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Rapid research COVID-19

Community responses to COVID-19: Community hubs as social infrastructure

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SYNOPSIS: Community hubs, halls and centres are a core component of the 'social infrastructure' of places, and they have come into their own during the pandemic. They provide direct practical and emotional support for people, enable people to stay connected, and also have a symbolic significance for communities. This briefing examines the role they have been playing during the crisis, the challenges they face in terms of providing COVID-secure activities and looks at future opportunities and dilemmas.

Key points

- Community hubs play an important role in social infrastructure (spaces that enable people to meet up), but the way they do this has been quickly rethought during COVID-19.
- Community hubs have helped focus responses to the pandemic – they came into their own by quickly pivoting towards emergency support. They continue to offer spaces for connection, and closures and restrictions have been mitigated in part through the development of virtual activities.
- The main challenges community hubs have experienced during COVID-19 have been around safe reopening amidst changing guidelines, how quickly residents will return to face-to-face activities, and financial sustainability. Many fear that hubs will struggle to stay afloat just at a time when they are needed most as spaces for connection, care and support.
- Looking ahead, groups responsible for community hubs are thinking about how to address isolation and loneliness, how to balance face-to-face with online activities, and the financial viability of socially-distanced reopening.

This briefing is the 13th in a series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

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

Introduction

Amid the disruption to just about everything, COVID-19 has affected one of the fundamentals tenets of community action: the ability to meet up. Social distancing and restrictions on gathering have simultaneously closed down spaces to meet but also opened up new possibilities through online platforms. Community meeting spaces, such as community hubs and centres, have often been the focal point for many activities and organising, but their role has quickly been re-imagined through the crisis.

In this briefing we take a closer look at community meeting spaces during COVID-19, both physical and virtual. Drawing from recent literature and from [ongoing research](#) in 26 different local areas, we examine in turn the role of community hubs before the pandemic, during the crisis itself, and consider their immediate future. We look at the impact of COVID-19 on the operations and sustainability of community hubs, and conclude by observing the paradox that they are seemingly indispensable and yet at the same time highly vulnerable.

What are community hubs?

Community meeting spaces have received a great deal of attention generally in recent years. This is partly because of the growing interest in place-based activity and in the significance of 'social infrastructure'. In the context of the government's efforts to articulate its 'levelling up' agenda, discussion of the value, scope and limits of social infrastructure continues (Kelsey and Kenny, 2021; Snelson and Collis, 2021). For this briefing, we take the spirit signalled by Gregory's (2018, p.11) definition of social infrastructure:

"The places and structures and buildings or clubs that enable people to get together, meet, socialise, volunteer and co-operate..."

This allows us to focus on something more tangible: the role of community hubs, and their pivot during the pandemic towards virtual meeting spaces.

A recent guide describes community hubs as:

"Buildings (or parts of buildings) [which] provide and host community activities that local people need. They are led and run by the community and are open and accessible to everyone. This also means their purpose can change over time to be available to people" (Locality, 2020a, p.6; see also Trup et al, 2019).

A typical example of a community hub from the areas involved in our research is a late 60s or early 70s purpose-built centre that was previously a local authority youth and community centre or a village hall and is now managed by a local community group. The physical space might consist of a large gym area, some smaller meeting rooms, kitchen space and toilets as well as an office for administration.

Although this is a common idea of a community hub, in practice they come in many different guises, for example as purpose-built village or community halls, or services or activities organised through other spaces, such as GP surgeries, local sports huts, clubs or pavilions, pubs and local shops. They offer large and small spaces for meetings, events and activities focused on, for example, health and well-being, arts and crafts, and education and skills. As well as providing diverse services "they may also provide opportunities for community engagement and a focal point for people to meet" (Locality, 2020a, p.6).

