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Sheffield Hallam University

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Rapid research COVID-19

Community responses to COVID-19: the role and contribution of community-led infrastructure

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SYNOPSIS: Briefing 7 identified community-led infrastructure (CLI) as an additional dimension of the structures and systems that support civic life, alongside social and voluntary sector infrastructure. This paper takes this a step further by exploring what CLI looks like on the ground, how it is supported and its role in responding to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on findings from across the 26 study areas, and learning from other recent community-based research, we also provide reflections on how recent experiences might inform the future development of CLI.

Key points

- CLI attempts to address the needs of the wider community rather than focusing on a single cause or group and is defined by community ownership and control.
- It can be identified through certain characteristics and enabling elements, including access to resources, worker support and places to meet.
- CLI has not only been integral to swift and appropriate responses to community needs during the pandemic but has also played an important role in co-ordinating local action.
- Effective CLI requires time and long-term investment to build relationships of trust, social networks and community agency and power.
- CLI does not operate in isolation from broader social and voluntary sector infrastructure. Responses to COVID-19 have been at their most effective when there has been a degree of integration between different forms of infrastructure.

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

Future briefings will be published throughout 2020 and 2021 to share early findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

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Introduction

In Briefing 7, Macmillan (2020) points to two defining aspects of CLI: the community-wide approach and the location of ownership, control and influence. The focus is on enhancing communities in some way and, crucially where organisation and decision-making lies in the hands of community members. It is about the building of community leadership, the creation of agency and an assertion of community power (Boyle, 2019).

These are, however, ambiguous concepts – they are elastic rather than absolutes. We understand community leadership as emerging from interactions, relationships and networks (Pigg, 1999), "where individuals and groups within the community … take the lead on issues and practical projects which are of interest to them, responding to identified local needs," (McCabe et al, 2018a) – and nurturing people to work together effectively. Local Trust has found that this requires a diverse set of skills "covering strategy and vision, relationship-building and implementation, which suggests that leadership needs to be distributed across a range of people" (Local Trust 2020).

The report from phase one of the 'Community responses to COVID-19' study (McCabe et al, 2020) suggested that the presence of CLI enabled communities to harness their resources and respond rapidly and appropriately to the pandemic. This briefing explores the role and contribution of CLI in more detail, drawing from learning conversations across the 26 study areas.

In the literature, effective CLI includes certain features, such as connected networks of residents, a credible resident-led structure/community leadership and trusting relationships at community level. It is also enabled by factors such as access to money, a meeting space or a base (a 'hub', which can be physical or virtual), access to support provided by paid workers or on hand facilitators, and access to information and learning opportunities to support active citizenship and engagement (Home Office, 2004; McCabe et al, 2020; McCabe et al 2018b; Taylor et al, 2007). Figure 1 (below) illustrates these features.

