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Rapid research COVID-19

Community responses to COVID-19: Potential and limits of community power in a pandemic

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SYNOPSIS: New concepts of community power have risen up the policy agenda during COVID-19. Communities have widely been seen as integral to meeting local needs and as having the capacity to respond rapidly to the pandemic. The idea of community power is often assumed, in policy terms, to be a universally beneficial force. However, this fails to address issues of inequality in balances of power within and between communities. This briefing draws on primary research findings to offer a critical and reflective approach to understanding issues of power, and asks: what has community power looked like during the pandemic, and what are its limits? The paper highlights (in bold throughout) key concepts of power, as observed and experienced in communities during the pandemic, and concludes with some reflections on the implications of the findings.

Key points

- During COVID-19, communities have demonstrated the **power to** respond to urgent and emerging community needs, often when local groups have the **power to** work effectively **with** each other and external agencies.
- There is also experience of agencies and organisations exerting **power over** communities, and instances where community groups have exerted power over people in their communities – for example, in deciding who should or should not receive support.
- New **spaces** have opened for communities to gain agency, and use newfound power to both respond to need and potentially influence future policy.
- At the same time, the **invisible** and **hidden** faces of power have at times operated to reinforce existing inequalities through affecting who has access to participation in and support from community responses.
- While there are signs that power relationships have shifted within communities during the course of the pandemic, this research has also highlighted where those inequalities remain ingrained.

This briefing is the 12th in a series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Briefings were published throughout 2020 and will continue through 2021 to share findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

#RespondRenew

Introduction

[Briefing 11](#) reviewed an emerging body of literature highlighting the ways in which COVID-19 has demonstrated the power of communities to rapidly mobilise and organise. This has been a key element of the growing policy interest in community power by bodies such as New Local, with arguments being made to relocate power away from government and the private sector towards a 'community paradigm' (Lent and Studdert, 2021; Pollard et al, 2021). Those writing about "post-pandemic" society in general (Parker, 2020) and civil society in particular (Tibballs, 2020) offer a vision of fundamentally changed relationships between citizens, communities and the state, where power is rebalanced towards communities (Pollard, 2020).

We suggested in Briefing 11 that this is an optimistic vision of fundamental shifts in power towards a more equitable and inclusive society as we emerge from the pandemic, which should be set against a counter-view that COVID-19 has reinforced previous inequalities (BMJ, 2020). Calls for the devolution of power are not new (Fryans and McLinden, 2020; Mulgan, 2006; DCLG, 2008), but community responses to COVID-19 have brought to the fore with a new urgency critical issues and questions about how power is understood and exercised within and between communities.

Drawing on the work of thinkers such as Gaventa (2006) and Lukes (1974), [Briefing 11](#) shared a framework for considering power, through focusing on the forms, faces, spaces, places and levels of power. This current briefing utilises that framework to consider what has been learned about how power operates within and between communities during the pandemic. It is based on analysis from [our ongoing research](#) into community responses to and recovery from COVID-19, based on 26 communities in England.

In this briefing, we proceed by first considering the different forms, faces and spaces of power within these communities during the pandemic. We then distil aspects of these findings to focus in more detail on what the limits of community power might be in terms of who is and isn't included and what this might mean for the transformative potential of community responses. We conclude with reflections on the implications of these findings for future policy and practice.

What has power looked like within community responses to COVID-19?

Forms of community power

From the start of the first lockdown in March 2020, this research has found extensive evidence of communities' **power to** act quickly and resourcefully. The creation of mutual aid groups, the establishment of food services and online social and arts-based activities are a few of the most obvious examples of what has been achieved through the realisation of community power (our [Stronger than anyone thought](#) report provides more details). Residents did not wait for others to take action, but took steps either individually or collectively to respond to the needs that they identified in their communities. As one resident said "People can react to a need today, [we] don't need three months and a committee to talk about it. We can make decisions in 24 hours". Established community groups, faith leaders and ad hoc groups of volunteers have worked to ensure that residents in their communities had access to the support they required, and in doing so they mobilised and developed knowledge, skills and resources, demonstrating and reinforcing their capacity to act, to get things done.

The research has also exposed a strong sense of **power with** others, evidenced through the building of networks of individual volunteers and community groups that have worked together locally for the common cause of meeting the needs in their community created by the pandemic. There have been clear demonstrations of the ability of groups within communities to act together. Small, often informal, community groups have played their part, alongside larger or more established organisations and funded initiatives such as Big Local partnerships.

