



# Birmingham's Collaborative Neighbourhoods

A snapshot of the community-led response to coronavirus and what this means for resetting the civic and community relationship

Commissioned by the Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit



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## Executive summary

### Key findings

#### Relationships

- Council/community relationships prior to the crisis have impacted the way communities have been able to respond to coronavirus.
- Where local assets and partnerships were recognised and linked in with a more coordinated response to the crisis has been possible. Council teams which have focused on creating an ‘enabling and facilitating’ culture have worked more closely with community organisations to respond to the crisis.
- Other positive existing relationships identified by community organisations, prior to the coronavirus crisis, are those with some local councillors; officers involved in the Community Asset Transfer Process; and the Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit and Adult Social Care. These positive experiences were not universal, with several respondents mentioning how they had experienced a ‘commercial’ approach to Community Asset Transfer, rather than one that focused on long term investment in a community organisation. Beyond the council teams mentioned here, many respondents referred to struggling to build relationships with the local authority.

#### Community organisations’ role during the crisis

- Community organisations have responded at pace during the crisis, repurposing existing services, developing new services to support groups that are not catered for by mainstream services, and coordinating food distribution and other support for local communities. Others have had to scale back activity due to the financial impact of the crisis on their organisations
- On top of direct support, community organisations have acted as ‘cogs of connection’ during the crisis. They have connected people up with a range of different services and activities, as well as connecting the different “layers of local”, from the street-level mutual aid response to city-wide services and provision.

#### Support for community organisations during the crisis

- Smaller organisations, especially those that are Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic -led, have, at times, ‘slipped through the gaps’ of central government and local authority support. Several respondents noted that grassroots organisations felt disconnected from council structures during the crisis.

- Centralised support posed challenges for community organisations, owing to the speed at which they reacted and worked with the sector. Concerns of this nature were raised about Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Voluntary Service Council and The Active Wellbeing Society. Where these structures linked to local networks the response was more positive.

### Looking to the future

- There are concerns about the impact of poverty and economic hardship, health inequalities and digital exclusion in the communities in which community organisations work. Some respondents spoke about concerns for future organisational stability, because of the crisis raising questions about existing business models
- There was hope that some of the new partnerships formed between communities and the council during the crisis could lead to change. Respondents spoke of a new settlement in which community organisations play a more central role in the city in future.

## **Recommendations**

### Support a community powered economic recovery

1. Develop an integrated community and inclusive growth approach to recovery and change.
2. Reset the city's Community Asset Transfer policy.
3. Embed the Keep it Local Principles in the Council's inclusive growth agenda and join the Keep it Local Network.

### Build collaborative public services

4. Realise the potential of the Working Together in Neighbourhoods White Paper by investing in it to ensure its take-up across different local authority departments.
5. Embed procurement flexibilities across the council.
6. Link the migrant and refugees' sector in the city with the neighbourhoods and locality working.
7. Build upon the work done through the Neighbourhood Networks Scheme and identify further opportunities to work 'upstream'.

### Turn community spirit into community power

8. Develop a new neighbourhood approach to capacity building to include peer support, and a responsive offer for smaller and newly established and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic-led organisations.

### Develop an approach to culture change across the council

9. Facilitate a wholesale shift in Birmingham City Council culture from a parent/child relationship to one that it is 'enabling and facilitating'.

## Research aims and methodology

Locality was commissioned by Birmingham City Council's Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit to carry out research with a sample of small and medium-sized community organisations and key stakeholders across Birmingham. The research was carried out in June 2020, with the following aims:

- To understand how community organisations have mobilised during the covid-19 crisis.
- To understand relationship changes between community organisations and Birmingham City Council (BCC) brought about by the crisis.
- To explore how lessons from this crisis can support greater impact of the Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods White Paper across BCC's working practices.
- To identify the role community organisations can play in city-wide recovery, in tandem with relevant agendas such as inclusive growth.

We carried out interviews with 11 community organisations, 10 Pioneer Places (made up of multiple community organisations and services), several council and sector stakeholders, hosted two roundtables with i) BCC officers and ii) elected members and BCC's Chief Executive and undertook desk-based research. We used Locality's recently published report, 'We were built for this'<sup>1</sup>, which looks at the community response to coronavirus across the country, as a comparison and reference point.

## Going into the crisis

Community organisations across the city began from a range of different starting points when the crisis hit. In some cases, strong existing relationships enabled a quick coordinated response. In others, the crisis has led to new relationships being forged at pace. We cover some of the factors which led to these shifts below.

