

**RADIX PAPER NO 23**  
**JULY 2021**

Essays on Covid community  
responses by a cross-party  
group of MPs.


Edited by Ben Rich

**RADIX**

THINK  
TANK  
FOR THE  
**RADICAL  
CENTRE**

**TOGETHER  
AGAIN**





“THE PUBLIC  
RESPONSE TO  
CORONAVIRUS SHOWS  
THAT WE CAN, IN THE  
FUTURE, HAVE A BETTER  
SYSTEM FOR SUPPORTING  
OUR COMMUNITIES:  
MORE LOCAL, MORE  
ENTREPRENEURIAL AND  
MORE TRUSTING.”

**BORIS JOHNSON**  
23rd June 2020

# CONTENTS


	PAGE
<b>FOREWORD</b> <i>by Ben Rich</i>	3
<b>SHOCK-ABSORBING COMMUNITIES</b> <i>Danny Kruger MP</i>	7
<b>BOTTOM UP</b> <i>Rachael Maskell MP</i>	11
<b>COVID 19: A CATALYST FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY REGENERATION AND RENEWAL</b> <i>George Freeman MP</i>	19
<b>GROWING OUR SOCIAL FABRIC POST-PANDEMIC</b> <i>Jo Gideon MP</i>	24
<b>CHRISTIAN FAITH COMMUNITIES AND THE PANDEMIC</b> <i>Tim Farron MP</i>	29
<b>COMMUNITY SPIRIT WITHIN THE ABERAVON CONSTITUENCY</b> <i>Stephen Kinnock MP</i>	36
<b>BACK THE WHITE HORSE</b> <i>Layla Moran MP</i>	40
<b>SOME EARLY CONCLUSIONS</b>	44
<b>NEXT STEPS</b>	45

# FOREWORD

*The past year has been, and will continue to be transformational for communities across Britain. There is no question that, as we emerge, coronavirus will have left in its wake huge economic and social damage, but there is another side to this story.*

***The pandemic has also seen individuals and local communities coming together like never before, to support each other through these difficult times.***

- *Neighbours have set up WhatsApp groups to check on each other's welfare and provide support with shopping, hospital visits, or just to address loneliness.*
- *Community groups and voluntary organisations have stepped in where public services have been overwhelmed. Informal support groups have sprung up across the country and been inundated with offers of help, including from those who have been furloughed or made redundant.*
- *Charitable giving has been maintained and many charities have not only survived but even thrived despite the most challenging of circumstances*
- *Local authorities, public bodies and the NHS have mustered lists of volunteers longer than they know what to do with and,*
- *Staggeringly, over half of us have volunteered in one way or another over the past twelve months.*



OVER HALF OF US  
HAVE VOLUNTEERED  
IN ONE WAY OR  
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PAST TWELVE MONTHS

*This paper is concerned with learning the lessons of this new spirit of collaboration, to see how we can harness this social capital in the longer term to build stronger, more supportive and more self-reliant communities post-Covid.*

It takes as its starting point the experiences of a cross-party group of MPs and the stories of their own constituencies' responses to Covid. Each contributor takes a very different approach but collectively their narrative is both moving and compelling. It also cuts across political affiliations.

We hear for example from **Jo Gideon**, the newly elected Conservative MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central how many local people describe the pandemic as "a largely positive experience" growing pride in their community and their sense of family. Jo goes on to recommend a number of initiatives from NHS Cadets and a network of Community Callers to a National Natural Service to build on the legacy of lockdown community action in her constituency.

Labour's Shadow Minister for the third sector and voluntary organisations, **Rachael Maskell**, MP for York, describes a city with an extremely strong social fabric and voluntary sector organised through York CVS, based on its Quaker heritage.

The list of grassroots initiatives she identifies in response to the pandemic is impressive, although she expresses scepticism about the role of national or local government in supporting - and in particular, funding - the local voluntary sector.

In contrast, **Layla Moran**, Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, is keen to emphasise the role that her local authority - The Vale of White Horse District Council - has played, not by duplicating or seeking to take over grassroots projects but by enabling and supporting their communication, the effective management of data and coordination.

Her colleague and former party leader, **Tim Farron**, explicitly emphasises the role played by faith-based and particularly Christian community organisations in his constituency of Westmoreland and Lonsdale. Alongside numerous examples from his own constituency he mentions the story of Pastor Mick and the charity Church on the Street ministries in Burnley who provided the homeless pre-prepared food bags and clothes from the boot of a car, and organised volunteer NHS nurses to help those who couldn't access primary care. Farron argues that the role of Christians should be understood in that

they believe that they are not saved by doing good works, but are saved in order to do good works.

**Stephen Kinnock** MP takes an altogether more secular view of the numerous pandemic period community projects in his constituency of Aberavon in Wales.

He describes the many "small good deeds" performed by individuals such as the Baglan street champions running shopping and other errands for vulnerable residents and community groups such as the Busy Bees Sewing Group making scrubs bags, Alice bands and Covid forehead bands. He also talks about how local businesses have stepped up whether equipping a field hospital (Construction firm Andrew Scott Ltd), turning production over to making scrubs for frontline medical staff (First Corporate Clothing) or simply donating PPE (Tata Steel). And he finds much to praise in the actions of local sports clubs, housing associations and educational institutions.



WE CAN HARNESS THIS  
SOCIAL CAPITAL TO  
BUILD STRONGER, MORE  
SUPPORTIVE AND MORE  
SELF-RELIANT COMMUNITIES  
POST-COVID

**George Freeman**, the MP for Mid-Norfolk, takes as his baseline not the past year but the past decade. He puts forward three projects which he says represent the best in local, national and international regeneration. The Norfolk Way/Mag 7 project is a sustainability initiative aiming to build a grassroots network of local entrepreneurial leaders and engagement to deliver tangible local benefits through Net Zero. The Big Tent is a national cross-party festival of political ideas, founded by Freeman which seeks to be a space where new understanding, empathy and friendships can emerge from constructive debate. Finally, the Reform for

Resilience Commission looks at the long term structural economic and geopolitical legacy of Covid 19 focussed on building “Health Resilience” internationally.

In analysing their responses, we have been particularly interested in identifying the common ingredients of successful community action, understanding what has worked and what hasn't, and what are the risks and benefits of moving from public to mutual services, even if driven by necessity.

**While I want to pay tribute to all our essayists for their contributions, I hope I will be excused for singling out Danny Kruger**, MP for Devizes and a former Number 10 adviser, whose paper *Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant*, inspired this work. In it he writes:

*“We are on the cusp of a new era of economic and social policy. The era just ending was governed by economic and social doctrines, which have caused us to become the most regionally unequal country in the developed world, with a range of chronic social challenges. The era now opening must address these challenges by putting communities at the heart of policy making.*

*The experience of the recent crisis – the willingness of local people to step forward and collaborate, the flexibility shown by public services and the social commitment of businesses – shows what is possible.”*

We hope that this collection of essays, starting with one by Danny Kruger himself, will be the start, not just of a conversation, but also practical cross-party action, which will last well beyond the current pandemic to ensure that - in the words of Winston Churchill - “No good crisis goes to waste”, as we come together again.

**Ben Rich**  
Chief Executive Radix UK

# SHOCK-ABSORBING COMMUNITIES

DANNY KRUGER MP



*Danny Kruger is the MP for Devizes, former Political Secretary to Boris Johnson and chief speechwriter to David Cameron. Prior to that he was chief leader writer at*

*The Telegraph and Director of Research at the Centre for Policy Studies before helping to found and working full time at the youth crime prevention charity, Only Connect. Elected as an MP in 2019, his paper, 'Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant', written over the summer of 2020, inspired this report.*

The global pandemic tested the systems that govern our lives. Some were found to be sound, others were proved wanting - and some needed to be invented from scratch. One such was a system to supply essential food to millions of vulnerable people who became dependent on neighbours overnight.

In Devizes, the vicar of St James' Church, the Rev. Keith Brindle, and his team were the first to move. On 20 March, three days before the national lockdown was announced, they put out a call to the congregation and the wider community.

Within a week they had 344 volunteers vetted and referenced; there was no time for the criminal records check process, so they took volunteers on the word of people who knew them.

And so began the Devizes Covid-19 Support Group: three months of leafleting and phone calls; delivering shopping and prescriptions; checking on the lonely and the worried.

FOUR THOUSAND SPONTANEOUS 'MUTUAL AID GROUPS' WERE SET UP IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES DURING THE LOCKDOWN, PART OF A GENERAL PHENOMENON OF NEIGHBOURLINESS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

## FOUR THOUSAND MUTUAL AID GROUPS

Four thousand of these spontaneous 'mutual aid groups' were set up in local communities during the lockdown, part of a general phenomenon of neighbourliness across the country.<sup>1</sup> The Office for National Statistics estimates that almost half of people provided help or support to someone outside of their household, such as shopping or providing meals, during the first month of lockdown.<sup>2</sup>

1. A sample were celebrated in June in the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/winners-of-the-2020-queens-award-for-voluntary-service-announced>

2. ONS, 'Coronavirus and the impact on caring', July 2020, accessed via: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/holdthroughthecoronaviruscovid19lockdown/2020-07-09> (14.09.20)



And this spontaneous support was itself supported by the exertions of local charities, foundations and businesses.

