

Place Based Social Action: Learning from the COVID-19 crisis

Coming out of lock-down, July 2020

The Place Based Social Action (PBSA) programme is funded over seven years (2017-2024) by The National Lottery Community Fund (the Fund) and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The PBSA programme provides support to local partnerships in ten places to develop social action approaches that address issues and priorities that matter to people in their community, and encourage new ways of working so people have more ownership and influence over local services. The local partnerships are made up of local communities, civil society organisations, public sector organisations, service providers and businesses.

The COVID-19 crisis has brought to the fore the strength and resilience of local communities and the experiences of the PBSA places has revealed a desire from local people to take part in social action. Some PBSA partnerships were heavily involved in the community response to COVID-19 and had to find creative solutions to adapt to a rapidly changing situation. Approaches varied across the programme but examples include establishing food distribution hubs, coordinating volunteers to carry out food and medicine drops, addressing social isolation by setting up phone lines and creating befriending networks, adapting existing support from face-to-face to online and thinking about longer term solutions to tackle destitution, unemployment and increasing isolation. Some areas had to put their PBSA plans on hold whilst the demands of their social sector day jobs took over.

The next phase presents new challenges - in a context of lockdown easing, government guidance changing, and buildings and community centres being allowed to reopen. PBSA partnerships are having to balance people's fears and continued uncertainty about the future with developing safe solutions to addressing longer term issues.

This document shares learning gathered through reflective sheets and peer networking sessions, from the ten PBSA partnerships at end of June/early July 2020, as the initial crisis period begins to come to an end. The themes reflect key topics of interest identified by the places.

Needs and concerns in PBSA places

PBSA places are hearing concerns in their communities about a range of issues as lockdown eases. These include fears about the risks involved in coming out of lockdown, and concerns about adhering to social distancing guidance. The impending recession and very visible economic impact on businesses are also on people's minds, especially as increasing numbers of people are facing redundancy. **Digital exclusion** remains a pressing issue, with many people becoming more isolated as time goes on.

Some partnerships raised more specific concerns around their areas of focus. For example, the partnership in Colchester, working to build a 'dementia friendly borough' highlighted an **increase in caring responsibilities** and **limited respite for carers**, as well as changes in caring responsibilities for carers working with people of reduced mobility and sensory impairments. In Hartlepool, the lead partner Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust raised big concerns around **short-**

term tenancies for street sleepers coming to an end and the difficulty in getting them housed elsewhere.

How partnerships are reacting to coming out of lockdown

Community engagement

The crisis has allowed partnerships to connect with people they have not previously reached. Many of the partnerships have seen this as an opportunity to work more cohesively with the community, and have taken this period of change as a point to **pause and reflect on the immediate relief efforts, and to listen and consult the community** when considering next steps.

In Colchester, the Community Response Team are working with local community groups to understand the most pressing needs and adapting their support offer to meet these. In Halifax, the partnership plan to hold a **'Big Conversation' with local people** to get them involved in designing services that address issues that are most pertinent to them. Similarly, in Lincoln and East Marsh, the partnerships are planning to **launch engagement campaigns** that gather feedback through mediums like surveys to determine priorities moving forward. In Sefton, they are **using social media to conduct 'polls'** as a quick and regular route to engagement, asking people what COVID-19 has meant to them and asking them to share their thoughts going forward.

Getting more people involved in social action

The crisis response has illustrated how many people are willing to take part in social action for the benefit of their local community. For some PBSA partnerships, that has highlighted that pre-crisis, they were only reaching the 'usual suspects'.

Retaining volunteers

As lockdown eases, some partnerships have reported **losing volunteers** as people have returned to work and there has been a less immediate need for volunteers as social distancing has relaxed. Though a decline in volunteer numbers is inevitable the partnerships are working hard to ensure that social action and volunteering remains relevant and that the momentum built up in crisis is not lost.

Places are having to re-think the volunteer offer to retain those that have been mobilised through crisis. Many are addressing the issue of growing isolation by **developing or building their befriending element of support and Good Neighbour schemes**, enabling local people to help their neighbours to enjoy a better quality of life and by formalising volunteer buddy systems (Watchet and Hackney). In Bristol, they are **finding, coordinating and providing support to unpaid support workers** to help them be better placed to provide authentic and long term practical and emotional support to vulnerable people in the community.