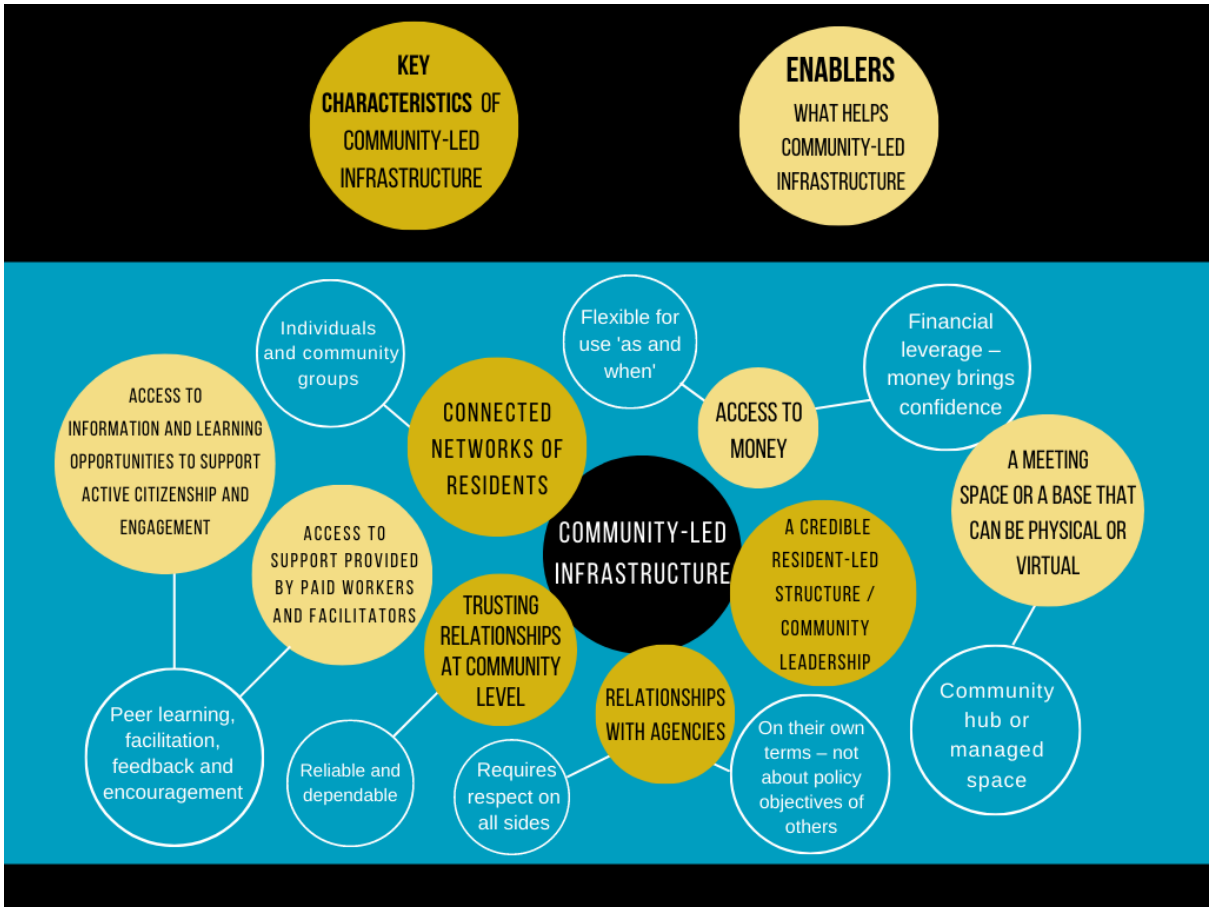

Figure 1: Characteristics and enablers of community-led infrastructure

The characteristics of community-led infrastructure

There is evidence of **connected networks of residents** active in most areas, and in several places this has been enhanced as people became more involved as local volunteers during the first lockdown. The strength of these networks is variable; ranging from established community and faith groups, to the network of community organisations that, as a local authority officer remarked, "just came out of the woodwork to do what needed to be done in each village and community", and to the residents who started something very informally (a food response, for example) and then developed into more organised community groups:

> "Some of the community activists have signed up with organisations they weren't part of before, rather than a group of loosely affiliated activists, it's become more firm if you see what I mean, more organised, it's almost like a network has developed …a recognition of a common identity of being part of the organisation, someone actually resourced and donated T shirts for us all, suddenly we were all wearing the same T shirts when we were doing it" (resident).

However, in some of the study areas, we noticed that there was a lack of people with practical hands-on knowledge and experience of how to organise things and access support - those who know 'who, what and where' to get things done. Networks seemed relatively small, with few people having an overview of where to get help. In other words, there may be community activities and groups in an area but what is lacking are the inter-connections. As van Eijk (2010: p. 478) noted when exploring the concept of network poverty, the neighbourhood is in reality a collection of neighbourhood settings, "and thus it is the composition of these settings that may reflect in people's networks rather than the composition of an entire neighbourhood".

Responses to COVID-19 have illustrated how well-established networks have been mobilised. One resident commented on how willing people were to step up when necessary:

> "The importance of people who aren't as lively on the front as we are. They are there to help in the background. The people that matter – [it is] those behind [us] that deliver. Within a few phone calls, lots of volunteers are there."

These developing or emerging networks are becoming **credible resident-led structures** within their communities, particularly where there was a gap prior to the pandemic. However, it is in the areas that have been building agency and structure for several years, that we can see the value of their presence over the last eight months. A community member commented:

> "The board have been the driving force throughout COVID. This is what [the organisation] is all about. Showing the community what can be done, not just in ordinary circumstances, but in extraordinary circumstances. … it is [the organisation] that has

> risen to the bar and to the occasion, dedicated people … great community feeling amongst the board. Fundamental. Enthusiasm is infectious. Show a belief in the project and the community."

Similarly, in another area, one chair said:

> "Without us there would not have been a response, you would have got the odd person saying if you need anything I will get it for you. No one else would have done. There wouldn't have been an action group. A good job we were around."