As this suggests, the essence of the response in the early days of the crisis was messy informality, which nevertheless resolved itself into spontaneous order through the common sense and self-organising instincts of communities. The task for official systems was quickly to catch up, to support the mutual aid effort, and to plug it into the government's public health and welfare policies. In Devizes, the Town Council immediately offered the Covid-19 Support Group the use of the Town Hall and its phone lines, so a rota of volunteers could process the hundreds of calls for help that came in each day. The County Council set up a virtual Wellbeing Hub of its own, but as Jessica Gibbons, Director of Communities and Neighbourhoods for Wiltshire Council, told me, this was designed to support rather than replace voluntary effort:

*'We were a convenor and enabler, providing the structure and guidance, monitoring where support was being provided by community groups, mapping resource need, and identifying gaps in provision. Through the Wiltshire Wellbeing hub, we connected those in need with groups that could respond. We brought voluntary sector partners together, initially daily, to monitor impact and respond to emerging need. We learned not to step into spaces where we weren't needed. Wiltshire Council did not convene or coordinate volunteers ourselves. Early on, it was obvious community groups could do this well. What they needed from us was guidance providing reassurance that they were doing the right thing and a strong network of support to formal services and advice when needed.'*

**WILTSHIRE COUNCIL DID NOT CONVENE OR COORDINATE VOLUNTEERS THEMSELVES. WHAT WAS NEEDED WAS GUIDANCE, A STRONG NETWORK OF SUPPORT TO FORMAL SERVICES AND ADVICE WHEN NEEDED**

The sheer pace at which this support rose to an immense challenge goes to show the strength of solidarity in ordinary life in Britain. Very few of us live independently but instead rely on the support of our family and community every day. Now that we can see this more clearly, we must ensure that official systems honour, enable and sustain these associations for the future.

### **A LOT OF ETHICAL RULE-BREAKING**

We have made a very good start. Throughout the pandemic we have seen examples of new-found openness and a can-do spirit in public services often seen as bureaucratic, resistant to innovation, and poor at community engagement. This must stick. As Michael Little, formerly of Dartington Social Research Unit, puts it, public servants allowed themselves 'a lot of ethical rule-breaking... the citizen was put ahead of the process.' Helen Buckingham of the Nuffield Trust described how the NHS 'changed almost out of all recognition' as normal systems were abandoned and new ways of working were embraced.



Councils suddenly found it was possible to do the impossible: in response to the crisis for children in care during lockdown, Bristol City Council was able to process applications by would-be foster carers in six weeks rather than the usual nine months. And at a national level, government moved fast to relax the rules around procurement which for years have frustrated innovation and gummed up supply chains.

It is possible to exaggerate the scale of this revolution, or its likely longevity. Evaluation of the spontaneously-erupting mutual aid groups may show that they displaced or duplicated organisations already available in local communities, or that they were predominantly found in more affluent areas. The upsurge in neighbourliness may recede as the furlough scheme ends and many working age people return to their jobs or look for work.

**COUNCILS SUDDENLY FOUND IT WAS POSSIBLE TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE: IN RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS FOR CHILDREN IN CARE DURING LOCKDOWN, BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL WAS ABLE TO PROCESS APPLICATIONS BY WOULD-BE FOSTER CARERS IN SIX WEEKS RATHER THAN THE USUAL NINE MONTHS**

And even if, as I hope, the community spirit of lockdown is sustained, the type of volunteering we have seen during the 'response' phase of the crisis might not be appropriate to the 'recovery' phase we are now entering, with fewer people needing immediate help but having more persistent and complex needs. There is a difference between collecting a bag of shopping for someone and meeting the needs of a family facing a combination of bereavement, unemployment and mental ill health.

## **SOCIAL FABRIC SHOCK-ABSORBERS**

All that said, however, the case for trying to sustain the community spirit of lockdown is strong. If we get another surge of infections, the more connected our communities are the better they will cope. Indeed, it appears that while neighbourhoods where people mix and know each other may experience higher initial infection rates than places with less social capital, these places are able to respond to an outbreak better.

As the Behavioural Insights Team summarise the evidence from European countries, 'the same ties that bind people and communities together, increasing the risk of infection, appear to have protected them in the long term.'

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Contact tracing is more successful, especially in vulnerable and marginalised communities, when public health professionals on the ground work in close partnership with local civil society. People are more willing to observe social distancing and other precautionary measures when they feel part of, and responsible for, their community.

This will always be the case.

As restrictions are lifted, strong families and communities will remain as vital as ever. And we will weather the next disaster - be it another pandemic, technological failure, the effects of climate change, or some other ghastly unknown threat - if our social fabric is strong enough to absorb the shock.

## BOTTOM UP

RACHAEL MASKELL MP



*Rachael Maskell was elected MP for York Central in 2015. She served in the Shadow Cabinet under Jeremy Corbyn and is now Shadow Minister for*

*the Voluntary Sector and Charities. Prior to her election she was a national official with the Unite Trade Union where she was responsible for representing the charity sector on improving voluntary organisations and the opportunities for those that work in the sector.*

**YORK IS RENOWNED AS A VOLUNTEERING CITY AND THIS PANDEMIC HAS DRAWN OUT MANY NEW MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES**

*“York is renowned as a volunteering city”<sup>(1)</sup>. It has a well-developed formal voluntary sector organised through York CVS, and this pandemic has drawn out many new mutual aid and community initiatives. According to UK Onward’s Social Fabric Index, York scores extremely highly when looking at relationships, physical infrastructure, civic institutions, economic value and positive social norms<sup>(2)</sup>.*

To contextualise, the city, governed by a unitary authority, has a population of just over 210,000 which traditionally has had a very high level of employment.

In March 2021 figures for York Central showed a 4.1% (3,375) unemployment rate (compared to 6.5% nationally), however this has risen sharply since the same time last year, when unemployment was just 1.6% of the population<sup>(3)</sup>. York has conventionally had a very high level of academic attainment with 74% with Level 3 in English and Maths, half attaining a level 4 qualification and only 4.1% of the working age population with no qualifications<sup>(4)</sup>. Just 16.48% of the population is aged over 67<sup>(4)</sup>.

York, historically developed many pioneering social initiatives through the work of Quaker philanthropists culminating in the work of Joseph Rowntree through his social industrial model, leading to wider civic initiatives and that of his brother Seebohm Rowntree, which was rooted in the population surveys to uncover the scale of poverty in the city. These led to local and national transformation as well as seeding a spirit of social entrepreneurship in York.

Prior to Covid 19, York experienced a number of significant floods, most severely and recently in 2015. A groundswell of community response initiatives emerged where faith communities, in particular, provided voluntary time and donations of money, food, clothes and goods to support those in need. The spontaneity of this response was overwhelming and provided context as to how the city responds to a crisis.

In January 2020, York came into the spotlight as the first UK case of Covid 19 was identified. At this stage, people were wary, economic activity slowed, but civil society had no immediate role. Further flooding in February, once again challenged parts of the economy, but like the rest of the nation, it wasn't until March that civil society was first involved in responding to Covid 19, and at pace.

## NATIONAL INITIATIVES STRUGGLED TO HARNESS VOLUNTEERS

The calls for volunteers to sign up to the NHS and City of York Council, resulted in many people in York offering to help with the pandemic community response, however neither the NHS nor the local authority knew how to deploy the offers of help alone. To date, Government is unable to provide either numbers or deployment activity.

Some found themselves delivering pharmaceuticals, but were met by prescription charges. Assignments were ad hoc, disorganised and short lived.

The sector, locally and nationally, highlighted how damaging these schemes have been by not engaging with organisations who know how to safeguard and train, or to connect people into a sustained relationship of reciprocity.

While national initiatives failed to reach expectation, York CVS quickly organised within itself and with wider stakeholders. While City of York Council tried to drive initiatives, it was the voluntary sector

which identified need, reached deep into the community and provided the necessary response.

From the community hubs that were established across the city we know that 19,957 phone calls, door knocks, referrals and welfare checks were made. There were 1,068 food and essential shopping trips, 7,007 volunteer engagements around the food project and 1,506 prescription pick-ups.

## VOLUNTARY SECTOR MORE FOCUSED

Across York an incredible response was launched, through informal volunteering as neighbours reached out to one another, street Facebook and WhatsApp groups were set up. Reports from Thursday night street checks to coincide with clapping for the carers, to music being played in streets to cheer people up. Need, when disclosed, was largely met by communities rediscovering neighbourliness.

**CALLS FOR VOLUNTEERS TO SIGN UP TO THE NHS AND CITY OF YORK COUNCIL, RESULTED IN MANY PEOPLE IN YORK OFFERING HELP, HOWEVER NEITHER THE NHS NOR THE LOCAL AUTHORITY KNEW HOW TO DEPLOY THE OFFERS OF HELP ALONE.**

York CVS provided a central focus for more formal community support by establishing a directory of response organisations, listed the services they offered, availability and contact details. Each of these organisations provided their own Covid 19 response, meeting need and providing services on top of moving other regular activity on-line and plugging gaps which statutory services no longer had capacity for.

York CVS also established its Volunteer Centre which matches opportunities to volunteers, provides continual support and coordination and is helping to further map and measure the voluntary work of the city.

A directory of food support was also established through a partnership with Healthwatch York listing over 20 locations in York where food was available through either the formal foodbank or local initiatives by churches, community centres or members of the public.

## GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES

The '**I Am Reusable Community Foodbank**' shared their story of moving from a share table of excess food outside their home into a seven day a week operation serving 100 people most days in addition to around 1,000 food parcels each week. The project moved to a shed, with fridge and lighting, and goods included DVDs, books, clothes and hygiene items. In linking in with supermarkets and Fareshare, the project demonstrated high logistical skill and

draws on volunteers from the community, although still predominantly rests on a caring couple who wanted to help. As trust was built, people shared their experiences of domestic violence, need for support, and it has now linked with multiple agencies providing response support to the city. The project costs include getting food deliveries and power, although no financial help has been offered or received.

**Foxwood Community Centre** moved from its 'pay as you feel' café to food provision in the pandemic, distributing over 5,000kg of food, and supporting children with grab bags through the school holidays. The centre helped people with loneliness and isolation and has worked with the Council's Local Area Coordinator to provide outreach into the area. Recognising deprivation and the challenges for children, they also provided craft packs, stationery sets and printed activity books. They have collaborated with 17 other organisations, and helped establish a real sense of community .

**Tang Hall Big Local** is a Local Trust initiative and works in tandem with **Tang Hall Food Hub**. From 27th March 2020, they joined with the **Tang Hall Community Centre** and City of York Council to form the 'local distribution hub'. A weekend call out for volunteers saw the number rise from a handful almost 70 who were trained remotely, alongside the development of new online processes.