In one study area, a group of loosely affiliated activists have formed a common identity through the wearing of branded t-shirts and some have signed up with organisations that they were not previously involved in. In the longer term, this collective identity, or sense of belonging to a community – often growing out of the connections that [community-led infrastructure](#) bodies have been building for several years – has enabled some areas to start to think about how they can use their collective strength to tackle the more complex issues that are emerging as the pandemic endures. These tend to include increasing mental ill health, unemployment and debt.

For many communities there was an implicit understanding that this ability to act together was most effective at a hyper-local level and when resident-led, reinforced by a conviction that community groups were stepping up while public agencies were still working out how to respond. In other communities networks were built with a wider range of bodies, including external actors (such as local authorities), widening and/or deepening the relationships through which power with others was exercised (see [Briefing 10](#) for evidence of how relationships between communities and local authorities have played out during the pandemic). In many of the study areas people describe a new sense of shared leadership across community groups, and between community and statutory organisations, with one respondent commenting: “it’s been a joint thing, not bottom up or top-down really...”.

A belief in the collective strength of communities has developed through individuals and groups working together.

In some of the study areas, these developments have resulted in a rebalancing of the relationship, and shifts in the perception of where power lies. In one area, for example, relationships with the council were deemed to be strong and much improved through their collective response to the crisis, as evidenced by the council funding a relief hub and supporting and facilitating more neighbourhood-level action rather than leading this themselves. A belief in the collective strength of communities has developed through individuals and groups working together. Within this, the value of long-term investment in building community-led infrastructure that has had the power, credibility and local knowledge to facilitate, and often co-ordinate, community responses to COVID-19 has been highlighted (McCabe, 2020).

While the action may be collective, the experience of involvement is often very personal. Across the 26 communities, the research has evidenced many examples of **power within** – individuals who have developed a sense of self-worth, improved self-esteem and confidence through their community activity. Individuals shared a belief that they can improve their own lives, as well as influence their local environment and help others in their local community. These examples range from people on furlough with something to get out of bed for, through to those keen to become more involved in community life beyond the pandemic because they have realised what they can contribute and achieve with others in their communities. In some cases, these individual realisations of power within have extended into a collective sense of trust, confidence and hope as new and existing community groups have seen in concrete terms what can be achieved when they work together.

The research has also evidenced examples of **power over** – of some actors affecting the behaviour and choices of others. This has been seen at various levels. Our study of communities shows evidence of power being used in more dominating ways, which has seen certain people side-lined within community responses.

Sometimes this has happened unconsciously, sometimes not. Some individuals and some groups have, for example, used their power over others to affect who can and cannot participate in the community response. Correspondingly, some people have lost any sense of self-determination, as others have dominated community activity. At times this has been resisted. Some volunteers have felt uncomfortable about the power dynamics between the helper and the helped, and in one case volunteers pushed back against a well-meaning paid community worker who tried to tell them when they should and should not volunteer (see [Briefing 6](#)). There has also been evidence of the power that local authorities, and other external actors, can hold over communities, affecting their ability to respond (see [Briefing 9](#) and [Briefing 10](#) for a fuller discussion of community and local authority relationships during the pandemic).

Spaces of power

There are many examples of communities that have **created** their own spaces within which they have come together to determine appropriate responses to the crisis. There has, for example, been an upsurge in increasingly formalised networks of volunteers, where individual residents have created a space to come together to decide how best to collectively – rather than individually – meet the needs of their neighbours: for example, the coming together of community groups and small businesses to provide a hot meal service for homeless people, or livestreamed cook-along sessions with a community chef. Within these created spaces residents have been able to set their agendas and determine their own courses of action. This has enabled a sense of control. It is where people have often felt most comfortable.

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There are also examples of where communities have for the first time been **invited** into spaces hosted by others, such as the local authority. As noted above, in some cases this has led to positive working relationships, with the voice of the community being heard and a collective response realised. In one case-study area, for example, a community-led infrastructure body now sees the council listening to what it is saying, acting on it, and suggesting they can learn from how communities organise and their local links and intelligence. One community worker commented: “this is one of the biggest things that has happened”. The challenge for communities in these invited spaces, however, has been to ensure that they are able to assert their vision, values and ways of working, and not find themselves co-opted into providing volunteer based services on the cheap or managing access to services that should in reality be the role of the council.