There is no central register of community hubs, halls or centres. Because of this and overlapping definitions, there are no reliable figures for an overall total, although several reports mention an estimated population of around 10,000 community halls or centres (Archer et al., 2020, p. 5; Community Matters, 2021, p. 3). The latest survey of the community

business market reports that, pre-pandemic, 29 per cent of community businesses identify their main business activity as being a community hub, facility or village hall (Higton et al, 2021, p. 11), yielding estimates of 2,000 community hubs and 2,700 village halls operating as community businesses (ibid, pp. 73-4). Archer et al (2019, p. 21) estimate a total of 6,325 assets in community ownership in England, albeit unevenly distributed with lower numbers in more deprived and urban areas. A survey of these assets found that 81 per cent identified as being a “community hub, hall or centre” (ibid, p. 26).

Trup et al (2019, p. 5) report, from a survey of organisations in England which own or manage community hubs, that 58 per cent of hubs have a hyper-local area of benefit; 89 per cent operate from just one building; 61 per cent have been operating for five years or more; whilst 41 per cent own the building and 30 per cent operate on a long lease. The literature identifies several factors thought to underpin the successful operation of community hubs, including, where possible, acquisition and development of assets, as well as diverse income streams, engaging with the local community, building partnerships with other service providers and focusing on local community needs (Richards et al, 2018, pp. 5-7).

The literature also indicates some fragility, even before COVID-19. In a context of declining grant income many community hubs operate on very tight margins with inadequate reserves, having to “walk a financial tightrope” and “control costs with an iron fist” (Trup et al, 2019, pp. 5-6). Archer et al (2019, p. 53) confirm this picture: many were “running on a shoe-string” and broader statistical analysis revealed that community hubs, halls and centres were not associated with excellent financial health. Nonetheless, Trup et al (2019, p. 8) note “an abundance of know-how and skill” amongst organisations running community hubs.

While financial sustainability clearly matters, it is only one of the many pressing issues facing community hubs. Arguably a more important set of priorities concerns what a community hub is there for, what it can do, and what it represents for the community. COVID-19 has certainly sharpened these dimensions. This might include how it helps to make a place, as emphasised in the Civil Society Futures Inquiry (2018, p. 6):

“People really care about the place where they live. Young and old have a passion for their neighbourhood, town, city. And they need spaces where then can meet – can be, can talk, can celebrate, can mourn.”

Allied studies of day centres and similar community spaces emphasises their role and symbolic value as “spaces of care” (Conradson, 2003, p. 1988), providing not just material support, nor even friendly interaction, but a “place of welcome” and intensive and informal “affective community”. This deeper sense of meaning and attachment is revealed when they are threatened. For example, a recent study of the emotional dimensions and impact of the closure of Sure Start Children’s Centres highlights the “intimate connection with the spaces by service users” showing how “emotions can be understood to circulate around particular places and spaces that are easily swept aside or ignored during austerity cuts and restructuring, yet may constitute the most important aspects of the service” (Jupp, 2021, pp. 9, 13).

It is also important to note, however, that a ‘space of care’ for some may not be so for others. It may provide resources and refuge, but it might also be perceived as less welcoming, constraining and discomfiting, even experienced as a ‘space of fear’ (Johnsen et al, 2005). Spaces offering support to vulnerable and marginalised people often

need to manage challenging behaviour, and finding an appropriate balance between freedom and control can be difficult. The practical realities and ambiguities in community hubs and similar spaces suggests the need to attend to the quality of a space, how it is experienced, and its everyday values and meaning. How, then, has this manifested before, during, and looking beyond COVID-19?

Community hubs before the pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, physical spaces to get together played a number of valuable roles for the local community. There are many ways in which community hubs can benefit the community, including helping to build more cohesive communities, enabling more integrated services, transforming old and underused buildings, and providing a focus for community led action (Locality, 2019).

Our research has highlighted numerous pragmatic examples of how community hubs were used prior to the pandemic, including:

- running activities for all age groups – from parents and toddler classes to youth activities and from knit and natter to carpet bowls; from coffee mornings to community lunches and Sunday dinners; from welfare rights and advice sessions to employment and training support
- hiring out rooms to other groups and agencies – which adds to locally-based services and enables community hubs to raise income through rental fees
- acting as a focal point – for community events and activities, a space where anyone can drop in.