Two teams were formed. One focused on volunteer coordination and responding to need, including packing 100 food parcels

a week, the other on distribution while other volunteers supported contact with people shielding.

In the first six months there were 10,400 hours of volunteer time, supporting 733 households.

The “Isolation Grub Club” was also set up with partners **Food Circle York** and **Choose2Youth**; cooking and delivering meals twice a week. Around 6,000 meals were delivered and links built with members of the community continue to thrive.

Tang Hall Big Local and Tang Hall Community Centre partnered with local food waste charity YourCafe, to create a food offering after distribution hubs closed with two weekly events through the Tang Hall Food Hub where cooked meals and supermarket waste food are readily available. Around half of the volunteers remain supporting this continued activity although others who were furloughed, have had to return to work.

**AROUND HALF OF THE VOLUNTEERS REMAIN ALTHOUGH OTHERS WHO WERE FURLOUGHED, HAVE HAD TO RETURN TO WORK**

Tang Hall Food Hub has had 3,500 hours of volunteer time, and provided over 1,600 food waste parcels, and over 2,800 freshly cooked meals. It continues to serve around 65 households, over 170 people, but no one is turned away.

The relationships built in Tang Hall have strong foundations and people take their own initiatives, for instance recruiting a team of volunteer bakers to make cakes for families who would otherwise never have such treats.

## LOCAL CAFES AND RESTAURANTS STEPPED UP

**The Supper Collective** formed by local restaurants and cafés to provide free meals for people worst impacted by the lockdown who were unable to prepare meals due to frailty, ill health and/or financial challenges. Volunteers bag up and deliver meals, coordinating work through a helpline, seek funding and run the operation. Referrals also came from statutory services or where need was identified. In all, over 12,000 meals were distributed by over 60 volunteers, mainly by bike. The operation was withdrawn when other services became available and lockdown eased.

## PAYING FOR SUPPORT

**Two Ridings Community Foundation** provides “grants and support to grassroots charitable organisations across North and East Yorkshire”<sup>(5)</sup> and has distributed £2.3m of the £3m raised in response to Covid 19 across its footprint, benefiting 400 organisations and community initiatives.

Some, but all too few, local charities were in receipt of statutory funding in the first period of the pandemic, and this trend continued.

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Many required staffing to respond to the pandemic, so were unable to utilise the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Despite repeated requests, the Government was unwilling to make an exemption for charity staff to allow them to volunteer. Most charity staff volunteer for their organisation outside of working time, so organisations lost the benefit of this too.

## **ONLINE SUPPORT AND COUNSELLING**

**York Fighting Coronavirus Together** is a social media platform working across agencies and the Community and Voluntary Sector, provided an independent voice sharing details of restrictions and lockdowns, infection rates, vaccine programmes and wider activities.

**Kyra Women's Project** supports women to make positive changes in their lives. All services, groups and courses were moved online which according to a survey during summer 2020 showed 56% saying Kyra's support had helped their overall recovery; 56% saying they were less lonely; 67% saying their mental health had improved; and 50% had learned new skills.

At the height of the pandemic, they supported 50 women per week through online counselling. 19 different online sessions took place each week with 158 members attending session online. A total of 346 women were supported virtually.

Over this same period, the number of volunteers for the project doubled, with 40 new volunteers trained, DBS checked and inducted. They are now engaged in helping to run courses, drops ins and other activities.

As a result of the new ways of working and volunteer base, the reach of Kyra has extended to women unable to access the centre. A second legacy has been the Kyra Covid Capsule produced from the writings and images from members encapsulating their experiences of lockdown.

## **WIDESPREAD ACTION**

The issues which **Citizens Advice York** dealt with escalated during the pandemic, like the poor quality of private rented accommodation, poorer access to statutory services and the DWP. As Citizens Advice York is part of the national organisation, data was also collated on the impact of the additional £20 uplift to universal credit and the information shared with Government, MPs and others.

## **SUPPORT FOR DISABLED PEOPLE**

**The Wilberforce Trust** which helps people with visual impairment, hearing impairment or sensory loss remained fully



operational through the pandemic. They made adaptations to support customers, starting with welfare calls from 3 April 2020 to all customers and signposting to relevant sources of support where required.

Calls ensured customers had support networks, could access shopping and had connectivity with friends and family. Where appropriate, steps were taken to assess if they could use technology effectively and that people were coping in the light of the circumstances.

Face to face appointments and home visits, community activities, in-house activities, transport, admin, counselling and fundraising formed the basis of **MyInsight York**'s work and had to move online. 25 home visitors moved to calling their clients and more were needed to keep pace with demand. In addition, 25 volunteers were 'repurposed' from fundraising, activities, admin or transport drivers to keep pace with this work. A new Home Connections service was established through delivering over 500 pieces of specialist equipment to visually impaired peoples' doorsteps in York.

One volunteer said, *"Giving back' makes me feel valued and I know that what I am doing is worthwhile ... we have all mutually benefited in equal measure."*

**'GIVING BACK' MAKES ME FEEL VALUED AND I KNOW THAT WHAT I AM DOING IS WORTHWHILE ... WE HAVE ALL MUTUALLY BENEFITED IN EQUAL MEASURE**

**York ME Awareness**, which has over 190 members, saw a rise in enquiries from those experiencing 'Long Covid' and has continued to raise awareness of the condition.

## YOUNG AND OLD

**York's Scout Groups** were provided with Zoom accounts, activity home pack and ran events like 'camp at home'. Scouts provided volunteers to the wider community effort and made important community connections. They also engaged in a number of challenges, including their fundraiser 'Race around the world'. When young people needed support, local Scout Groups were able to maintain around 50% engagement, and have learnt important lessons from the pandemic, which they hope to develop.

**Alheimers Society York** faced multiple challenges with the loss of face-to-face activity like their dance café, reading group and the young onset group. However, the volunteer-led team very quickly replaced the singing groups with an online version, opening within two weeks of lockdown starting and an exercise and quiz group developed although not everyone had the necessary IT to engage.

Volunteers have developed new digital skills and confidence using technology. Others stepped up in taking on more prominent roles than previously, including in the leadership of groups. This has helped maintain their wellbeing and enabled them to have contact with others.

Volunteers are very aware of the impact that successive lockdowns have had on people affected by dementia and have seen how the continuity of seeing people and maintaining relations has been of real importance.

Some have stated that the online groups have been 'life savers'; provided a structure to a day that would otherwise have had none; and said how seeing a familiar face has helped them.

**Ageing Without Children (AWOC) York**, is the main branch across the country, and while most of the 160 members are from York, some are from further afield. Since April last year, weekly socials were held on zoom to maintain contact. It is likely this will continue after the pandemic and enables greater contact with people beyond York. AWOC is now engaging in research, campaigning and enabling similar groups to be established around the country.

## EDIBLE YORK

**Edible York**, which encourages people to grow their own food, had to make immediate changes to its ways of working, restricting people to two volunteers at city centre beds, while community events and plant distribution had to be put on pause. Online videos for home-schooling were produced about seed sowing and other child/parent resources were prepared, including an array of videos.

Around 20 seed stations were established so people could collect seeds, pots and compost to start growing.

Small plants and surplus indoor decorative plants were shared. People offered, via Facebook, to share plants from their seeds if they had surplus, sowed plants in public spaces and private gardens and were even given a small donation to post seeds in two areas of York.

The edible beds were tended, and excess germinating plants were sold on, raising over £100.

The charity trustees held regular video conferencing meetings and editions of Edible Express were produced and circulated online. Through education and gardening, people testified improved mental and physical health, reduced loneliness and increased neighbourliness, not to mention the benefit of the produce.

## MOVING FORWARD

Although just a flavour of some of the activities that took place at the height of the pandemic, the work continues and the learning gained is being applied to build an even stronger civil society in the city. Animal welfare charities faced significant issues with feed for animals, environmental charities continued to campaign about climate crisis and faith groups continued to reach out with a breadth of services to meet physical, emotional and spiritual needs. While essentials, like food and pharmaceuticals, were seen as immediate priorities, issues like loneliness and isolation escalated due to the pandemic and now require significant focus.

I have held an initial seminar to discuss the issue and am now looking to take this forward to understand and address the need.

Importantly, relationships have been built between the community and the formal sector and statutory agencies in the city. However, most organisations highlighted how they received little or no financial support. Having met with many charities during the pandemic including **York's AgeUK, York Mind, The Island, St Joseph's Trust, The Isobel Ward Charitable Trust, OCAY (Older Citizens Advocacy York), Snappy, Changing Lives, the Youth Hostel Association**, and talked to all sectors locally and nationally they have also highlighted the strain that this has placed on their organisations. The loss of fundraising and trading has been particularly challenging and organisations which have been able to sustain their activities in some form now need to build resilience.

**THE LOSS OF FUNDRAISING  
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RESILIENCE**

The activities highlighted the scale of unmet need in the city, not least in relation to food provision. This has led to a new campaign to call for a new 'Right to Food' to provide sustainable infrastructure to feed the city.

Other campaigns have also emerged, such as disabled people campaigning for access to the city centre since streets were closed due to making space for pedestrianisation. Volunteers have gained new skills and confidence and a sense of connectedness to a wider effort to support their community. The sense of neighbourly connection has been generated through the street-by-street organisation, and people feel more integrated into their community. While a lot has been learnt about local communities, and more services are starting to return, there has been a recognition that the scale of onward need requires significant support, both from volunteers, co-ordination and funding. York is a positive example of a network of connected communities, extraordinary giving and a deep commitment to reaching out to meet the needs within our city.

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# COVID 19: A CATALYST FOR LOCAL COMMUNITY REGENERATION AND RENEWAL

GEORGE FREEMAN MP



*George Freeman is the founder of the Big Tent Ideas Festival, the Reform for Resilience Health Commission, the Bridge of Hope and the Norfolk Way. After a fifteen-year*

*career as an entrepreneur, George was elected to Parliament in 2010 and has served as Government Life Science Adviser (2011-13), UK Trade Envoy (2013-14), Minister for Life Science (2014-16), Chair of the Prime Minister's Policy Board and Conservative Policy Forum (2016-18) and Minister for the Future of Transport (2019-20).*

## INTRODUCTION

You find out who your friends are when you need them' goes the saying.