### Relationships with BCC

Several respondents spoke about existing relationships with their local councillors, officers in the Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit and, where they were in place Adult Social Care Link Workers. Some community organisations identified positive relationships with officers involved in Equalities and Cohesion and the Community Asset Transfer Process. A specific example of the Prevent Manager was cited as a good relationship with a commissioner because of the "open and transparent" nature of the relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Locality (2020), "We were built for this: How community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis – and how we can build a better future", Page 12 Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/We-were-built-for-this-Locality-2020.06.13.pdf>

These positive experiences were not universal, with several respondents mentioning how they had experienced a 'commercial' approach to Community Asset Transfer, rather than one that focused on long-term investment in a community organisation. One stakeholder observed the difference in relationships between the 'social' and 'economic' side of the council:

*"No ambivalence about the sector within Adults, Children's and PHE...but this is a dichotomy with economic development."*

Beyond the council teams mentioned here, many respondents referred to struggling to build relationships with the local authority. One respondent, reflecting on their relationship with the council, said:

*"It [the council] is a beast to navigate! There are some helpful officers, but they are helpful in spite of the structure."*

## **The scope of activity carried out by organisations we spoke to**

The organisations we spoke to cover a range of service areas and agendas across the city. We spoke to organisations involved in local economic development, education and skills training, welfare and benefits advice, community development and local enterprise support. We heard about their role in supporting health and wellbeing; early years and youth work; family support; older people's activities and support; arts, heritage, and culture projects. Others were involved in tackling homelessness, food poverty and substance misuse.

Many of those we spoke to deliver a range of different services from one community hub. Others are involved in neighbourhood-based partnerships which cover many of these areas. In short, these organisations are tackling some of the biggest social, environmental and economic challenges Birmingham faces, in partnership with their communities.

## **The coronavirus response in Birmingham**

### **Adaptation of services**

Many community organisations in Birmingham have kept community services running through a shift in delivery model – with services moving online and via telephone. For example, the Brandwood Centre developed a digital engagement service for socially isolated people in their communities – their 'Click and Connect' service. The Nishkam Centre, in the north of the city, moved welfare advice services online, which saw a spike in demand as the crisis hit.

They have played a role reacting and responding to emerging needs of communities, where there was not much information or support. For example, ACP Group in Sparkbrook helped

develop an offer around Muslim funeral arrangements and women-only wellbeing and coaching activities. Support for specific groups that weren't covered by mainstream services was a recurring theme. For example, the Pashtun Trust developed a set of advice videos in the Pashtun language and Kikit Pathways to Recovery moved their drug and alcohol counselling services online as well as translating information about Covid-19 into community languages.

Established community organisations such as Moseley Community Development Trust and Northfield Community Partnership were able to use their trusted status and organisational credibility to support community-led responses to Covid-19 such as [Moseley Together](#) and [Northfield Stakeholders Group](#).

### **Development of new support**

A large proportion of community organisations have engaged in food distribution and other support for shielding groups and those most isolated by the crisis. One group – Cedar Church – set up an 'honesty shop' in the local hospital, which supplied food to key workers who weren't able to go shopping. On top of food distribution, community organisations have played a role distributing prescriptions, plants, laptops and other digital equipment. One mutual aid group provided packs of toiletries for victims of domestic violence having to flee to shelters, recognising that local shelters would not have had the time to pull together these essential items whilst dealing with increasing numbers during lockdown.

Many community organisations coordinated local communications - delivering thousands of leaflets and newsletters with up-to-date information on the pandemic and support available locally. To do this, they have recruited, supported and coordinated hundreds of new volunteers across the city. The Sutton Vesey Network used their neighbourhood forum grants to continue to resource existing newsletters, the Boldmere Pages and the Banners Gate Neighbourhood Forum newsletter, to inform local people quickly about advice and support services. Alongside paper communication, organisations established single points of access via telephone, at a community level. Through this they played a social prescribing role – triaging and signposting people to the most appropriate local support.

Lots of the organisations worked with and coordinated mutual aid efforts across the city. These groups often operate at a street level, to support their immediate neighbours, especially those 'shielding' from the coronavirus. Community organisations played a role in coordinating this support at a larger, community scale. Bournville Hub were able to develop an emergency response in 24 hours and built upon local and established networks of communication and support to coordinate 1,000 volunteers through their local mutual aid groups.

### **Scaling back**

Several community organisations in the city have had to furlough staff. Organisations that are reliant on trading income, or do not have steady streams of grant or contract income, had to mothball work at a time when they wanted to mobilise. In such cases, organisations aimed to find a middle ground, keeping a small number of staff working to move some of their services



online or to a telephone service. Welcome Change based in the East of the city saw their income drop due to lockdown and furloughed staff but continued to provide and develop essential services such as food banks and food parcels and welfare visits to local older and vulnerable residents.

## Community organisation characteristics and how they drove the city's response

Through all our interviews, we heard how community organisations were able to mobilise quickly to support the communities in which they are based. A number of different factors enabled this rapid mobilisation. At the same time, some of this rapid response happened in spite of wider system challenges.

### Local rootedness and knowledge, and relationships with the community

One of the key drivers of the community response to the coronavirus crisis has been the deep local intelligence and relationships built up over time. An understanding and appreciation of local nuance was central to the offer provided by community organisations. This strong social infrastructure is not something that can be created at pace. It has been built up over time and was vital when the crisis hit.

*At Laurel Road Community Sports Centre:*

*Our response was enabled by existing relationships and a deep understanding of the people you work with. A lot of our elders have a lot of pride and this makes it difficult to ask for help from people they don't know.*

The trusting relationships community organisations, including many Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic-led organisations, have with local people means that they can develop services and support that are sensitive to the way local communities operate. This trust, built up over years, also played a role in driving people to use these services.

