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Space to Connect

'Keeping in Touch' Sessions Round 1: Summary Write Up

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1) Introduction

Between 14th Jan and 3rd March '21 the LBU team ran seven online 'Keep in touch' sessions for S2C projects. Representatives from 23 S2C projects took part in the sessions.

The purpose of sessions was to provide an open, informal space for projects to connect and share delivery and development experiences with each other. In the current circumstances of Covid 19, we felt offering this opportunity to connect with others was particularly important. The content of the sessions was driven by the people who came along and what they had to say, but some of the things we aimed to explore were; *updates since our last contact, any challenges, opportunities realised and learning identified.*

The sessions were recorded to capture the learning from what people shared to inform our outputs and reports. This summary paper outlines the issues, challenges and opportunities discussed in the 7 sessions.

2) Challenges

a) Challenges for communities

Key challenges identified for communities continue to be:

- practical/ essential needs e.g. lack of access to food, gas, electricity, income (including welfare)
- home schooling
- lack of social contact and resulting loneliness and isolation
- lack of access to IT devices and Wi-Fi capacity

It was recognised that lockdown has been particularly tough in some parts of the country subject to many **local restrictions and localised lockdowns being prolonged**. Added to this is the impact of 'fake news' and misinformation within communities about Covid 19 – e.g. vaccinations hesitancy.

b) Access to funds and grants

Obtaining funding has been a challenge for many projects due to a high level of competition for resources due to demand and growth in community groups. Whilst there have been a number of funding streams for Covid 19 responses, in some cases this took away funding for 'usual' project activity. There was recognition that small amounts of funding can go a huge way in small organisations.

Some projects had **lost income** due to lack of rentals of their physical space e.g. by other providers and some needed to **use their financial reserves** to keep going and maintain the fabric of the space, "*using savings to stand still depletes reserves and scope for growth*". This is part of the broader anxiety around finance and funding going forward.

c) Digital exclusion

Lack of access to IT devices, Wi-Fi capacity and IT 'know how' has meant many people have been unable to connect or engage online. Work has been done locally in some areas to build capacity and access through provision of training, support and provision of reconditioned IT equipment and data packages. Getting older people online has been tricky for some projects, but where this has been successful it has been *“worth it and rewarding”*. There are some examples of early thinking on developing community-based IT and wi-fi access collectives to share costs.

d) The nature of online delivery

Online delivery was seen as being less fluid and more formal - and potentially off-putting for some who are used to an informal drop-in situation in a physical space - rather than signing up for a session with a login and password, which can act as a barrier to some people. One project had, pre-lockdown, an open-door policy which meant people could just come to the cafe and find out about events and activities and join in as they wanted to. They had lots of big events with diverse community members who were now more difficult to reach due to the inability to run these events or the café.

“Online activities need to be planned and organised so there's less free flow...whereas when the cafe was the front door - it was a good way to get people in informally...”

Engaging online is also more of a challenge where existing relationships don't exist;

“When we haven't met people in person before it can be hard to engage online - partly due to their lack of access or skills but also because relationships have not been developed and people may be wary....this means we may not be meeting the needs of those who really need our support.”

*“ it's really tough to replicate this online unless we're already in contact with people so I'm **not sure we're reaching those who we really want to reach** who may not know about us or feel uncomfortable with online activities .”*

There are also resource implications in that online delivery requires more planning and preparation (e.g. time needed to make up and distribute activity packs) and increased cost for materials e.g. providing arts materials for individual activity packs – as materials can't now be shared as they would be in a group setting.

There were several examples of how projects had adapted to online delivery with great success:

“We lost connection with the community when Covid 19 happened but we have embraced zoom and now YouTube and ran a nine day festival for 200 people, more festivals are now planned along with the trail in the park we give out activity packs to families who visit the park who may not have access to online.”

The Bromley-by-Bow team created a 'social online drop in' via Zoom for people to learn more about local resources, have some social time. This has grown into a 'Skills Share' model where people offer up things they can do for others, similar to time banking. This has become a very positive intergenerational space for many.

