, however, it was the power and resources of central government which appeared to make a difference locally. Providing direct funding for community groups independently of local authorities, mandating voluntary and community sector participation on Local Strategic Partnerships, and promoting community participation provided credibility, autonomy and legitimacy on the LSP (Taylor et al, 2005, p. 86; Taylor, 2006, p. 278).

The New Labour years up to 2010 were characterised by the idea of a partnership between the voluntary and community sector and the state, based on interdependence and trust. As well as an overarching framework, this filtered through mechanisms at local level. However, asymmetrical power relations within partnerships are a key source of tension for the voluntary and community sectors. Craig and Taylor (2002) indicate how claims for engagement on supposedly equal terms between local authorities and voluntary and community organisations can sometimes be seen as tokenistic given the immense resource imbalances. The lack of resources and power of the voluntary and community sectors makes it possible that the stronger influence of other statutory partners may come to distort the aims and independence of voluntary organisations and community groups. This leads to the twin dangers of isomorphism, where the sector comes increasingly to mirror the characteristics of dominant partners, and incorporation, where the sector's independence is compromised. Given its resource dependency, however, the voluntary and community



sector faces difficult choices and may be compelled to participate in partnerships because of the perceived consequences of non-participation.

These dilemmas have encouraged some to explore how, even at local and neighbourhood level, government at a distance can still have powerful effects, by reassigning responsibility and rules of the game that encourage particular forms of professional 'fitness' to be good partners. Even in decentralised institutions, initiatives and programmes, the "new governance spaces are still inscribed with a state agenda, with responsibilities pushed down to communities and individuals at the same time that control is retained at the centre, through the imposition and internalisation of performance cultures that require 'appropriate' behaviour" (Taylor, 2007, p. 314). Navigating such spaces requires time, resources and a sophisticated ability to manage ambivalent positions. Partnership working thus requires resources, and yet by 2010 the political will was no longer supportive.

#### 4. Austerity localism

The Labour government's architecture for local partnership working and community governance was swept away during the austerity programme of Conservative-led governments from 2010 onwards. Efforts were made to streamline an otherwise 'congested state' (Skelcher, 2000). Local Strategic Partnerships fell by the wayside, and many area-based initiatives and institutions were dismantled under the aegis of public spending cuts and reducing state bureaucracy. A new Big Society agenda sought to transcend 'big government' and empower citizens to work to address their own local concerns. The new approach promoted localism and social action, but this would largely bypass or operate in opposition to local government and other public sector bodies. New community rights were introduced, for example to challenge and run local services and to bid to take over community assets.

Much of the austerity programme of the 2010s was implemented through local government, and as a result local authorities have by necessity become focused on trying to meet basic statutory requirements, particularly in relation to adult social care and children's services (Hastings et al, 2015). We can see a political project of 'austerity localism' underway in the early years of the coalition government; that is, "the process by which the state can be rolled back via the pretence of dispersing power, when in reality a highly centrally controlled framework of responsabilisation has led local actors to respond reactively in order to contain its worst consequences" (Dagdeviren et al, 2016, p. 147). Here, the rhetorical power of localism and decentralisation are "mobilised as a direct challenge to state intervention, regulation and the public sector," which is "part of a broader repertoire of practices through which the government has constructed the local as antagonistic to the state and invoked it to restructure the public sector" (Featherstone et al, 2012, pp. 177-8).

What happens to relationships at local level in austerity localism? Subsequent research has examined its impact on the voluntary and community sector but reaches different conclusions around the recasting of relationships. In Liverpool and Bristol, for example, researchers detected closer working relationships. Amidst the impact of spending cuts on local services and voluntary and community groups, they found that "the threat of austerity had helped to improve relations between the sector and local councils, and had also helped to improve relationships within the sector itself. Respondents used the metaphor of a 'blitz mentality' where the threat of austerity had drawn people together" (Jones et al, 2016, p. 2074).

A contrasting picture emerges from the north-east of England, where researchers found a chasm between central-government rhetoric of empowerment and realities on the ground. Local cuts to services, grants and contracts, and increased charges for venue hire, threatened the independence and operation of many community groups and voluntary organisations (Clayton et al, 2016). More fundamentally, the research highlighted

increased 'social distancing' amongst stakeholders. Research participants from the voluntary and community sector, including a resident-led community centre which had lost out on a bid to a large national voluntary organisation, "felt as though they, their work and those they worked with were being pushed away from established positions in local networks of service provision and under-valued in terms of expertise and contribution to community life" (p. 730). The research concludes that "there is a sense of increased disconnect, distrust and distancing from local authorities. This is perceived by some as intentional, and others as a result of an affective distancing through their lack of knowledge, understanding or empathy in a context of mounting pressure and declining capacity" (pp. 736-7).

Austerity localism highlights how the wider political, economic and financial context, and the relationship between central and local government, follows through into expectations and demands placed on voluntary organisations and community groups. It also shows how resources and relationships can be affected. Much of the research, however, looks at the experiences of more formal voluntary organisations delivering local services, often under increasingly constrained contracts with local authorities. What appears to have been less well-researched are the relationships between grassroots community groups and local authorities (though see Ware, 2014). It is also always worth probing the extent to which references to the 'voluntary sector' or 'voluntary and community sector', in both local authority communications and research reports, reach beyond established and visible organisations towards grassroots and community-based groups.

## Conclusion and implications

The key themes from the literature on relationships between local government and the voluntary and community sector largely predate COVID-19. But in the rapidly changing context of the pandemic, it is evident that relationships have been reordered in quite radical ways (Robinson, 2020). It is not quite clear how and why these might vary across areas, how fundamental and widespread they are, and how embedded they may have become in new ways of working.

The discussion suggests **four questions for further investigation**, both in ongoing work in this study and elsewhere. These will be explored in the next briefing in this series and as the research continues:

- What are the conditions for effective relationships between communities and local government?
- How extensive, deep and productive are relationships between communities and local government, and what structures, mechanisms and work underpin this?
- How do these conditions and relationships play out and pay off in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What variations exist between different localities, and what accounts for this variation?

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## About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

These are place where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme
- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme
- areas categorised as “left behind” because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community.

The research, which also includes extensive desk research and interviews across England, is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

## 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

CAN Mezzanine | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR  
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