Nishkam Centre explained:

*We were asking people to do things they hadn't before, such as use online services, and this meant they had to trust us.*

Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic-led organisations also explained that their diverse workforce, representative of the communities in which they work, was important. Speaking multiple languages and understanding cultural norms their staff were able to meaningfully engage with and effectively support different communities in the area.

### Strong networks

Alongside these relationships with local people and an understanding of the local place, many of the community organisations interviewed through our research possess strong networks, and relationships with other local organisations.



Legacy West Midlands, explained this in more detail:

*“We are part of an excellent network of community organisations - based on years of working together. It means we don’t replicate but support. There is no one dominant organisation and our work is guided by...mutual trust...similar ethos and values.*

This role was highlighted in recent Locality research. “They [community organisations] have a pivotal role in the local ecosystem, with networks of relationships with local people, public sector agencies, providers, businesses and other local partners that have developed organically over time. Indeed, they have a catalytic role linking up these, often disconnected, parts of the system.”<sup>2</sup>



Fig.1: The role of community organisations in their local place

## Relationships during the crisis and their impact

Respondents spoke about some of the positive experiences of working with the local authority during the crisis, as well as some of the challenges they faced. Learning from both can inform future council approaches to working with communities across Birmingham.

<sup>2</sup> Locality (2020) “Keep it Local: How local government can plug into the power of community.” Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/LOC-Keep-It-Local-Report-40pp-WG08.pdf>

## **Successes**

### **Pioneer Places**

In the Pioneer Places, established by the Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods White Paper<sup>3</sup>, respondents noted their positive relationship with a range of different local authority stakeholders. This included with the NDSU, the Neighbourhood Network Schemes, the Adult Social Care team and the Children's Trust. As well as the strong links they had been able to build with the council, these places also reflected on strong relationships locally which helped them to respond to the crisis.

*"The partnership works because of strong, accountable, transparent leadership. We share information in order to build the capacity of others around us"*

*Northfield Community Partnership*

### **Support from the Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit**

The Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhood White Paper<sup>4</sup>, in establishing the Pioneer Places, created a framework and structure through which Birmingham City Council could engage with specific localities. It is worth noting that these localities had existing localised infrastructure, partnership and networks which the Pioneer Place scheme sought to recognise. The NDSU has been a key point of contact for these organisations with many citing the relationship they had built up with key Officers over the years – providing a helpful contact that understood the local landscape and would help to navigate the complex world of the local authority. Respondents in these places spoke about the positive impact these existing local relationships had on their response. They also emphasised the importance of small £1k pioneer place grants, which they were able to access quickly and with little bureaucracy.

*We've had lots of support from the NDSU, including small and easy to access grants.*

However, with an approach that works in places where that connection already exists, there will also be places that don't benefit from this support. One community organisation spoke about the difference a small grant, such as those received by the Pioneer Places would have made to their work.

*If we'd had a stronger relationship with BCC that would have invaluable. That would have been the pathway. For example, a £1k cash injection immediately would have gone a long way for emergency food parcels. In a crisis, community organisations need access to small cash grants with little bureaucracy.*

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<sup>3</sup> Birmingham City Council (2019), Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods, Available at: [https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/11839/working\\_together\\_in\\_birminghams\\_neighbourhoods\\_white\\_paper](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/11839/working_together_in_birminghams_neighbourhoods_white_paper)

<sup>4</sup> Birmingham City Council (2019), Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods, Available at: [https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/11839/working\\_together\\_in\\_birminghams\\_neighbourhoods\\_white\\_paper](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/11839/working_together_in_birminghams_neighbourhoods_white_paper)

## **The Neighbourhood Networks Schemes**

Another service structure – The Neighbourhood Networks Scheme (NNS) – was cited by respondents as a useful conduit for their relationships with BCC. This was particularly noticeable in the locally-led approaches such as those in Northfield, Erdington, Selly Oak and Perry Barr where there was recognition that local organisations had led the crisis response and were recognised for their strengths. Although some frustrations were raised by interviewees about the initial process of procurement the relationship with Adult Social Care was generally perceived as helpful and supportive.

In an interview with Birmingham Voluntary Sector Council (who provide development support to Neighbourhood Network Schemes and administer some of the NNS and Early Help grants) they highlighted the value of the sector and its need to be recognised as a key partner for BCC.

*The voluntary sector **was** the city's response – the resource that was deployed was the city's response.*

## **The Active Wellbeing Society**

Several respondents spoke about the positive relationships they have formed with The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS). One respondent said:

*“Although there have been lots of staff changes, they [TAWS] have worked well in the area to support the community and our work”*

This approach was helpful because it connected in with local systems that were already established. Challenges arose for community organisations when this was not perceived to be the case.

## **Challenges**

### **Centralised infrastructure support posed challenges for community organisations**

Several respondents commented on the pace and suitability of support from centralised, city-wide institutions, including Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Voluntary Service Council and The Active Wellbeing Society.

One respondent noted that they had to get in touch with these organisations, rather than the other way round. This respondent explained that ‘communities led the way, and the council had to catch up’.

