

November 2020 **BRIEFING 7**

Rapid research COVID-19

Community responses to COVID-19: towards community-led infrastructure

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SYNOPSIS: Research on the role of community action during COVID-19 to date has suggested that well-established 'community-led infrastructure' (CLI) – that is, networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money – can make for an effective community response to COVID-19. This briefing situates CLI in a gathering conversation involving different but overlapping conceptions of infrastructure, alongside other concepts such as community capital and the social fabric. Two aspects of CLI – its focus and how it is controlled – are highlighted, which appear to be otherwise underplayed in current debates and alternative understandings of infrastructure.

Key points

- The COVID-19 crisis has led to a renewed interest in infrastructure – the background structures and systems that enable things to happen.
- Voluntary sector infrastructure has slipped from the policymaking agenda over the last decade and struggled in response to austerity and changing practice and political priorities. However, it has regained prominence during the pandemic.
- Although sometimes ill-defined, social infrastructure has gained considerable attention in recent years and is making headway in political circles.
- The idea of CLI draws strength from two omissions in recent debates and alternative conceptions of infrastructure: its focus (CLI is oriented towards whole communities) and the question of control (CLI is explicitly community led).
- The idea of 'infrastructure' may be acting as a 'boundary object' – a means to bring people from different fields and with different understandings together in a common conversation.

This briefing is the seventh 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

The report from the first phase of the *Community responses to COVID-19 study – Stronger than anyone thought* (McCabe et al, 2020) – identifies the importance of ‘community-led infrastructure’ (CLI) for supporting an effective community response to the pandemic. It suggests that “Where community-led infrastructure – consisting of connected networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money – has been built, it appears to make a difference” (p. 4) in generating wider-ranging and more proactive community responses.

This briefing sets the concept of CLI within a context of different understandings and debates about ‘infrastructure’, which appear to have resurfaced in policy and practice discussion in recent years. The conversation has become quite congested with variations on a broad infrastructure theme. There has, for example, been a great deal of recent interest in ‘social infrastructure’. There have also been interventions promoting civic infrastructure and some renewed attention to existing voluntary sector infrastructure.

If infrastructure is therefore not thought to be a helpful term, others are available, such as ‘community capital’ as “the sum of assets including relationships in a community and the value that accrues from these” (Parsfield, 2015: 12); ‘purposeful participation’, which “affords social capital [which] depends on social infrastructure” (Sinclair, 2019: 5); or ‘social fabric’, consisting of five ‘threads’: relationships, physical infrastructure, civic institutions, economic value and positive social norms (Tanner et al, 2020: 11). While it is possible here that people are talking past each other in conversations around infrastructure, they may also be convening around a semblance of a common conversation.

There is a risk that reference to CLI in the midst of this already congested discourse about infrastructure could of course add to the confusion. However, the aim in this briefing is twofold: first, to shed some light by comparing and contrasting different conceptions of infrastructure, and second to highlight the core dimensions of CLI that seem to be missing from alternative understandings. CLI is important because it focuses on the community as a whole, as opposed to individual groups or organisations, and because it emphasises leadership and control by communities. These features underpin the power of community responses to COVID-19, and draw attention to the role of earlier and ongoing investment to build CLI.

In this briefing the discussion starts by interrogating the broad concept of infrastructure, then covers voluntary sector infrastructure and social infrastructure before finally exploring the notion of community-led infrastructure.

What is infrastructure?

Conversations about infrastructure often go around in circles and typically falter at the point at which someone asks ‘...but what is infrastructure really?’ There is an underlying unease about the concept: it seems vital and necessary, but frustratingly elusive. A simple dictionary definition might refer to the basic structures and facilities that enable a society or organisation to function, such as transport, communications, power supplies and buildings. The focus tends to be on the civil engineering of ‘hard’ physical and material structures – bridges and roads – rather than development of ‘soft’ relationships, such as networks and frameworks. It is “the background structures and systems that allow social, economic, cultural, and political life to happen. With infrastructure, the central dynamic is around the facilitation of activity” (Latham and Layton, 2019, p. 3).