The importance of a community building as a welcoming space was repeatedly emphasised in our research: are people likely to want to come in and use it, and will they feel comfortable being inside it? Will they feel as though they belong, that they are not 'out of place' and that in some sense it is 'theirs'? Buildings are not just bricks and mortar, and nor are they just places for events and activities; they have wider symbolic meanings. Groups responsible for hubs told us of the efforts they had made to create that sense of immediate comfort – attending where possible to physical surroundings such as carpets and seating areas, openness, and having photos of the neighbourhood and residents on the walls – a place where anybody can wander in.

The importance of community hubs can often be seen in moments of loss – for instance, in one area a resident mourned the recent loss of a hub in a diverse community:

“Our community hub no longer exists, it has fractured the community where people have gone back into their own specific community groups ... We have a diverse group of people so our community hub was a meeting place for everyone.”

Community spaces have therefore been shown to be valuable community assets and can make all the difference when it comes to building community agency. Communities without hubs or buildings can sometimes struggle to develop their activities. Matt Leach has argued in respect of the Big Local programme, for example, that “... communities need to have shared space where people can gather, plan, organise and run activities” (Trup et al, 2019, p.1). Where Big Local areas have secured a shared community space “they have often been able to make fast progress in building levels of civic activity and developing new partnerships to make a difference to their area” (ibid).

Community hubs across the 26 study areas are all at different stages of development. Some have a long history, often built by the local authority; some are quite new; some are in the building phase and about to open; some are in the discussion and planning stage. Indeed, it is worth noting that in some places, the creation of a community hub has been a community priority for many years, but development has been delayed by changing public policy and avenues for funding. Moreover, they also differ with regard to management arrangements – some are owned by community groups, some are owned by a local authority or private owner and managed by a board of trustees on behalf of the community. In a few cases, groups hire space in community centres or public buildings, albeit on a frequent and regular basis.

This was, broadly speaking, the picture of community hubs and centres before COVID-19. However, as our research has shown, the demands of dealing with the pandemic have affected that picture in numerous ways.

Community hubs in the pandemic

Community buildings

Many community hubs have come into their own during the pandemic. There are several examples of where community buildings have provided strong leadership at a local level – getting on and doing what was required. This research (see [Briefing 8](#)) affirms the picture seen in other studies (Renaissi, 2020; Coutts et al, 2020) in finding that physical community hubs were critical at the beginning of the first lockdown to enable communities to pivot into emergency response, particularly given the need for access to food.

Findings about the value of physical community hubs indicate that they enabled community ownership of the response, as the community had a physical space through which to provide support. Additionally, providing food meant that community organisations were able to maintain some level of contact with the community during the pandemic, at a time when other face to face activities were being curtailed. Some level of direct contact has been valuable for understanding emerging community needs, connecting people to other services and providing services that enabled people to interact.

One example of the wider benefits of food initiatives is a community fridge. It was ostensibly about providing food and preventing food waste, but it has essentially been the only way that the community group has been able to keep its finger on the pulse of the community and understand what was needed - people would come out for the fridge but not much else. In another area it was noted that “We’re talking to people as they come in. Getting that regular meeting with people using the fridge.”

Restrictions permitting, physical spaces have been used as venues for informal drop-in sessions for those who are feeling isolated and alone, or for more formal mental health provision. With the permission of the local authority and health bodies, one study area managed to keep its community centre open during the last lockdown to provide activities which combat social isolation. The provision of COVID-19 safe space due to the size of the building also proved to be a business opportunity because it was the only place open with space for hire.

Community hubs are symbolic as spaces for connection that anyone can access. Residents often perceive community buildings as central to their community. The ramification of this has been that several areas experienced residents becoming upset when physical spaces had to close, and crying tears of joy when they re-opened. But the flexibility and adaptability of community groups in response to the closing of these physical spaces has been

impressive. Several have made effective use of outdoor space, and many have transitioned activities to online platforms.

