



PBSA – Learning paper 4

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1. Introduction



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).

PBSA 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 that people have greater ownership and influence over local services. The local partnerships are made up of local residents, civil society organisations, public sector bodies, service providers and businesses. A civil society organisation in each place leads each partnership.

This paper provides an overview of the social and economic challenges that each place is facing. It explores the role of social action, and ways of working in the final months of 2020 against the backdrop of going in and out of lockdown. The paper aims to draw out key learning for both funders and delivery organisations. It is the fourth in a series of papers that Renaisi has produced since May 2020.

Methodology

An emergency framework, developed by Renaisi has helped guide the learning approach through the crisis period and beyond. The overarching questions were:

- **Needs:** What are the main needs in the area triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- **PBSA approaches:** What approach are PBSA partnerships taking in their local area (E.g. frontline immediate relief filling a known gap, community-led actions etc)? How are they adapting their PBSA plans?
- **Collaboration:** What is the role of the PBSA partnership? How are PBSA partnerships working together and with others in the local area?
- **Community:** How are PBSA partnerships working with the local community?
- **Learning:** What is the impact of COVID on partnerships and organisations? What difference does PBSA make during the COVID period for a) those most closely involved b) the community?

This initially set out three phases:

- **Short term** (March-June 2020) – addressing the immediate crisis and acute need
- **Medium term** (July-December 2020) – the ‘recovery’ period – continuing to respond to evolving needs and vulnerabilities as lockdown eases, and planning for the future in collaboration with others in the local area

- **Longer term** (2021 onwards) – adapting to the ‘new normal’ and focussing on community resilience.

Since developing the framework in April 2020, it is clear that medium and longer term ‘recovery’ and ‘adapting to the new normal’ phases have not played out as expected. However, they continue to provide a relevant structure for understanding the work of the PBSA partnerships in such a changeable environment, focusing on how delivery has transitioned and adapted, how momentum around social action has been sustained, and how PBSA areas have been able to support community resilience.

This paper has been informed by mid-year reports completed by PBSA partnerships in October 2020, and in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in December 2020, looking back on the period between September and December 2020. In total, 13 individuals, from organisations involved in PBSA partnerships, across nine of the PBSA areas were interviewed.¹ Some of these discussions were carried out in groups of up to three, as requested by the participants, to support collective reflection. Interviews were recorded and researchers took detailed notes. These were then analysed thematically using the ‘medium term’ phase of the evaluation framework. Interviewees were informed that their contributions would remain anonymous and the direct quotations used in this report have not been attributed to specific partnerships.

2. Context of places and community needs



This section provides a brief overview of the local context of the PBSA places drawing on publicly available data to help explain some of the existing challenges that PBSA partnerships have been facing. It summarises issues that were previously reported (up to summer 2020), and outlines how community needs have evolved since then. This helps to situate the themes and findings that follow on the role of PBSA between September-December 2020.

Vulnerability of places

The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) measures seven domains of deprivation - income; employment; education, skills and training; health and disability; crime; barriers to housing and services; and living environment.² A low IMD score indicates a higher level of deprivation. Figure 1 shows the most recent release of IMD scores, from 2019, for the ten PBSA local authority areas. However, it is important to take this as a snapshot only, PBSA activities are often located in, or targeted at more deprived geographical areas within an overall local authority area.

¹ Renaisi were unable to interview representatives from North East Lincolnshire due to issues with capacity

² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation Data](#)

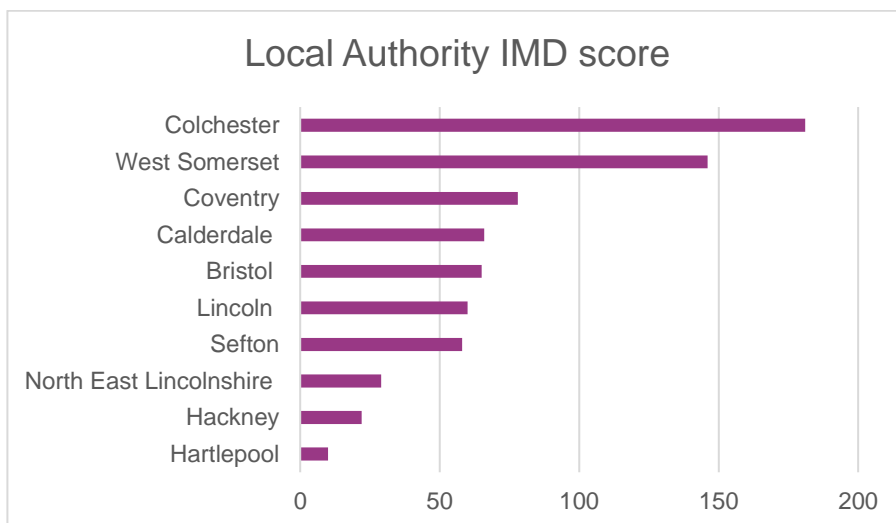


Figure 1: The IMD scores for the ten PBSA local authorities

Table 1 below shows the IMD local authority ranking for PBSA places compared to other areas in England. In the 2019 IMD, all PBSA places, excluding Colchester and West Somerset, were in the top 30% most deprived local authority areas in England. The ranking also shows that Hackney and Hartlepool are in the top 10% of most deprived areas in the country.