For Gregory (2018, p. 8), the term infrastructure is “dreary and unappealing”. Partly because of its complexity, and varying conceptions, infrastructure “is not something we talk about much. It tends to be invisible and go unnoticed, unless something goes wrong” (Roelich, 2020, p. 141). It is notable that the term, which originated in French railway construction in the 19th century, is derived from the Latin prefix ‘infra’, meaning ‘below’. Infrastructure is very

hard to discuss without resorting to metaphors: it is the 'underlying foundations'; the 'hidden wiring'; the 'root systems' that give life to something; it 'greases the wheels' to make things happen; it is the design, architecture or scaffolding that supports something, the networks or systems to supply information and resources. It is "society's operating system" (Gregory, 2018, p. 7).

An expansive and rather convoluted definition of infrastructure for voluntary and community action was developed in 2004 for the New Labour government's £230m ChangeUp programme. It attempts to combine what it is for (its function) and how and by whom it is provided (its form):

"Infrastructure describes the physical facilities, structures, systems, relationships, people, knowledge and skills that exist to support and develop, co-ordinate, represent and promote front line organisations thus enabling them to deliver their missions more effectively. Infrastructure organisations are those whose primary purpose is to provide infrastructure functions or services (support and development, co-ordination, representation and promotion) to front line organisations. They are sometimes called umbrella organisations, second tier organisations or intermediary organisations." (Home Office, 2004a, p. 15)

In this conception, infrastructure serves as the background structure and systems; the behind-the-scenes work to support, develop and promote 'front line' activities.

Voluntary sector infrastructure

The ChangeUp programme aimed to develop the voluntary sector's infrastructure, in order to help enhance, grow and improve the work of frontline voluntary organisations and groups. Access to appropriate support and expertise would build the capacity of the sector, and so help realise its potential role in the New Labour government's Third Way project to develop a new mixed economy of public services (HM Treasury, 2002; Home Office, 2004; Alcock, 2016).

'Infrastructure' was widely adopted during the 2000s as the favoured term to describe this support and expertise for the voluntary sector, tending to replace alternatives such as umbrella and intermediary bodies or development agencies. Alongside this, 'capacity building' and 'civil renewal' tended to be used instead of 'community development'. 'Infrastructure' generally referred to the work of a seemingly growing industry of national, regional, local and neighbourhood support organisations, networks and hubs, working generically across the voluntary sector or in specific fields (for example, criminal justice and homelessness), on specialist topics (for example, finance and evaluation) or with specific groups and types of organisation (for example, small organisations, social enterprises and black and minority ethnic communities).

One simple way of expressing the overall functions and activities of voluntary sector infrastructure is that it exists to support the sector, or parts of it, or organisations within it, in three main ways:

- **Develop:** providing direct support, facilitating learning, providing information, advice and guidance.
- **Influence:** consultation, representation and promotion.

- **Connect:** networking, collaboration, brokering.¹

A similar framework can be seen in the core functions and quality standards developed by the National Association of Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) for its network of local infrastructure organisations, primarily local Councils for Voluntary Service. An updated list for its recent '[Heart of Our Community](#)' campaign describes the work of these bodies as focusing on:

- **Development:** working with the local community to create and develop ways to meet the needs and aspirations of people in their area.
- **Liaison:** bringing people together from all kinds of voluntary and community groups to make connections, share what they do and support each other.
- **Support:** encouraging local voluntary organisations and community groups with tools, information and practical expertise, so they can be the best they can be.
- **Representation:** making the case for, and speaking as the trusted voice of, the local voluntary community with local councils, NHS, government and others.
- **Working in partnership:** connecting with local initiatives and partners, and working together on local projects, to share knowledge and resources for the benefit of the local community, voluntary organisations and community groups.

