



# Coordination in place

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# Introduction

Local action by charities, mutual aid groups, and local government has been vital in responding to the outbreak of Covid-19—from helping the vulnerable to access food and medical care, to supporting those at risk of loneliness and poor mental health.

There is mounting evidence that local groups came together and collaborated to combat the crisis and its knock-on impacts in ways not seen in ‘normal’ times.

But now, as we transition out of the initial ‘emergency response’ to Covid-19 and look ahead to the recovery from the longer-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing economic downturn, will these new ways of working be sustained?

Since August 2020, NPC has been working with three areas in the UK—Buckinghamshire, Coventry and Sutton—where coordinated, place-based activity has had a positive impact on the community during this crisis. The aim is to share, maintain and build upon the positive shifts we have seen.

This research explores some ‘on the ground’ perspectives of why collaboration improved significantly during that initial ‘emergency response’ period of the pandemic, and how we can sustain these positive shifts for the long-term benefit of communities and people in need.

We have focused on the mechanisms that enabled coordinated action between local voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations and local authorities, and what can be learnt from what worked and what didn’t work well. We have researched some threats to that newfound coordination and identified opportunities for addressing those threats.

With many thanks to the Rothschild Foundation for its generous support of this work, and for its ongoing support and involvement in programmes resulting from these findings.

# Collaboration during the pandemic

## Our three areas

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift towards many of the ways of working and attitudes that place-based working had been aiming to address for many years. We heard from our coordinators and some key stakeholders in our three areas of focus (see the Methodology) about a number of positive changes in partnership working that took place during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Buckinghamshire

In Buckinghamshire, a VCSE task group (and some smaller subgroups) formed quickly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, providing insight and challenges to the newly formed unitary authority ([Buckinghamshire Council](#)). The council later established a framework for tackling long-term implications of the pandemic, led by four thematic partnerships: the 'Health and Wellbeing Board', the 'Local Enterprise Partnership Board', the 'Buckinghamshire Growth Board', and the 'Voluntary and Community Sector Recovery Board' (also referred to as the 'VCS Recovery Board'). This represents the formalisation of the task group (see the case studies for more).

The leads for these thematic partnerships now meet regularly through a 'Strategic Partners Forum' and in future their work will be carried out in partnership with 16 other 'Community Boards' (again, see the case studies for more).

### Coventry

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, [Coventry City Council](#) activated the 'Community Recovery and Engagement Cell' as part of its emergency planning structure (see the case studies for more), which helped to coordinate the community's response. The group comprised of council officers, public sector workers, and VCSE leaders who agreed priority areas for action and worked with communities on the response process. Focuses included food, supporting people in isolation, and supporting vulnerable people not [shielding](#).

## Sutton

[Age UK Sutton](#), [Community Action Sutton](#) and [Volunteer Centre Sutton](#) worked with the council to lead and coordinate the VCSE sector's response to the Covid-19 pandemic using a triage system. Several local hubs were established to provide key services for the community, including food provision. Community Action Sutton was responsible for referring local residents to local VCSEs after the council had dealt with immediate needs and safeguarding concerns.

## Common positives

Analysing the responses from our different partner areas we see some commonality in what happened during the crisis:

- Faster collaboration between organisations and sectors
- A stronger sense of shared focus
- Greater pooling of data and resources, and less bureaucracy
- The lowering of organisational boundaries

These changes were described as critical in enabling organisations to respond effectively to the pressing needs of communities. Participants felt these changes had been underpinned by some fundamental attitudinal changes, including:

- Stronger levels of trust between councils and the VCSE sector
- Demonstrable appreciation of the VCSE sector and more relinquishing of power by local councils
- A willingness to take risks and try new things
- Greater honesty about what is and is not working in relation to meeting needs
- A stronger awareness in the community of underlying societal issues, which have been exacerbated by this pandemic

Our findings in these places have been echoed in the insights of other recent papers by [Compass](#) and [Carnegie UK](#) and can help inform how the public and third sectors can and should be working together to build back better from Covid-19. However, participants in our research also felt that these changes were enabled by mechanisms that were quite unique to the initial pandemic response, including:

