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Space to Connect Keeping in Touch sessions: Executive Summary

July 2021



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Space to Connect is a partnership between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Co-op's charity, the Co-op Foundation, to unlock the potential of community spaces where people can connect and co-operate. Between 2019 and 2021, 57 community organisations received grants totalling £1.6 million to help build social connections, address local challenges like loneliness or access to services, and expand activities.

Leeds Beckett University and Locality are Space to Connect evaluation partners. The experience of Space to Connect projects, the ambitions of the funders and the learning from the programme is captured in a variety of tools, reports and briefings available at:

<https://leedsbeckett.ac.uk/spacetoconnect>



Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport



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This summary paper outlines the issues, challenges and opportunities discussed in the 12 Keeping in Touch (KIT) sessions as part of the learning support to project sites. The purpose of KIT sessions was to provide an open, informal space for projects to connect and share delivery and development experiences with each other. In the context of Covid-19, this opportunity to connect with others was particularly important, as projects were refocusing at pace to provide support to people during the Covid-19 social restrictions in 2020. The sessions identified five themes that were relevant to projects during this period:

1. Engaging new groups and communities
2. Working in new partnerships
3. Digital space – uses, approaches and inclusion
4. Making community spaces more sustainable
5. Covid Recovery – future developments post lockdown

Challenges and new issues for communities in lockdown and community organisations' response

Some key challenges and needs in communities related to the Covid-19 pandemic and social restrictions identified in the KIT sessions have been:

- Request for **practical support** to meet essential needs, including food, fuel, income.
- Issues with **home schooling**: digital access, space in the home, balancing work commitments, etc.
- A **lack of social contact** resulting in loneliness and isolation.
- Increased **mental health issues**.
- **Digital access** to Wi-Fi/data, IT devices and the skills to use these.
- Need for **relevant information and guidance on Covid restrictions**.

Having the resource, skills and capacity to respond to these new issues has been a challenge for many organisations. There was also the challenge posed by the increase in volume and frequency of people contacting community projects.

Community organisations shifted their focus to meet and respond to these new needs in their communities, eg, providing online homework clubs, reorganising spaces as food banks and food hubs, **welfare check-ins** for people, providing information on Covid-19 and lockdown rules, and supporting vaccine uptake.

Theme 1: Engaging new groups and communities

Some projects had reached new communities or sections of the community during the lockdown periods. These new groups included:

- **Older people**, often those who were not previously accessing community projects and who often preferred face-to-face rather than online contact.
- **Young people** experiencing latent issues around mental health.
- **Young families** for whom home schooling meant parents had no personal time for themselves and needed support and reconnection.
- **People who had been furloughed or recently unemployed**, who perhaps lacked confidence and felt lonely or needed advice on welfare benefits and finance.
- **Traveller communities** struggling to make ends meet and making more use of social supermarkets.
- **People in rural villages** who valued the role of outreach, recognising barriers to transportation.
- **Vulnerable adults and those shielding** were at risk of isolation and needed lots of support.

All projects spoke of **creating “hubs” and “bubbles”** for groups of people in neighbourhoods and delivering support and resources via these mechanisms.

What needs to be done in terms of reaching new communities? Ideas from project leads

- It's important we **don't forget people** when things return to normal – new groups with new and greater needs will emerge.
- **Language and terminology** can be and is stigmatising and/or disempowering. Community spaces are not “charity” but places that enable, empower and are inclusive – a welcoming space for community support. Using strengths and asset-based language can be helpful.
- Use **existing and established spaces and places** to engage with (new) people.
- **Blended approaches** needed going forward to maximise reach and participation (mix of online and face-to-face).
- Need to **really listen to people's needs, aspirations and issues** and meet people in their own safe spaces; explore the role of outreach contact.
- Consider how community groups can be **integrated into what is mainstream**
- **More collaboration** and partnerships to build new approaches; share assets and resources.

Theme 2: New connections and partnership working

Many projects had seen increased opportunities for new connections and partnership working with public sector bodies and community organisations. Since lockdown, partner organisations were more forthcoming and willing to share resources, providing opportunities to tap into each

other's expertise and groups more easily. Partnership working could be a major feature in post Covid-19 recovery and was seen as necessary due to future funding restrictions. **Funders and commissioners are also encouraging partnerships** to achieve greater impact in communities, seeing a key role for grassroots organisations in the delivery of projects and activities. Funders and Commissioners need to write into their specifications that partnerships are integral not just desired.

Some of the identified benefits of partnership working were seen as:

- Better use of resources and sharing of skills leading to greater impact.
- Reaching and engaging a wider group of individuals and new communities.
- Fostering trust with communities and building reputation of organisations.
- Increasing opportunities for signposting and provision of support.
- Enabling other smaller organisations to access funding as part of a partnership.

