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

May 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 to 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.

PBSA partnerships have been heavily involved in the community response to COVID-19. They have had to rapidly adapt and innovate, and be flexible in the way they work. In many cases, original PBSA plans are on pause, whilst partnerships address the immediate crisis. The Fund have emphasised the need to support the PBSA places to do this, and have created the space for the repurposing of grants as well as access to their new emergency fund.

This document shares initial learning from across the ten PBSA partnerships from their response to the crisis so far.

Approaches: the main approaches PBSA Partnerships have taken to respond to crisis

In the immediate response to crisis, partnerships identified the most pressing needs to be:

- Essential food and medicine supplies
- Social isolation and digital exclusion
- Financial concern and uncertainty

The sections below outline the main approaches places are taking to address these needs. Although there are similarities across the ten areas, some interesting differences are emerging around how different types of organisations have been involved in the crisis response. For example, community anchor organisations have tended to find themselves undertaking immediate crisis response activities such as focussing on food/medication and vulnerable individuals, and have been able to draw on their existing relationships and networks across their places.

Some partnerships on the PBSA programme have less of a frontline delivery role, and their focus has been more on medium/long term relief exploring issues around social connectedness, building relationships within communities and developing the means to sustain this beyond COVID-19.

However, it is worth noting that these two broad approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and have a different level of emphasis depending on the local context. Where partnerships choose to focus their efforts is inevitably shifting and adapting as different community needs emerge and they seek to coordinate with other local responses.

Coordinating volunteers

The current situation means places have seen many members of the local community come forward to volunteer their time and skills. In many cases, these are volunteers that have not previously been involved in the PBSA plans. In some areas, local authorities and other local stakeholders have looked to PBSA partnerships to coordinate the effort locally. Partnerships have

been matching volunteers to emergency food and pharmaceutical requests (Hackney), managing volunteers to man new phonelines (Bristol), working with the council to carry out rapid volunteer vetting (Bristol), managing the borough wide volunteering response (Hackney), providing pastoral support to volunteers at the frontline (Hartlepool), and providing individual bursaries for transportation (Colchester).

Community hubs and foodbanks

Community anchor organisations that have physical assets such as community centres or other buildings have been able to use these as community hubs, acting as emergency response centres for support, food parcels and advice. Other places have been working within a local referral network and channelling donations to local foodbanks (Coventry, Hartlepool, Lincoln and Sefton).

Tackling isolation

Isolation remains one of the biggest concerns and as social distancing continues at risk groups will remain under the radar. Partnerships have set up outreach and befriending phonelines (Bristol, Colchester, Coventry, Hackney, Lincoln, Watchet). These have been essential for people who are on their own and unable to leave their homes – offering friendship and providing support. Callers have been establishing whether people have enough food, offering to collect shopping and prescriptions, and referring to more specialist support where needed.

An unexpected and positive outcome in Coventry is that partnerships have been able to use the crisis and the anonymity of a phone call to ask about financial needs in a way that was not possible or appropriate previously and provide signposting, advice and support to address this.

Providing support virtually

Several PBSA partnerships were using a community organising approach prior to COVID-19, and were harvesting ideas from local people to bring local communities together. Social gatherings are rapidly being adapted to a virtual context – pub quizzes, social suppers, virtual open mic nights, daily community chats, and Bollywood dance sessions have all gone online, giving local people an accessible way to engage when they are unable to meet face to face. The partnerships are seeing new technical skills in the community and leadership skills emerging from volunteers. They are also connecting with people previously unknown to them.

WhatsApp has provided a lifeline for people without computers and tablets particularly through the mutual aid groups, these have enabled partnerships to have an accessible route to engagement and ability to capture feedback quickly and easily.

Longer term thinking to address social isolation

Those that have been less involved in the crisis response are considering longer term approaches to social connectedness such as setting up and facilitating health and wellbeing groups and connecting them to local partners like GPs (Colchester). Others have been working to secure new assets to provide community spaces in future – plans that were in place for the partnership prior to COVID-19 but are now more important than ever (East Marsh).

Collaboration: How have the partnerships worked together and as part of the wider system?

The role of collaboration has become increasing important during the COVID-19 period, in recognition that no one organisation has the skills or capacity to respond to everything. This has played out in a number of ways and has often been influenced by existing local infrastructure.

Local authority partnerships

PBSA Evaluation: Learning note

There has been evidence in the majority of places that local authorities have reacted nimbly and been able to work with voluntary sector organisations who are well connected to the local community. In some cases, there have been notably quick responses to issues that had previously been considered as tricky or hard to make progress on. For example, in Hartlepool those who had been previously hard to house – have been housed within 20 mins of presenting to the local authority.

Prior to the crisis, some partnerships had strong existing relationships with local authorities and as a result many of these have increased their collaborative working – for example, on volunteer vetting and DBS checks (Bristol); working with local authority staff deployed at ward level (Coventry); acting as the local authority nominated volunteer hub(Hackney); and brokering relationships with the voluntary sector to provide advice on safeguarding and protecting volunteers (Hartlepool).

Voluntary sector partnerships and signposting

The crisis has meant some partnerships are thinking carefully about their role in the local area and making sure they work in a streamlined way, fitting in to a wider area-based response rather than duplicating. In some cases, partnerships have decided not to contribute to an already saturated support network but instead to focus on stakeholder mapping, knowing who is doing what locally and signposting to those coordinating the immediate response.

Some of the partnerships are working closely with organisations with specific expertise such as supporting mental health needs through a local MIND in Watchet and supporting digital inclusion through Hartlepower CIO in Hartlepool.

Challenges: What have been the main obstacles partnerships encountered?