Continuing to reach new volunteers

There is a recognition that many of the volunteers that have stepped forward during the crisis period come from a more affluent socio-economic background than the people they are supporting. Partnerships are keen to widen the demographic and ensure that their routes to engagement are accessible. Some places are also shifting their focus towards **using platforms like Facebook, twitter, WhatsApp** that people are using anyway, rather than trying to introduce new technology such as zoom which has the potential to alienate people (Halifax and East Marsh).

Working with mutual aid groups

Like several other of the PBSA places, Hackney found that supporting groups to work within formal structures and systems without undermining their enthusiasm and creativity could be a challenge. The partnership in Hackney responded to this by focusing on relationship building and understanding where the mutual aid groups could add value and share their social capital and skills, rather than cajoling them to work within existing systems. The Hackney partnership provided training and advice, **helping with safeguarding, referrals and processes for deliveries**. The partnership's involvement with the mutual aid groups increased awareness of their organisation locally and people from other parts of the borough have since approached them to set up their own local projects. The partnership have also shifted their focus towards connecting mutual aid groups and volunteers more generally to wider pieces of work in the voluntary and community sector where they are needed e.g. **to organisations working to address health issues or domestic violence services**.

Re-imagining social action

The COVID19 pandemic has posed both challenges and opportunities to social action. Whilst most places have seen a rise in volunteering and a desire to get involved locally through mutual aid, traditional models that assign volunteers to pre-determined tasks have a different motivation to 'social action' which starts from the position of 'what do you want to change' and builds on people's strengths. Therefore, the challenge for PBSA partnerships is how to identify which volunteers have the drive to go beyond the peer support opportunities provided by mutual aid and get more involved in leading local change.

Some places are recognising that the **narrative and framing around social action needs to be rethought** in a way that is a) accessible b) increases interest in a movement of people towards change and c) meets people where they are and appeals to their self-interest.

Movements by their nature are inclusive and must be collectively led by the community of people effected. There is hope that the **consultation exercises will inspire this sort of self-starting action** in some areas (Colchester, Coventry and East Marsh).

Delivery – responding to needs

Digital exclusion has been a primary area focus for the partnership in Hartlepool – they have been working to address the digital divide by accessing equipment and supporting people to use it. They have partnered with [Hartlepower](#) who are providing cheap broadband and dongles. They have also involved a local care home in an intergenerational project to share stories through digital means - this has not only been an opportunity for older and younger people to develop friendships, but it has additionally supported older people to get connected and grow confident in using new equipment and technology.

Projects to address poverty have been developing amongst partnerships to react to an increasing reliance on foodbanks and in preparation for an imminent recession. Some are providing food hubs (Coventry, Halifax, Sefton), and teaching the community how to grow food and cook health meals (Coventry and Hartlepool). In Halifax, they have helped a local Mosque to set up a 'community fridge'. In Coventry, their growing project is also being set up to provide a sustainable food source for the food hub, social suppers and local café. The partnership in Hartlepool are working with Edible York to send out growing packs of seeds and cook books. They are also developing the third [Action Lab](#) which aims to identify collective solutions to addressing poverty more widely and understanding how this looks different in light of COVID-19.

What PBSA places are thinking about next

Whilst many PBSA areas are in a period of reflection and using this time to pause and consult the community, or adapt their volunteer offer, others are beginning to think through practical next steps using learning from the crisis period, adapting approaches that they know to be impactful and capitalising on new opportunities.

Opening up buildings

Partnerships are keen to re-open meeting spaces and services such as a community pub (Sefton) and community hubs (Hackney and Sefton) but have raised concerns about doing this safely whilst adhering to social distancing rules and local authority trading standards. Locality has produced [a toolkit](#) which outlines key risks and considerations such as the maximum number of people allowed in at any one time, cleaning considerations, service priorities and financial viability of opening, to support their members to think through the process.