The investment and policy attention in voluntary sector infrastructure under New Labour was not to last. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession, Conservative-led governments from 2010 onwards had other priorities. Wider voluntary sector support programmes were a relatively soft early target for cuts in the new strategy of deficit reduction and austerity. The new emphasis was on bottom-up social action in support of the Big Society agenda. The organised voluntary sector, its infrastructure and existing models of support, fell out of fashion, often positioned as bureaucratic, wasteful, self-serving and ineffective (Conservative party, 2008; Bubb and Michell, 2009; Office for Civil Society, 2010). Instead, cutting out the middleman, or 'disintermediation', became the new dispensation. Frontline organisations still needed expert guidance, it was argued, to strengthen their systems, strategies, sustainability and governance, or to become 'investment ready'. But government and charitable funders became interested more in bespoke, demand-led approaches to capacity building and support, such as 'funding plus' and voucher schemes, underpinned by a growing market of consultancy (Big Lottery Fund, 2011; Cairns et al, 2011; Walton and Macmillan, 2014; Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales, 2019).

As public funding for voluntary sector infrastructure support was recast in these ways, or simply cut at national and local levels, existing infrastructure organisations struggled to adapt. Many organisations closed, or contracted, or sought to develop in new ways, including charging for services. The idea of a coordinated structure of support, and voice to government, began to fall by the wayside. Attempts were made to galvanise a case for voluntary sector infrastructure (broadened sometimes to 'civil society') through dedicated commissions, research and new models, but with limited overall impact (Independent Commission on the Future of Local Infrastructure, 2015; Sen, 2016; Hunter and Longlands, 2017). In its 'civil society strategy' the government sought to adopt a supporting role in social sector-led efforts to create "a robust, diverse, and effective support system", promising to "convene key stakeholders to explore how we can collectively help to develop strong local support systems for social sector organisations" (HM Government, 2018, p. 78).

In fact, it has not been until the gathering crisis around COVID-19, and the voluntary and community sector response to the crisis, that the value of strong, well-connected voluntary

¹ Developed by National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) for its 'Value of Infrastructure' Programme (2009-2012). Based on 'PERFORM: the Outcomes Framework for Infrastructure' (COGS, 2006) and influenced by the 'Engage, Develop, Influence' Model of Infrastructure Function as developed by Growing up in the West Midlands (G:Up).

sector (or civil society, or social sector) infrastructure has been reassessed by many government departments, local authorities and charitable funders. Writing in *Civil Society* during the summer of 2020, Ed Mayo, CEO of Pilotlight (a charity that connects business executives with charities to help charities become more effective), suggested that people's eyes had been opened to the role of infrastructure. He wrote:

“...the UK does not lack volunteers or community spirit; it lacks the infrastructure to harness their potential for public benefit at a time of continuing need... We need resources for the voluntary sector yes, but more than that we need a system for making the most of those resources. It is a word we should use with pride when it comes to the voluntary sector: infrastructure” (Mayo, 2020).

If voluntary sector infrastructure may be undergoing something of a renaissance during COVID-19, it remains to be seen whether this is likely to be anything more than temporary. In the meantime, and in recent years, the conversation about infrastructure has been dominated by another use of the term: 'social infrastructure'.

Social infrastructure

In the UK the idea of 'social infrastructure' began to gain traction from around 2018, following the near simultaneous publication of reports commissioned by the Early Action Task Force ([Sloccock, 2018](#)) and Local Trust ([Gregory, 2018](#)). The former aimed to highlight the protective role of social institutions in the 'upstream' prevention of social problems; that is, early action rather than the 'downstream' response to problems after they have occurred. The latter was part of a process of broadening discussion of area-based deprivation beyond low incomes and employment towards the quality of community institutions and facilities, which fed into the emerging identification of 'left behind' areas ([Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, 2019](#)).