Evidence around the extent to which there are **trusting relationships** at community level is less clear, though this issue has been tested through the current crisis. Robinson (2020) for example, suggests that trust has increased over the last nine months:

> "We have seen a shift from doubt to trust in relationships between people … Thin ties get thicker as people trust one another more" (p. 10)

There are many examples of residents trusting residents, that groups of people can deliver what is necessary – and this results in others being comfortable with investing their voluntary time and/or making donations. According to a community activist, "volunteers saw people they knew doing something and thought if they are doing it, I will". Moreover, residents and agencies trusted local workers and organisations to just get on with it. In one area a food project has built up a relationship with residents over several years and was therefore trusted to deliver when most needed; in another local workers and volunteers were trusted enough by a local supermarket that they could set up a payment scheme for shopping collected on behalf of others.

There are some very positive examples of where **effective relationships with agencies** have paid dividends. During the first lockdown, one local authority worked very closely with voluntary organisations, for example, Citizens Advice and a Homestart project. However, they also noted how they could not have met community needs without community-led infrastructure actively supporting in the way it did – buying fridges and providing emergency funding to a local initiative to make up food parcels. Community structures have been seen to be more flexible and filled the gaps that other services just could not do – weekend food deliveries, for example. According to a local authority interview:

> "People needed a rapid response and these groups have established a different relationship with the community."

The enablers of community-led infrastructure

Access to money plays an important role in enabling effective CLI. The majority of the study areas are fortunate enough to have programme money – from Big Local or the Creative Civic Change programme - that they can use flexibly. It brings confidence and a power to act, and can make things happen quickly, or compensate where people are stretched – for example where it has been used to pay for others to provide a needed service.

It is interesting to note that several areas made provision in the light of COVID-19 for an emergency fund that could be used flexibly and proactively as and when necessary, for example to support local community groups or pay for IT equipment. In many cases, this money has not been used as yet but it provides some confidence that they are ready to act if the need arises. Access to money also brings credibility with other agencies and opens doors to wider influence. As one Big Local rep observed, a CLI body was "sitting on a panel as one of only two grassroots organisations which shows the difference having your own money makes". In most of the areas that have had sustained investment over several years, community hubs have been established or relationships have been built with existing community centres, thereby enhancing their provision and financial sustainability. Having **a base** is a key feature of CLI. This does not have to be owned or managed by the CLI as long as it has regular access arrangements; indeed, it does not have to be physical at all, as has become apparent during the periods of lockdown. The credible structure described above has in many cases shifted to meeting online, either for governance meetings – deciding on vision, strategy and planning, or to enable coffee mornings and activity groups to continue to meet. In the light of the pandemic, e-infrastructure might be seen as an additional characteristic of CLI.

There are both up and downsides to physical community spaces. Many community hubs have come into their own during lockdown, primarily as food distribution centres but also as venues for informal drop-in sessions for those who are feeling isolated and alone, or for more formal mental health provision. Downsides however include worries about the financial viability of closed venues, the amount of work involved in repeated closing and COVID-safe re-opening of community hubs and tensions over the question of whether services are safe to run or not. Balancing community need with safety is a difficult line to tread. In one area studied, the CLI 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, whilst in another area the CLI would have risked upsetting its partnership with other agencies if it had re-opened.

In many areas, CLI relationships with community members as well as other organisations have been crucial. They have provided the means by which to set up support quickly and build on existing levels of trust. However, these relationships often stem from, and are maintained by, **paid workers**. In one area for example, it is the artist in residence who also works in a food club that has built trust with and among community members; in others it is the paid workers who have co-ordinated mutual aid groups and volunteers to deliver a response, helped residents to use online meeting platforms and liaised with other agencies. There is evidence, therefore, that having a worker or workers has been critical to many of the community responses observed. It does also depend on the dynamism and skills of the worker to a large degree and their understanding of how to maintain the resident-led ethos if they are not to dominate.

In addition to paid staff, the majority of areas in this study are part of programmes that involve a facilitator role, a dedicated person who acts as a critical friend and oversees the building of CLI. These people have also played a role in supporting online activity when face to face has not been possible and have helped to ensure that governance procedures have continued, alongside troubleshooting and spirit building when needed.