Community assets

Securing new assets had been flagged as a priority for places at the PBSA Gathering in February. However, the pandemic has forced some places to reconsider whether the benefit of having this tangible presence in communities outweighs concerns around sustainability. In East Marsh, for example, the partnership had been working for months to secure a community asset which was eventually sold to another buyer during the pandemic. They have seen this as an unexpected positive as they would have been unable to rent out rooms or, office space. These unforeseen circumstances have allowed the partnership to re-focus on strategic collaborations with other voluntary sector partnerships and consider different ways a community hub might be viable in future.

Community organising

Three places are using a community organising approach as part of their core delivery of PBSA (Lincoln, Halifax, Coventry). In other areas many of the partnerships are interested in implementing this approach or formalising similar activities.

Social distancing and associated fears have made face to face engagement more difficult and usual community organising practices of 'door-knocking' almost impossible. The partnerships have had to adapt creatively, moving existing conversations and events on-line (Coventry and Lincoln). Coventry, for example, have made their monthly 'social suppers' virtual. In Lincoln, they have been providing one to one IT sessions for older recruits. In Halifax, the partnership assigned community organisers to deliver food packages to vulnerable residents, allowing them to combine the 'listening' role with essential visits.

Expanding the geographic area of focus

Two PBSA areas have chosen to expand their work to a borough wide level seeing this as an important platform to increase their profile, and work more cohesively with organisations in the wider area. The partnership in East Marsh are linking with the the Flourishing Towns pilot in Grimsby and the ['Building Back Better'](#) campaign which seeks to plan a way through the economic downturn. In Hackney, the partnership is expanding the reach of the Our Place project, including building stronger relationships with the local authority and CCG around social cohesion and supporting residents beyond the two estates the project had originally been focussed on.

Whilst the potential downside to this might be a larger area of focus and grant spend spread more thinly, the upside is reducing the risk of duplicating local services. In addition, across the PBSA programme, places have defined the boundaries of their places differently from local

neighbourhoods and wards to a town-wide level. This flexibility to move beyond these originally fixed boundaries is a positive of the programme.

Using digital platforms more effectively

Using effective digital platforms to engage people has become critical to the community response. In East Marsh, they are trialling digital platform [Simply Connect](#) to match volunteers to people in need. In Coventry, the partnership are developing an online learning platform for partners to meet virtually. Watchet are working with [Free Ice Cream](#) to design a digital map of community organisations, small businesses and organisations of power. This aims to highlight the importance of people's connections to each other in the town's social infrastructure.

Demonstrating impact visually

Partnerships have expressed interest in visually documenting the impact of their support efforts to provide richer insights around lived experiences, capture feelings, and behaviours and bring evidence to life with people's stories. In Hackney, the Volunteer Centre are beginning to use their [Our Place Hackney website](#) to showcase the impact of their work using case studies. In Bristol, the partnership are working with a local filmmaker to do this on a local estate. As part of Renaisi's learning partner work, all places will receive support from [CloseUp Research](#) to produce video diaries telling the story of PBSA and the experiences of places during this extraordinary moment in history.

Status of PBSA plans and support from providers

As the country begins to come out of lockdown the status of PBSA within partnerships differs from place to place, depending on their involvement with the crisis response locally, engagement with local organisations, socio-economic changes to the local area and what progress they had made with the delivery of their PBSA plans prior to the pandemic.

Re-visioning – Bristol, East Marsh, Hackney

The partnerships in Bristol, East Marsh and Hackney had not progressed with their PBSA plans to the same extent as other areas pre COVID-19. The crisis has provided an unexpected positive in this regard, allowing them to re-think using learning from the local volunteer response (Bristol, Hackney), build stronger relationships with local organisations and local authority (all), and position themselves to be part of strategic initiatives across the wider area (East Marsh and Hackney). All three are in a unique position of not yet having spent much of their PBSA funding and being able to re-pivot their ideas and harness the momentum of the social action response to COVID-19 without having to undo a lot of previous planning.

Pausing and revising - Colchester, Coventry, Halifax, Lincoln

The partnerships in Colchester, Coventry, Halifax and Lincoln all had strong existing focuses pre-COVID-19, these are likely to be enhanced by learning from the pandemic. Colchester's focus has been to support people living with dementia; Coventry's to empower the community to self organise and take ownership of local change; and Halifax and Lincoln both use Community Organising as an approach and have established local hubs. Colchester and Lincoln had strong pre-existing relationships with their local authorities, and Halifax and Coventry were in the process of building these. These well-established partnerships, are now at a point where they are pausing delivery to engage their communities in leading and directing their next steps.