There were isolated antecedents. For example, between 2006 and 2009 the Regional Development Agency Yorkshire Forward invested £35m of EU funding in the South Yorkshire Social Infrastructure Programme (Wells et al, 2010), while in 2006 the Milton Keynes/South Midlands (MKSM) Social Infrastructure Group established a plan to stimulate social infrastructure (Boldero, 2006). However, the main impetus behind the current interest in social infrastructure comes from America – specifically, Chicago.

In the wake of the 1995 heat wave in Chicago, US sociologist Eric Klinenberg was puzzled that traditional analysis based on poverty, unemployment and demographic profiles failed to explain varied outcomes – particularly mortality – across different neighbourhoods (Klinenberg, 2018). Instead, he argued that it was a neighbourhood's social infrastructure – “the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact” (p. 5) – that made the difference to neighbourhood outcomes, and more generally “plays a critical but underappreciated role in modern societies” (p. 14). Klinenberg's focus is on human connection and interaction in physical spaces, but within this he works with a broad definition of social infrastructure:

“Public institutions, such as libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, athletic fields, and swimming pools, are vital parts of the social infrastructure. So too are sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, and other spaces that invite people into the public realm. Community organizations, including churches and civic

associations, act as social infrastructures when they have an established physical space where people can assemble, as do regularly scheduled markets for food, furniture, clothing, art, and other consumer goods. Commercial establishments can also be important parts of the social infrastructure.” (p. 16)

As commentary on social infrastructure grows, so does the range of definitions, to the extent that it is sometimes hard to discern what isn't involved. Slocock (2018, pp. 2-5) offers perhaps the most expansive definition, involving three dimensions: “buildings, facilities and the built environment; services and organisations (public, private and voluntary); and strong and healthy communities (social capital; social norms; influence and control; partnership working)”. Gregory (2018) tends to stay in the realm of physical spaces; here social infrastructure covers “the range of activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community. These are the places and structures and buildings or clubs that enable people to get together, meet, socialise, volunteer and co-operate... This is not what happen – it's the stuff that supports stuff to happen” (p. 11).

These writers all highlight the importance but relative invisibility of social infrastructure as part and parcel of everyday life – the ‘third places’ of social interaction after ‘home’ (first place) and ‘work’ (second place) (Yarker, 2019). Its role in supporting ordinary social connection and gathering is often an unintended byproduct of other purposes. It does not arise spontaneously, however, and requires investment (p. 4). Arguably the growing interest in social infrastructure has arisen because it has become depleted, particularly in more deprived communities. It is argued to have faced either “decades of underinvestment” (Gregory, 2018, p. 34) or been the subject of disinvestment – “a quiet reduction in social infrastructure assets either from closure, sales or poor maintenance” (Slocock, 2018, p. 8).

However, as social infrastructure has risen up the agenda, it has gained an audience in political and policymaking circles. It is a strong feature of the review by Conservative MP Danny Kruger for the prime minister to “consider ways of sustaining the community spirit [seen] during lockdown, into the recovery phase and beyond” (Kruger, 2020, p. 4). Kruger sees renewing and modernising social infrastructure as a way to address weakened ‘connecting tissues’ of the country, and a vital tool for ‘levelling up’ communities (p. 16).

For Kruger, social infrastructure appears to involve both prosaic and esoteric elements; descriptions that combine physical reference points (what it is) and desired outcomes (hopes for what it will do). Hence, social infrastructure is variously “the amenities and services that helped hold [communities] together” (p. 12); “the software of social capital, trust and belonging” (p. 39); “the institutions and gathering places, and the people (from youth workers to librarians, and all those working on informal and ‘below the radar’ social projects) who bring people together and enable the common life of a community” (p. 16), and also includes “support for local charities” (p. 43).

A clear idea of social infrastructure, and its conceptual limits, remains rather hard to discern here. However, Kruger’s review argues that beyond recovery from COVID-19 “our communities need a better model of social infrastructure and neighbourhood organisation than they had before the virus struck. This should include a far greater degree of local empowerment,” (p. 48). This reference to power takes us neatly towards CLI.