Another organisation, when speaking about their relationship with the council, spoke about their frustrations.

*“BCC wasn't connected to the grassroots effectively - [they] weren't sure who was doing what”*

*“The relationship needs to be more proactive and inventive.”*

One community organisation, when speaking about their engagement with centralised said:

*They are too bureaucratic and not quick to react - [at the time of interview] we still haven't received any funding.*

There may be reasons, such as due diligence, behind this perception but this was perceived to be in direct contrast to the issuing of small grants on the basis of trust and existing relationships for Pioneer Places. The challenges some groups faced in engaging with centralised support link to some of Locality's national findings on the community response to coronavirus. On the whole, we heard a story of strengthened relationships, and new well-functioning systems. However, some community organisations reported that:

*Centralised support systems across some local authority areas were disconnected from neighbourhood approaches. There were missed opportunities to connect community assets and resource these during the response<sup>5</sup>*

### **Responding at different speeds**

Community organisations responded at pace because of their deep understanding of their local communities and existing expertise within organisations. There was also a humility and an understanding that they too needed to connect with and not duplicate large scale activity – but supplement with local intelligence and cultural understanding. Villa Road Soup Kitchen who have been working in the area for 66 years provided lunch bags for local people to complement the wider food delivery service that was being offered through TAWS.

This sequencing – of mutual aid groups and community organisations establishing the first layers of response, to be followed by local authority support – was seen in places across the country.

*"Local authorities have often then plugged statutory services into these community networks, coordinating at a strategic level and adding resource."<sup>6</sup>*

This experience of organisations at different scales reacting at different speeds may seem common sense. However, it points to a future in which the respective strengths of different stakeholders are maximised. Calderdale Council recognises that during a crisis response, community organisations play a local coordination role that the council isn't able to fulfil. Therefore, the council conceives of its role as being to "coordinate and align existing work happening at community-level"<sup>7</sup>

In reflecting on the coronavirus response, BVSC recognised that perspective plays an important role.

*"'Quick' and 'slow' looks very different from different perspectives."*

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<sup>5</sup> Locality (2020), We were built for this, Page 59

<sup>6</sup> Locality (2020), "We were built for this: How community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis – and how we can build a better future", Page 12 Available at: <https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/We-were-built-for-this-Locality-2020.06.13.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

## **Smaller and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic-led organisations slipping through the gaps**

Several respondents spoke about the challenges smaller organisations faced in accessing support. One larger organisation said: “we’ve had enough support, but smaller/grassroots groups haven’t, and this has frustrated them.” Another respondent spoke about smaller groups that emerged during the crisis being unable to access support, and being “cut out of delivery by larger national organisations” that were funded to deliver services but didn’t connect to organisations on the ground.

One group spoke of their frustration with repeated attempts to connect with BCC (including their local councillors) to offer community language support during the pandemic.

Some of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic-led groups talked about feeling disconnected from centralised support, reporting that they found traditional approaches ‘out of touch’ with some of the issues that they were dealing with. They also explained how nuanced their support to the community needed to be. Alongside advice on social distancing and lockdown groups talked of the need to provide culturally appropriate food (and in some cases cooked/hot food) as well as challenging community interpretation on health messages.

*Many [people] in the community are disconnected with 'authority' so will listen to each other and this has caused issues around social distancing and accessing hospital.*

## **Concerns for the future of Birmingham’s communities**

When asking respondents about their concerns for the future, based on their interaction with communities over the course of the coronavirus crisis, and what this means for the future, four key themes presented themselves:

- Poverty and economic hardship
- Health inequalities
- Digital exclusion
- Organisational stability and their future role

### **Poverty and economic hardship**

This is overwhelmingly the most common concern community organisations have for the future of the communities they work with. Some organisations have experienced work with low income families that “were always struggling but will now be pushed over the edge”. Others reflected on finance issues and the more specialist debt and welfare advice that will be needed across the city as “people’s situations become more complex”.

Several respondents looked at this specifically through the lens of the young people they work with. Challenges around unemployment may disproportionately affect young people.

Organisations are thinking about how they can harness their assets to support youth employment and skills development.

## **Health inequalities**

Another widespread response to the question about future concerns was about the way health inequalities have been reemphasised. Many spoke about the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, and the impact this is likely to have in the future. This has led some to consider how their work to tackle the social determinants of health can be strengthened in the future through engaging with systemic and structural issues.

*“BCC needs to treat us as equals so we can help in the planning. We need strategic and long term leadership and planning as well as a clear understanding of how we fit in to that. Need to look at systemic issues not just immediate impact e.g. health inequalities/social determinants”*

Others spoke about the mental health impacts of the coronavirus crisis – increased isolation, anxiety and loneliness caused by the lockdown which could yet have longer-term knock-on effects. Indeed, experts are warning of a “tsunami of mental illness” on the way.<sup>8</sup>

## **Digital exclusion**

The move to online work, socialising and engagement with public services in recent months has accentuated existing digital divides. Several organisations spoke about this as concern for the future, and the role they have in improving digital literacy and access in their communities. Organisations also spoke about the need for them to increase their digital offer, as periods of social distancing are sustained and people’s habits change. Some interviewees highlighted the sector’s need to become more digitally aware as prolonged and isolated exposure could increase the risk of grooming and radicalisation.