3) Opportunities

a) Responding to new issues:

Covid 19 presented **new issues and needs** for communities which projects have responded to e.g. food poverty, access to welfare benefits, support with home schooling. The Gasgoyne and Morningside youth club was moved online and provided an extensive offer to young people aged 8 to 17yrs. Each day there were sessions with educators/teachers on homework/course work; cookery and fitness classes as well as one to one support sessions that explored the impact of Covid.

b) Reaching new communities

A number of projects reported that they had reached new communities or sections of the community through the project. In light of Covid19, all spoke of **creating 'hubs' and 'bubbles' of support** for groups of people in neighbourhoods and delivering support and resources via / to these mechanisms e.g. on mental health, arts-based activities.

Older people were identified as a new group to respond to by some projects. Often people who were not previously reaching into community projects or services. One project which worked with older people with long term conditions had seen high levels of loneliness, isolation and mental health problems. High levels of fear people amongst some older people has meant they won't go outside – there is a need for accessible appropriate messaging and information from trusted sources. Some reported technology barriers for older people, despite some offering access to devices and training and support in using these.

Young people were a new target group for some projects – especially as much delivery for young people had reduced, resulting in latent issues emerging. Young people's need for space and perceptions of space had changed massively - with schools and parks having become very important to young people. Changes in the perception of space and where young people feel safe has changed in Covid. There was a sense that the barriers to accessing space for young people have changed from being about costs and transport to being about other Covid-related factors.

There is a need to engage young people in different ways using space and trusted relationships. Young people were seen by some as a group who were more difficult to engage online- preferring during the social restrictions more face to face connections. One project had targeted University students by setting up a new group for them which aimed to link students into community arts projects across the locality as contributors. This aims to build capacity and also respond to mental health and isolation issues being experienced by (largely overseas) students as a result of lockdown.

“The group will seek to provide an opportunity for them to feel they belong and can engage in and influence cultural and arts activity as well as providing mental health and social support. Once established, we plan to fold them into the wider space to connect community....it's difficult to integrate different groups when they're all online and people don't know each other- it's easier to do this when you're meeting in person”.

Another project planned to use the Expand funding to look at how spaces can be used to connect more people, especially young people, in the ward.

Whilst new communities were being identified and supported – some projects reported challenges in effectively engaging some groups. One example related to those communities that felt under **increased surveillance** related to Covid 19 and lockdown, where there existed anxiety amongst some community members who already felt under surveillance for other reasons e.g. immigration status.

c) Increased partnership working and connections

Many projects referred to the increased opportunities for new connections and partnership working.

There was a sense that, since lockdown, partner organisations were more forthcoming and willing to share resources and signpost to other local projects – and that things seemed, *“a bit more joined up”*. Some groups, previously seen as ‘gatekeepers’ of particular community groups, were seen to be ‘opening up’, providing opportunities to tap into each other’s expertise and groups more easily. In some areas the emergence of new grassroots organisations was seen as positive for promoting and adding to the project activities. Forging new relationships via partnership working with different organisations helps breakdown barriers and shares understanding that there are shared goals to be achieved by pooling of resources. All commentators on this theme sensed that partnership working would be a major feature in post Covid recovery.

Many funders were also encouraging partnership working, seeing a key role for grassroots organisation in the delivery of projects and activities.

“We’ve built good Connections with the council who now see the value of the community hub which was formerly the community club we do more partnership working with a range of agencies”

Local Authorities in some areas have mobilised networks of Community Organisations to share resources and work in partnership. Good example of LA support includes mentorship scheme that provides a key contact within Council to support Community Organiser/action. Working with local health champions to reach people and promote resources.

d) Co-production - Building Capacity, Capability

Community organisations have had a role in supporting people who stepped up to get involved in the Covid 19 response to gain new skills, take on new roles and set up new community resources. This helps sustain community action and supports efforts around 'building back'. One example of this was a project which is ‘recruiting’ students and young people into community projects, using the Kick Starter Trainee scheme as a mechanism. Another had taken up Apprenticeships for volunteers to migrate to.