Place	Local authority ranking out of 317 areas in England	Deprivation of LA area comparative to the rest of England as a percentage
Colchester	181	Within the 60% most deprived areas in England
West Somerset	142	Within the 50% most deprived areas in England
Sefton	89	Within the 30% most deprived areas in England
Bristol	82	
Coventry	81	
Calderdale	76	Within the 25% most deprived areas in England
Lincoln	68	
North East Lincolnshire	66	
Hartlepool	25	Within the 10% most deprived areas in England
Hackney	7	

Table 1: Ranking of the PBSA local authority areas on the IMD

Impact of Covid-19

Figure 2 below presents four of the seven IMD indicators (income, employment, education and training, and health and disability) for the PBSA local authority areas and the ranking of these indicators out of the 317 areas in England. Low rankings signify higher levels of deprivation.

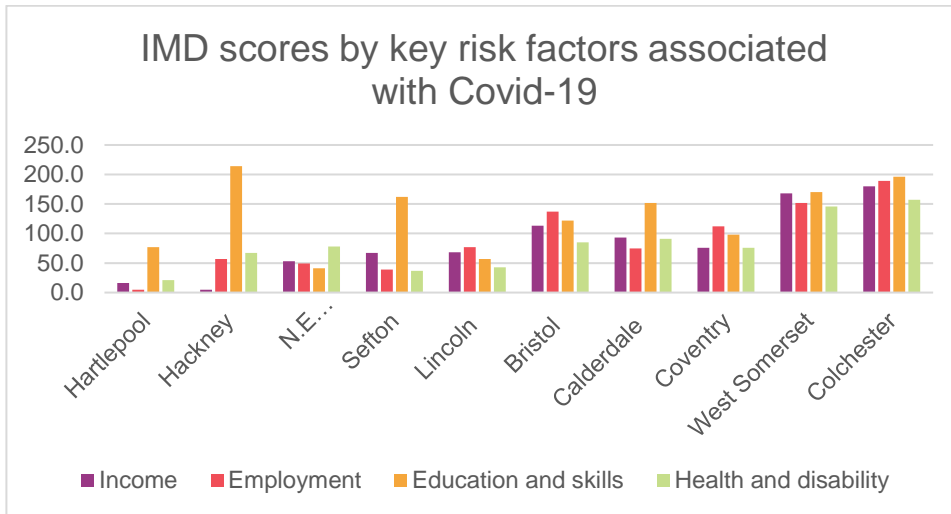


Figure 2: IMD ranking by key risk factors associated with Covid-19 in the PBSA areas

These four indicators are the ones that are most likely to be impacted by the effects of the pandemic, and Figure 2 helps to give an indication of the extent to which PBSA areas might be exposed to risks associated with Covid-19. The area which could be seen as most vulnerable is Hartlepool, as the four indicators all fall within the most deprived 25% on the overall ranking. Hackney, North East Lincolnshire, Sefton and Lincoln, also have lower scores on either three or four of the IMD indicators, indicating they are likely to also be more at risk.

Data from the British Red Cross Covid-19 Vulnerability Index in Figure 3 below combines multiple sources of open data to identify vulnerable areas and groups.³ The Index currently maps clinical vulnerability (underlying health conditions), demographic vulnerability (over-70s, people seeking asylum), social vulnerability (barriers to housing and services, poor living environment, living in “left-behind” areas, loneliness, digital exclusion), and health inequalities.