In the areas where resident-led groups do not have their own paid staff or previous strong connections with community workers on the ground, they have played the facilitation role themselves. There is evidence that it is a little more fragmented than might otherwise be the case. Indeed, in one case, a local voluntary organisation from outside the area has found itself picking up requests for help but is operating without any connections to activists and volunteers on the ground.

24 of the 26 case study areas have access to national programme **information and learning opportunities** – through Local Trust – which have proved invaluable. The offer, right at the start of the first lockdown, of a paid-for Zoom licence in particular was the catalyst for many groups to embrace online meetings and activities. Additionally, opportunities to network on a national basis have been taken up with enthusiasm by many people – residents as well as paid workers. Workshops covering topic such as working with local authorities, getting your community online, mental health needs and provision, sustaining community hubs through to free access to fundraising training workshops and online conferences have proved popular. Not all areas have taken advantage of these learning opportunities, but those who have feel better networked now than previously.

The legacy of earlier investment and support

The defining characteristics and enabling factors supporting CLI discussed above are not always in place or as strong as they could be. In effect they are targets to aim at. We suggest that the intention to establish the characteristics and enabling factors is as significant as achieving them. For example, CLI attempts to address the needs of the wider community rather than focusing on a single cause or group within the community yet it takes many years to say with confidence that CLI is reaching everyone in a community, if indeed, it ever really happens. Equally, the picture changes over time with resident control and influence and community leadership waxing and waning in cycles. It is a challenging process of community building and in part dependent upon external influences.

There is emerging evidence that the presence of all these features of CLI is apparent in the most ready and resourceful communities in the study, though to varying extents, and that this has not happened by accident - it is the result of investment and support prior to COVID-19. There is a strong connection to Big Local investment in 21 of the 26 areas, although there may also be an inheritance of at least some features of CLI from previous programmes and projects – for example, the existence of community centres or relationships between residents and paid workers may pre-date Big Local. We intend to reflect further on this as the research evolves.

Nevertheless, many of these 21 areas have said they could not have delivered what they have over the last eight months if they had not had the Big Local investment and support over many years. It has taken time for them to become confident in what they do, and to have the respect of the community that they can and will deliver. As one resident noted:

> "It is evident that [Big Local] has made a difference as there was nothing. No one thought they would get anything. Absolutely transformed the way that the community operates."

Even in those areas where there have been governance tussles, the fact that they organised so quickly around the pandemic has to be credited to previous investment in CLI.

Correspondingly, where community responses have been more fragmented and under-resourced, there is a perceptible lack of previous investment and support. This is not to say

there has not been any investment, but it has not always been community wide or strategically about building community leadership or long enough. For example, in one study area there has been a government pilot programme, but this had a limited focus and scope and was controlled by the local authority. In other areas there are existing community centres and networks, but these tend to be project focussed and are not explicitly about resident ownership.

What has tended to happen in such areas is that residents became affiliated to a response through individual or organisational 'nodes' in the community, for example churches, a councillor, a school, or a community project (RSA, 2010). Interviewees' explanations of the impact and appeal of these connections was linked specifically to the immediate needs in hand, i.e. exploring mental health with young people in schools, or having food delivery services promoted on a leaflet by local third sector organisations. One respondent stated they felt very well connected but attributed this to his own resources and networks. In another example, a meeting set up between foodbanks to link pandemic support activities did not result in a new way of working more collaboratively, perhaps through a lack of established relationships, structures and previous experience of collaboration.

How community-led infrastructure is helping with longer term post-COVID planning

In the majority of areas with CLI, there is evidence of thinking ahead to the longer term, not solely focussing on responding to the current situation. This is to a large extent the result of previous experience of planning based on identified community need. Networks and relationships have been extended and links with other agencies solidified. Several areas are thinking more strategically about food poverty, for example, and making broader connections outside of their immediate community to tackle this through interventions that go beyond foodbanks.

In some areas, CLI is resetting budget priorities to meet new emerging needs such as mental health provision, debt counselling and employment support. Residents have developed a clearer focus on the why and the how of what they deliver or commission. In one area, for example, the main infrastructure body has changed its approach to fund core community services over a longer period of time – local people have identified current need, and forecasted likely future needs, putting appropriate provision in place.

How the experience of COVID-19 informs the development of community-led infrastructure

Discussions about what has been needed, what has been provided and apparent gaps when facing a crisis such as the pandemic prompt reflection on what makes for effective community-led infrastructure, what role it plays and how it may be enhanced. This is especially true in communities where residents were already economically challenged and the impact of COVID hit hardest.