Outdoor spaces

People have taken advantage of outdoor spaces in a variety of ways. In a number of areas 'friendly' benches have been installed as places for individuals to socialise outdoors. People have also been encouraged to take part in socially distanced walks, street-based keep fit or litter picking sessions. Allotment spaces have been used for groups displaced from buildings. There are examples of art-based projects creating welcoming window displays, an outdoor performance space and the commissioning of a door-to-door puppet show.

In some areas, new outdoor spaces were created, with one research participant exploring how to use a local park as a public 'room', and others turning indoor community cafes into outdoor services at picnic benches, or setting up a take-away cafe in a closed park ticket kiosk. However, success was mixed; anecdotally this was because before the pandemic, people came to cafes as much for the social aspects as for food and drink, which was missing in a takeaway service.

Virtual community hubs

Online spaces have come to the fore as an alternative means of connection for communities. The majority of the 26 research areas have maximised Facebook contact and also started to use Zoom (and occasionally Teams) and WhatsApp.

Facebook was already familiar to many people and has been used to share information across communities. Facebook Live has enabled youth clubs and residents groups to continue to meet, and one area live-streamed cooking tutorials with a community chef. Zoom has been new to many people, but embraced as a tool to keep social activities going while restrictions were in place or people were shielding.

Existing activities such as knit and natter, arts and crafts, relaxation sessions and coffee mornings have all been moved online, and new initiatives have been set up on Zoom in response to reduced face-to-face contact, such as counselling sessions, daily morning drop-ins and community quizzes.

Zoom and Teams have also proved vital in planning and managing ongoing business and decision making:

"One of the factors that has kept [us] going and alive has been the fact that we have carried on the monthly board meetings, the working groups... has been business as usual in one respect. This has been the key to some kind of normality and people have appreciated that. Everyone knows [we are] still around."

Many of the community-led infrastructure (CLI)¹ bodies in the research purchased tablets to give out to residents so that they would be able to join in online activities. In one area, the CLI body bought 16 Zoom licences and provided training for other community groups so

¹ Community-led infrastructure (CLI) refers to networks of residents, community leadership, trust, relationships with agencies, and access to money within a community. It is explored in depth in [Briefing 7](#) and [Briefing 8](#).

that they too could connect with their users and participants – they believe this initiative has supported over 1000 online community meetings.

WhatsApp has also taken off, primarily as a networking tool. Promoted initially by the informal mutual aid groups that sprang up at the start of the first lockdown, it has continued to be used as a quick and effective way of identifying who needed help and co-ordinating a volunteer response.

The use of digital connections has not been without its challenges. Many of the study areas have reported some initial scepticism and a lack of confidence in digital activity. There is a recognition that the use of virtual meetups has highlighted inequalities in communities in that some people have limited access to the equipment and data required. Some also experienced shifting levels of digital engagement due to 'Zoom fatigue'; some people were reluctant to engage in virtual spaces after several months of purely online engagement during the pandemic, including children who were spending their days on computers for school work.

It should also be noted that in a few places there has been little or no use of virtual spaces. Some groups have struggled to keep governance functions going because of the number of people unwilling to engage in Zoom meetings or hampered by lack of broadband connectivity, and others lacked confidence or felt uncomfortable in facilitating virtual activities such as drop-ins and craft groups. However, most of the 26 areas did connect in some way through online platforms.

Overall, there are similarities between areas in how physical spaces, such as community hubs, and virtual spaces have been used during the pandemic. For the most part, aims and objectives have not fundamentally changed, but how activities are delivered has. As one community worker put it:

“What we do is based on community need and that hasn't changed, we're here to serve the community and are still delivering what is needed but in a different way.”