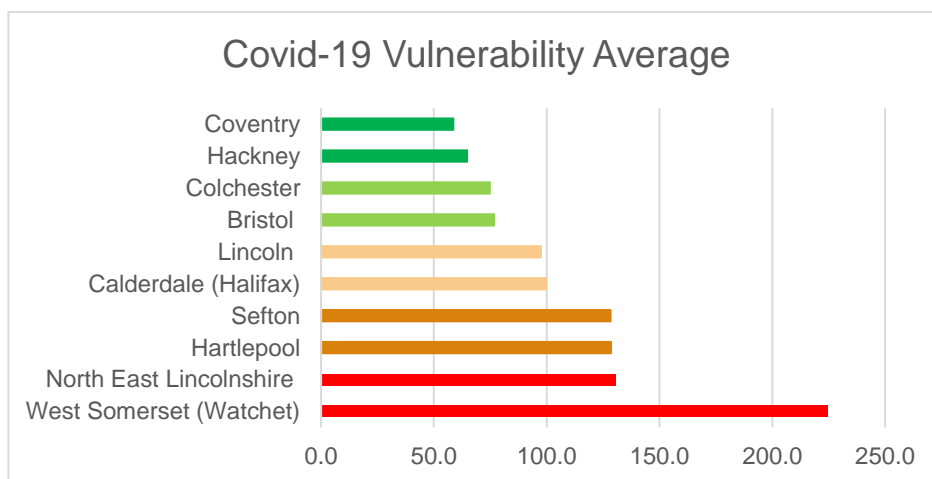


Figure 3: British Red Cross Covid-19 Vulnerability Index for PBSA areas

³ [British Red Cross Covid-19 Vulnerability Index](#)

This diverges from the IMD data and highlights West Somerset as the area with most people at risk. Further analysis of the figures shows that West Somerset has an older population than other PBSA local authority areas, as well as a smaller overall population. Conversely, Hackney has high risk factors on the IMD but is one of the least vulnerable on the British Red Cross data, due to a significantly higher population and a lower overall proportion of people in the at-risk categories.

Overall, the IMD and Vulnerability Index data helps to illustrate two issues: 1) that some PBSA places were already experiencing significant challenges associated with poverty prior to the pandemic; and 2) areas are facing additional risks and challenges across their communities – including groups needing support for the first time alongside existing problems (such as employment) being exacerbated. From an initial analysis, the level of deprivation in a place does not appear to significantly influence the type or focus of social action over the last year, but this is something that we will review further in the next round of interviews.

Challenges that places are facing

An earlier learning paper highlighted that the most significant challenges PBSA places were facing at the end of summer 2020 were:

- The **closure of public or communal spaces**, including libraries, community centres, and charity shops. This was prohibiting access to free computers and wifi, as well as cheap clothing, and disproportionately affecting those already suffering from financial hardship.
- The **closure of voluntary sector services**, including meals on wheels, provision for mental health, lunch clubs and youth clubs. This meant that professional and personal support networks were being removed from those who need it most, as well as adding to the problem of growing isolation.
- **An increasing digital divide** in households without digital devices or wifi, or where the only digital device was a mobile phone. This has further exacerbated the problem of isolation and made it more challenging for people to stay connected and do basic things like schoolwork, or fill out benefits forms.

Towards the end of 2020, places were generally finding that existing issues such as poverty, long-term unemployment, mental health issues, loneliness and isolation, domestic violence, and antisocial behaviour, were becoming more prevalent and more extreme, and **levels of vulnerability caused by the pandemic have grown**. One partnership reported that they were increasingly having to work with partners who have specific expertise around acute need, where previously they had felt equipped to support people with varying needs themselves.

"The big issues we were already dealing with here, have been even more exacerbated." PBSA Partnership 1

"People who are isolated are more isolated over the last month, people who were hungry are hungrier." PBSA Partnership 6

Emerging needs at the end of 2020

It has been widely acknowledged that more people across the UK are falling into poverty as a result of the pandemic. For example, a report published by the Legatum Institute in November 2020, found there were **690,000 additional people in poverty** in the UK as a result of the economic fallout caused by the pandemic, and that the largest impact has been amongst working-age adults.⁴ JRF's annual report on the scale and nature of poverty highlights the groups that have experienced the worst economic and health impacts, including part-time and low-paid workers and BAME households.⁵

These trends have been echoed in the most recent interviews, with PBSA partnerships reporting that **one of the most significant shifts has been in the number of people experiencing poverty for the first time**, as the reality of longer periods of unemployment become more apparent.

"There is a new layer of people coming into the system." PBSA Partnership 4

PBSA partnerships have seen knock-on effects for other services including: an increase in families seeking childcare support, where parents have had to start working several jobs; having to support more people to claim Universal Credit; access advice; and use foodbanks. This poses a challenge in terms of capacity, but also in terms of the resilience of communities. Several PBSA partnerships reported that experiencing poverty for the first time was also having an impact on people's mental health.

*"Those that were struggling are better equipped to deal with hardship. People who have lived in poverty before are more resilient than those that haven't."
PBSA Partnership 6*

Building on this, PBSA partnerships have identified **concerns around the levels of 'hidden need'**, particularly in people newer to poverty, who have not accessed services before, or where support has dropped off due to face-to-face services closing. One PBSA partnership referred to their biggest concern at the end of 2020 as being '*not what we are seeing, but what we aren't seeing.*' Another reported that although they had seen a decrease in referrals for safeguarding, they felt it unlikely that domestic violence had decreased, just that people had stopped reporting it.