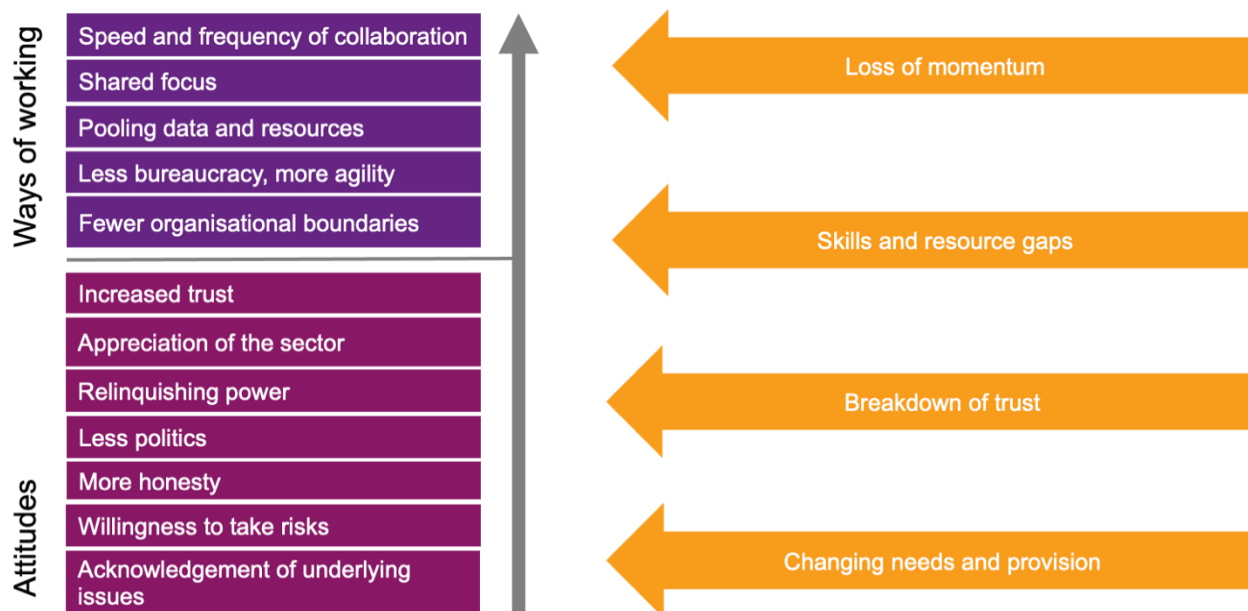
- Permission to focus on a single shared priority
- The momentum driven by the immediacy of the problem and the need for urgent solutions
- The additional time and flexibility afforded to people by remote working

## Common challenges

During the first phases of our research, participants shared what they felt most threatened the positive shifts outlined above. These were threats that sometimes hadn't yet materialised but some felt had the potential to reverse the positive changes they have seen. The four key threats that we uncovered were:<sup>1</sup>

- a breakdown of trust between organisations and sectors;
- a loss of momentum;
- skills and resource gaps;
- and difficulties in keeping up with changes in need and provision.

Figure 1: Positive changes to place-based collaboration and their corresponding threats



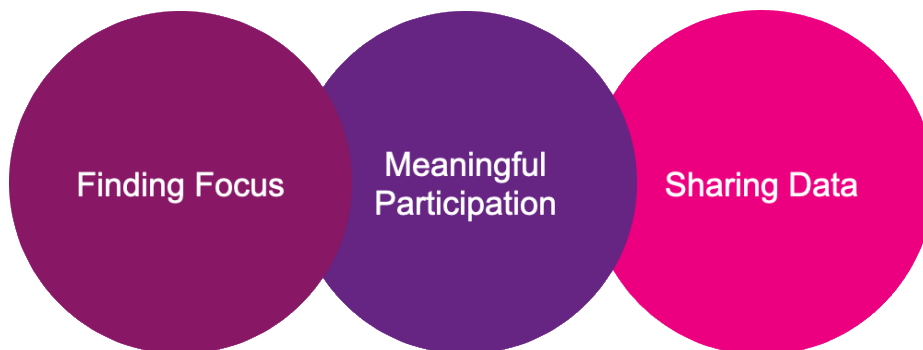
<sup>1</sup> The findings here are explored in greater detail in our [interim paper](#), published in October 2020.

## Sustaining collaboration

Charities, funders, and government are now at a key turning point, as we transition out of the initial 'emergency response' to Covid-19 and into the longer-term reality of the pandemic.

We must decide how we keep up the momentum and maintain the trust that has developed between different organisations. Keep up the reduction in bureaucracy, while ensuring we take an informed approach to decision-making, allowing proper consideration of longer-term aims and the meaningful co-design of solutions. We must also explore what additional support—structures, resources, tools—can help continued multi-agency working, and the role that funders and others can play in enabling this to take place.

Since October, we have worked with our area coordinators to explore and identify opportunities for addressing the threats discussed above. There are three themes that have emerged as requiring particular attention for sustaining the progress that has been made on collaboration:



- Finding new focus—supporting new and existing partnerships between charities and local authorities, to maintain energy and focus, whilst working at a sustainable pace
- Enabling meaningful community participation—ensuring communities are meaningfully involved in planning, delivering and evaluating projects, addressing the issues that affect them
- Improving the use of local data—improving the collection and sharing of data between councils and VCSEs to support coordinated action

NPC will be taking action, in line with the themes and implications explored in this research, through the [Pledge on Place](#) network. If you'd like to be involved in this, please [get in touch](#).

## Finding focus

As the pandemic continues, supporting partnerships between charities and local authorities to maintain energy and focus, whilst working at a sustainable pace, is perhaps one of the biggest challenges places now face. In our [first phase of this research](#), which captured the spirit of the first six months of the crisis, we heard that new and successful collaboration was enabled by a number of factors. These include, among others, a stronger sense of shared purpose and permission to focus on a single priority. However, there are a number of factors putting pressure on continued partnership working. These include:

**Risk of burnout.** Burnout is a worrying reality, particularly for staff who have stepped up to cover for reduced capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Forums for collaboration becoming less productive.** We have heard reports that some forums that were very fast-moving and action-oriented in early 2020 are reverting to 'briefing' formats, with partners sharing updates and there being less of a clear sense of tangible collaboration on tackling issues.