Well, for those of us who have worried about the effect of modern working lives on community and neighbourhood, Covid 19 has demonstrated that the traditional British sense of neighbourliness is alive and well.

Covid 19 has been the catalyst for a flowering of local community spirit and volunteering on a scale not seen since the Blitz. Last summer, Government was overwhelmed as 500,000 people volunteered within days of the call.

COVID 19 HAS DEMONSTRATED THAT THE TRADITIONAL BRITISH SENSE OF NEIGHBOURLINESS IS ALIVE AND WELL

The Covid emergency has seen the greatest civil mobilisation since the war and reawakened a sense of community and civic responsibility across the land.

There can be few silver linings from an event that has had such a terrible impact on our society. But, if marshalled correctly, I believe this renaissance of community could be a catalyst for a genuine and long-lasting renaissance of grassroots civic renewal and local regeneration.

For those of us like me for whom this was one of the core missions of our coming into politics, this is a huge moment.

But we mustn't rest on our laurels. We must now look to the next stage and build on this revival of communitarianism to renew our politics. Local activism isn't just about local 'community work': it is also KEY to local ECONOMIC renewal. As the Government commits to post-Covid recovery and cleaner and healthier growth on the road to Net Zero, its striking that Covid has also mobilised

**COVID HAS TRIGGERED A HUGE APPETITE FROM LOCAL ENTREPRENEURS FOR A “HEALTHIER AND CLEANER” MODEL OF GROWTH POST-COVID: A MORE LOCAL, DECENTRALISED, GREEN AND CIVIC MODEL OF GROWTH**

a local entrepreneurial energy to deliver a stronger, decentralised model of local growth.

In Norfolk a project called The Norfolk Way which promotes local economic regeneration and our annual local Enterprise Festival brings together some of the 30,000 small businesses in the county. Covid has triggered a huge appetite from local entrepreneurs for a “Healthier and Cleaner” model of growth post-Covid: a more local, decentralised, green and civic model of growth.

**NATIONAL: THE BIG TENT**

The first project I want to look at is a national one. Set up after the Brexit Referendum result in 2016, the Big Tent is a charitable foundation dedicated to creating space for non-partisan conversations about big policy issues and to giving a voice to places and people left behind, particularly focussed on tackling the sense of powerlessness and marginalisation felt by so many ‘Left Behind’ areas.

Fundamentally, it’s a movement to catalyse, convene and curate the new conversations needed by people and places left behind

by partisan politics to unleash real, transformational and lasting renewal and regeneration. Crucially, the Big Tent is about Making a Difference.

From those early days in 2016, our priorities were always clear: the Big Tent was not the outreach wing of a political party. It was not just a political “Talking Shop”. And it was certainly not just a summer Festival. At its core the Big Tent project has always been about regeneration. The Big Tent was founded to tackle the disenchantment in many communities in the north and south that has arisen due to the complex impacts over many years of many powerful factors: of recession and its remedies; of globalisation and deindustrialisation; of the centralisation of power through technology, with its many benefits but also immense disruptions and manipulations; more recently, of course, through the devastating effects of the global pandemic, exposing deep inequalities and the divisiveness of Britain's exit from the EU.

A major part of the Big Tent philosophy is the belief that better understanding and empathy will emerge, as well as friendships, through finding collective solutions and positive action. The Big Tent aims to be a political community where differences are debated and opposing views reconciled.

**BIG TENT AIMS TO BE A POLITICAL COMMUNITY WHERE DIFFERENCES ARE DEBATED AND OPPOSING VIEWS RECONCILED**

At the centre of the Big Tent project are our six core values of fostering **conversation**, being strictly **non-partisan**, always seeking to be **dynamic** and optimistic, working in a **participative** way, **collaborating** to find the best solutions and **pioneering** new innovations and ideas.

With these core six values, the Big Tent is helping people in areas that are in need of regeneration unlock their vision. It is community spirit in action. And it is providing a model for how we can put community and regeneration at the heart of the new political agenda.

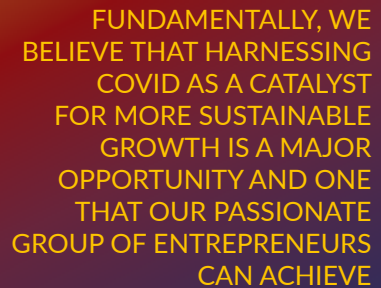
### LOCAL: NORFOLK WAY/ MAG 7 PROJECT

The second project I want to look at is an example of local economic regeneration here in rural Norfolk and show how Norfolk and East Anglia has an opportunity to move from being a rural backwater for holidaymakers and dormitory commuter villages to a 'New California' science and tech hub at the frontline of a new cycle of innovation-led growth.

At the core of the Norfolk Way/Mag 7 project is the belief that there is a real opportunity to seize and shape a genuinely different post-Covid model of growth which is both more productive, competitive AND more sustainable. It is about making sustainable local growth a reality through building a grassroots network of local entrepreneurial leadership and engagement so that Net Zero goes from being a "Government

Target in London" to a locally lived reality with tangible local benefits. All of us involved in the project believe that this requires ongoing interaction and engagement - digitally and face to face - as well as high impact one-off events.

The key to this whole vision and plan is digitalisation. Without reliable digital connectivity and data we haven't a chance of delivering success: from mapping emissions to introducing on-demand buses to car share to smart energy to eco-tourism to digital health and decentralised growth. Digitalisation is a fundamental necessity.



FUNDAMENTALLY, WE BELIEVE THAT HARNESSING COVID AS A CATALYST FOR MORE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IS A MAJOR OPPORTUNITY AND ONE THAT OUR PASSIONATE GROUP OF ENTREPRENEURS CAN ACHIEVE

Fundamentally, we believe that harnessing Covid as a catalyst for more sustainable growth is a major opportunity and one that our passionate group of entrepreneurs can achieve.

This vision of a more decentralised, digitalised, better connected local economy is not only more family-friendly and environmentally sustainable - it is also more economically resilient. The key to making the national economy more resilient is to recognise the national economy is made up thousands of local

economies: and to make them more resilient. The historic over-centralisation of our UK political economy is nowhere more entrenched than in Whitehall and Treasury centralisation.

The policy dilemma is that whilst Covid has been a huge boon to local communities in terms of growing community spirit, it has also been a moment of extraordinary HMT centralisation: with the Treasury literally transferring billions of relief direct into local businesses bank accounts.

**MATCHING LOCAL  
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EMPOWERMENT WITH  
FISCAL AND ECONOMIC  
FREEDOMS IS THE NEW  
POLICY FRONTIER FOR  
GENUINE LOCAL ECONOMIC  
RESILIENCE**

Matching local community empowerment with fiscal and economic freedoms is the new policy frontier for genuine local economic resilience.

### **INTERNATIONAL: REFORM FOR RESILIENCE COMMISSION**

The Covid 19 pandemic has been a wake-up call to global leaders every bit as significant as climate change: after a phenomenal period of economic globalisation and expansion in recent years, the Covid 19 virus has triggered a global economic crisis and contraction of unprecedented proportions.

A single virus has wiped trillions off the value of companies, bankrupted whole sectors, triggered public sector spending on a scale far in excess of the bank Crash of 2007. The pandemic has shown us that the world has changed and will continue to change. We must be ready for it.

The Reform for Resilience Commission ([www.r4rx.org.uk](http://www.r4rx.org.uk)) was set up last year to look at the long term structural economic and geopolitical legacy of Covid 19. Just as the banking crash of 2007 triggered a major policy reset and institutional strengthening of the global financial system, so too Covid has profound implications for – and requires a serious “reset” of – the commitment of developed nations to national and global health security and resilience.

Covid 19 has demonstrated something else which MUST be put at the heart of any serious post-Covid policy response: in many of the most developed global economies there has been too little attention paid to the structural relationship between Health and Wealth. We have lazily assumed that economic growth inexorably leads to improved health.

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OF POOR HEALTH RESILIENCE**



Covid 19 has highlighted all too tragically the legacy of this failure to ensure growth drives health.

In some of the world's most advanced economies – nowhere more than the USA and the UK – Covid 19 has exposed the huge economic risk and cost of poor health resilience. Tackling this structural health weakness and boosting our health resilience must be central to our post-Covid policy reset.

It is this issue of “Health Resilience” which the Reform for Resilience Commission has been set up to help countries tackle. The Commission focuses on new approaches to health economic models, with better measures of the value of interventions. And new approaches to harness fast evolving new health technologies and digital health tools to improve both health and wealth. It is an example of marshalling a digital community (in this case of health experts and policymakers) to create change and renewal.

As nations around the world grapple with containing Covid and mobilising the vaccine roll-out, in a spirit of recognition that no national economy is immune these days from health, economic or political instability in the rest of the world, and that our economic resilience is only as good as that of our weakest trading partner, Covid is also catalysing a new era of global economic co-operation in health security and pandemic preparedness.

## CONCLUSION

Empowering communities – whether at a local, national or international level – is the key to real renewal and regeneration. Scratch beneath most of the hardest political and economic challenges facing our society and the twin curses of powerlessness and marginalisation are never far from the surface. From the personal to the international level - renewal and regeneration through empowerment is the theme that links all the projects I have worked on as a Member of Parliament and Minister.



We must continue empowering local communities both within and outside formal decision-making structures; consider the role played by different tiers of government and public bodies in supporting (or hindering) local responses; and make the case for proposals which will harness the community spirit shown during the pandemic.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. Let's seize it.