Community-led infrastructure

In general, there are two significant omissions in discussions around the concept of ‘infrastructure’ – the questions of focus, level and function on the one hand, and ownership, control and influence on the other. It is these gaps in the conversation that lead to the concept of CLI.

First there is the question of focus, level and function. Clearly, much attention and investment has been given to voluntary sector infrastructure. However, overall, it has tended to be organised and resourced around support services both to new groups and existing organisations; that is, it has largely involved an organisational development focus. There have been and remain significant challenges for infrastructure organisations around securing funding for work around voice and influence, to enable and amplify representative voices of the sector, and to bring these into policymaking processes. Likewise, voluntary sector infrastructure is rarely able to work with whole communities unless it has either been resourced to do so (for example, in targeted area-based initiatives) or set up to do so (such as community associations or development trusts). This compounds a long-term trend away from community development work.

Some specialist infrastructure can support specific but geographically dispersed communities of interest. In general, however, the resources for existing voluntary sector infrastructure have tended to be concentrated on work with individual groups or organisations across a range of communities, rather than with and through place-based communities as a whole.

Social infrastructure, meanwhile, is mainly about protecting and developing physical spaces, buildings and amenities, to support everyday gathering and connection. This is undoubtedly important for the health and vibrancy of places, and really matters insofar as it has been depleted in recent years. However, there is less apparent concern in discussions of social infrastructure of enabling and promoting community action – the necessary processes and practices through which communities can make things happen according to their own priorities.

A second, less well-developed, aspect of the conversation about infrastructure is the relative lack of discussion around ownership, control and influence, around power. Much of the research and commentary in different areas of infrastructure concentrates on organisation and effectiveness – what it looks like, who provides it, what it is for, and whether it is any good. Hidden beneath all these questions is the question of who owns and controls the infrastructure in question. Existing voluntary sector infrastructure has long been caught in a perennial and sometimes unhelpfully binary debate about insider and outsider approaches to policy influence. Does it seek to speak for and respond to the concerns and agenda of its members and users, or to a wider array of influential funders and statutory stakeholders (Rochester, 2013; Davis Smith, 2019)? The in-between positioning of intermediary bodies has often been and remains an uncomfortable place, as well as a source of creative tension.

Likewise, the conversation about social infrastructure can easily be drawn into a narrow focus on whether, across different communities, it exists and in what state, rather than how it may be configured, and who owns and controls it. Prioritising the former – the apparent ongoing depletion of social infrastructure and its consequences – appears to have been a necessary step in gaining political and policy traction, as part of a wider concern about socioeconomic disparities across the country. Broadly, the debate is still primarily in the realm of surfacing social infrastructure, drawing it to attention and articulating what it is and why it is valuable. The latter concern – with community power and control – is a slower-burning fuse. While there is a concern with power in early reports about social infrastructure (Gregory, 2018; Slocock, 2018), the task of shifting the debate beyond just mapping the presence or absence of physical spaces and hubs for interaction, gathering and connection is a work in progress.

How does CLI address these gaps? The idea of investing to build communities has a long history of action by governments and others – funding bodies and professional community development networks – in various guises, and with different degrees of enthusiasm. The New Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 probably offered the most concerted government efforts to build community capacity for local action, at least in terms of combining resources with senior political attention. For example, alongside the investment in voluntary sector infrastructure under the ChangeUp programme, the Home Office was

also developing the Firm Foundations framework for community capacity building (Home Office, 2003, 2004b). Although it never received the same sustained support and resource as ChangeUp, the framework and its prior consultation are interesting for outlining key components of 'community level infrastructure' (Home Office, 2004b, p. 11), namely:

- a meeting space or a base (a 'hub'), which can be physical or virtual
- access to 'seedcorn' funding, such as small grants funds or community chests
- access to support provided by workers with community development skills
- a forum or network, owned by and accountable to the community
- access to high quality and appropriate learning opportunities to support active citizenship and engagement.