**Difficulties with networking and building new relationships remotely.** Participants described particular difficulty in addressing differences in opinion while working remotely, and we have heard that existing forums may risk becoming 'exclusive' as they fail to include new voices in conversations.

**VCSEs that were not involved in the 'emergency response' are lagging behind.** We know many charities, particularly small charities that are less engaged or included in coordinated response efforts, that are struggling to keep afloat financially and are often not involved in council coordinated efforts and committees.

**Concerns over tightening purse strings.** Organisations continue to struggle with funding for their own organisational development, at a time when charities are having to radically rethink how they operate. Concerns over the tightening purse strings, as we're seeing from many funders already, are likely to accelerate a return to competitive and non-collaborative tenders. Short-term spending deadlines also continue to prevent VCSEs from strategic, long-term planning and decision-making. For place-based initiatives that often require decades before genuine local impact is seen, these short-term cycles are particularly damaging.



**A return to the status quo.** Our research has highlighted concerns that collaboration between the public and third sectors is beginning to lessen the longer the pandemic goes on. Carnegie UK's [paper](#) highlights that public sector staff have been 'returning to their substantive posts,' leaving behind some of the cross-sector partnership working we had seen in the initial pandemic response. Our coordinators echoed this concern, with VCSE leaders likely to disengage if collaboration meetings begin to feel less productive.

All these factors work against building consensus, clarity and focus between the VCSE sector and local councils, in turn damaging the momentum gained in the pandemic and stalling collaborative efforts.

## Enabling meaningful community participation

Collaboration is resource-intensive—at least in the short term. Yet, the outcomes of collaborative solution design far outweigh the upfront investment. Greater ownership, better insight and understanding, and increased empathy between organisations and communities with different cultures and practices all ensure that co-designed solutions generally have better sticking power and the potential for impact.

However, in most local areas across the country, these groups are often not meaningfully involved in planning and delivering solutions to the issues that affect them, and practices fell particularly short during the Covid-19 pandemic.

With local authorities under huge financial strain, and with collaboration not being incentivised, many councils continue to run piecemeal community consultation or engagement practices. And yet, there are many pockets of innovation across a number of areas and organisations including the [Barking and Dagenham Collective](#), [UCL's Co-production Collective](#) and the work of the [Citizens Alliance Network](#). In our own research, we learned about Buckinghamshire's 16 'Community Boards' model, Sutton's 'St Helier's Place' pilot, and Coventry's 'Community and Prevention Operational Group', all of which aim to improve the way organisations and agencies work with communities through forums for engagement and solution design.

Across the three areas involved in this research, organisations broadly felt that community participation had been handled well during the crisis; local authorities took more steps to involve the community in their responses and had an increased awareness of local assets, resources and needs. However, some people felt there was a risk that this way of working would be lost after the immediate crisis, with a return to more traditional consultation rather than participatory approaches.

Over the past few months, we've heard from a range of sources—our coordinators in our three areas, participants of our [Pledge on Place](#) network, and participants at NPC's recent [Leading](#)

Impact seminar on user involvement—that it has been a challenge to uphold meaningful and proportionate community participation alongside the need to make urgent changes and decisions. Keeping up with the required pace of action made it particularly difficult for organisations to engage with underrepresented groups without pre-existing relationships in place. In some cases, VCSEs also felt that local authorities had reverted back to the role of gatekeeper and contract manager, with limited transparency over how funds are allocated and how priorities are set.

In Coventry, it was recognised that greater shared responsibility and collaboration was needed. Aligned to its 'One Coventry' approach, and as a continuation of the work of the 'Community Recovery and Engagement Cell', the council co-ordinates a 'Community and Prevention Operational Group' where partners continue to work together to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. The group also explores opportunities for a more community-influenced, preventative, and place-based approach to supporting residents. There are challenges linked to the work, including a recognition of the cost involved for VCSE's time in taking part in meaningful collaborative exercises. There are also challenges around the time it takes to build trust and meaningful engagement with different communities, and that it can easily be broken. In order to build better trust the voluntary sector has been challenging the council to be more transparent about how funding is allocated, something that appears to be happening more since the pandemic began. The council would also welcome the sector being more explicit about the changes it wants to see and how the local authority could do things differently. The council is also mindful of having finite resources and capacity—therefore greater awareness and recognition of the pressures staff are under could help improve issues around trust.

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the essential role of community-rooted organisations, these organisations rarely play a structured role in defining priorities and designing solutions at both local and national levels. Efforts to involve local groups in national planning initiatives are often extremely limited: one Buckinghamshire VCSE leader told us they were asked to mobilise only one week in advance of the vaccination roll-out in their area, whilst national charities and other stakeholders had been involved in planning six months in advance.

In NPC's wider work, we continue to uncover numerous challenges and risks that places and organisations face when it comes to meaningful engagement with communities. These include:

- **Placing too much responsibility on communities to come up with answers at a time when people have limited capacity and headspace.** There should be a clear purpose when asking communities to get involved.
- **Asking organisations to develop plans for community participation while resources are stretched.** Sharing insights and learning is important for reducing demands on time, but

pre-existing models can be difficult to find. Starting community engagement from scratch is felt to be particularly hard and tends to result in low engagement.