One project had **established a ‘space to connect’ advisory group** involved in progressing arts and cultural activities in the area. It had a mixed membership including people with lived experience of mental health, local mums, University staff and a mix of ages abilities and backgrounds. Another project was developing a cadre of **community activists** to help in bid writing, setting up projects and delivery of innovation ideas. This co-production and capacity building was seen has having multiple benefits for both individuals, in terms of skills, and organisations, in terms of sustainability;

“... [it] helps people with life skills and preparedness for work or vocational experiences...It's part of our sustainability approach – capacity – capability – growth.”

A project in the Midlands are developing a cadre of ‘community connectors’ and the same project had used a **buddying system** to encourage people to go out to places with a friend, to help address fears and anxiety about ‘re-connecting’ with community places and spaces.

There is **value in promoting the benefits of civic acts** for individuals and communities e.g. personal satisfaction and pride gained from saving the park.

Future Proofing – Covid 19 has helped sites in asking - *is what we have planned resilient enough and able to flex?*

e) Rise in Volunteering

Whilst many older volunteers had had to step down due to shielding, many organisations have seen a growth in volunteers during lockdown. In some cases, this included people from neighbourhoods who were stepping up to volunteer, providing a capacity opportunity. Intergenerational opportunities have also emerged as volunteers from different age groups work together.

Some organisations which rely heavily on volunteers reported many are ‘run into the ground’ – feeling drained and tired having been through stressful, upsetting experiences through lockdown. Organisations recognised the importance of giving volunteers permission to take a break and look after each other. In one project, WhatsApp has been used as a means of regularly checking in on the well-being of volunteers who were also linked to the local social prescribing service. It raises the point of how and what community projects provide to support volunteers’ wellbeing more generally.

We heard examples of how some projects were being increasingly flexible about volunteering roles with an emphasis on ‘do what you can when you can – every little helps’ – for example, King George 5th Memorial Fields Park in Knowsley, a green space project had seen an increase in people accessing the park area and made available litter picking/tidy up kits to people to collect litter as they walk around the space. This was informal and didn’t require regular commitment.

f) Blended approaches / embracing the digital

There was recognition that the online space is here to stay and offers many benefits in terms of reaching those who would find it difficult to connect in person for a range of reasons. The importance of **making the online space a nurturing welcoming space** was emphasised. Many organisations saw value in a ‘blended’ approach with some sending out materials, activity packs and even refreshments in advance to run alongside online activities. This physical connection alongside the virtual can help make people feel engaged, connected and valued.

The intersection of the physical and online space was seen as important in having a role in supporting people to do things collectively e.g. by creating a peer learning scheme. One example was an online gardening group – the idea being that if people were working together already online, it will be easier for them to work together in person when restrictions allow.

Digital platforms were not always live sessions, some projects were using Youtube as a place to build a library of information and resources which people could access as and when.

g) Role of outreach and creative engagement

Projects were using outreach and creative approaches to meet the needs of different groups and to make sure they were connecting with people who are isolated, especially those who are digitally excluded, through activities such as Street Theatre, Garden Theatre. For the Everyman Theatre working alongside Mersey care, a performance that could be done at people's doorsteps enabled them to reach out to and access new communities of interest who could engage with it – reaching new demographics and teams as a result. There was a view that the creative arts could be a key partner in cross sector community development and social action in that it has the flexibility to respond and be present.

Role of creativity - keeping the profile of the organisation, seeing its activity being present and maintaining engagement with people requires lots of creative thinking and practical action.

Another project (Independent Arts) had sent 1/4 of a circle out to community members and invited them to colour it in and post it back. They then created full circles out of the quarters and put them in the shop windows. This helped people feel part of something and have the chance to work on something together with people as a means of connecting.