## **Organisational stability and their future role**

Business models have been challenged during this crisis, and organisations face uncertain futures. One community organisation remarked:

*How do we futureproof when we don’t know what the future is?*

Several organisations spoke about their concerns about declining demand for room hire and use of their buildings, and the impact this will have on financial stability. Although this trading

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<sup>8</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists (2020) “Psychiatrists see alarming rise in patients needing urgent and emergency care and forecast a ‘tsunami’ of mental illness”. Available at: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2020/05/15/psychiatrists-see-alarming-rise-in-patientsneeding-urgent-and-emergency-care>



model is currently challenged, over the longer-term asset ownership and localised economic development is still likely to support economic recovery and resilience.

Organisations referred to the role they had played working with and coordinating smaller organisations during the crisis. They recognised that as acting as community anchors<sup>9</sup> they had a role in the delivery of local infrastructure support.

*We need investment in the right type of infrastructure going forward. We want support to develop a CDT for the area to tackle some of these issues across the partnership. [We need] better procurement process that builds the capacity of the sector.*

Other places talked of the need for local structures such as Neighbourhood Councils<sup>10</sup>.

Community organisations were keen to highlight learning from this crisis period to support a changing relationship with the local authority. They spoke about the need for more investment for and recognition of local infrastructure. Some of the organisations had been the local connector for many years; supporting the development of resident-led and smaller community organisations and questioned the logic of not starting with the community when deciding council strategy.

*Could they start with our [community] plan rather than trying to put everything in place to suit theirs? Although this is an investment how much time and money is spent on duplication or Officers having to source information?*

## Looking to the future: opportunities and recommendations

Birmingham City Council can play an important enabling role across the city, working with people and organisations to put the power of community at the heart of coronavirus recovery. Some of the new ways of working that emerged during the crisis can form the basis of a new future. Importantly, this moment offers an opportunity to ‘reset’ – to develop an approach to ‘recovery and change’ which builds on and mainstreams work that exists in pockets across the city. These recommendations lay out potential routes through which Birmingham City Council, in partnership with local communities, can do this, by:

- Supporting a community-powered economic recovery
- Building collaborative public services
- Turning community spirit into community power
- Developing and approach to culture change across the council

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<sup>9</sup> Community anchor = independent, community-led organisations which are multi-purpose and provide holistic solutions to local problems and challenges.

<sup>10</sup> Neighbourhood Council = one of the forms of the first tier of local government, alongside, town, parish and community councils. They are statutory bodies. They serve electorates and are independently elected and raise their own precept.



## **Support a community-powered economic recovery**

### **Develop an integrated community and inclusive growth approach to recovery and change**

Recent Locality research has demonstrated the role of community organisations in strengthening “local economic resilience”: creating a productive local economy that’s environmentally sustainable and supports community wellbeing. In particular, community organisations act as local economic multipliers in the disadvantaged areas they operate – places we know will face the toughest challenges in the years to come. They ensure the wealth they generate is redistributed in their neighbourhoods, by employing local people in good quality jobs, using local supply chains, and providing training opportunities so local people can become economically active.<sup>11</sup>

Respondents spoke about the opportunity that a shift in culture and relationships provided by the coronavirus crisis could represent.

*There has been a revival of the ‘15-minute neighbourhood’<sup>12</sup>. How do we support local business and the local economy?*

Mobilising the role of community organisations to provide pathways to employment in the wake of the crisis is more important now than ever, especially in areas of multiple deprivation where labour market challenges will be particularly acute. The barriers people experience to employment are often complex and place-specific, ranging from a lack of access to networks, to caring responsibilities, to transport issues. Therefore, mobilising the assets, solutions and capabilities across the community to address these barriers and determine the solutions is essential. Work to tackle large scale unemployment has been done in the city before (Longbridge and Northfield) and pilots are currently underway to demonstrate the role community organisations play in supporting strategic recovery plans.<sup>13</sup>

Coronavirus is a worldwide crisis that’s hitting the UK severely and its’ impacts are of a scale beyond a significant regional economic collapse like Longbridge. That said, the solution should be similar – respect and invest in those key teams mobilising a response, support and engage communities and work on long term recovery planning.

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<sup>11</sup> Locality (2017) Powerful Communities, Strong Economies, Available at: [https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LOCALITY-KEEP-IT-LOCAL-002\\_revised260318\\_summary.pdf](https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LOCALITY-KEEP-IT-LOCAL-002_revised260318_summary.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2019/9/6/7-rules-for-creating-15-minute-neighborhoods>

<sup>13</sup> Pioneer Group are developing an employment pilot and are part of the community wealth building partnership in Birmingham.

To harness this potential, communities should play a central role in Birmingham's economic recovery. Too often, their work is seen as an add on, rather than a central route through which through which BCC can achieve their goals.