- **Challenges related to online working.** Digital exclusion makes community engagement challenging and many organisations experience difficulties collecting data and connecting with other practitioners online.
- **Having honest conversations about what community engagement requires, including a genuine handover of power, demonstrated through financial investment.** Organisations need to recognise, respect and adopt the language used by communities, and bring marginalised communities and those less connected to their communities into decision-making.
- **Managing the tension between a quick community response and making time for more strategic and long-term user involvement.** This means transitioning from informal to more formal approaches when the time and context allows.

Faced with these challenges, it is unsurprising that many areas feel daunted by ‘getting it right.’ Compass’ recent report, [From Paternalism to Participation](#), on the work of the Barking and Dagenham Collective, issues a warning that the government may well look to capitalise on the good will and collaboration seen in the pandemic:

*‘The government will have seen the potential that has been unleashed through the crisis and may look to replicate it on the cheap: a rerun of the Big Society which failed to recognise the need for the local state to have the resources to invest meaningfully and provide the necessary infrastructure for civil society engagement.’*

If councils are to engage in genuine and meaningful collaboration with communities, they need support from national government in the form of procurement frameworks that incentivise co-production and collaboration, and they need a sustainable financial settlement that gives them the capacity and confidence to invest in this work.

## Improving the use of local data

The collection and sharing of data, by and between different sectors in the UK, continues to be a challenge, and it is being felt particularly keenly now, as areas grapple with understanding how needs are evolving in 2021 and how best to respond. Better use of data in the VCSE sector can help in a multitude of areas, including operations, evaluation and learning, communications, and innovation but, in the context of place-based approaches and for this research, we are particularly

interested in the power of sharing data to improve funding, community intelligence and the understanding of needs.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst we are seeing a lot of innovation on sharing data in the sector from the likes of the [Data Collective](#), [International Aid Transparency Institute](#), [Open Contracting](#) and [Open Referral](#), as well as from the [Institute of Open Data](#), [360Giving](#), [Data.org](#), and NPC's own [Local Needs Databank](#), there are ongoing difficulties around gathering data on how provision and funding compare against needs at a local level. Reasons for this include: limited capacity to do detailed data gathering and analysis within local authorities; inconsistency in approaches to publishing and gathering data and a lack of resource in many civil society organisations to process data from the ONS, NHS and others; limited guidance at a national level; challenges with gathering data whilst social distancing measures are in place; and limited coordination on driving forward shared data agendas.

For many areas, good practice has been dependent on passionate and resourceful local pioneers, willing to find ways around common IT and governance barriers to local data sharing. We would like to see these initiatives better supported, and for knowledge and best practice examples to be highlighted and brought into the mainstream.

Through our research in our three areas, the common themes that emerged around data sharing during the pandemic were:

- **A lack of clarity of the local 'system'**, including a lack of understanding of needs, provision, and funding distribution. Participants spoke of potential efforts to map needs and services within areas to identify gaps, though they commented that these efforts are resource-intensive and not always supported by local infrastructure bodies or councils. When mapping exercises do take place, these can also become outcomes in themselves and they do not feed into wider strategy or decision-making discussions.
- **Poor understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on complex and long-term needs.** Although the response to the immediate, visible needs of communities was in some places well-coordinated at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been less focus and understanding of data around complex needs, such as digital exclusion.
- **Difficulty sharing funding data.** In some areas, we heard of groups making concerted efforts to share information and resources as needs changed during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic: funders in Buckinghamshire created a shared data spreadsheet and partners across different areas streamlined or temporarily relaxed data protection protocol. At

<sup>2</sup> Powered by Data (2017), [The Capacity for Data – how the social sector can build data informed organisations](#)



a national level, 360Giving has been publishing invaluable data on grant allocations through its [Covid-19 Grants Tracker](#), but this data is harder to find at a more local and granular level, taking into account public as well as private funding. Sharing grants data is still challenging for many, for example due to partners using different data management systems, processes and analysis methodologies. This leads to missed opportunities to identify gaps or duplication, and to realign strategies and priorities based on local needs.

- **Difficulties finding IT and systems fit for desired collaborative and agile behaviours.** Many organisations experienced difficulties in getting new technology and systems up and running at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst some organisations got around this by using temporary solutions, these may not be appropriate for long-term use.
- **Over-emphasis on quantitative over qualitative data.** The understanding of ‘needs’ often does not include input from communities themselves. Many organisations working with communities are making best use of hard data that is in the public domain (for example, ONS data) and combining this with data collected by frontline organisations (for example, activity data collected by charities). However, fewer organisations are exploring how communities themselves experience issues, and what their preferred solutions might be. This requires more meaningful community involvement, an emphasis on long-term building, trust-based relationships, and moving away from deficit-based language. Communities should be involved in needs mapping processes and qualitative data (for example, interviews with residents) should be given equal weighting to ‘hard’ quantitative data.

#### **Case study: Buckinghamshire and new partnership working**

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic saw a seismic shift in the attitude of the local council towards working with the local VCSE sector in Buckinghamshire. VCSEs found new levels of visibility and recognition, and there was better trust and understanding of the sector.

The council established a ‘Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Recovery Board’, which led on community resilience during the pandemic. The group evolved from a small number of VCSE leaders, who in previous years had held quarterly meetings with the CEO of the council, to a forum that began meeting weekly to identify and address needs.

Local funders established a ‘strategic funding group’ who met fortnightly during the first wave of the crisis, to share data and make joint decisions on funding allocations.