The work being carried out during the crisis period is being done within the context of acute need, vastly reduced opportunities for face to face contact and uncertainty about when this crisis period will end, and what the subsequent 'recovery' period will look like. There have been numerous challenges, and those most pertinent to PBSA partnerships are outlined in the following sections.

Placing volunteers

The partnerships working on the frontline have often struggled to place volunteers or give them meaningful engagement tasks. There are more volunteers than people needing support and after volunteer matching has taken place, there are limited opportunities for newer volunteers. Partners have raised concerns that people who have expressed a new interest in social action will not stay engaged because there are not enough opportunities to do tasks and activities that are appropriate to their skills.

Lack of face-to-face engagement

People that are isolated, lonely or unable to access support are at risk of becoming more detached. Some partnerships have reported that people are not attending virtual meetings because they do not have access to or do not use technology; or because they do not want to engage. Providing devices to people who do not have them has been useful in some cases, but has not addressed how inaccessible they can be for people without digital skills.

Solutions to digital inclusion and outreach such as setting up phonelines and telephone befriending are filling a gap but they are not necessarily a sustainable substitute for face-to-face engagement. Community development and approaches like community organising are based on authentic real-life connections and relationships. Not being able to do this coupled with the issue of digital exclusion has meant some people are engaging less or not being reached at all.

PBSA Evaluation: Learning note

VCSE staff furloughed, redeployed, seconded or working from home

Nationally, more than 60% of charities have furloughed staff.[1] Many of the agencies partnerships usually work with have stopped working, and their support workers are working from home and unable to provide face-to-face support. In addition, staff from within some of the PBSA partnerships have been seconded or redeployed to new areas and partnerships have had to pause recruitment.

Re-deployment of staff within local authorities has meant that some roles like Neighbourhood Manager or Community Coordinator have been moved from areas where they have existing relationships and knowledge of the place (Lincoln, Coventry). This has meant that some partnerships are having to build these relationships again from scratch which can be frustrating at a time when speedy responses are required

Safeguarding

The unprecedented number of volunteers and risks around spreading COVID-19 have made safeguarding one of the trickiest elements of the partnerships' mobilisation efforts. There are many variables to ensure that the whole system works safely. PPE equipment has been hard to source, DBS checks take time, handling money in return for goods needs to be thought through carefully and those staff and volunteers providing frontline support require additional support for anxiety.

Solutions are being developed - for example, in Bristol DBS checks are being turned around within 24 hours by the local authority due to pre-vetting provided by the partnership and support and guidance for anxiety is being offered over the phone. In Watchet, the partnership are using Sumup card readers, providing a safe way to pay for people's deliveries. However, this has raised some new issues for those who do not have credit cards.

What next? The questions we are looking at:

The PBSA partnerships have reported that the crisis has allowed them to connect with people and organisations beyond the 'usual suspects'. From local food drops to taking on leadership roles, people have demonstrated a willingness and desire to support their community. It is too early to say whether COVID-19 will mean that social action is 'a new normal' but the signs are promising.

The partnerships are beginning to hear from people in their communities on how they want to manage their lives going forward. Many are worried about the mental health crisis and are looking at ways to mitigate this. There are two further phases of community response that PBSA partnerships will need to focus on:

- Medium term: identifying how resources can be used to help those at increasing risk and working with key organisations to continue providing services
- Longer term: shifting to recovery and adapting to a 'new normal', focusing on resilience and keeping the 'good' practice that has emerged. However, this will be alongside dealing with the economic fallout and ongoing acute needs and destitution.

Learning from the immediate crisis period

We are only at the very beginning of understanding the impact of COVID-19 on communities and how PBSA places have been responding.

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[1] Pro Bono Economics/Civil Society Media results: 5 & 6 May 2020

Different organisations are responding in different ways - **knowing where the partnership fits within the system** and understanding where value can be added has helped to contribute to effective community responses.

PBSA partnerships on the frontline have been able to get up and running quickly for a number of reasons:

- They have intelligence on what they can do at a local level and **pull on partners from across statutory and voluntary organisations** to provide advice on additional services.
- They have **spaces that they have been able to repurpose**.
- They can **target their activities because they are already aware of their local community strengths and assets**.
- They are connected to people who are operating services across different hyperlocal geographies and have been able to make referrals.

The learning so far suggests that where organisations have existing relationships in place and a history in the area, they are able to effectively coordinate the response. However, the ability to do this can be negatively affected where staff have been furloughed or redeployed, and this is particularly pertinent with local authority relationships.

The partnerships have found **face-to-face engagement to be irreplaceable** but have created solutions such as befriending calls, support phonelines and virtual gatherings that are allowing them to connect with new people and offer more support.

Partnerships have been inundated with volunteers and the community have been encouraged and facilitated to take greater responsibility for their place. However, concerns have been raised around **keeping people meaningfully engaged** in social action after the crisis period ends. The community-led mutual aid groups have allowed partnerships a quick route to engagement. However, the organic nature of the groups means they can also be unwieldly and lack guidance or protocols.

Implications for funders

These initial insights provide some useful points for funders to consider:

- **Increasing isolation seems to be the biggest risk in communities** – solutions to tackling this should be prioritised. Other themes around mental health support and destitution are also hugely significant into the recovery phase.
- **Creative solutions to working with volunteers** such as harnessing specific skills e.g. digital, counselling; or building new skills by providing training opportunities e.g. community organising, or similar projects will support the retention of volunteers throughout the recovery stage.
- **Streamlining of support** using collaborations, networks and referral systems is likely to remain vital - funding for staff posts and core costs to sustain these connections will strengthen local sectors.
- **Relationships with local authorities and other public-sector bodies have strengthened,** and solutions have been developed that support easier access to services for the community. There are some concerns this will not continue and ideas for developing longer-term approaches to the mutual benefit of both the public and voluntary sector will be important to consider.