The impact of COVID-19 on community hubs

The challenges

We reported in *Stronger than anyone thought* that in September 2020 a priority for many groups was to reopen their community hub. Prolonged closure has had an impact on both access to face-to-face activities and services, and on finances for centres that relied on room-hire charges. There have been many challenges.

The official guidance for re-opening community hubs has been confusing. Respondents to a Community Matters survey expressed concern:

“About the confusing information about what the restrictions were that they are supposed to abide by and were trying to keep up with issues around the 'rule of six' but also exemptions that applied to educational activities and voluntary and community sector meetings and gatherings” (Community Matters, 2021, p.20)

This has led to questions in some areas as to whether services are safe to run or not, with concerns about 'getting it wrong', for example around the requirements for Test and Trace. Some areas have been able to conduct risk assessments and have the space and capacity

to make hubs as COVID-safe as possible, such as through marking out spaces for social distancing. However, this has not been feasible for smaller community hubs where the size of the space meant activities were not viable.

Changing guidance has seen repeatedly closing and re-opening of community centres. This back and forth has been frustrating and demanding for those who have put time and effort into carrying out risk assessments and health and safety checks in order to reopen spaces that were subsequently closed again. In some areas this has had a negative impact on community morale as well as on service provision. In one area a key community group has become increasingly less active because of closure of its hub. Elsewhere a community centre worker expressed deep frustration about having to close activities:

“Yesterday, [I] was in floods of tears letting families know we are closing, letting the kids down. Had 58 children signed up [for an event] that we have had to let down. Other staff very low as used to keeping going.”

On the other hand, the benefits of reopening, if only for a short time, have been recognised. One community worker remarked:

“Even though [we were] only open for three weeks, [it was] worth it because lots of people popped in and at the classes they were in tears – “thanks for opening up and giving me an opportunity for two weeks of activities”.”

Balancing community need with safety is a difficult line to tread. In one study area, the CLI body was encouraged by the local authority to resume drop-in sessions as there was nowhere else for those feeling isolated and emotionally vulnerable to go. In another the CLI organisation would have risked upsetting its partnership relationships with other agencies if it had re-opened.

For some the financial losses incurred through closure have been a great source of worry and even those that opened during summer 2020 found that their income level had not returned to anticipated levels. In some cases, this was because only some of their rooms were large enough to accommodate enough socially distanced people to make activities financially viable; others were largely used by groups of older people who felt unsafe returning to social activities. While there are examples of people desperate to come back into centres, creating worries about safety, it has been difficult in some places to get people to reengage in face-to-face activity and footfall has been low. This presents groups with a financial dilemma about reopening if they will not necessarily get the attendance required to break even.

The opportunities

The pandemic has not all been doom and gloom for communities, and there are examples of how community hubs may be strengthened in the months and years going forward. Echoing research by Locality (2020b), we found that the temporary closure of buildings provided an opportunity to upgrade community spaces; for example, to improve Wi-Fi connectivity and carry out maintenance tasks like boiler and roof repairs.

In addition, some community hubs have become much more integrated into the broader array of services and facilities in the area and have become better known as a result of their response to COVID-19. Community hubs have reported a silver lining in terms of raising their profile and engaging with new people, through direct services or more outreach work and forging new partnerships with other agencies. In some areas, groups that had to find new spaces to accommodate the preparation of large numbers of food parcels or required larger kitchens to safely provide hot meals have made new connections with other organisations.

Additionally, some hubs have greater financial sustainability than they did before the pandemic, at least in the short term. Grants have been valuable in replacing lost revenue, with some councils providing significant financial support. For some there has been more time to fundraise successfully while centres have been closed. One study area reported raising £240,000 compared with £80,000 the previous year, and another secured award of £100,000 from the National Lottery Community Fund. Another community centre has gone from a deficit to a surplus of £20,000 in the last two years.

Emerging from COVID-19: the future role of community hubs

Community hubs might play many potential roles in the future, especially in response to emerging needs in their communities. For example, this could involve meeting intensifying needs such as reconnecting people, providing welfare rights advice and improving health and wellbeing. There are a wide range of possibilities in how different organisations are considering taking this forward.