## Finding focus

There are governance and structural steps which charities and local authorities can take to ensure that the collaborations they have set up endure.

### Applies to:

- Local government
- Local civil society

### Addresses:

- Loss of momentum and trust
- Loss of focus

### Actions:

- VCSEs to ask for financial support to take part in collaborative efforts
- Local Covid-19 recovery groups to find ways to reduce the burden on individuals through more effective devolved structures
- Local partnerships between charities and local authorities to seek new, unifying focus points that support people to come together to tackle specific issues

## Small VCSEs need to ask for support to take part in collaborative efforts

The burden on individuals heavily involved in coordination at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic has been high, and many leaders are now facing significant pressure. There is also a recognition that the response structures set up for the pandemic, and the time implications of being a part of these structures, disproportionately impacts smaller charities with one or two paid members of staff. For these charities, the burden to attend coordination meetings tends to fall on one individual, whilst larger stakeholders, such as the council and statutory bodies, can share coordination efforts across larger teams. Charities need to be proactive in asking for funding to take part in these collaboration exercises, or at speaking up via their local charity representatives if this is proving challenging.

*‘There are so many ... crisis response groups and calls that I did last week, I spent seven hours on stuff that was all about crisis response, not actually about my day job ... people breed meetings, and I think it’s impossible to be part of all of them.’*

## Buckinghamshire participant

## Local Covid-19 recovery groups need to find ways to reduce the burden on individuals through more effective devolved structures

Our research has shown a need for more effective local structures that can support devolved decision-making and reduce the burden on individuals. There is also a need to recognise the time cost of coordination and explore ways for smaller organisations to be supported and incentivised to continue engaging. In Buckinghamshire, the local 'VCS Recovery Board' is now looking at creating more efficient and streamlined subgroups focused on tackling specific themes, which will reduce pressure on the central group.

Reviewing these structures will also provide an opportunity to reflect on which organisations were previously missing from conversations. Bringing in new voices will encourage new thinking and increase capacity. VCSEs need support to engage more with other bodies, such as private businesses, housing associations and other statutory services, to improve awareness in these organisations of the local VCSE sector and to help develop collaborative solutions.

*'We've talked a lot about councils, but actually, I think we probably need to be talking more about the health system, and maybe other partners like the Department for Work and Pensions and housing associations.'*

Sutton participant

### Case study: Local partnerships in Sutton

During the Covid-19 pandemic, local VCSEs and statutory bodies in Sutton built on existing partnerships and forums to increase collaborative working. This included the 'Operational Leadership Group', where sector leaders met weekly to talk through any tensions or difficulties in their work together, and the 'Building Resilience Forum'. VCSE representatives felt that the importance of their role and the recognition they received from the public sector had improved during the crisis.

There was also an improvement in relationships and collaboration between the local clinical commissioning group, other health providers and Sutton's voluntary sector. Health leaders recognised the importance of having local providers with knowledge of local residents inputting into key decisions.

Similarly, voluntary sector leaders had much more direct communication with local government leaders, with more frequent meetings, greater recognition of the sector and quicker funding decisions. The local council entrusted the responsibility for coordinating a triage system to Community Action Sutton. During the second wave of the pandemic, the council completely devolved responsibility for this work to the voluntary sector, whilst continuing to hold themselves ultimately accountable.

This work was underpinned by the principles of the [Sutton Plan](#), a shared vision for tackling issues across the borough in a collaborative way. This collaboration meant that relationships were already strong before the Covid-19 pandemic, and it allowed organisations and sectors to work together more quickly and efficiently when the crisis hit.

## Local partnerships between charities and local authorities need to seek new, unifying focus points that support people to come together to tackle specific issues

The enablers of collaboration during the pandemic included permission to focus on a single priority and groups having a shared goal around tackling the immediacy of the crisis that communities were facing. As we transition into longer-term recovery, partnerships that were established in the pandemic will need to think about ways of replicating or maintaining this shared focus on action, beyond sharing knowledge and insights. Our coordinators identified the risk that partnerships established in response to the pandemic may become less productive, with forums reverting to information-sharing over decision-making. To prevent a drop in engagement, organisations need to



find new, unifying focus points where they can work together to tackle issues. This has worked particularly well in Sutton, with the establishment of a 'Fairness Commission' and the decision to focus jointly on tackling racial injustice in the area.

**Case study: A 'Fairness Commission'**

In 2017, Community Action Sutton and the local council worked together to establish a 'Fairness Commission'. The commission was comprised of Community Action Sutton, the local clinical commissioning group, the council and local residents. It replaced the pre-existing 'Equality and Diversity Forum'. In its first year, the commission researched and reported on the experiences of children and young people in Sutton, and it found that there had been a collective failure of leadership in addressing inequalities in this area, leading to the development of a borough-wide plan for children and young people in Sutton.

The commission now operates as the council's equality forum and, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the forum agreed to focus on addressing racial inequalities in Sutton. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, the commission established a subgroup (the 'Black Lives Matter Group'). This began primarily as an informal group with no constitution or terms of reference. However, it has since evolved and is now coordinating the development of several Sutton-based initiatives, including a Sutton Black history trail; an education project focused on producing materials for schools; and work to support and build BAME leadership in Sutton, including as trustees and governors.