This reality indicates that in areas that were already experiencing high levels of poverty and stretched services, such as Hartlepool, Hackney and North-East Lincolnshire, the problem is becoming more acute with greater numbers of people needing support and an increased level of vulnerability with regard to fundamental needs.

⁴ Baroness Philippa Stroud, *Poverty During The Covid-19 Crisis*, Legatum Institute, November 2020

⁵ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2020-21>

3. The role of place based social action at the end of 2020

This section of the paper explores what has been happening ‘on the ground’ at the end of 2020 and how PBSA partnerships have continued to adapt against a backdrop of increasing vulnerability and further lockdowns. The aim is to illustrate the role PBSA has played during this period and where some of the opportunities and challenges have been.

PBSA activities

The last learning paper highlighted approaches taken during the crisis period, aligned to ‘typology of social action’ developed by New Economics Foundation (NEF). Table 2 below builds on these including new activities and changes at the end of 2020.

PBSA Activities	Typology of social action	Places	When
Using assets to become community hubs	Befriending and helping; Formal volunteering	Bristol, Halifax, Sefton and Watchet	Primarily during the crisis period
Working with mutual aid groups	Advocacy and social movements; Befriending and helping; Formal volunteering.	Coventry, Hackney and Watchet	Primarily during the crisis period, but since adapted to create formalised volunteer pathways like Good Neighbour schemes
Community Organising, community connectors and active listening	Community Organising; Co-production	Halifax and Lincoln	Throughout, gaining more traction during Summer 2020 onwards
Working with others to create referral networks and share data	Peer support and learning	Colchester, Coventry, Hartlepool and Watchet	Throughout, with more recent efforts to diversify contacts and reach new people
Developing activities of wellbeing support including growing projects, community gardens, virtual calendars	Co-production	East Marsh, Colchester, Hartlepool, Halifax, Coventry, Sefton and Lincoln	Throughout, with outdoor areas proving to be very popular over the Summer and Autumn months, and a more recent push over the festive period

Developing pathways for people to develop solutions, such as social enterprise or standalone groups	Co-operatively owned services, Co-production	Sefton, Lincoln, Halifax, Bristol	Throughout, with more traction being built from Autumn 2020 onwards, as partners seek to re-balance power
Strategic planning through community consultation	Community Organising, Co-production	Lincoln, Bristol, Sefton, Colchester, East Marsh	Autumn 2020 onwards

Table 2: PBSA activities and the typology of social action

For the most part, the PBSA partnerships are supporting their communities with holistic solutions to various local needs, and the diversity of social action responses across the ten places remains a key feature.

In the September to December 2020 period, crisis work had less prominence, even with subsequent lockdowns. There are a number of reasons why this is the case, including emergency relief not being required at the same level as before (with lockdowns being less strict than earlier in the year and fewer people shielding); relief work being co-ordinated in a more planned way across their place; or partnerships contributing to a very specific issue (e.g. homelessness). Increasingly places have been thinking about how to embed longer-term social action activities, rather than ‘one off’ interventions, and re-visiting and adapting plans that existed before the pandemic.

Adapting place based social action – key themes

Looking across the ten places, there are two key themes that illustrate the effects of the current uncertain context on place based social action, and how PBSA partnerships are navigating this: community listening and consultation; and enabling shared responsibility and community empowerment. These themes were apparent in our first round of interviews and introduced in the previous learning paper, but the most recent interviews provided an opportunity to explore these in more depth.

Community listening and consultation

It is becoming increasingly clear to PBSA places that whilst the ability to carry out certain activities will fluctuate with lockdown restrictions, priorities in the community are likely to remain fairly consistent. As a result, many of the partnerships have carried out listening exercises to ensure that their work is still grounded in the needs and aspirations of the local community.

The previous learning paper highlighted that at least six of the PBSA partnerships were planning to run community consultation exercises. Some partnerships have now completed these exercises and have reported what they have learnt.

Enablers

Dedicating time and resource to do it properly: The partnership in Hartlepool used PBSA funding to employ a Community Development worker to start engaging with the community and

understanding the resilience of people. Through this exercise they found out that those newer to poverty were coping less well than those starting in a state of poverty.

Collective listening: Some of the partnerships found that inviting other organisations to join consultations, or ‘piggy-backing’ on existing initiatives allowed there to be more scope to align strategies and ensure that the community’s voice was at the heart of these. The PBSA partnership in Colchester brought local partners together as part of a ‘listening exercise’ which helped them develop a collective narrative. Since this initial meeting, teams have formed around specific themes and members are individually meeting around social changes they want to see.