Some challenges of partnership working were seen to be

- **“All being on the same page”** – It's important for community groups to be on the same page, especially when working with local authority partners to demonstrate a joined-up contribution to the issues and opportunities in communities.
- **“Seeking advantage through collaboration”** – A need to find a way to rub along together and negotiate a way that meets the needs of all partners, whilst achieving new opportunities that couldn't be realised by a singular approach.
- **“Limited capacity and resource”** - Many organisations have too much going on that distracts them from seeking new collaborations and partnerships. It's a challenge to develop capacity and resource to explore new relationships.
- **Behaviours in partnerships** – Our behaviour and how we respond is important in new relationships and partnerships. Being clear about expectations and roles and responsibilities is important.

Theme 3: Digital space – uses, approaches and inclusion

Most projects had made an urgent transition to online platforms to promote their resources and presence whilst using digital spaces as a place to keep connected to local communities. Project leads also spoke of the skills and capacity - within projects and the people accessing the resource - to make these shifts as being a challenge. Themes related to digital include:

Digital exclusion

Lack of access to IT devices, Wi-Fi capacity and IT “know-how” meant many people in communities have been unable to connect or engage online. Work has been done locally in some areas to build capacity and access through provision of training, support and provision of reconditioned IT equipment and data packages. There are some examples of early thinking on developing community-based IT and wi-fi access collectives to share costs.

The nature of online delivery

Online delivery was seen as being less fluid and more formal – and potentially off-putting for some who are used to an informal drop-in situation in a physical space. Engaging online is also more of a challenge where existing relationships are not mature or trust is still being established. Online delivery requires more resource, planning and preparation (eg, time needed to make up and distribute activity packs) and increased cost for materials (eg, providing arts materials for individual activity packs). **Resourcing the equipment**, capacity and skills needed to make the shift to digital was a challenge and impacts on finances and future sustainability. New funding sources needed to be secured to maintain and develop further the digital resource and new skills and know-how brought into projects.

Blended approaches/embracing the digital

The online space is here to stay and offers many benefits in terms of reaching those who would find it difficult to connect in person. **Making the online space a nurturing, welcoming space** was emphasised as important. So-called “blended” approaches – some form of physical connection alongside the virtual – may help make people feel engaged, connected and valued, and support people to do things collectively.

Theme 4: Making community spaces more sustainable

The key elements for making community spaces more sustainable include:

Co-production - Building capacity and capability

Community organisations have had a role in supporting people who stepped up to get involved in the Covid 19 response to gain new skills, take on new roles and set up new community resources. This helps sustain and extend community action and supports efforts around “building back”.

Rise in volunteering

Whilst many older volunteers had to step down due to shielding, there has been a growth in volunteering by people from neighbourhoods. Many volunteers are drained and tired, having been through stressful, upsetting experiences through lockdown. There is a need to give volunteers permission to take a break and look after each other. There is **value in promoting the benefits of civic acts** for individuals and communities.

Role of outreach and creative engagement to meet the needs of different groups

The creative arts could be a key partner in cross-sector community development and social action, as it has the flexibility to respond.

Role of creativity

Keeping the profile of the organisation, seeing its activity being present and maintaining engagement with people requires lots of creative thinking and practical action.

Access to funds and grants

Finance was an urgent issue for many projects, with income streams becoming challenged, and some relying on contingency funds to maintain delivery. Local and national funding resources were becoming more competitive due to growth in Covid community groups. Funding streams for Covid-19 responses took away funding for “usual” project activity. Some projects had **lost income** due to lack of rentals of their physical space.

Theme 5: Covid-19 recovery

Plans for post-Covid-19 social recovery and concerns about the long-term effects of Covid-19 in communities were issues for all projects. Covid-19 served to amplify issues already present in many communities – poverty, inequalities, mental health issues, unemployment, disconnected

communities, and disparities. A growth in these issues was expected and a need for increased support to address these was identified.

There was a view that increased demand but a lower ability to support with fewer resources might be a challenge going forward. There was a sense that local organisations needed to be on the same page around solutions – and work in partnership where feasible – but recognise the **need for associated resources and commitment from commissioners and funders.**

A **“Covid decompression” phase** is needed to better understand the work achieved, the impact of the experience on volunteers and staff, and action to be defined for reopening. Community groups have been involved in local networks to talk about the recovery phase – what can, might and does this mean for them?

There are opportunities to co-produce local recovery responses with communities. Some key messages and actions include:

- **Take time to review and reflect:** How has the project been refocused? In what ways did it become responsive and reactive? Ask community members what they need and want going forward. Explore how best to support people to return to “new normal” in the Covid-19 recovery phase.
- **Focus on the hyper local:** Build relationships and delivery at a very local level. Ensure developments are from within – recognised by and supported by local people, *not* “solutions” provided by external agents.
- **Reconnecting/story telling:** It's a crucial time for projects to help people to express their experiences of lockdown through stories, which can be powerful and have different purposes.