## Meaningful participation

Meaningful participation is resource intensive and will need funding to be sustained. But the results, as you can see in the case studies in this section, make it more than worth it.

### Applies to:

- National and local government
- Funders

### Addresses:

- Skills and resource gaps
- Breakdown of trust

### Actions:

- Government to provide resources to coordinate and convene local authorities and civil society
- All stakeholders need to treat civil society as equal partners in the design of solutions
- Identify and shift the barriers created by procurement frameworks

## Provide resources to coordinate and convene local authorities and civil society

We have seen how collaboration was important during the crisis, however, outside of times of dire need, it is often eclipsed by organisational cultures and incentives. Government, at all levels, should be thinking about how it can incentivise collaboration.

Upcoming government funding focussed on places, including the [Shared Prosperity Fund](#) and the [Levelling Up Fund](#), offer an opportunity to protect and support the collaboration happening at a local level.

However, current proposals for these funds not only neglect social infrastructure and the role that civil society can play in levelling up communities, but they also shed little light on how co-design and collaboration should be factored into the design of solutions. That being said, the [capacity funding](#) being offered by the government, to support councils with their bids, could enable collaboration with communities to be resourced.

### Case study: Buckinghamshire's 'Community Boards'

Buckinghamshire's new unitary authority is currently establishing 16 'Community Boards' to empower local communities to design and fund local initiatives. Each of the 'Community Boards' are being given pots of funding by the local council to distribute to their local communities.

The boards are supported by paid members of staff (a Chairman and a Community Board Coordinator) and they will run five core meetings a year to encourage local participation in resolving issues. The role of the staff will be essential in ensuring that a broad section of the local community is involved. They will use a wide range of engagement methods, for example, working groups and conversations in public spaces, and social media engagement, such as Instagram polls. Small charities are likely to benefit from the work of the boards; these charities are often active locally but they are too small to be on the council's radar.

While it is too early to know if these boards have been successful, there are ambitions for the boards to address and overcome difficulties in achieving engagement and representation across communities, which had been a challenge for the previous community engagement mechanism ('Local Area Forums').

As has been well documented in previous research by many of our peers—[IVAR](#), [Collaborate CIC](#), [Renaissi](#), [Lankelly Chase](#) and [NPC's own framework for place-based funding](#)—funders are also in a unique position to support multi-agency collaboration, particularly in areas where they have relationships with local councils and VCSE networks.

In this research, we uncovered a number of ways in which funders could encourage better multi-agency collaboration after the pandemic:

- Provide funding for smaller VCSEs to take part in collaborations—recognising that the time cost of being in partnership discussions affects small charities disproportionately
- Provide core funding for organisational development at a time when most charities are having to pivot significantly, and may need support with mergers and other opportunities in order to come together with others
- Reward charities that are planning ahead beyond the crisis period and are looking at future issue areas—possibly more complex or indirect issues—likely to be exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic in the medium and long term

- Support charities to address growing skills and talent gaps by exploring skills shares and other models
- Consider working more closely with infrastructure bodies and community organiser networks, helping them to develop more collaborative programmes of work
- Consider funding programmes that our participants considered to be extremely valuable but are typically viewed as hard to fund, such as mapping exercises that help charities to understand their role in the ecosystem and how needs, demand, and provision compare locally
- Consider new ways to collaborate more closely with council teams

*‘Clever charities are looking ahead to what needs to happen from Easter (2021) onwards ... but they can’t apply for the funding to do it ... I think funders are really holding us back in that regard.’*

Buckinghamshire participant

## All stakeholders need to treat civil society as equal partners in the design of solutions

Collaboration won’t come about just through proper resourcing, but through civil society being treated as an equal partner in planning and solution design, as echoed in [a recent speech](#) by Matt Whittaker, CEO, Pro Bono Economics:

*‘Let’s have the sector as an equal partner in the discussion and debate about what levelling up means and how we go about achieving it, and bring people across, national government, local government, business and local communities together to determine what the priorities are in their particular areas, and then start to think about what’s the best delivery.’*

This requires flexibility in how collaboration is planned and administered locally. In many places, community and voluntary services (CVS) are strategically placed to lead on cross-sector collaboration, but in other areas the local authority or other infrastructure groups might be more suited to providing this convening function. Whatever the structure, these organisations need to be embedded in the local system. They must also be well-resourced, to support VCSEs with their organisational development, at a time when many are re-evaluating their delivery models.

This also requires organisations across public and civil society to interrogate the internal attitudinal barriers to collaboration, beyond legislation and policy change. As explored in greater detail by Locality in its report [People Power: Findings from the Commission on the Future of Localism](#),



previous attempts to legislate on community involvement haven't worked very well, and the required changes in practice run much deeper than policy and procedure. This was echoed by a participant in our research from Coventry:

*'When we work with voluntary sector or community-based organisations, we do have quite high expectations of them. So, we want them to do our engagement work, for example, but we don't realise that actually costs quite a lot.'*

**Coventry participant**

To do meaningful participation well, those who fund it need to reflect not only on the time and resource costs of collaboration, and where this is felt more acutely, but also on the internal cultures, attitudes and behaviours that prevent collaborative working. They should then examine how these can be overcome.