"There's a feeling that the partnership approach is being reinforced by individual organisations as well as by us, which makes a difference because we know other organisations are invested in this way of working." PBSA Partnership 3

Asking big questions: Some partnerships found that asking ambitious questions helped elevate the consultation away from everyday issues and beyond activities. In Hackney, the partnership’s approach, through their [Our Place project](#), was to recruit peer researchers who identified people to speak to and then used a snowballing technique to engage with others, as well as carrying out surveys, attending drop-ins and putting postcards through letter boxes. They asked questions, like: ‘What would the success of this work look like for you?’. The team plan to use the results to inform a resident owned action plan for the area.

Focusing on topics that support people to feel comfortable to contribute: The partnerships found that focusing on themes of interest meant that more people felt confident to contribute. For example, at a consultation in Bristol, the Community Development Officer ran a session on young people’s health and wellbeing which is a topic that many feel able to talk about. They are since developing collaborative approaches to supporting young people in the local area. Similarly, through their [Stronger Neighbourhoods](#) work, the partnership in Hartlepool held community conversations to address serious issues like drinking in the streets, and anti-social behaviour in a specific area; and have since been able to bring community members together to collectively think through solutions.

Challenges

Over consulting: Due to a rise in locally led solutions during the pandemic (like mutual aid groups), local VCSE organisations, local authorities and policy makers are increasingly seeing the value of the ‘voice of the community’. On one level this is a positive development, recognising that people’s experience of living in an area allows them to be experts on structural barriers, challenging local dynamics and what might be needed to overcome them. However, some partnerships reported concerns around ‘over consulting’, duplicating efforts, or having the potential to be tokenistic. This could potentially lead to consultation fatigue, or the perception that what people have said is not important, or that action is not being taken. One PBSA partnership plans to tackle this by building in a process of ‘you said, we did’ to feedback to the community.

Enabling shared responsibility and community empowerment

The pandemic highlighted a great sense of community spirit and previously untapped power and resources amongst residents and community groups. In the crisis period, some partnerships were leading activities and people 'from the front' given the immediacy and complexity of the issues being faced. However, in the most recent round of interviews, there was a far greater emphasis on developing leadership and sharing responsibility with local people, capitalising on the power in communities and supporting people to make a difference themselves. This has been beneficial in two ways: 1) it empowers residents to take ownership of their local area; and 2) it allows the PBSA partnerships to step back from the front line and focus more on strategy.

Enablers

Upskilling: Throughout the pandemic volunteer numbers have fluctuated. As previously reported, many PBSA areas lost volunteers as they returned to work, people stopped needing as much support, systems were created where volunteers were no longer necessary, or those volunteering simply lost interest. One of the PBSA partnerships also linked a reticence to continue volunteering with a lack of confidence around skills. Many of the partnerships are now focussing on offering more sustainable positions, that will allow people to develop and grow within volunteering roles.

In both Halifax and Sefton, the partnerships have trained community journalists and reporters, to collect stories and perspectives which support their 'listening' work and helps the partnerships to powerfully demonstrate impact through visual mechanisms. It has also allowed them to make inroads and build skills in specific communities, such as young people in Sefton and BAME communities in Halifax.

"Learning these skills has given people confidence, and having a camera and a task to film gives them purpose and supports them to be self-assured in situations they might not otherwise feel so comfortable." PBSA Partnership 9

In Coventry, the partnership run a '[Change Maker University](#)' training programme, which aims to develop leaders to '*intentionally build relationships, start movements and take action*'. To date seven local residents have taken part in modules. There have already been examples of participants being able to use newly developed listening skills to build deeper relationships in their service delivery roles. Those that have gone through the Change Maker University will also be part of co-delivering future cohorts, continuing to build their confidence and leadership skills.

Supporting people to take responsibility: Some PBSA partnerships have had success in developing leadership by enabling residents to take responsibility for local issues themselves. For example, in Lincoln, a Good Neighbours Scheme is being set up in the PBSA neighbourhood (Sincil Bank) using a model that is being rolled out across the county. The main PBSA organisation felt they should not have a role in leading this, but that they could support by passing on some of their experience and knowledge, as well as signposting people for support once it is set up. The scheme will be led by residents as part of an existing neighbourhood board. The intention is that this will be the platform to take forward the community response work that happened during the immediate crisis period and make it more sustainable over the long term.

Another good example has been in Sefton where support has been provided for people to setup social enterprises. The intended outcomes provide long-term solutions to tackle local social issues, as well as providing one or more people with an income. The partnership in Sefton helps people develop their ideas, apply for funding, set up governance structures and bank accounts and provides business advice. In the most recent set of interviews the partnership reported that there had been a surprising growth in people wanting to develop their own enterprises, due to people losing work, or re-assessing their priorities. The previous learning paper highlighted that three partnerships were building pathways for people in to social enterprise, these most recent finding suggests that now could be good time to develop this thinking further.