There are also examples of spaces that have been **closed** to community groups, or individuals within them. In some areas, for example, it has proved hard for community groups to get a seat at local-authority level crisis-response decision-making tables. Within some communities, certain groups have been side-lined and effectively denied access to certain elements of response efforts as the spaces through which they have been coordinated have been closed to them. In one area, for example, nobody interviewed had any detailed knowledge of the local authority’s response to COVID-19. In another, a resident

reflected that the council was working with the large voluntary sector infrastructure bodies but not involving groups on the ground, commenting: "They don't want tiny projects springing up – they say 'register here and we will co-ordinate'".

Faces of community power

The **visible** face of power has been evidenced through the rules and procedures that have acted to either include or exclude parts of the population during the pandemic. Furlough rules have, for example, given some residents more time to get involved in their communities – some for the first time. At the same time, however, others who would normally be active in their communities have been constrained by the rules and procedures associated with lockdown; they have been told to shield and stay inside, and as a result been less present in everyday decision-making structures.

In addition, those stuck at home have not always been party to decisions about the kind of services that should be on offer to them. One local authority officer stressed how it was important that older people should be seen as an asset – as "valuable not vulnerable" – and supported to be more visible in innovating and creating their own spaces and responses to the crisis.

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While many communities have been very fluid about who can and cannot volunteer, there are some that have insisted on putting people through DBS checks and risk-assessment procedures when all they wanted to do was to help a neighbour. Similarly, while some adopted informal, non-hierarchical approaches to their decision making, others took the opposite approach and those formal, hierarchical rules and procedures affected who did and didn't get involved or have a say.

The **hidden face** of power has been evidenced through people in powerful positions manipulating agendas and marginalising the concerns or needs of others, either intentionally or unintentionally. This was played out through individual lack of access to decision-making spaces, which became increasingly dependent on digital technology and expertise and therefore risked becoming dominated by a few; failure to recognise the specific needs of more marginalised groups within communities; and more negative attitudes around who was and was not welcome at foodbanks, or more generally who was or was not deserving of support because of their lifestyles. There are, for example some groups that adopted highly formal systems to assess eligibility for food and other emergency aid. However, in other areas this **power over** residents was resisted, taking it on trust that if someone asked for food, they actually needed it. Such trust-based transactions reduced stigma, the potential for judgement and shifted power dynamics.

Power has also operated **invisibly** (Veneklasen and Miller, 2007) through shaping the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation and of community. This can be seen in some of the beliefs about risk which have limited people's power to act. Dominant views about what is 'normal', 'safe' and 'acceptable' in community activity have restricted some people's participation. Similarly, there are examples of exclusion and inequality faced by new groups, who are springing up to create their own spaces to do something in their community but who have been treated with suspicion by more established community

groups. We have heard evidence of racial inequalities, where Black and minority ethnic communities have felt unwelcome both as volunteers and as residents looking for support.

Power has also operated invisibly – through shaping the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation and community.

As Veneklasen and Miller (2007) describe, some invisible forms of power constitute beliefs that are deep-seated and systemic and influence how people think about their place in the world and what is seen as 'normal'. Further, community groups often have experience of behaviours and approaches to participation that favour **power over** – for example in their interactions with larger voluntary bodies and public agencies – and they can then replicate such approaches in the way that they organise themselves. Freire (1970) warned of the risk of marginalised groups becoming 'new oppressors' as they mirror the actions of those who oppressed previously in society.

At a broader level, the emphasis within debates about power in communities of place can shift attention away from communities of interest or identity – or can at least separate the two as different topics. As an example: on the one hand, there are shifts in power associated with highly localised, and praised, community action. On the other, global shifts in awareness about racism and power associated with the Black Lives Matter movement are taking place. Yet, despite the common ground between these debates (on the power of place and the power of 'race' as an ideology) there appears to be relatively little crossover or cross-fertilisation between the two. Nevertheless, the last year has highlighted the impact of systemic beliefs about race and racism on the outcomes of Black and minority ethnic people in the UK during the pandemic (Blundell et al, 2020), and the unequal distribution of power associated with the social construction of race in our society.

What have been the limits of community power?