*'[Community organisations] are really getting fed up with ... [the local authority] telling them how to do something. They're saying, tell us what the outcomes are that you want to achieve ... But then let us work out how to do that. You don't know how to do it. That's why you come to us.'*

**Coventry participant**

In many places, collaboration also requires civil society organisations to have a greater understanding of the constraints being placed on councils by the government, and the reasons behind the difficult decisions they are having to make.

### **Case study: ‘St Helier’s Place’ pilot, a commitment to meaningful collaboration and flexible delivery**

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders in Sutton established a ‘Systems Leaders Group’, a key decision-making body for health and social care in Sutton. The group comprised of leaders from local public health bodies, the local clinical commissioning group, local hospitals, the city council, and VCSEs.

Alongside this, our Sutton coordinator, the outgoing CEO of Community Action Sutton, established a community development subgroup. The group completed community development training and worked to gain the buy-in of the wider ‘Systems Leaders Group’, including the council leaders. The group decided to employ a Community Development Officer in a building in St Helier, and they developed a place-based working pilot for the area, to be launched later in 2021. The aim is to reduce inequalities in health and well-being between St Helier and other wards in the London Borough of Sutton.

Whilst the project is just at the beginning of its journey, and so we are yet to see any specific outcomes, there is a focus on ensuring all partners are fully committed to co-production, and that funders are bought into the value of the work through clear short and medium-term indicators of impact. The local leads are also keen for the pilot not to be viewed as an opportunity to be scaled up in other areas, which would undermine the ambitions for the solutions to be driven by the specifics of the locality. Plus, the same approach may not be needed, or indeed work, elsewhere.

## **Identify and shift the barriers created by procurement frameworks**

While senior officials and commissioners wish to explore co-design models with VCSEs, this often stalls at the procurement stage, and we are told staff often come up against prohibitive national procurement frameworks and incentives. A number of networks, including [Locality’s Keep It Local Movement](#), help to support councils to work around overarching incentives structures that focus on value for money over social value, but there is an opportunity with the recent [consultation on procurement](#) to go further to ensure these barriers to collaboration are reduced.

An ideal scenario would be one in which commissioning staff, procurement staff, community engagement staff, local VCSEs and communities themselves work hand in hand to design and develop approaches. The reality is that councils that try to do this need the budget, the time and

the know-how for navigating what they see as prohibitive national procurement frameworks and incentives. There are also fears that the recent consultation on procurement will not go far enough in considering the different standards and approaches required when it comes to procuring services designed to increase social value in communities.

The result of these tensions is that VCSEs continue to be treated in many areas as suppliers rather than partners, are engaged too little and too late, and are not adequately consulted on how best to meet community needs despite holding extensive local knowledge.

In our research, VCSE leaders described some commissioning and procurement processes as unclear and lacking transparency. Although this may often be for important reasons (for example, anti-corruption processes), we heard that it is difficult for VCSE leaders to engage with council staff working in procurement. This has the potential to undermine VCSEs' trust in the council, despite the council's trust in the sector having increased during the crisis.

*'Procurement officers are not engagement staff. They're doing what they've absolutely been trained to do, which is procure ... without putting it in the broader context of what commissioning should be about.'*

**Sutton participant**

Whilst many local procurement leads are invested in involving the VCSE sector in the design of tenders and processes, we are told this is often in spite of national guidelines. More needs to be done to support local procurement leads to set and publish spending decisions, their intentions for building social value, and their intentions for responding to the needs of local communities.

### **Case study: The Coventry ‘Community Recovery and Engagement Cell’**

Coventry City Council activated the ‘Community Recovery and Engagement Cell’, as part of its emergency planning structure. This forum existed to coordinate a community response to the crisis and consisted of council officers (including representatives from public health and early years departments) and external partners (including [Warwickshire Public Health](#), [Coventry Law Centre](#) and [West Midlands Police](#)).

Local VCSE leaders that were part of the group found that there was a greater recognition of their work from the council, and that there was a sense of shared responsibility and shared power. The council understood that their resources were best placed assisting and enabling the VCSE sector, whilst the VCSE sector needed greater agency and authority to act in the best interest of communities in need. This represented a huge shift from the more traditional commissioner and provider power dynamic.

More recently, as a continuation of the work of the ‘Community Recovery and Engagement Cell’, the council co-ordinates a ‘Community and Prevention Operational Group’ where partners continue to work together to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as explore opportunities for a more community-influenced, preventative, and place-based approach to supporting residents. There is a recognition from council staff that more needs to be done to listen to the lived experiences of residents and the issues being voiced by communities, to better understand and collaborate on the best response. The council are committed to the ‘One Coventry’ approach—the organisational and collaborative approach that helps shape the way the council works with its partners to improve the city and people’s lives. ‘One Coventry’ is enabling better use of resources to deliver better outcomes for people, and helps the council and its partners meet the challenges of increased demand and reduced funding.

Whilst there is still a lot of work to be done, VCSE leaders appear to be more comfortable directly addressing their concerns and holding the council to account. The council also showed willingness to build on these relationships during its distribution of the ‘Winter Grants Scheme’, by inviting voluntary sector partners to influence strategic and operational decisions.