*Adult social care, neighbourhoods and housing need to pull together to talk to the economic side of the council. The [voluntary and community] sector can fall through the gaps and become ping pong ball in between.*

This points to a broader recommendation, of involving community organisations with relevant expertise in strategic planning to tackle systemic issues – such as the social determinants of health. Too often, community organisations are asked deal with symptoms, rather than use their expertise to inform a strategic approach some of our biggest economic, social, and environmental challenges, challenges.

### **Reset the city's Community Asset Transfer policy**

The availability of community spaces underpins community wellbeing in good times and bad.<sup>14</sup> These are the places where community power is built - through the groups, services and amenities they house and the connections and relationships that are forged within them. Furthermore, community ownership or management puts the governance of these spaces in the hands of local people – unlocking new capacity, service improvement and innovation.<sup>15</sup>

We have seen this power like never before during the coronavirus crisis. Much of the extraordinary community response to coronavirus has been made possible through community spaces and services that have provided crucial local capacity and resources. Community buildings have been centres for local coordination, bringing together crisis support schemes like foodbanks and distribution. In addition, community buildings often house multiple services, groups and businesses under one roof; this co-location was an invaluable foundation for the local response, making partnership working and information sharing quicker and easier, based on existing trust and relationships.

Community ownership offers an opportunity for places to develop affordable housing, revitalise our high streets and create hubs of local economic activity. Locality's publication, 'Developing a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy: a guide for local authorities'<sup>16</sup>, lays out some of the principles councils should consider when developing a new Community Asset Transfer Policy, including:

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<sup>14</sup> Bagnall, A et al (2018) "Places, spaces, people and wellbeing: full review". Available at: [https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Places-spaces-people-wellbeing-full-report-MAY2018-1\\_0119755600.pdf](https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Places-spaces-people-wellbeing-full-report-MAY2018-1_0119755600.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Locality and the Co-op (2020). "In Community Hands: lessons from five years of community asset transfer." Available at: [https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COP33979\\_In-Community-Hands\\_2020.03.18.pdf](https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COP33979_In-Community-Hands_2020.03.18.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Locality (2020), Developing a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy: a guide for local authorities, Available at: [https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COP33979\\_In-Community-Hands\\_Appendix\\_2020.03.18.pdf](https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COP33979_In-Community-Hands_Appendix_2020.03.18.pdf)

- Having a portfolio holder responsible for CAT
- Integration within other strategies – particularly the council corporate plan
- Cross departmental commitment
- Co-design with the community
- Clarity on availability of community assets, process and decision making
- Clarity around the scope and terms for CAT

We heard that BCC and other asset-owning stakeholders in the city needed to be more imaginative about their use and disposal of assets beyond immediate gain and that the Valuing Worth<sup>17</sup> process was a helpful tool for organisations to demonstrate return on investment to council departments.

One of the practical routes through which BCC can provide community organisations a greater economic stake is community asset transfer. Through this research, community organisations told us that their experience with officers involved in community asset transfer was a frustrating one. Birmingham City Council should consistently apply its Community Asset Transfer approach which sees asset transfer as way of investing in communities, rather than a transaction which removes property from the council's balance sheet. It also can reassert its approach through the review of its current policy and it's application, in line with the principles outlined above.

### **Embed the Keep it Local Principles in the Council's inclusive growth agenda and join the Keep it Local Network**

When developing an approach to inclusive economic recovery, BCC should apply the Keep it Local principles to any plan. Covering local wealth building, service redesign and community partnership, the principles offer a cross-cutting, whole system approach to local government strategy. In publicly endorsing these principles, Birmingham Council can join a group of likeminded councils in the Keep it Local Network<sup>18</sup>. These places are aiming to unlock the power in their communities by building strong local partnerships, sharing power and maximising local strengths.

Through the Network there are regular opportunities to learn from one another – involving council officers in these sessions provides a practical way to shift cultures internally.

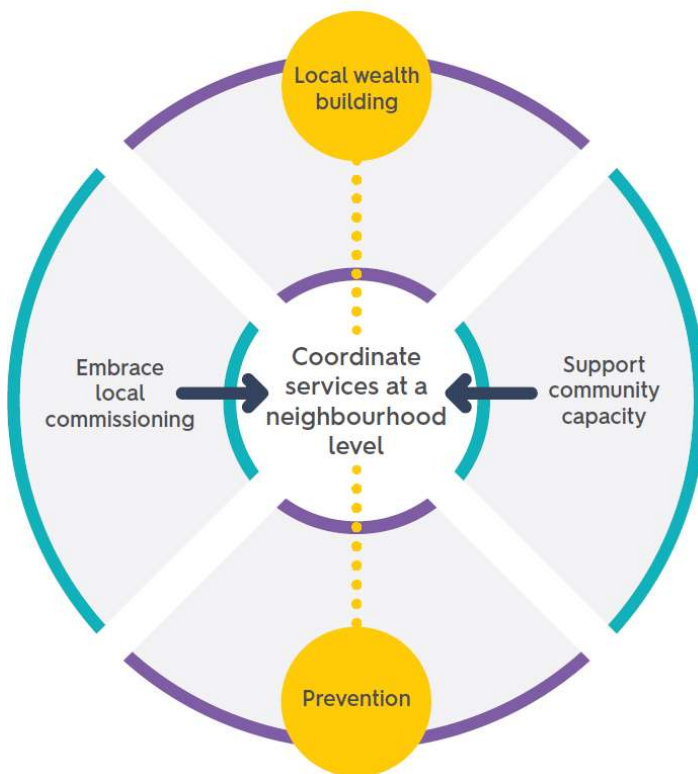
### **The Keep it Local principles and approach**