# GROWING OUR SOCIAL FABRIC POST-PANDEMIC

JO GIDEON MP



*Jo is the MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central, having been elected at the 2019 General Election on a pledge to 'level-up' historically underfunded regions. Jo was quickly*

*promoted to PPS in the Business Energy and Industrial Strategy Department and has spent her first year in Parliament championing the local ceramics industry, promoting apprenticeships & skills for younger people, and speaking out about health inequalities across regions.*

*Jo has a broad business background: ten years as an importer and wholesaler of handmade papers supplying major High Street and independent retailers; as well as setting up and running award-winning social enterprises, working with businesses for university innovation and enterprise centres and mentoring business leaders in peer support networks.*

As the Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent Central, I am enormously proud of my community and how everyone came together to protect those most in need during the last year. A year that made us acutely aware not only of our personal vulnerability but also of our connectedness. Regardless of what part of the country, or what neighbourhood you came from, where (or if) you worked or your education – everyone experienced isolation during lockdowns, missed contact with family and friends;

many people lost loved ones, and everyone was aware of someone who was struggling to cope.

## **“IN AN ODD WAY COVID HAS DONE US GOOD”**

During the first lockdown, I conducted an online survey to gauge residents' feelings, including the impact of volunteering on their mental health—the findings featured in the “Connecting Communities” report, which I co-authored for One Nation Conservatives.

Of the Stoke respondents, 39% stated that Covid 19 had changed their view of the local community. The following quote is reflective of respondents' comments referring to the opportunity to spend more time with family:

**“WE HAVE LEARNED MORE ABOUT EACH OTHER AND PATIENCE. IN AN ODD WAY IT HAS DONE US GOOD AS A FAMILY”**

*“We have learned more about each other and patience. In an odd way it has done us good as a family. So enjoyed some precious moments. Some days were a bit tedious and we'd lose a bit of a track of time, but largely positive.”*

Comments on the role and importance of community were common, such as this example of the gratitude expressed of the community support:

*"The importance of the community has grown in my world. Those neighbours and local businesses who supported me and my family have a permanent place in my heart."*

While fewer volunteers responded to the survey than in other constituencies, 20% of non-volunteers did want to volunteer but could not find an organisation or group to join. If we are to encourage volunteering post-pandemic, any barriers to signing up need to be examined.

## PRIDE IN STOKE ON TRENT

Asked if Covid changed their view of their local community, this comment is a fair summary across various responses:

*"I am so proud of our communities in Stoke on Trent, the Covid response makes me proud we have warm big hearts in the City and need investment and support as we don't have the resources of bigger cities [sic], develop a partnership with Government and connect communities. Sometimes we have to cut out the middleman. A new delivery model can be designed and implemented. Don't go back to what was."*

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Cutting out the middleman is easier said than done in a system that has treated citizens as consumers of services rather than members of empowered communities for decades. It will require a seismic shift in our national thinking to enable this new social model approach.

However, it is one that this Government can embrace, for it is a fundamental principle of Conservatism that we believe in small government and local, community-led solutions. We must challenge the narrative that suggests the solution to all inequalities lies in growing ever larger, top-down controlled public services. This undermines the power of communities to support their own health and wellbeing and stifles the philanthropic approach, which has been a lifeline during the last year.

## SOME TENTATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

The "Connecting Communities" report made five recommendations which, based on our experience locally, I endorse:

- **NHS Cadets:** An NHS Cadets service should be created by NHS England. Unlike the Armed Forces, which have reserve and cadet forces, the NHS has no official volunteering arm beyond third party organisations such as Help Force and St John's Ambulance.
- **Minister for Volunteering:** Upgrade the Minister for Civil Society to a Minister for Volunteering, whose work would include capturing and enhancing the mutual aid phenomenon. This position would

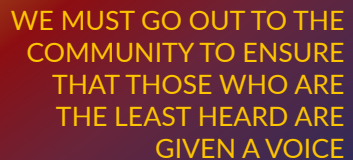
*sit with joint responsibility across the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to best enable the breaking down of barriers within public services that prevent community and individual initiatives.*

- **National Natural Service:** *A National Natural Service would be focused on the young and unemployed in rural and coastal settings, which may have less access to job support than urban settings. Building upon environmentalist Ben Goldsmith's push for a National Natural Service, volunteers could be marshalled to establish new woodland, restore coastal saltmarshes, peat bogs and wetlands, creating corridors of nature through the landscape, building local green spaces, supporting local farming and improving our national parks. This, in turn, could act as a pathway to traineeships in the Green Economy, from green construction to flood protection.*
- **Volunteering Pathways:** *The survey and wider research indicate that when individuals volunteer once, they are overwhelmingly likely to volunteer again. Therefore, we recommend that the Minister for Volunteering encourage first time volunteering through schools, workplaces and job centres.*
- **Community Callers:** *The findings indicate a role for street-level volunteer support to check in on vulnerable and isolated neighbour's wellbeing and mental health. Community callers would provide tools and an online calling platform to encourage outreach in person and via phone whilst maintaining safeguarding.*

In addition to sustaining and growing the volunteering base, more structural changes need to be made to empower local delivery of levelling up opportunities through investing in community development.

As part of the Council's City Forum conference, I recently facilitated a discussion with key stakeholders about the barriers to delivering the City's priorities on the theme of health and productivity.

If we are to move from a needs-based to an asset-based approach, there needs to be a gap analysis of existing services to better connect citizens with support. This joining-up should entail more than collegiate style partnership working or the forming of consortia to secure funding, and it needs to move to co-producing solutions. Furthermore, the design of these solutions needs to place those with lived experience at its heart.



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The second key point is that we need investment in developing ideas that tackle these challenges farther upstream – looking at early intervention and prevention rather than cure when we consider issues such as obesity. We must go out to the community to ensure that those who are the least heard are given a voice.

We must listen and learn from real-life stories, and these will have far greater power to deliver behaviour change than raw clinical data.

### **PORT-BREXIT COMMISSIONING FRAMEWORK WILL MAKE A BONFIRE OF UNNECESSARY PAPERWORK**

The funding of many contracts for local VCSO organisations has been through short-term, competitive tender. This creates an inherent tension as groups and charities who should be on the same side instead are forced to fight for the same pot of money. Many smaller community-based organisations miss out because of the over bureaucratic commissioning framework. Our new post-Brexit commissioning framework will provide an excellent opportunity to make a bonfire of the mountain of unnecessary paperwork, which was the price organisations had to pay to secure EU Funding. This should see an end to funding the most competent bid writers rather than the most innovative but less professionally articulated bids.

The Shared Prosperity Fund needs to be bold in its offer. Just as we led the world with our entrepreneurial approach to the vaccination programme – from the funding of research and development to the early signing of contracts for multiple vaccines whilst they were still being developed, ensuring the fastest rollout of almost any nation – so we must harness the same spirit in our determination to Level Up. I am confident that the innovation which has supported our NHS during the last year – from digitised GP

services to a massive NHS volunteering programme to vaccinate the nation - will carry on post-pandemic in our health service and our lives more widely. We must look to new solutions to age-old problems because we have both the technologies and the entrepreneurial asset base in Britain to deliver.

When we are looking to address the complex barriers to equality of opportunity for those farthest away from employment, whether through ill health, education and skills or chaotic lives, those best able to design programmes that ensure the best outcomes are those embedded in the community. Government funding often constrained by Westminster siloes historically have measured outputs rather than outcomes and have favoured large organisations because of a culture of risk averseness. This Government has demonstrated that we are at our best as a country when we are bold and accept risk as a necessary part of progress and innovation. The passage of the ARIA Bill through Parliament is a testament to this. So now is the right time to adopt the same approach to the community development work within the Levelling Up agenda.

Instead of charities, social enterprises and community and voluntary sector groups bidding against each other at a national level for individual projects, we should look to support local commissioning across a wide range of themes, with a commitment that a percentage be spent directly in neighbourhoods and delivered by grassroots groups or smaller social businesses and charities.

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In Stoke-on-Trent, the City Council has just launched a City Forum which brings together all sectors and a wide range of community voices. This will underpin and inform the City Prospectus, which lays out an ambitious vision for the city.

### **LOCAL SOLUTIONS BY LOCAL PARTNERS**

There is an incredible energy in the Potteries. Voted “the UK capital of kindness”, community spirit is evident in every neighbourhood. Stoke-on-Trent is on the up. Once defined by its “left behind” status, change is already visible across the city. The physical infrastructure is improving with new investment both from the Government and the private sector in brownfield sites as well as the £35 million Transforming Cities Fund, which will address some of the most urgent public transport challenges.

The city is rich in philanthropy and has access to all the local knowledge needed to design and deliver a comprehensive Levelling Up strategy.

It rose to the challenge during the pandemic. The most vulnerable were helped through a catalogue of individual funding pots from multiple departments administered in the main by the local authority. However, going forward the complex social infrastructure challenges are best addressed with local solutions by local partners – both private and public sector - and communities. The Government’s role is as an enabler, with local authorities or a locally established umbrella body for Levelling Up Communities.

The pandemic has renewed our connectedness to our community. The recommendations of “Connecting Communities” set out to create new engagement opportunities within communities to grow our social fabric and our collective resilience. Reviewing our commissioning models for investing in our social infrastructure and replacing short-termism and state-led interventions with local and sustainable solutions must complement national schemes if communities are to have ownership of their future well-being.

# CHRISTIAN FAITH COMMUNITIES AND THE PANDEMIC

TIM FARRON MP

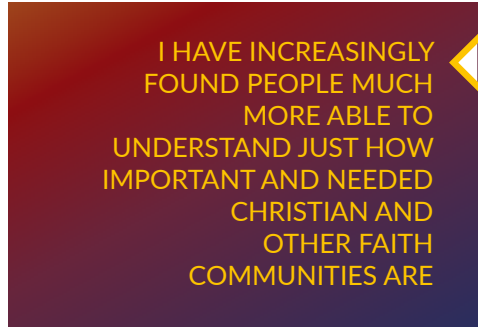


*Tim Farron has been the MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale since 2005 and was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats in 2015. He resigned after the 2017 election*

*despite increasing the party's representation from 9 to 12 seats, stating that he had become "torn between living as a faithful Christian and serving as a political leader". He is currently the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.*

## CHRISTIAN FAITH COMMUNITIES AND THE PANDEMIC

During this pandemic, people have faced death, illness, unemployment, sadness, isolation, boredom, poverty, challenges to their dignity, cancellation of exams, disruption of studies, the fizzling out of relationships, business failure, and the denial of those things we tend to look forward to: holidays, nights out, time with friends, going to the football, to watch a concert. Hope for the future has been interrupted by fear of sickness and death or, for some, by poverty or tedium.