## Sharing data

Currently, local government, charities and funders have to proactively seek each other out and be sensitive to each other's incentives in order to make data sharing possible. In future, without a crisis to provoke collaboration, these bodies will not find each other interacting as much, which could result in less collaboration and slower progress—unless they deliberately set out to sustain it.

### Applies to:

- Local government
- Local civil society

### Addresses:

- Changing needs and provision
- Loss of focus

### Actions:

- Champion local data sharing and support the alignment of systems and processes
- Involve VCSEs and statutory groups in critical data and systems reviews
- Experiment with collaborative multi-agency models

*'We're listening to the national information, and not having any local data, so ... we're reacting to something that may be a national problem, but it's not relevant here.'*

Buckinghamshire participant

## Champion local data sharing and support the alignment of systems and processes

Local authorities are uniquely placed to champion local data sharing and to publish methods and processes so that civil society groups can align and target their needs more effectively.

We know data is collected and analysed in a myriad of ways across the country and trying to centralise this may be difficult and problematic, not least because different areas will have different needs and constraints. Instead, it would be helpful for local authorities to support local groups on how to collect and analyse the data they collect, making collation and collaboration easier. Simple

directions, such as the taxonomies of data and the systems used, could go a long way to supporting better multi-agency integration.

### **Case study: Data sharing on free school meals and technology support**

In the Spring of 2020, Coventry City Council began coordinating efforts to support families entitled to free school meals during the Easter school holidays. The council was receiving daily information from the Department for Education and the guidance on issues such as eligibility for free school meals was changing rapidly.

Normally, it would be difficult for the council to respond to such rapidly changing guidance, potentially being better placed to wait until needs and recommendations were more stable and defined. However, in this case there was an immediate and rapid need for city-wide communications, in order to inform families about available services. The council used data from local schools to target their communications on free school meals and were quickly able to set up regular briefings with schools about vulnerable children who might be eligible for support. The council also quickly adapted to new criteria as it was introduced, for example children in families with no recourse to public funds became entitled to provision.

With these new streamlined processes and relationships in place, the council was able to quickly set up a similar system to get support to families eligible for data allowances and Wi-Fi routers, as part of the Department for Education's [technology support scheme](#).

The council has contacted schools and other organisations working on the free school meals scheme, sharing guidance on eligibility and the processes that need to be followed in order for families to get access to the support they are entitled to.

This work has been very positive, in terms of creating efficient and quick systems for partnership working in a fast-changing environment. The council's way of working with schools has become more collaborative, as they have introduced structures to help get support to those that need it quickly and they have improved internal communications between departments working with children. However, it is difficult to evaluate the impact of these new systems, as the methodologies for tracking impact were not developed alongside the new processes.



## Involve VCSEs and statutory groups in critical data and systems reviews

Changing systems and data collection methods happens rarely and normally only at key strategic milestones. When local authorities themselves are starting to review their own data processes, they should consider bringing in VCSEs and other statutory services in order to co-design tools and methods to meet shared requirements.

## Experiment with collaborative multi-agency models

In Buckinghamshire, a new shared data project is underway which attempts to address the challenges around sharing data through a collaborative process involving a range of public and third sector stakeholders. The aim is to develop a tool for collecting and sharing data on needs, demand and provision between organisations in Buckinghamshire. The core project team comprises of members from the [Rothschild Foundation](#), [Heart of Bucks](#), [Community Impact Bucks](#), the Chair of the 'VCS Recovery Board', and members from the council's community engagement and business intelligence teams. The project aims to bring qualitative and quantitative insight together to:

- Understand needs and demand, as well as how needs are experienced
- Clarify how funds are allocated across needs and demand—the geographical and thematic spread
- Understand how services and provision (statutory and non-statutory) currently match up against where the demands and needs are highest
- Inform collective and individual organisational strategies to target provision where it's most needed

The tool, which is likely to be a dashboard, will be partially public, with core teams such as the 'VCS Recovery Board' and core council teams having access to interact and moderate the inputs. The team are currently exploring different models for how the tool will be resourced, managed and improved over time. The aim is for both the process and the output to be an invaluable resource and an example of place-based data sharing that could support other areas to learn and adopt similar approaches.

# Endnotes

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## Contributors

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## Methodology

We took a lean approach to this research, given the limited capacity across local councils and community groups at the time. We ran a longitudinal study between July 2020 and January 2021, tracking the perspectives of three local practitioners (described as ‘coordinators’ in this report) in our three areas of the UK, as they transitioned through initial response to and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. We took an inductive approach, building on key themes as they emerged from our engagement. The research was carried out through a series of monthly interviews with the coordinators and supplemented by background reading and conversations with other key stakeholders, such as VCSE leaders and council staff, in the three areas (see a list of contributors above).

This report intends to provide insight into how changes related to coordination were (and in some cases still are) happening on the ground, and what positive changes can be capitalised upon and championed amongst other practitioners and the funding community. The insights and findings detailed in this report are drawn from those conversations with our coordinators and the other stakeholders from each area, while the implications set out in this paper are our own.

When identifying places to take part in this research, we sought areas that showed: strong cross-sectoral working between organisations; signs of community informed approaches; ideas for working well or for learning from mistakes; the availability of a lead coordinator to take part in our six months of research; and a mix of geography and demographics.

As mentioned above, the areas that were invited and agreed to take part in this research were Buckinghamshire, Coventry and the London Borough of Sutton.

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