Additionally, the PBSA programme this quarter, saw multiple of examples of partnerships supporting residents to deliver smaller activities, to keep up the momentum of social action even when face-to-face activities became harder to carry out. There were various growing and food related activities, as well as a virtual advent calendar, in Colchester. The calendar, originally created to lift the spirits of people in a local care homes, grew in to something much larger which included entries from a community theatre group, a nativity play from a primary school, a children's choir, a personal trainer demonstrating seated exercises and much more.

Representation: The importance of representation within leadership has been considered key for some partnerships who have been trying to engage with people and communities who have not previously been involved in social action. In Colchester, the partnership has done this by adapting their approach from looking at the whole population, to an approach which champions the diversity of individuals by creating platforms for people who had not had previous opportunities to input, such as an event on Latin American culture with leaders sharing stories. The partnership in Colchester also held a Citizen's Conference with BAME Communities, which included an independent advisory group led by police and Colchester360, focusing on BAME hate crime, and community engagement and inclusion. This approach is supporting their aim to help more in the community build their own agency. Similarly, the partnership in Lincoln are looking to set up a BAME network to help with engagement going forward.

"We can talk about integration and citizens voice but that will only happen if it's truly a representative meeting, heard, seen and actioned by the system itself rather than sitting outside of it." PBSA Partnership 3

Challenges

Retainment: At the end of 2020, the biggest reported challenge around enabling shared responsibility and empowerment, is still around sustaining people's interest in social action, with partnerships experiencing people 'dropping off', not wanting to commit or disengaging after initial periods of volunteering. These challenges were more acute due to external factors beyond people's control such as the cold weather, and changing lockdown scenarios putting an abrupt halt to some activities. Ongoing exhaustion and fatigue caused by the pandemic is also a big factor in people's motivation and energy levels.

Key points

- Despite the challenges of the pandemic, there is still a clear role for social action but partnerships will have to work hard to make sure it remains relevant, accessible and advantageous to those taking part.
- These approaches show that social action activities are harder to plan in the context of changing restrictions and therefore partnerships are having to work more strategically, and put more resource into understanding communities' needs, aspirations and motivations, with a view that activities will flow more organically from this.
- In order to be sustainable, social action activities need to form part of a bigger plan and responsibility needs to be shared with residents, elevating them from being 'helpers', to 'leaders'.

4. The status of organisations, partnerships and collaboration at the end of 2020

This section explores key themes relating to organisational resilience with a particular focus on staff wellbeing. It also looks at how the PBSA partnerships are adapting their PBSA plans, planning for the future, working across partnerships, and collaborating across their areas.

Organisational resilience and staff wellbeing

It is widely acknowledged that voluntary sector organisations on the frontline have been operating under extreme pressure during the pandemic. Findings from the new Covid-19 Voluntary Sector Impact Barometer suggest that even by October 2020, **over half (56%) of organisations expected demand for services to increase due to issues associated with rising unemployment.** The study also found that 80% of voluntary sector organisations expected Covid-19 to have a negative impact on delivering their objectives in the coming year.⁶ Organisations delivering PBSA are no different, and the interviews demonstrate just how significant challenges have been at the end of 2020, with **clear issues around operational fragility, especially with regard to staff wellbeing.**

The previous learning paper highlighted that PBSA partnerships had been suffering from 'burn out' amongst staff and volunteers, with some people working days of up to 12 hours, seven days a week. In the most recent interviews, **overworking remains an issue** but has been **further impacted by new lockdown restrictions** such as staff having to home school children, fears around personally contracting Covid-19, as well as potentially passing it to other more vulnerable

⁶ Covid19 Voluntary Sector Barometer, Nottingham Trent University, Sheffield Hallam University, NCVO, *Respond, Recover, Reset: the voluntary sector and Covid19*, October 2020

people. Staff in organisations have also been facing concerns about continuity, weariness from the year, and having to change and adapt delivery plans again.

Organisations are also struggling with online fatigue and the continued lack of face-to-face interactions amongst staff and volunteers, with a number of the partnerships **reporting internal tensions**, due to additional stresses and workloads, as well as the inability to have informal chats and share niceties.

"We are losing the every-day conversations and we are struggling to get people together from different organisations." PBSA Partnership 6

This period is markedly the most challenging wellbeing wise. One PBSA partnership talked of the value of honest conversations at this point, 'recognising challenges rather than just trying to get on with it'. Beyond this, PBSA partnerships, like the majority of the sector are struggling to come up with solutions to very real problems around staff and volunteer mental health.