Pressing ahead in a 'new normal' - Hartlepool, Sefton and Watchet

Hartlepool, Sefton and Watchet had established partnerships with strong plans in place pre-COVID-19. They have had to rapidly adapt their approaches and are using this time to work with their communities and get the next steps right, but are also in a position where they can continue to confidently press ahead. Sefton's neighbourhood scheme has progressed through to full planning which will allow for future eco homes, future job opportunities, new business opportunities, leisure facilities to be co-designed with local people to improve their town. In Hartlepool, they plan to launch Action Lab 3 and are in the process of sourcing a research intern to understand the effects of COVID-19 to feed in to the design of this. In Watchet, the partnership quickly re-purposed some of their PBSA funding to support with emergency response - they have effectively set up a good neighbour scheme, secured a new community asset and commissioned digital mapping of the local social sector and power dynamics. Going forward they are thinking about how to communicate with the community in a way that continues to build agency and empowerment.

Learning from coming out of lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented numbers of volunteers and a significant boost in local social action. Although this has been born out of necessity to support growing numbers of vulnerable people, an unexpected positive outcome has been that people have found sustainable hyperlocal solutions to helping themselves - through friends, neighbours and volunteer matching systems where they would have previously relied on the statutory sector. For those that led the community response to crisis in their area, two key factors seem to have supported this:

- 1) The lead partner's existing relationships within the community and the focus of their existing work (Bristol, Hackney, Halifax, Hartlepool, Sefton)
- 2) The PBSA partnership, plan and delivery to date i.e. newly developed relationships with agencies, volunteers and with each other has allowed them to mobilise quickly (Colchester, Coventry, Watchet)

Relationships at every level seem to play a critical part in effective response:

- Between the partnerships and the community: based on trust and placing the community's needs and motivations at the heart of the response, has enabled more people to get involved.
- Between the partnerships and the local social and statutory sector: this has been mutually beneficial and has allowed for the system to work more efficiently and effectively.
- Between the partnership themselves: harnessing networks and skills of all organisations, enabling further reach.

The relationships operate at different levels in every place and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of these is likely to support partnerships to understand where they can add value to affect the response moving forward.

Some partnerships are considering how they can **use PBSA funding and the existing partnership structure as leverage** to grow these local relationships and access more funding for the local area.

Peer networking opportunities

The PBSA Gathering in February highlighted a clear appetite to share approaches across the partnerships and this now feels more pertinent than ever. Whilst the things that places wanted to share and learn from each other about might now have a different focus, it's important that the

connection between places is sustained. Renaisi and Locality have adapted their support to enable more peer networking opportunities for PBSA places, such as open and targeted online sessions to connect places up and share ideas. Targeted sessions will be flexible based on what the places say they need, and the ideas currently being considered include:

- Community organising whilst coming out of lock down (this took place on 7th July)
- The transition back into delivering activities face to face and buildings opening
- Partnership with local authorities and other local organisations
- New priorities that emerge from communities following the community consultation

Implications for funders

Partnerships are transitioning their support from immediate relief by creatively adapting approaches, utilising volunteers in different ways and setting up project specific interventions to address need such as food poverty and digital exclusion. However, there still remains a lot of uncertainty about the future. These initial insights provide some useful points for funders to consider as lockdown eases:

- Some of the PBSA places are re-configuring their plans and priorities through local consultation and listening exercises, keeping the community engaged as they move towards implementing priorities is likely to be more challenging than one off consultation. Whilst delivery partners can provide support and share learning around sustaining community engagement in longer term projects; grants to support this activity should be a priority.
- Places are recognising that the narrative around social action needs to be rethought to be more accessible and meet people where they are. This could be a critical point to provide funding support for communications and framing.
- With the introduction of localised lockdowns (Leicester – July 2020) and continuing uncertainty about a second wave of the pandemic, as well as the time places will need for authentic community consultation - flexibility from funders around timeframe, plans, spend and reporting will provide places with the space they need to proactively adapt and nimbly react to change.