People are disturbed and disorientated, unsure of how or whether the Government can help them amid so much suffering or uncertainty. As a result of this though, I have increasingly found people much more able to understand just how important and needed Christian and other faith communities are embedded in the local community they have been best placed in a time of crisis, ready to step in, where there is the most need.

Over the last few decades a lazy consensus has grown around the notion that faith and religion are no longer relevant or important to our society. We may be familiar with the concept of Christians doubting their faith from time to time. However, it seems to me that there is now a wave of doubt amongst non Christians, as people reach a state of crisis about all that they had their faith in given the uncertainty, disruption and disappointment of the last year or so.



At the same time, the practical evidence of Christians meeting the needs of their communities during the pandemic has really changed the way that many people view the church. It has majorly shifted the focus for most people towards the practical outworking of Christian faith in serving people in need, and away from the often negative perceptions based on specific theological positions on social issues that still lead many to conclude that Christian faith and Christian communities are irrelevant in the modern world that churches have got their hands dirty and put their money where their mouths are during the pandemic has turned the head of many a sceptic.

## CHANGING ATTITUDES TO CHURCHES

A Savanta ComRes poll showed that more than a third of non Christians now agree that local churches are making a positive difference in their community that that's up from just a fifth thinking that before the pandemic. 42% of UK adults now agree that churches are helping their community a 7% rise on before the pandemic.

**42% OF UK ADULTS NOW AGREE THAT CHURCHES ARE HELPING THEIR COMMUNITY – A 7% RISE ON BEFORE THE PANDEMIC**

There is also more specific data that demonstrates this shift in perceptions. The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society recently produced a report looking into partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during the pandemic. The report generally shows overwhelmingly positive responses from local authorities working in partnership with faith groups as a result of their experiences during the pandemic. This contrasts with before the pandemic when the largest barrier to councils partnering with faith groups were concerns that they would want to provide services exclusively and favourably within their respective faith group, have conflicting views on equality, or would only be interested in activities that included explicit evangelism. On the role of faith groups, the report showed:

*“91% of local authorities describe their experience of partnership with faith groups as ‘Very Positive’ or ‘Positive’”<sup>3</sup>*

*“93% of local authorities consider wider sharing of best practice in co-production between faith groups and local authorities to be ‘Very Important’ or ‘Important’”<sup>4</sup>*

In response to the pandemic, the survey found that Christians led the way in distributing food through local authority-coordinated distribution programmes. Of the various faith groups contributions, Christians provided:

- 62% of transport and delivery services
- 62% of collecting and donating food or money
- Operated 59% of food banks

3. APPG faith and society, 2020: 1.

4. APPG faith and society, 2020: 1.

Christian organisations also provided 58% of pastoral support/befriending services, 48% of cooking and meal deliveries to their local community, made up 52% of volunteers to local programmes, and of faith groups that made their buildings available, Christians made up 46%.<sup>5</sup>

The study shows the numbers for other faith groups as well, demonstrating their crucial role too. However, the significance of the role of Christian faith groups cannot not be underplayed. Given the small minority of the UK population that regularly attends church, why is it that the overwhelming majority of these services are provided by churches and other Christian groups? What motivates these people?

**THE SMALLER, MORE LOCAL PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS HAVE COME INTO THEIR OWN – SHOWING JUST HOW IMPORTANT IT IS THAT OUR COUNCILS HAVE PROXIMITY TO THOSE THEY SERVE**

Will this mean that local authorities and central government rediscover the importance of Christian and other faith communities to local contexts, mobilising people to support those who are struggling? More generally, could faith groups experience a renewal as they are now increasingly seen as a valued delivery partner and ally to local authorities and government?

## GET PARISHED

During the pandemic I have been overwhelmed by the number of stories and examples I have encountered about Christians stepping up in their communities to meet critical needs: providing food, deliveries to enable independent living, emotional and pastoral support.

Faith communities across the board have stepped in to enhance and support the work of local councils in social care, education, housing and sanitation - to name just a few.

I have noticed also that the smaller, more local parish and town councils have come into their own – showing just how important it is that our councils have proximity to those they serve. If you are a councillor representing a few hundred people in the neighbourhood where you live, you are so much more likely to be able to understand and meet local needs than if your ward is huge and you represent many thousands of people. I represent a community where every square inch of my vast constituency is parished. Consequently, the mechanism exists for the people to be represented at close quarters by a council and councillors where volunteerism is written into their way of life and where forensic care for the community is physically possible. Maybe something that we should learn from the pandemic is that the rush towards larger unitary authorities and mayors serving vast numbers of people across huge areas, is not wise.

5. APPG *faith and society*, 2020: 24-25.

Reducing the localism of local government is a recipe for reduced resilience and care for our communities.

In South Cumbria, the foodbanks mostly existed prior to the pandemic and they are mostly run by churches. However, there has been an amazing growth in foodshare schemes during the Covid crisis. These schemes operate in order to reduce food waste in cooperation with grocers and supermarkets, but they have in reality met the needs of those in food poverty. The foodshare schemes have almost all been the inspiration of individual parish and town councillors, the councils themselves or other residents' groups. It has been a source of inspiration to me as I see people taking initiative to love and care for their neighbours.

Not everywhere is as lucky as we are in South Cumbria, most of the country lacks a local parish council because the network is pretty patchy. Those unparished places, then, have perhaps been the communities to have benefitted most from the role played by churches and other faith groups – embedded in their communities they have been able to get a quick grasp of the things that must be done to support their community and then to practically meet that need.

### EMPOWERED TO STEP IN

Churches have been a vital collaborative partner to local government to achieve its ambitious goals in service to their communities.

I have been part of the South Lakeland Resilience Group since March 2020, it contains school leaders, public health professionals, councilors and – amongst others - a church representative. No one bats an eyelid that the church is there because we all see their relevance due to the practical role they play.



THE COLLABORATIVE EFFORT  
BETWEEN CHRISTIAN  
COMMUNITIES, COUNCILS  
AND OTHER LOCAL BODIES  
HAS SEEN A GROWTH IN AN  
APPRECIATION OF LOCAL  
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS  
AND LAID THE BASIS FOR  
A FUTURE STRUCTURE FOR  
TAKING COMMUNITY ACTION

The collaborative effort between Christian communities, councils and other local bodies has ensured that people have had their needs met but this partnership has also seen a growth in an appreciation of local democratic institutions and laid the basis for a future structure for taking community action. Secular parishes and the church have grown in confidence having been empowered to step in and assist in coordinating and creating teams of volunteers in providing community support, in areas like delivering shopping, organising food banks, walking dogs and pastoral support.

A particularly memorable case which received coverage in the media, was the story of Pastor Mick and the charity Church on the Street ministries in

Burnley. Pastor Mick and his team stepped up to the heart-wrenching challenges being faced in their area during the pandemic. From providing the homeless pre-prepared food bags and clothes out of the boot of a car, to organising volunteer NHS nurses to help those who can't access primary care, delivering food to homes, to picking up and delivering medical prescriptions, to just making visits to those who are lonely and in need of company.<sup>6</sup>

On a larger scale Your Neighbour, an organisation committed to working with local churches across the UK to restore hope, renew community and tackle injustice in the wake of Covid has found that amazingly five million meals have been provided to those in need by the church each month since the beginning of the pandemic, that 90% of the churches they surveyed have supported the vulnerable during this pandemic and a hugely encouraging 71% of churches have delivered new services, many in areas of the community where they have never been active before.<sup>7</sup>

## WHY WE SHOULDN'T BE SURPRISED

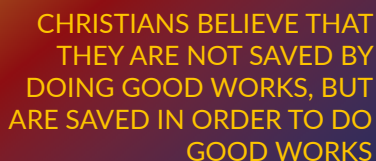
It's important to understand that the intent of highlighting these cases is not to boast about how amazing Christian faith communities are, but to seek to understand how big an impact they are having, and perhaps to understand what lies behind this.

6. BBC, 2020

7. *Your Neighbour*, 2021

Of course, there are many places where the church and others are not stepping up to the plate or are failing to fulfill their mission, but the disproportionately high community provision from Christian organisations begs the question: why is this so? Why do they do it?

A true understanding of Christianity tells us that the motivation to serve and to meet people's needs does not arise from a desire to do good in order to win God's favour. Christians do 'good works' because they have been saved by faith in Christ NOT in order to get saved. To put it another way, Christians believe that they are not saved by doing good works, but are saved in order to do good works.



CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THAT  
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GOOD WORKS

## CHRISTIANITY HAS AN INALIENABLE PUBLIC DIMENSION

This approach is foundational to the core beliefs, as set out in the Bible and the commands of Jesus. For Christians, Christ must be at the centre of all that they do and he is not simply a detachable part of their lives but is understood to demand to be inside all of it. It is for this reason that the Christian faith cannot be seen as a private, personal affair but a very public one.

This goes against much post 'enlightenment' thinking but it should be no surprise because the person and work of Christ had an inalienable public dimension.<sup>8</sup> Much of Jesus' ministry as he walked this earth was focused on spending time with the broken, the outcast, the poor and those alienated by wider society. He preached famously to those who wish to follow him in his sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:14:

*"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."*

Often Christianity is understood as a religious practice for the individual pursuit of finding God. Karl Marx thought that faith, particularly Christianity was the 'opiate of the masses', a kind of distraction from the suffering that surrounds us in the real world before our very eyes, but this is not what is foundational to Christian faith in practice. It is certainly true that the Christian message gives comfort to those who trust in Christ, but Christ asks that we not remain in our own comfort but to react and face the suffering and hardship we see in the world around us. This is important, not in order that the Christian may receive just rewards for good works but that believers treat social action as worship to God.