Planning for longer-term sustainability

Although 2020 has demonstrated what is still possible in very difficult circumstances, as the context shifts again this presents additional challenges for places trying to deliver their PBSA plans. With one year left of 'phase 2' and four years left of PBSA in total, for many, this meant recognising that they needed to re-focus their ideas and projects yet again.

"There has been a feeling of hopelessness since September that wasn't there in the Spring." PBSA Partnership 10

"We need to get away from original plan and just accept we won't get to that as the world is a very different place." PBSA Partnership 3

Sustainability planning is playing out in several different ways. This paper has already explored using **community consultation to guide longer term visions** and **upskilling local people to be more responsible for their own outcomes**, as well as using the legacy from the crisis response, by **adapting activities to give more ownership to the community**.

Some partnerships are **building on aspects of their original plans**. For example, in Lincoln, they are working with a Community Land Trust to generate income for the area through property ownership; and in Sefton, the partnership continues to focus on the role of public and private businesses in supporting community activism, through their '[Access to Work programme](#)' which develops training and employment pathways for young people.

In other areas, partnerships have **stepped back and used their time to think more strategically**, for example, in East Marsh the partnership are considering opportunities like neighbourhood planning with multiple local partners, to focus on local regeneration through asset acquisition and the transformation of green spaces which will provide benefits for numerous organisations.

"We now have to challenge our considerations and concerns about putting things on hold." PBSA Partnership 3

Changes/adaptations in PBSA partnerships

The previous learning paper categorised the PBSA partnerships into three ways of working with each other throughout the pandemic: 1) collaboratively; 2) continuing to connect but not delivering activities together; and 3) working as independent organisations. The recent interviews indicate that for the most part PBSA partnerships that had not been working cohesively together in the crisis period, took opportunities to re-connect later in the year. The midyear reports submitted by PBSA places also revealed that **eight of the ten partnerships had increased their membership to include new partners**, as a result of the increased partnership working they had experienced during the crisis period, as well as due to an appetite to diversify and connect with more people in their communities.

New partners include **local businesses** in Watchet and Sefton, **health focused organisations** in Halifax, Hackney and Colchester, **mutual aid groups** in Hackney and Watchet, and a **housing association** in Colchester, to name a few.

Although the decision to increase partnerships is considered a positive step, the latest interviews unearthed some **challenges with incorporating new partners in planning**, and ensuring that everyone's voice is heard. One partnership also highlighted that mixed levels of organisational development, strategy, diverse interests and priorities, made some partnership sessions harder to run. Another recognised complexity in trying to authentically engage with new groups from communities they are less familiar with, finding that this work has to be intentional and purposeful, to make new members feel prioritised.

"From an organisational and planning perspective, I have to remind myself of my audience and what skills and areas of interest they can bring, not focusing on one area to detriment of wider audience, recognizing sometimes we have to focus e.g. holiday hunger, won't appeal to every one within the partnership."

PBSA Partnership 3

Working collaboratively across the area

One of the benefits to increasing networks, and working with new partners during the pandemic has been partnerships' increasing ability to play a role in catalysing **systems change**, and understanding how collaborative solutions can tackle the root cause of problems such as re-offending, homelessness and children and young people's development.

"Everyone is beginning to acknowledge poverty is linked to homelessness, addiction, alcoholism, these things can affect rent payments etc. It affects everyone in the system." PBSA Partnership 6

The development of a joint initiative in Hartlepool, which brings together a group of people who have the onus and ability to change the way services are run locally, provides a good example of new systems working in a PBSA area. The group includes PBSA partners, the local authority, health organisations, probation services, the police and other voluntary sector organisations. They have developed a **clear purpose which cuts across a variety of local issues**, and created a **safe and trusting space** amongst partners. Facilitated by an external consultant, the

group are **exploring barriers and levers within the system and how each organisation fits in to that puzzle**. This has been underpinned by a commitment to **share relevant data** with each other and **use storytelling** to help them with collective influencing.

Other partnerships reflected on the importance of **understanding the roles and contributions** of each organisation. For example, in Bristol, the partnership has worked with the council to re-frame responsibilities in terms of what both parties can offer i.e. who should consult the community and how, to ensure they are working supportively and not duplicating.

Operating within the context of fewer volunteers and scarce funding has meant that **competition amongst voluntary sector organisations has been common**. Partnerships that have successfully addressed this have done so by being able to **offer resources or additional benefits to organisations collectively coming together**. In Colchester, they are carrying out a large piece of work that will allow data sharing across services, meaning those who have chosen to be involved will have access to much better data regarding their community.