The discussion above is suggestive of positive shifts in relations between those traditionally seen as holding power (such as local authorities) and those at community level, who can sometimes be perceived by others and themselves to have much less power. In some of the study areas, the locus of power has been described as shifting to include previously marginalised groups through use of invited and created spaces where people feel welcome. More informal and devolved forms of decision-making have emerged that can feel more inclusive and less hierarchical to communities and have supported quick and responsive community action.

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The local knowledge and networks held by local residents and community groups are seen as important sources of power and have resulted, in some cases, in a rebalancing of the relationship with local authorities. There have been attempts to address some of the inequalities that have emerged in how power is shared when responding to the pandemic, such as moving from a traditional food-bank model to more equitable and distributed approaches to sharing food.

Yet, at the same time, there is a recognition in some areas that despite responses to the pandemic offering new opportunities for wider participation, longstanding inequalities in community involvement have remained persistent; participation is shaped by who has the time, capacity, resources and accepted social identity to get involved and make decisions, which can in turn affect who has access to support. A further examination of how power operates within communities has also, therefore, highlighted some of its more enduring and challenging affects and limits.

Despite responses to the pandemic offering new opportunities for wider participation, longstanding inequalities in community involvement have persisted. Participation is shaped by who has the time, capacity, resources and accepted social identity to get involved and make decisions – which can in turn affect who has access to support.

Structural inequalities – in terms of race, gender, age, class and disability – have exacerbated the differential impact of COVID-19 on certain groups and individuals. They also characterise the distribution of power in communities. In this section we distil some of the findings detailed above to specifically consider the limits of community power in terms of its effects on who has been involved in community responses, both in terms of providing support and receiving it. This is not intended to undermine all that has been achieved through community power – far from it. Rather, it is intended to highlight that those more challenging aspects of power within communities need to be worked with in order to challenge and transform rather than reinforce existing patterns of inequality.

Considering in more detail the different forms, spaces and faces of power has highlighted the ways in which it has shaped:

Who can access support: There are belief systems behind eligibility guidelines, with people making decisions about who the deserving and undeserving poor are, and who has a right to support. In some cases, these have excluded the most marginalised. One person described feeling like they were “playing God” when making decisions about who could and couldn’t access support. They reflected on the ways in which their own prejudices were playing out in the responses they provided. While it is relatively easy to support those we see as or are deemed to be more worthy within our society, our own prejudices can sometimes make offering that support to others more personally challenging. This research suggests, for example, that older people generally are seen as inherently deserving, while some families – often the most financially challenged – are sometimes not. In some cases, access to support can be directly denied; more often it is indirectly denied through lack of sustained effort to ensure that more marginalised groups are reached. While in some communities extensive efforts have been made to reach out to certain marginalised groups (for example, homeless people), in other communities there was less evidence of this. In some areas, concerns have been raised specifically around the lack of ethnic diversity in terms of who was accessing support services. As one response hub co-ordinator acknowledged, “we need to be proactive in finding them and understanding their needs”.

Who can volunteer: There are examples of gatekeeping around volunteering, which has included ostracising new and emerging volunteers and potential community leaders because they are not seen as the ‘authentic’ voices of the community. It was sometimes thought a community could only be represented through traditional and formalised structures, and by people who know the rules of the game. In one area, Black volunteers have talked about how they were not made to feel welcome, and a faith-based leader commented on how some sections of the community, in particular Black people, were

not offered the same opportunities to request help and were less aware of what was on offer.

Relationships between helpers and the helped: Reyes (2020) has commented that well-intentioned interventions can “reinforce existing inequalities and hierarchies prevailing in the unbalanced relations of power between those who help, and the ones who are helped”. We have found an awareness that volunteering can reinforce inequalities, both through who has access to volunteering, but also through the relationships between the helper and helped. There have been a number of attempts to address this by, for example, moving away from a traditional food-bank model to more equitable and sustainable approaches, to sharing food at the local level through community fridges, pantries and social-supermarket models.

Who works with whom: There are those communities that have gone it alone and resisted offers of external support, through distrust of public agencies and more formal voluntary organisations and concerns that this might involve a community group giving up what little power they might hold. Within some communities, it is apparent that groups are more or less keen on working in partnerships with others.

Who can access resources: Many of the research respondents in this study are the guardians of community resources. Through having the discretion to decide where to target grants and commissions, and to direct the services they wish their paid staff to provide, certain community members have power over others. While there are examples of very open and transparent decision-making and efforts to ensure that all sections of the community are benefitting, there are also examples of invisible power where decisions appear to have been made on the whim of an individual or rested upon who gets on with whom.