1. Think about the whole system not individual service silos
2. Co-ordinate services at a neighbourhood level
3. Increase local spend to invest in the local economy

<sup>17</sup> <https://communityassettransfer.com/valuing-worth/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/keep-it-local/join-the-keep-it-local-network/>

4. Focus on early intervention now to save costs tomorrow
5. Commit to your community and proactively support local organisations
6. Commission services simply and collaboratively so they are 'local by default'



*Fig. 2: A 'whole system' Keep it Local approach*

### **Build collaborative public services**

As a recent Core Cities paper laid out, “return and recovery cannot happen without high quality, properly resourced public services”<sup>19</sup>. Local government needs to be adequately resourced.

However, there is lots local government can also do within the current climate. The Working Together in Birmingham’s Neighbourhoods White Paper<sup>20</sup> set out an ambitious vision for services. The paper committed the council to “make services more responsive to local neighbourhoods.” It proposed to do this by:

*Establishing a cross-service (and partnership) review to explore ways to make services more responsive to neighbourhoods, including:*

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.corecities.com/sites/default/files/field/attachment/pressing%20restart.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Birmingham City Council (2019), Working Together in Birmingham’s Neighbourhoods, Available at: [https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/11839/working\\_together\\_in\\_birminghams\\_neighbourhoods\\_white\\_paper](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/11839/working_together_in_birminghams_neighbourhoods_white_paper)

- *Extending the role of Relationship Managers who provide a point of contact for wards in each key local service*
- *Service redesigns, using the example of Neighbourhood Networks in our Adult Social Care service*
- *Job design in public facing roles to enable more flexibility and responsiveness*
- *How service managers and senior management can engage with neighbourhoods*
- *Identify and implement ways to reduce “red tape” that prevents local groups from addressing local issues. This will include considering: ensuring conditions of grant aid are proportionate; the requirement for public liability insurance for all organisations; and a “Citizens Right to Challenge Bureaucracy”*
- *Contracts and procurement (including engaging the community more in commissioning).*<sup>21</sup>

**Realise the potential of the Working Together in Neighbourhoods White Paper by investing in it to ensure its take-up across different local authority departments.**

Tackling each suggested action, laid out in the proposed cross-service review, could have a huge positive impact on the structures and culture of Birmingham City Council, and ensure the White Paper has impact beyond the Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit. While some of the measures in the review have been taken forward by the council, this has not been done in a systematic way. The council now has an opportunity to fully implement these steps.

*We need a strategic approach to community development and localism. How do we use the white paper to fast track anchor-type approaches in areas that have little infrastructure?*

### **Embed procurement flexibilities across the council**

Aside from these ready-made recommendations that Birmingham Council has committed to undertaking, there are new opportunities for change that the coronavirus crisis has presented.

In mid-March, the Cabinet Office published two Procurement Policy Notes<sup>22</sup>. The guidance laid out how procurement practice should be shifted in local authorities, CCGs, central government and elsewhere, in light of the coronavirus crisis. Where, in the past, the focus of many contracts has been on outputs and specific outcomes, which can shut out local voluntary and community organisations, some councils are now looking for broad outcomes

<sup>21</sup> Working Together in Birmingham’s Neighbourhoods, Page 15

<sup>22</sup> Cabinet Office (2020), “Procurement Policy Note - Supplier relief due to COVID-19”, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0220-supplier-relief-due-to-covid-19>  
Cabinet Office (2020), “Procurement Policy Note - Responding to COVID-19”, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0120-responding-to-covid-19>

that meet community need and public purpose. These flexibilities can pave the way for transactional relationships to be replaced by those based on trust.

As Andrew McCartan, Commissioned Services Manager Wirral Council, one of the Keep it Local councils, puts it:

*Traditionally, we've been a very KPI, performance-driven organisation. During the crisis, we've seen organisations do things well without this level of process and a greater degree of trust and collaboration. We now need to use this learning to understand how we commission and procure things in the future, and where appropriate and in the best interest of local communities, move away from some of those more inflexible approaches to more collaborative, outcomes driven partnership solutions with these organisations and local community businesses.”<sup>23</sup>*

### **Link the migrant and refugees' sector in the city with the neighbourhoods and locality working**

Through this research, migrant and refugee work was identified as a potential area that could be better coordinated with neighbourhoods and locality-based working in the city – tying this 'communities of interest' work into the 'communities of place' approach adopted by NDSU. This was identified as especially important for new arrivals in the city, to ensure they can get to know their new neighbours and the range of provision available in their communities.