In practice, the community-led intentions of many government area-based programmes at this time, such as the New Deal for Communities (NDC), gave way to a centralised target-driven approach, with strict parameters on how and when to spend available resources, and where residents felt the burden of responsibility for the regeneration of their communities but lacked the control or power to act (Lawless et al, 2010).

The *Stronger than anyone thought* report (McCabe et al, 2020) argues that CLI

"has addressed the pandemic with a resourcefulness that has enabled rapid adaption, and the adoption of new ways of working and more creative responses to addressing need...[it] has provided opportunities for people to respond to the crisis" (p. 28).

The research indicates that prior investment and support to build CLI has made a difference; so far, it has been meeting some of the local challenges of COVID-19. Here, CLI refers to the groups, networks, relationships and resources operating at and led in some meaningful sense by communities. This is perhaps most obviously visible and familiar in 'communities of place' – that is, in neighbourhoods and villages, whether affluent, relatively disadvantaged or mixed – but in principle it also applies in dispersed communities of interest and identity, such LGBT and black and minority ethnic communities.

Across the board, however, there are two core dimensions of CLI. First, it operates at the **community level**. It brings ordinary people together in everyday settings to work on mutually agreed priorities and projects. It has a focus on 'us', being 'the community' as a whole locale or group. It tilts towards informal organising, unpaid effort, and tends to avoid the hierarchical trappings of managerial or professional structures, in favour of more egalitarian and distributed forms.

Second, it is **community led**. This aspect draws attention to the locus of control and leadership at community level; that is, how things come to be organised and how decisions are made. It emphasises the relationship between those in and of the identified community, and others who may surround, support, interact and influence it, such as statutory bodies, other forms of support infrastructure, professional advisors and funding bodies. Priorities for action, for ways of organising and for key decisions should remain in the control of community members.

The idea of CLI is similar to the notion of 'civic infrastructure' developed in a study of public participation in eight localities in England (Lowndes et al, 2006a; 2006b). Civic infrastructure here refers to "the formal and informal mechanisms that linked different local organizations and their activities, and provided channels for communication with local policy-makers" (Lowndes et al, 2006b, p. 552) and acts as an institutional filter shaping peoples' prospects for participation in local politics and decision making. Whereas this notion of civic infrastructure is fundamentally about the relationship between the public and formal local

decision-making processes, the idea of CLI aims to focus both within and beyond individual communities. It is about community priorities and actions, but not in isolation from wider political and economic structures.

Conclusion and implications

This briefing has explored different understandings of infrastructure in play in recent years, as a prelude to a more detailed elaboration of CLI. Many of the conversations, and conceptions of infrastructure, appear to overlap in complex ways, and interweave with other metaphors such as community capital and social fabric. The conversation may be going nowhere as a result – or at least anyone could be forgiven for thinking so. Or alternatively, infrastructure may be acting as a ‘boundary object’; that is, a concept with “different meanings in different social worlds but [whose] structure is common enough to more than one world to make [it] recognizable, a means of translation” (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 297). The concept of infrastructure is perhaps sufficiently abstract, vague and open to different interpretations, but simultaneously hints towards a recognisable feature of the world, that it can bring different people from different fields into a broad conversation.

In advancing the idea of CLI in this briefing, the aim is neither to replace existing conceptions of infrastructure, nor even to suggest that CLI is somehow more important. Rather, it has been to review existing debates, and then to see CLI as a way of redressing identified gaps. The discussion suggests **four questions for further investigation**, which will be explored in the next briefing in this series and in ongoing work in the study:

- What does CLI look like and how is it configured in different communities?
- To what extent is the community response to COVID-19 through current configurations of CLI a legacy of earlier investment and support?
- How do the different elements of CLI work individually and in combination, and are some elements more important than others?
- How can the experience of COVID-19 inform how to develop and enhance CLI?

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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.

They are places 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 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

localtrust.org.uk

Local Trust

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