Another project convened RE:Imagine and RE:Ignite sessions where they brought people together online to imagine what they would like Wolverhampton to feel, look and be like in 2030. Based on the work of Rob Hopkins 'What If?' This funding will help us to move into the third phase which is RE:Activate. Bringing people together in groups linked to the things they identified in the first two sessions.

h) Role of Community Organisations in Lockdown

Food Poverty – Food Access: Shift to responding to food access and food poverty organising spaces as food banks and food hubs. Partnering with established Foodbank organisers. Repurposing physical space to use as food depots. Food parcel drops offs have had dual purpose for some - with a well-being check in at the garden gate.

Becoming increasingly apparent that Community Organisations and spaces are a **key vehicle for LA and Public Health in reaching communities** – examples of this are now evident in the new phase of Covid19 response – supporting vaccination uptake, flu jabs etc. However, excessively high level of risk aversion in LA's was problematic for some orgs in terms of what activities were permissible during lockdown.

Role of local cross-sector, multi-disciplinary groups (e.g. local resilience forum) can have a role in ensuring communities of interest are receiving relevant, targeted information e.g. need for appropriate culturally sensitive communications for BAME populations some of whom maybe vaccine hesitant. This highlights the need for appropriate culturally sensitive communications and in working together with public health and the local authority. **Community organisations have a key role in** health promotion around Covid 19. We heard of this from the African Health Policy Network.

4) Future Developments and Focus : Covid Recovery

Many projects were starting to think and explore plans for post Covid Recovery and expressed concern about the long term effects of Covid 19 in communities.

Many highlighted a likely expected growth in issues within communities post Covid 19 and the support needed to address these. There was a common theme from the discussions that such issues may only serve to deepen inequalities experienced by some communities, compounded by wider more systemic impacts. An example being **job losses** in local communities and the impact on finances, poverty (food, heating, housing etc.) and the resulting **Mental health issues**. **All projects described a commitment to working on these issues** and were already thinking about needs and how they might respond? e.g. a survey of mental health issues in BAME communities highlighted *peoples' fears and anxiety about Covid 19 and associated stressors – isolation etc.*

There was a view that increased demand but a lower ability to support with fewer resources might be a challenge going forward. There was a sense that organisations needed to be on the same page around solutions – and work in partnership where feasible - but recognised **the need for associated resources and commitment**.

Managing expectations around pace of change: people may expect instant change/return to normality but it will be a 'long and bumpy road' to recovery.

Planning around **how to be Covid 19 secure in the future**. Need for a **phased return to normality** and exploring what this looks like whilst having measures in place to deliver should restrictions return.

Explore how best to support people to return to 'new normal' in Covid recovery phase e.g. shopping, accessing services, regaining employment.

Online activities for groups who are shielding can really galvanise them and kept them connected. Explore different ways of working in 'pods' and 'bubbles'.

'Build back better' conversations can help avoid silos and bring groups together to explore how the local system can work better together on ventures as a way of re energising and play to individual / organisational strengths.

Recognition that the **charity sector needs space** - many have home workers and there is a need to address the workers isolation. One project had developed a support hub for charity workers.

Focus on the Hyper Local: build relationships and delivery at a very local level helps build outwards. Ensure developments are from within – recognised by and supported by local people NOT provided by external agents.

Take time to review and reflect: How the project has been refocused, what ways did it become responsive and reactive?

Reconnecting/story telling: We're about to begin **capturing stories from older people** about what the club means to them we want to energise that going forward and have a celebration for reconnections when we reopen. It's a crucial time for us to help people to express their experiences of lockdown through stories, etc,

5) Benefits of Space to Connect

“being involved in this programme has led to so many funding opportunities and new partnerships for us we put a toe in the water, and it's opened up other things”

“the space to connect project was so warmly welcomed by people it's a nice way for us to get to know people that we should have been working with... we have become a more trusted partner”

a) What's been useful about the LBU support?

- hearing what others are doing and how they're overcoming challenges and issues
- really enjoyed the storytelling MSC sessions
- spreading learning across the rest of the organisation to other strands of work
- in these KIT sessions it's been nice to be asked questions and say things out loud and reflect on what you've been doing - you don't often stop to think about these things
- Being in touch with people, other projects to share learning, opportunities for conversations is very powerful and useful.
- Keep learning sessions like these informal and semi structured. Be flexible.