Providing a physical space and enabling connection

Due to the pandemic's impact on isolation and loneliness, as well as increased bereavement and loss, addressing mental health will be a future priority for many centres. Face-to-face contact is felt to be a key aspect of this. In practice, this might mean offering activities in the same way as before COVID-19, or it might include planning outdoor activities such as holding street parties, using space outside the community hub or doing more work in community gardens. The underlying message is about helping people to reconnect with others, across the whole community, as demonstrated by representatives of one centre:

“For us it’s not that we have to do a particular thing, it’s just to be open when we’re allowed to, having the place that people can go to – the clubs they go to in our centre, etc. It’s the getting out that improves well-being.”

Some areas have even put plans in place to develop new physical spaces for the first time, recognising their potential value to meet future community needs, as well as attracting a broader range of people across diverse communities. For example, one area is working on the development of a community hub on the local high street which will be used as a one-stop shop for people to access advice about services and will include a community fridge.

Making the most of opportunities offered by digital

Many areas have used the experience of COVID-19 to value and embrace digital technology and are considering what is needed to meet evolving community needs. The pandemic has also opened up digital connections for some people who did not have them before. Community groups are planning to continue some online activities while restrictions

remain, or people remain anxious about taking part in face-to-face activities. In some cases, online activities have worked better than they did face-to-face, such as relaxation classes where being at home is more comfortable than lying on a community centre floor. One resident noted how groups can do things without needing access to a physical space:

“Zoom has opened up the door to lots of things you can do online, [we] have had pottery classes, young people doing podcasts. [We] have been able to look at other facilities that we didn’t really know were available to us pre-COVID. [Zoom] has definitely given us an extra opportunity to put on activities that are not face-to-face or within a building.”

There is learning however, that just as effort needs to go into making community buildings welcoming, the same is true of virtual spaces where what matters is facilitation to ensure openness, inclusiveness and friendliness.

A mixed approach

More of a hybrid approach blending virtual and face-to-face connections seems to be on the agenda of many, though some centres say they would struggle to resource both virtual and physical spaces. Some groups anticipate continuing with virtual meetings, making them more appealing for younger people and for people who work full time. Some also mentioned taking a seasonal approach to hybrid working – considering moving more activities online in wintertime.

Opportunities to do new and different things

Many want to continue new ways of working that started out of necessity during lockdown, such as online meetings or advice. For example, one group set up a COVID-19 helpline, which they anticipate continuing for future advice services. Others set up completely new activities and services that groups would like to continue, such as gardening and other outdoor activities. Some also trialled new services to mitigate revenue losses on community buildings while social distancing restrictions are in place, such as takeaway services from cafes, and in some cases made a profit. It has become clear that things can be done differently, with one resident stressing that continuing to bring people together is the most important thing they can do, with their hub being used as a connector, whether online or in person.

Adapting to COVID-19 has also led some places to reflect on the gaps in previous provision. In one area, a group has reflected on potentially being too centre-based in the past and needing to do things differently in the future – for example, by going out to build relationships with those who do not necessarily come to the centre. In another area, an organisation reflected: “You suddenly realise what you don’t do... So, it has been quite difficult to gauge where people are at.”

Making the most of new community connections

The pandemic has demonstrated in practice how work across the public, voluntary, private and community sectors could be more joined up. The presence of large community spaces has added value to this, with one group describing how “having a building that was big enough to allow COVID-safe meetings was transformational” in

allowing them to connect strategically with a number of city-wide organisations. Community hubs have the potential to enable this to continue, partly because they have the physical space to host cross-sector networks but also because of their community connections. Some community-led organisations felt that the pandemic had led to them being welcomed into the wider community, with other groups recognising them as an important touchpoint. One community worker commented:

“COVID has given us the opportunity to forge relationships with a lot of locally-based organisations that we didn't have strong connections with before – the majority of this online. It's given us a much louder voice locally.”