Key points

- Staff are working in very challenging conditions, that have worsened since September 2020. Not only has this caused difficulties for delivery, but it has meant organisations cannot rely on volunteers as much as they were able to in the crisis period, and stress caused by overworking, alongside being unable to connect face-to-face is even leading to internal tensions.
- Partnerships are recognising that PBSA plans need to be higher level and longer term. Many have used the period from September to December 2020, as an opportunity to think more strategically about what they can achieve and involving more organisations and people in this process.
- Overall, collaboration is still at the heart of PBSA and this is evident in the increasing numbers of organisations and people that have joined PBSA partnerships, with most coming with an offer of particular assets and skills for their local places.

5. Learning from this period



Lessons for collaborations, partnerships and local systems

- The pandemic has demonstrated the number of people willing to get involved in social action locally, and the response driven by the voluntary and statutory sector has highlighted just how many organisations are working to provide support on any one patch. The PBSA partnerships are purposefully increasing and diversifying to incorporate new voices. However, in doing so planning becomes more complex, and priorities can become marred with different perspectives. Successful collaborations have come about

when partners agree on a clear purpose, establish roles and contributions, and are representative and inclusive.

- With some organisations finding a new appreciation for the experience of the community, over consulting can become a real issue. It is important for PBSA partnerships to cooperate and understand from others what has been learnt already, where the gaps are and what has already been acted upon, rather than asking new questions. This will prevent future exercises from becoming tiresome or tokenistic.
- Data plays an important role in connecting up organisations. Getting more organisations involved in data sharing will lead to more informed systems and the ability to engage and support in a more person-centred way.

Lessons for funders

- Community organisations are working under extreme conditions, and resilience is decreasing. Funding provided during the pandemic (both in emergency grants and flexibility around spend for existing grants) has allowed many of these organisations to stay afloat. However, now is a point to provide longer term funding that mirrors the longer term strategic planning of the organisations and partnerships. This is essential in order to provide a level of sustainability and continuity in communities.
- Funding to support organisations and partnerships to create better systems has the potential to elevate the work that is being done at a community level. Whilst staff and volunteers are stretched, funding needs to be focused on:
 - Specific staff posts with systems-change, or community connecting built in to their remit
 - Mechanisms that support the collation, analysis and presentation of data (staff or systems)
 - External facilitators, mentors, strategists, support providers to help lift aspirations and see beyond the ‘every-day’

6. Conclusions

The PBSA partnerships are experiencing new challenges especially in terms of more acute (and ‘hidden’ needs), and growing concerns around the ability to deliver, whilst conditions become tougher for both staff and volunteers. The end of last year also saw a necessity to pause and reflect and re-group as it became apparent that ‘recovery’ was further off than anticipated.

At the beginning of the crisis period, Renaisi and the Fund outlined two hypotheses, the first, looked back to whether connections and relationships built through PBSA pre-pandemic, had influenced the role PBSA partnerships played in responding to the pandemic. Our previous

learning paper found that whilst some of the partnerships did credit the programme with being a crucial factor in their response, it would be misleading to suggest many of the connections were not present before the PBSA programme, though are likely to have been enhanced by it.

The second hypothesis, looks to the future: *The role that partnerships took during the crisis will have a significant influence on how place-based social action and the partnership is perceived by the community and other partners in the local area going forward.*

Emerging findings suggest that the role played by partnerships throughout the pandemic is already having a significant impact on how they are being perceived locally, with more organisations opting to join the partnerships. Some have also adapted activities from crisis in to longer-term social action aimed to empower community members, enhancing the viability and perception of the partnerships. In response to the pandemic, much more focus is also being put on strategic planning, focusing on understanding the priorities of the local community as part of rebuilding, future proofing, and reinforcing the partnerships by strengthening connections and bringing in new voices, further supporting the hypothesis.

The role of PBSA in ongoing community rebuilding seems to have shifted slightly in the last quarter, from one that was supporting residents through hardship (as many did during the pandemic), to an approach that strengthens communities by empowering residents to lead. In doing so the partnerships have re-visited some of the principles of social action, but in a way that is perhaps more authentic, and arguably has the potential to be more successful, than the plans that were originally set out. Being driven by necessity and having to act at speed has undoubtedly been a big factor. This has been manifested through working in broader partnerships, engaging more people and making the most of assets and skills, working with volunteers, and listening to the community to find mutually beneficial solutions.

As we move in to the final year of phase 2 of the PBSA programme, it feels like a useful time to consider how the places are understanding change, and to start to address some of the key longer-term questions in our learning framework, such as: whether there is a greater awareness of social action amongst residents because of PBSA; whether people are more involved in social action locally; and whether there have been tangible improvements and increased pride within the areas – taking into account the impact of the pandemic on all of these outcomes. This will be accompanied by drawing out further ongoing learning from across the programme on the foundations that support social action – for example, on what conditions need to be in place to make a successful partnership.