### **Identify new opportunities to work 'upstream'**

Several interviewees spoke about the work they had already been doing and the need for the council to work 'upstream' to intervene early and prevent issues mounting up over time. As per the Keep it Local principles, focusing on early intervention now can save costs tomorrow. Both community organisations and BCC interviewees recognised importance of BCC forming partnerships with community to achieve this aim. The Neighbourhood Networks Scheme and the Early Help (Children's Trust) have both been highlighted as a model for addressing intervention and prevention outcomes in future.

The latter has involved co-design with community organisations, been organised at a neighbourhood level and focussed on early intervention. BCC should build on the successes of these schemes and models and think about other service areas which can strengthen their preventative offer in partnership with communities.

### **Turn community spirit into community power**

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<sup>23</sup> Locality (2020), We were built for this, Page 18



The wave of community spirit seen during the crisis, across the country, has been a powerful source of hope amidst a persistent stream of stories of human suffering the coronavirus has brought to bear. One of the key challenges central and local government are grappling with is how to sustain this, once there is some return to stability.

### **Develop a new neighbourhood approach to capacity building to include peer support, and a responsive offer for smaller and newly established and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic-led organisations**

One of the central findings of this research is that many community organisations felt they slipped through gaps of centralised support during the crisis, whether this was the speed at which they were communicated to, or the ease of access to small grants. As the city looks to recovery it should consider how its infrastructure offer can be strengthened to work more closely with communities and to understand the nuance required to support Birmingham's diverse community.

Several respondents spoke about the importance of funded peer support as part of this offer – such as through a community hubs network. Discussions have been started with [Birmingham Community Matters](#) to explore this as part of their peer support model. There is also likely to be a wave of sustainability issues across newer and well-established organisations in the coming months, as their finances take a hit. Any infrastructure offer will have to focus on a number of issues including specialist areas such as digital inclusion and community business models and transformation.

### **Develop an approach to culture change across the council**

To bring about change in the three spheres identified above, the council needs to develop an approach to culture change, and opportunities to implement this approach, which mainstreams and turbocharges the principles laid out in the Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods White Paper.

### **Facilitate a wholesale shift in Birmingham City Council culture from a parent/child relationship to one that it is 'enabling and facilitating'.**

A recurring theme through this research has been the challenges community organisations have faced when engaging with the local authority. These organisations want to see a focus on collaboration between the local authority and communities, and a recognition of the strengths of both parties. Many of the recommendations in this section of the report aim to provide opportunities through which the council can begin to shift its cultures.

*When you are busy the unhelpful relationship with the council zaps the life out of you. There's a win-win situation but it feels like an uphill battle. [BCC needs to] trust us to do the right thing for our communities*



The Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods White Paper laid out this vision:

*The overall direction of change will be away from the structures of the city council towards a diverse pattern of neighbourhood and community groups and organisations taking on more power and more assets to enable them to deliver their own solutions to the challenges in their area. What is needed is a change of culture not necessarily a change of council structure.<sup>24</sup>*

Leaders across the Council will have to play a role in ensuring there are workstreams in different service areas, which allow people to put these principles into practice.

*The council should be asking communities: 'how can we help you to do this?' Not 'these are the reasons you can't do this'*

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<sup>24</sup> Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods, Page 9

## Appendix: List of research activities and participants

Thank you to everyone who took part in this research. Here we provide a list of all those involved.

### Interviewees

ACP Group  
Balsall Heath Strategic Partnership  
Banners Gate Neighbourhood Forum  
Birmingham City Council Adult Social Care (Migrant and Refugees)  
Boldmere Futures  
Bournville Hub  
Bournville Village Trust  
Brandwood Centre  
Cedar Church  
Elim Life Church  
Glebe Farm and Tile Cross Pioneer Place  
Handsworth Wood Youth Group  
Kikit Pathways to Recovery  
Laurel Road Youth and Community Centre  
Legacy West Midlands  
Moseley Community Development Trust (on behalf of Moseley Together)  
Nelson Mandela School  
Nishkam Centre  
North Edgbaston Coalition  
Northfield Community Partnership  
Northfield Stakeholder Group  
Pashtun trust  
Pioneer Group  
Stirchley Neighbourhood Forum  
St Pauls Community Development Trust  
Villa Road Soup Kitchen  
Welcome Change

### Councillors

Marje Bridle  
Mary Locke  
Rob Pocock  
Kath Scott

### Roundtable with Birmingham City Council officers (Community Recovery Group)

Suwinder Bains  
Karen Cheney  
Neil De-Costa  
Chris Jordan  
Kalvinder Kohli  
Pamela Powis  
Emil Prysak

**Roundtable with Birmingham City Council elected members and CEO**

Councillor Ian Ward

Councillor Sharon Thompson

Councillor Karen McCarthy

Councillor John Cotton

Councillor Fred Grindrod

Chris Naylor

**Follow up interview with Birmingham Voluntary Service Council**

Brian Carr

Stephen Raybould



Locality supports local community organisations to be strong and successful. Our national network of over 900 members helps more than 400,000 people every week. We offer specialist advice, peer learning and campaign with members for a fairer society. Together we unlock the power of community.

## Unlock the power in your community with us

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