Conclusions and implications

In 2017, Local Trust commissioned research to inform answers to the question: **What needs to happen for communities to feel and be powerful in the 2020s?** In the resulting findings report, Baker and Taylor (2018) proposed that: “A powerful community is one that has access to the support it needs where it needs it, and which is linked to other communities from whom it can learn and with whom it can create change”.

At the time of writing the report, no-one anticipated – nor would wish for – a pandemic. Yet listening to people who are active in their communities, there is a sense of power arising from the effectiveness of community responses in providing the support required by residents: a demonstration of the collective strength of communities. However, our research also points to the significance of context; to the relational nature of power, which can shift back and forth over time and depending upon circumstances; and to some of the limits to community power.

The pandemic has illustrated increased levels of agency at community level, and new opportunities for working with public agencies. A key challenge now is how to nurture this shifting relationship and harness the power within communities, so that ‘power over’ does not reassert itself as the dominant mode at community level, or at a broader level.

The pandemic has illustrated increased levels of agency at community level. There is a sense of collective pride and community confidence around what has been achieved. At

the same time, public agencies such as local authorities are realising the positive impact of joint-working with communities, and talk enthusiastically about maintaining and even furthering the changed power dynamics ([Briefing 10](#)).

A key challenge now therefore is how to nurture this shifting relationship and harness the power within communities, so that **power over** does not reassert itself as the dominant mode at community level, or at a broader level. While “the juxtaposition of powerful state and powerless community is a very limiting view of power in community” (Pearce, 2011, p7), reaching a balance of equitable, respectful, and trusting relationships wherein power is both **with** and **visible** is a tall order. New, more distributed ways of using power are susceptible to flipping back to the status quo as the system seeks to right itself, for example in the desire to distinguish between formal and informal volunteering, deserving and undeserving poor, state and voluntary sector (Cooper, 2008).

Communities have been busy on the ground over the past year, and have not had much time to reflect on what they have learnt or to develop a more critical analysis of power; to interrogate who holds it, how it is used and how visible (or transparent) are the processes for exercising power and decision-making at the local level. Indeed, there is a discomfort when questions of power are raised, in part because experience of power often means people see it as a negative force; they do not want to be seen to dominate. Power analysis, then, is important, both in terms of understanding the consequences of holding ‘community power’ and understanding inequalities within communities, but also noticing when there is a shift back to the status quo – because at that point they have a choice whether to accept the current systems or to challenge and disrupt them. The accepted dominant forms of doing things are not the only way (Lorde 2018).

Power has been remains unevenly distributed within and between communities, as well as between communities and other powerholders. This briefing has evidenced where there are signs that power relationships have shifted within communities. It has also highlighted where those inequalities remain ingrained.

During the pandemic there has also been a reimagining of community, and thinking about community power has come to the forefront. Yet both the concepts of community and power are contested (Hoggett, 1997). Power has been (and remains) unevenly distributed within and between communities, as well as between communities and other powerholders. This briefing has evidenced where there are signs that power relationships have shifted within communities, and how this is accompanied by greater trust and sharing of information and influence between neighbours, community groups and wider stakeholders like local authorities at a local level. It has also, however, highlighted where those inequalities remain ingrained. It is not as simple as ‘community, and therefore community power, is per se good’. The aim should be to ensure that any newfound power is shared, inclusive and sustained; it should not be used as **power over**, which will reinforce inequalities and exclusion.

As [Power in our hands](#) (Local Trust, 2020) acknowledges, community-led infrastructure alone cannot fully address the structural causes of inequality or limiting forms of power in communities. While residents may have power over a project or specific fund, there is a risk that they lack power to influence the policy that shapes people’s lives (Popay et al, 2020). In order to maximise and improve the impact of shifts in power within communities we have seen during the pandemic, it is important to acknowledge and pay attention to longstanding patterns of inequality and marginalisation that characterise how power is distributed and used within communities. As Powell et al (2020) put it, communities have an opportunity: to “nurture diverse participatory spaces; attend to connectivity between

spaces; and identify and act on existing power dynamics under-mining capabilities for collective control in disadvantaged communities” (p. 10). While it is important to recognise the power of communities to respond to crises, to meet needs and to create change, it is also important to recognise and work with the different forms, faces and spaces of power within and between communities, and the limits of what communities can achieve alone to transform them.

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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 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.

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