In Matthew 25 Jesus warned against idleness and selfishness, and stated that if you are to follow him, you treat all as you would treat him.

*"For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me. He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"*

One other thought. Jesus promises "in this world you will have trouble, but fear not I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Maybe one reason why Christians can face a pandemic and not panic or become disillusioned is that they are promised a life that is tough and uncertain at times. This can provide a kind of inner peace that permits them to look outwards to meet the needs of others.

## CONCLUSION

The response to the pandemic by faith communities is a phenomenon that defies easy explanation unless you are prepared to accept that the motivation behind this work is – at least possibly – rooted in something bigger.

What might be the legacy of all this? As a Christian, I hope that people will look again at the appeal of Jesus Christ to us all given that this service and love for others is grounded in a love for him.

What makes him so special? Surely its worth your while to put aside the 60 minutes it might take to read Mark's gospel for example and check it out?

But more generally I also hope that central and local government will become steadily less sniffy and withdrawn when it comes to working with faith communities to deliver services and provide support and that we may reappraise our approach towards local government and understand that small is not just beautiful, it is more effective too.

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# COMMUNITY SPIRIT WITHIN THE ABERAVON CONSTITUENCY

STEPHEN KINNOCK MP



*Stephen Kinnock is a Labour Member of Parliament, representing the constituency of Aberavon, Wales and is Shadow Minister for Asia and the Pacific.*

*He previously worked at the European Parliament in Brussels before holding various positions with the British Council including office director of the St. Petersburg office. In January 2009 he joined the World Economic Forum as Director, Head of Europe and Central Asia. In August 2012 he took up a position at leadership advisory firm Xyntéo in London. He is also a Board Member of Radix UK*

## THOUSANDS OF POUNDS FOR FLOOD VICTIMS

Community has always been one of the biggest strengths of the Aberavon constituency in good times and bad and this has been more evident than ever over the course of the last year and the awful impact the Covid 19 pandemic has had on families, livelihoods and society as a whole.

Aberavon has been affected in much the same ways as areas throughout the UK and across the world, but the community here has had its own hurdles to overcome too and, as always, dealt with them with dedication and resilience.

In January of this year the village of Skewen was rocked by a devastating flood after a disused mine shaft burst and sent torrents of water and sludge cascading into more than 80 homes, many of which had been in families for generations and some which had to be demolished completely.

The speed and level of community response to this awful incident was nothing short of astounding. Donations of food, clothing and essentials immediately began arriving with the Salvation Army co-ordinating the relief effort from its offices in the centre of Skewen.

And the kindness did not stop there. Thousands of pounds were raised for the flood victims in a matter of hours and to date the total raised now stands at £41,500 which has been donated largely by people living nearby to those affected but also from kind-hearted individuals and organisations across the world.

## COMMUNITY SPIRIT IN ABERAVON

The kindness of our communities was also recognised with a national honour in 2020 when the Cymer Afan Community Library, a group of volunteers based in Cymer in the Afan Valley near Port Talbot, were presented with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest award a voluntary group can receive in the UK.



**IN BAGLAN, RESIDENTS  
KNOWN AS STREET  
CHAMPIONS, HAVE  
VOLUNTEERED TO HELP  
VULNERABLE RESIDENTS  
WITH SHOPPING AND  
RUNNING ERRANDS**

The group was formed in 2014 to take over the village library and have developed it into a multi-purpose venue – a hub for the community.

There is a legendary community spirit in Aberavon, and yet again it rose to this challenge throughout the ongoing pandemic. There have been some truly amazing things happening in our community:

- *Age Cymru West Glamorgan have been cooking and delivering warm meals to people in the area.*
- *In Baglan, residents known as street champions have volunteered to help vulnerable residents with shopping and running errands.*
- *Volunteers at the Bethel Community Church have been busy distributing food parcels and clothing to residents in need.*
- *In Briton Ferry the Covid 19 Support group have been doing a fantastic job co-ordinating the street champions, getting food and medication to people who need it most.*
- *Members of the Busy Bees Sewing Group worked tremendously hard to make scrubs bags, Alice bands and Covid forehead bands.*

An army of volunteers also came together to demonstrate that great Cwmafan community spirit and support the most vulnerable residents in Cwmafan by running errands and helping with food and medication.

Port Talbot volunteers have been working tremendously hard making hundreds of scrubs of the NHS. They've been helped by St David's Church in Margam and Carmel Chapel who have provided access to their halls for cutting.

### **DRAWSTRING BAGS FOR NHS WORKERS**

The Friends of Margam Park have been making drawstring bags for NHS workers, allowing them to take their uniforms or scrubs home and place them directly into the washing machine.

Foodbanks have continued to be run in Briton Ferry, Cwmafan, Cymmer, Port Talbot and Skewen to provide this vital service at such a difficult time.

The team at Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Service have all been working really hard coordinating volunteers and helping people access the support they need.

Britain's Got Talent star Paul Potts has also lifted the mood, boosted morale and brought smiles to many faces with his amazing vocal skills.

The Aberavon residents action group RADAR have been working hard to support residents living in the area with food, medication and other essential

supplies as well as running errands.

Hundreds of people have also volunteered with the Neath Port Talbot Council's Safe and Well scheme to support residents who have been told to shield themselves and don't have someone to call on for support by picking up prescriptions, posting mail, making regular phone calls and so much more.

## BUSINESS RISING THE CHALLENGE

Our business community has also risen to the challenge presented by the pandemic.

Construction firm Andrew Scott Ltd worked hard to transform the Llandarcy Academy of Sport into a fully equipped field hospital with beds to help the local health board deal with large numbers of coronavirus cases.

Local engineering business BOC have been keeping hospitals supplied with the oxygen needed to help patients fight the virus. BOC engineering and project teams have also worked in designing and installing systems to the Nightingale Field Hospitals in Swansea, Cardiff and other hospitals around the UK.

First Corporate Clothing utilised the skills of their workforce and turned their production over to making scrubs for frontline medical staff working to fight Covid 19. They've also donated fabric to the Busy Bees Sewing Group to help them with their efforts.

Staff furniture group Ministry of Furniture have used their skillsets, utilised their versatility and repurposed

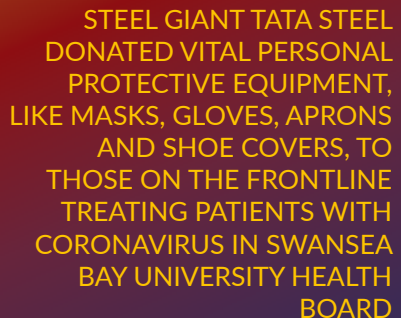
their machinery and facilities to make disposable face shields for frontline healthcare workers.

Rototherm Group in Margam reconfigured its facility on the Kenfig Industrial Estate and began producing face shields and has since gone on to secure UK government contracts to manufacture PPE.

CanDo Laundry started a new business venture in the Sandfields area making non-medical face masks for the public to use, reducing the pressure on NHS supplies.

Steel giant Tata Steel donated vital personal protective equipment, like masks, gloves, aprons and shoe covers, to those on the frontline treating patients with coronavirus in Swansea Bay University Health Board.

And housing association Tai Tarian donated facemasks to Swansea Bay University Health Board.



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CORONAVIRUS IN SWANSEA  
BAY UNIVERSITY HEALTH  
BOARD**

## EDUCATORS AND SPORTS GROUPS STEP UP

Our education providers and sports groups have also joined in the incredible effort and players for Aberavon RFC, working with Age Connects NPT, have been volunteering to run errands for people in the community.

Afan United have been busy keeping fit and raising money for Swansea Bay NHS.

Neath Port Talbot College turned their Llandarcy Academy of Sport into a field hospital, with the help of Andrew Scott Ltd and Neath Port Talbot Council, and handed over the 340-bed facility to Swansea Bay University Health Board.

Students and staff at Swansea University College of Engineering have also been using their base on the Bay Campus to mass 3D printing protective masks for the NHS while staff at Ysgol Bae Baglan have been donating visors to doctors and nurses.

So many organisations and individuals have been and continue to be doing great work across our community.

# BACK THE WHITE HORSE

LAYLA MORAN MP



*Layla Moran has been the Member of Parliament for Oxford West and Abingdon since 2017. She is the Liberal Democrats' Foreign Affairs Spokesperson and was*

*previously Education Spokesperson, an issue that she is deeply passionate about as a former Physics and Maths teacher. She has an international background; her mother is a Christian Arab from Jerusalem, and her father was a British EU Ambassador.*

The Covid 19 pandemic turned our lives upside down. For many of us it has been very difficult, but it's been particularly hard on those who were told by the Government to shield from the virus, who were then left isolated and alone. Millions couldn't go out and get the necessities they needed, something that would have felt unimaginable to so many of us before the pandemic struck.

But our community, through grassroots projects and through our councils, stepped up. In the first few weeks, it was residents' projects that kept people afloat and helped them to cope during an incredibly difficult time. They ranged from prescription and shopping pickups to mental health and loneliness services. It was community schemes that were not only able to help people in need, but keep the community spirit together during incredibly difficult times and unable to see our friends, family and loved ones.

It was very heartening, but it also served as a reminder of just how resilient our communities can be.

## LOCAL COUNCILS HOLD COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

In Oxfordshire, we were incredibly lucky with the range of groups that sprung up. But so much of the story of our local response to this pandemic is about our councils. One of the biggest lessons we need to learn from this pandemic is just how vital our local authorities are in our lives – how they hold our communities together in times of crisis. And if the Government doesn't use this moment to acknowledge that and provide a new long-term funding settlement for councils, we'll be missing a crucial opportunity to be better prepared for the future.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST LESSONS WE NEED TO LEARN FROM THIS PANDEMIC IS JUST HOW VITAL OUR LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE IN OUR LIVES – HOW THEY HOLD OUR COMMUNITIES TOGETHER IN TIMES OF CRISIS

A council in my constituency, the Vale of White Horse District Council, stepped up with a strategy in order to support vulnerable groups.