Challenges for community hubs beyond COVID-19

Despite feeling that the pandemic has offered new opportunities for community hubs, organisations are also mindful of challenges ahead. There are some concerns that communities will be reluctant to return to physical spaces as they have become used to virtual activity, and associated worries about the cost of opening physical spaces if few people want to use them. There is also concern that older people and vulnerable groups will continue to be anxious around face-to-face contact. As one resident put it:

“We're all talking about getting back to normal, but also need to recognise that there are people who don't want to go back to normal – they're still really worried.”

There are also challenges in maintaining new services and ways of working based around an increased need for physical space and social distancing. There is an ongoing need for activities requiring sizeable space, such as food provision, which will now have to adapt to, and compete for space with, returning face-to-face activities. Some response activities have already outgrown their existing premises due to demand. In one example, a foodbank which is likely to be in demand for some time to come will need to move elsewhere once the centre it has been using reopens for public activities. The need for social distancing and therefore limits on numbers has also meant that some activities are no longer financially sustainable, or that there isn't space to offer the activity for all that want to join.

Financial sustainability is a key concern for the future. There is a real fear in some areas that centres will struggle to stay afloat just at a time when they are needed most as spaces for connection and support. This applies particularly to those that lack strong financial reserves or have been less successful in securing emergency grants to fully cover lost revenue. The pandemic has exacerbated these challenges and there is evidence in our research of several local community centres, including some owned by the local authority, now running at a loss and being supported by community-led infrastructure organisations.

As emergency COVID-19 funding comes to an end, many organisations will be unable to offer some services. Communities may also lack the capacity to engage in newly-found ways of working, such as online activities, once the day-to-day intensity of normal activities resumes. In addition, there is a recognition that some response activities may need to be phased out as circumstances change, in such a way that residents will not be left without support. One respondent explained that:

“I get anxious about the fact that we have had time to connect with people over zoom and haven’t done normal day to day activities. Now we are going back into the world where will that time go when we support residents? Will I have the time, energy and capacity to still go to these meetings where other organisations in the community come together? Will I have the headspace to digest it and make plans that unify us all, as opposed to working in siloes again? My biggest concern is that as soon as I’m back out in the world I won’t be able to carry on that good work and relationships I’ve built over the past year.”

There are likely to be difficulties in getting the right balance between virtual and physical activities after COVID. Plans to balance virtual and physical spaces are still only provisional and emergent – a work in progress. Some are worried that having a mixed offer will reinforce inequalities in relation to digital exclusion. The limited capacity to deliver both virtual and physical activities has been identified as a problem. Finally, there are some concerns about the increased responsibility of managing COVID-19 safety and risks once face to face physical activity has resumed.

Conclusion

Community hubs, halls and centres are part of what can make places feel vibrant and connected, and have practical and symbolic value. In this paper we have considered how they have worked and adapted during the crisis, what immediate and enduring challenges they face and what lies ahead. There has been a lot of interest and discussion about social infrastructure in recent years, as part of the gathering concern with ‘left behind’ areas and a narrative of ‘levelling up’. The focus in this paper on community hubs helps to bring such policy and academic discussions closer to the ground in terms of the lived experience of different communities.

Our research indicates that community hubs balance many considerations: around how they meet the diverse needs of different groups in the community, how they are regarded in their communities, and how they can find the resources to maintain and enhance their buildings and to keep going. These have all been thrown into sharp relief during COVID-19. Many community hubs play a vital role, and achieve so much, in spite of the manifold challenges they encounter. Looking ahead, they face a precarious dilemma: on the one hand, they have arguably never been more needed; but on the other they appear to face severe financial challenges ahead. In emerging from the pandemic, these community spaces seem indispensable, and at the same time, highly vulnerable.

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About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

These are places where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme
- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme
- areas categorised as “left behind” because communities have fewer places to meet, lack of digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community.

The research, which includes extensive desk research and interviews across England, is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

Local Trust

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