The pandemic has meant that digital exclusion has come to the fore across all communities, seen in unfamiliarity with software programmes that make possible or enhance collective conversations, a lack of equipment, the affordability of data access and, in many communities, a lack of access to Wi-Fi. To be effective, CLI needs to be supported to incorporate e-communication - use of appropriate technology should be added to the list of core enablers of CLI. Those that have embraced technology this year

have described it as life changing and the signs are that this will continue to be a key part of CLI from now on.

Beyond a meeting space or base for activities, the need for greater community outreach has surfaced. Many groups have become aware that they were not previously reaching all sections of the community, challenging the assumption that people would come to them in a centre. Outreach activities, whether this be doorstep conversations or more activities in outside spaces, have proved to be popular and affective. In one study area a CLI body sensed that they are closer to residents and community groups when they reach out to people and are able to read the temperature of what is needed far more easily. Outreach would be a useful addition to what makes for effective CLI.

In some of the areas that currently lack community led infrastructure there are indications that improved connections between residents and larger voluntary organisations have developed during the pandemic. As a result, responses to the second lockdown have been more joined up than they were in March. There is also some evidence that the insight of active residents into communities is being galvanised and valued by more established agencies. This might be the start of building CLI in post-COVID communities and could at least narrow the gap between third sector organisations and the communities in which they are embedded. For example, in one area, a district wide charity has created a space for community activities and facilitated the consolidation of a network. Investment across a great many more communities to harness current enthusiasm and support to build community leadership and influence is needed to maximise the potential for greater community action and power.

Interaction of community-led infrastructure with voluntary sector and social infrastructure

As Briefing 7 explained, the purpose of highlighting community-led infrastructure is not to claim that it is more important than other forms of infrastructure, but to raise its profile as something different and inherently valuable. Yet it does not operate in isolation from broader social and voluntary sector infrastructure - in part it sits alongside and is dependent upon them. In fact, much of the CLI described in this briefing relies on established voluntary sector support to help with, for example, managing accounts and employing staff. Further, access to boarder voluntary sector infrastructure bodies (such as Councils of Voluntary Service or Rural Community Councils) has facilitated information flows within and between communities; provided a vehicle for linking and delivering food projects across a much larger geographical area; given hyper-local CLI opportunities to influence local authority wide responses to COVID-19 – and, by building new partnerships and alliances, strengthened both forms of infrastructure.

Equally important is access to quality social infrastructure. During the first lockdown and its immediate aftermath, CLI used public spaces not only to organise health and wellbeing activities (such as family walking trails) but also as spaces to hold meetings which could no longer happen in indoor venues. In areas with few public amenities, such as parks and open public spaces, CLI struggled to organise in these ways and relied almost exclusively on Zoom and related communication technologies.

Conclusions

Community led infrastructure (CLI) has not only been integral to swift and appropriate responses to community needs during the pandemic but has also played an important role in co-ordinating local responses. This chimes with the findings of others. Johannisson and

Olaison (2007) studied responses to a hurricane which hit Sweden in 2005 and suggested a notion of 'emergency entrepreneurship' characterised by "coping with rupture in everyday life by the acknowledgement of **local knowledge and leadership** and the use of bridging as well as bonding social capital **facilitating immediate (inter)action and swift trust"** (emphasis added).

The stress on community ownership and control is what makes CLI different from voluntary sector and social infrastructure. The case for CLI is reflected in a recent report from New Local promoting the ideas of the Nobel prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom (Kaye, 2020). It argues for enhancing community power with three conditions: locality - communities can manage their own resources; autonomy - democracy is more meaningful at a local level; and diversity - no one-size-fits-all solutions. It goes on to state that:

> "...nothing should be done nationally that would best be handled locally, and nothing should be done locally without real engagement and participation from communities" (p. 10).

Building community-led infrastructure entails a long-term negotiated process into which, the local context, history, political structures and power dynamics need to be factored. It is not a linear process and requires patience, skill and time. Once in place, though, its value is unquestionable. As a local authority put it:

> "The most important thing about this group is that you have community ownership which gives you more weight than outside agencies coming in... you achieve more when people feel empowered to do things and influence is in the community and not led from the top...it's community led from the floor up in a way that a council can never be."

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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 funder and support through the Creative Civic Change programme
- areas categorised as "left behind" because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community.

The research, which also 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.

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