They didn't operate separately from the grassroots projects – they enabled them to flourish by aiding their communication, use of data and coordination.

Local authorities are often the first point of contact for someone in need and therefore, especially during the first lockdown, they were inundated with requests for help from residents. The Vale of White Horse played a key coordination role in matching the person in need with the community group that was best placed to help them. Often, a resident needed help from a specific local group for a specific need, such as shopping. By stepping in but not taking over from the community projects, the district council was able to ensure residents were matched with the right service.

Without councils' support, community projects risked encountering issues with data protection and safeguarding, as well as failing to properly target the residents most in need. This wasn't because they didn't care about such things, but simply because their enthusiasm often outstripped their expertise. And so it was right for the council to scaffold while letting the groups harness that extraordinary civic energy that emerged.

### LOGISTICAL CAPABILITY AND DATA ACCESS

Local authorities have the data and the resources (for example, contact centres) which can not only be used to highlight those in need of help, such as the clinically extremely vulnerable, but also to contact residents easily and

**LOCAL AUTHORITIES HAVE THE DATA AND THE RESOURCES WHICH CAN NOT ONLY BE USED TO HIGHLIGHT THOSE IN NEED OF HELP, BUT ALSO TO CONTACT RESIDENTS EASILY AND RESPOND TO QUERIES SWIFTLY**

respond to queries swiftly. Often, a small community group will not have the logistical capability to deal with this level of contact, and they don't have the data on who needs help, and what their details are. The joined-up approach in the Vale of White Horse allowed the community groups to reach everyone who was in need of their services but, more importantly, the local authorities were able to point people in need to local services if appropriate, or connect them to a grassroots group.

This created a system where the public sector provided information to community groups, which they used in order to provide localised support to those who required it. It built on their respective advantages and integrated them into a single, holistic crisis response model.

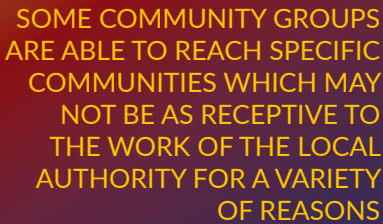
### COMMUNITY GROUPS LESSENER THE LOAD

The Covid 19 pandemic posed a specific and difficult problem. With most other crises, such as an extreme weather event, it is much easier to identify the people

in need. Their home may be flooded, for instance. When coronavirus hit, it was far more complex to find those who needed support.

This joined-up approach of the local authority and the community groups meant that many more people received the help they needed and weren't left to fall through the cracks.

Our councils were already stretched before the pandemic, and they were suddenly thrust onto the frontline of a global pandemic. Properly utilised, community groups lessened the load and provided support to residents who risked being missed otherwise. They not only boosted council services' reach, they augmented them too. There were some things only the community groups could provide, such as combatting loneliness.



**SOME COMMUNITY GROUPS ARE ABLE TO REACH SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES WHICH MAY NOT BE AS RECEPTIVE TO THE WORK OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITY FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS**

Furthermore, some community groups are able to reach specific communities which may not be as receptive to the work of the local authority for a variety of reasons. For instance, an illegal immigrant might be concerned about getting in contact with their council, but would be more likely to interact with a community group. Local authorities also struggle to interact as successfully with certain

minority communities, making grassroots initiatives invaluable, especially when it comes to the current vaccine rollout and reducing vaccine hesitancy.

Community groups are also particularly useful when councils are trying to communicate new public health guidance. National guidance on its own is not always as effective as it could be, in that it fails to take into account important local context and nuance.

### **INFORMATION MUST FLOW FAST**

Often, my council colleagues and I would be frustrated when national messaging was announced in real time before local bodies were even consulted, even though it was them who had to actually deliver it. Questions were being asked of them by residents before they even had a chance to digest the newest challenge. So, information had to flow fast.

In some cases, the national messages didn't match the local picture. For example, where nationally there was deep concern about levels of vaccinations in minority communities, in Oxfordshire we had some of the best take up in the country. This was in large part because local groups were able to provide local guidance to residents that were hard to reach.

As a Liberal Democrat, it's in my political blood that locally-led is best. Community groups, working with local councils, provided localised information and guidance to people instead of relying on national messaging.

IT'S IN MY POLITICAL BLOOD THAT LOCALLY-LED IS BEST. COMMUNITY GROUPS, WORKING WITH LOCAL COUNCILS, PROVIDED LOCALISED INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE TO PEOPLE INSTEAD OF RELYING ON NATIONAL MESSAGING

## LISTEN TO COUNCILS

What is clear to me is that this joined up approach – collaboration between councils and community groups - works, as shown by the work in the Vale of White Horse. Back in December, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coronavirus (which I chair) told the Government in its interim report that it should be listening to councils more and giving them more autonomy over the local pandemic response.

That recommendation is just as important now as it was then. When the next crisis comes, and it will, we need to be better prepared. We need to learn lessons – the good as well as the bad. What our local authorities in Oxfordshire achieved is a positive lesson we should be learning from nationally.

It shows that a non-politicised, grassroots approach can work in these situations, where consensus of approach is the most important thing.

By combining the independence of local groups with the expertise and guidance of councils, the community's response to the pandemic was significantly improved. The community stepped up. Every part of it. Voluntary, private and public. To achieve something remarkable.

Looking forward - the Vale of White Horse District Council is committed to keeping this initiative going with the great relationships and network of community groups they have created during the pandemic.

So next time you hear someone mention how nobody talks to their neighbours anymore, how communities are falling apart, tell them to look no further than Oxfordshire, and other places where everyone worked together to beat the virus and support each other. A better, more local future is possible.



## SOME EARLY CONCLUSIONS

The range and scope of community-led initiatives described by this cross-section of MPs is truly remarkable. Despite representing very different constituencies - from rural Norfolk to the Welsh valleys, from the prosperous West Country to the former 'Red Wall' and the capital of the North - the extent of social capital uncovered by the trauma of the pandemic is both revealing and reassuring. The assertion of the murdered MP Jo Cox that "we are far more united and have far more in common than divides us" is borne out by the way communities have come together to support each other across the country, regardless of background, prosperity and geography.

It is our intention to look in far more detail over the next year at the lessons which can be drawn from these experiences before making firm policy recommendations. Nevertheless, there are some common themes which emerge even at this early stage which are worth highlighting:

**THERE IS HUGE SOCIAL CAPITAL INHERENT IN OUR COMMUNITIES, WHICH IN NORMAL TIMES IS OFTEN SUPPRESSED AND DISEMPOWERED BY THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

- *There is **huge social capital inherent in our communities**, which, far from being harnessed, in normal times is often suppressed and disempowered by the public sector. Government works best when it works in partnership with the voluntary sector, coordinating, funding and supporting, rather than managing and attempting to lead.*
- ***Leadership is crucial**, whether inspiring action or clearing road-blocks for grassroots activity, **but this does not necessarily come from formal structures** and we should not be afraid of empowering those who do not have a formal mandate.*
- ***Volunteering pathways** need actively to be promoted to encourage first time volunteering including through schools, workplaces and job centres.*
- *Local authorities have a particular role to play in managing and **harnessing data** on behalf of voluntary groups.*
- ***Safeguarding, monitoring and data protection** need not be obstacles to the sharing of information and resources across organisations. Local authorities have a role to play in supporting compliance so that voluntary organisations can focus on delivery, but policing needs to be light-touch and pragmatic.*
- ***Small is beautiful**. Initiatives by street, cul-de-sac, village and Parish are often more impactful and certainly cost effective than centralised schemes even managed at local authority level*

- *Funding to support very small, **local initiatives will produce dividends** and the risk of waste in a few cases is likely to be more than outweighed by the benefits of taking risks and investing locally.*
- *Local economies are more resilient and local community and business empowerment therefore needs to be matched with **fiscal and economic freedoms**, within and outside formal decision-making structures.*
- *Local and national government should acknowledge and value the role that **faith organisations** continue to play in our national life and in the delivery of community services and should be less 'sniffy' about partnering with them.*
- *There is a **role for centralised initiatives** such as NHS Cadets and a National Natural Services but these need to be **tools to enable local action** rather than a duplication of it, which removed from local communities may be less effective.*
- *There needs to be space for cross-party discussion and for **de-politicised conversations**. The polarised and oppositional nature of much British politics does not serve us well.*
- ***Decisions can be taken quickly**, even in large public sector organisations – emergency procedures put in place for the course of the pandemic should not automatically be abandoned or competitive tendering reintroduced.*

## NEXT STEPS

The learning from these initial insights are valuable in their own right, but they are far from conclusive and the sample of constituencies may not be representative. Furthermore, while the experiences of individual MPs are significant as they are well-placed to provide an overview of activities in a particular area, they are at the same time somewhat removed from day-to-day life and their findings need to be compared with local grassroots experience.

For these reasons, we see this paper as a starting, rather than a concluding point. Our next step will be to test these early conclusions against local experience. To this end, we now propose to:

- *Establish a 18 month cross-party Commission comprising grassroots groups, local community representatives, business representatives, NGOs, faith leaders, Parliamentarians etc to produce a full report for government on developing Britain's community spirit.*
- *Collect evidence through a mixture of hearings, quantitative and qualitative research, consultation papers, international comparisons and a website*
- *Publish our findings as a major Report to Government*

If you would like to be involved in this ongoing process, serving on the Commission for Community Empowerment, submitting evidence or hosting a hearing session please email [Ben.Rich@Radixuk.org](mailto:Ben.Rich@Radixuk.org)

Thank you once again for your interest in our work and your support.

# TOGETHER AGAIN.

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“NEITHER THE INDIVIDUAL  
NOR THE STATE IS WHERE  
WE DISCOVER WHO WE  
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LIVES IN COMMUNITIES AND  
THE TRADITIONS WHICH  
SUSTAIN THEM.”

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

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