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Space to Connect Keeping in Touch sessions: A summary write-up

July 2021



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Space to Connect is a partnership between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Co-op's charity, the Co-op Foundation, to unlock the potential of community spaces where people can connect and co-operate. Between 2019 and 2021, 57 community organisations received grants totalling £1.6 million to help build social connections, address local challenges like loneliness or access to services, and expand activities.

Leeds Beckett University and Locality are Space to Connect evaluation partners. The experience of Space to Connect projects, the ambitions of the funders and the learning from the programme is captured in a variety of tools, reports and briefings available at:

<https://leedsbeckett.ac.uk/spacetoconnect>



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Introduction

This report presents the findings from a peer-to-peer learning network designed as part of the evaluation of the Space to Connect programme. The network – Keeping in Touch (KIT) – is the second phase of peer-to-peer learning support provided by Leeds Beckett University (LBU) to project sites.

Details of the approach and design of the network and headline themes that were discussed can be seen in Appendix 1.

This second round of five KIT sessions (from 17 March to 6 May 2021) had a focus on topics that had been raised in Phase One. The aim of the Phase Two KIT sessions was to pose some questions to explore these topics in more depth with projects leads.

The topics covered in Phase Two were:

1. Engaging new groups and communities
2. Working in new partnerships
3. Digital – uses, approaches and inclusion
4. Making community spaces more sustainable
5. Covid-19 Recovery – future developments post lockdown

Role of community organisations in lockdown – A summary

Challenges and key issues for communities

The Covid-19 pandemic, related lockdowns and social restrictions have resulted in numerous challenges and issues for communities. A number of these challenges and issues were presented in the KIT sessions by project leads. These included:

- Requests for practical/essential support to meet personal needs, including access to food; fuel (gas, electricity); and income (including welfare and need for advice on benefits and finance).
- Issues with home schooling – digital issues, space in the home, balancing work commitments, etc.
- A lack of social contact resulting in loneliness and isolation.
- Increased mental health issues.
- Digital access – to Wi-Fi/data, IT devices and the skills to use these.
- Need for relevant information and guidance on Covid-19 restrictions.

Having the resource, skills and capacity to respond to these new emergent issues has been a challenge for many Space to Connect projects. There was also the challenge posed by the increase in volume and frequency of people contacting community projects.

Response of community organisations to these new issues

We heard numerous examples of how community organisations had shifted their focus and pivoted to meet and respond to these newly identified needs in their communities.

For example, to address issues around home schooling, the Gascoyne and Morningside Youth Club was moved online and provided an extensive offer to young people aged eight to 17. Each day there were sessions with educators/teachers on homework/coursework; cookery and fitness classes; as well as one-to-one support sessions that explored the personal impact of Covid-19.

Many organisations made a shift in responding to food access and food poverty – often reorganising spaces as food banks and food hubs and partnering with established food bank organisers. Food parcel drop-offs served a dual purpose for some – with a wellbeing check-in at the garden gate.

We heard of numerous examples of projects offering welfare check-ins for people in their communities – whether this was a phone call or a gate/doorstep chat combined with a food delivery or collection.

Community organisations and spaces became a key vehicle for local authorities and public health teams in terms of reaching communities and providing accurate and relevant information on Covid-19 and lockdown rules around social distancing, as well as supporting uptake of the vaccine programme. Local cross-sector, multi-disciplinary groups (ie local resilience forums) can have a role in ensuring communities of interest are receiving relevant, targeted information: eg, there is a need for appropriate culturally sensitive communications for people from ethnic minority populations, some of whom maybe vaccine hesitant. This highlights the need for appropriate, culturally sensitive communications and in working together with public health, the local authority, and representative groups in communities. Community organisations have a key role in health promotion around Covid-19. We heard of this from the African Health Policy Network.

Whilst there were numerous examples of projects working jointly with the Local Authority in their areas, excessively high level of risk aversion in Local Authorities was problematic for some organisations in terms of what activities were permissible during lockdown.

We now present detail of the themed discussions within the KIT sessions. We have provided case stories from project sites to illustrate the five themes; these can be found in Appendix 2.

Theme 1: Engaging new groups and communities

Projects reported that they had reached new communities or sections of the community through the project, more so in periods of Covid-19-related lockdowns and social restrictions. New people reached included:

- Older people – Some projects experienced increased contact with older people during lockdown. For some, these were a new group to respond to and were often people who were not previously accessing community projects or services. Generally, project leads mentioned how these elders preferred face-to-face contact rather than online. However, there are examples where online support has been embraced with support, Bromley-by-Bow being an example of a tailored online offer to older people.
- Young people – Younger people preferred face-to-face to online engagement. Latent issues around mental health emerged. Young people's connection to and perceptions of spaces and places has changed. Young people were a new target group for some projects – especially as much delivery generally for young people had reduced.
- Young families and mums - Home schooling meant parents had no personal time for themselves, especially in households with limited space. A need to find ways to give them support and reconnection emerged.
- People who had been furloughed or recently unemployed – This group were perhaps lacking in confidence and feeling lonely, seeking advice on welfare benefits, finance, etc. Volunteering (eg in food banks) was a way of maintaining a sense of purpose and fulfilment, particularly for older men.
- Traveller communities – This community were struggling to make ends meet and making more use of social supermarkets.
- People in rural villages – There was an important role of outreach into local areas, recognising barriers to transportation and its impact on access to resources. For example, the Garage Project in Suffolk used the Wandsworth Bus going into villages to offer support rather than expecting people to travel to the centre – a new model for delivery – offering a peripatetic space to connect.
- Vulnerable adults and those shielding – This is a group to keep engaged with; numerous projects were looking at using green spaces as a Covid-19-secure way to help connect people who will need lots of support.

In light of Covid-19, all leads spoke of creating “hubs” and “bubbles” of support for groups of people in neighbourhoods and delivering support and resources via these mechanisms, eg through mental health, arts-based activities. There was also a view that young people and old people want to be together as they've been bubbled together in lockdown and want to stay that way, so there's a need and opportunity for intergenerational work.

Examples of “hubs” and “bubbles” for community issues include:

- One project in the African Health Network, which worked with older people with long-term conditions, had seen high levels of loneliness, isolation and mental health problems as a

result of lockdowns and social restrictions. This was compounded by misinformation that in turn led people to isolate more and become more reliant on support services.

- One project found that young people's need for space and perceptions of space had changed massively – with schools and parks having become very important to young people. The perception of space and where young people feel safe have changed in Covid-19.
- In Stoke, the B Arts Community Project 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 aimed to build capacity and respond to mental health and isolation issues being experienced by these (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 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, eg immigration status.

What needs to be done in terms of reaching new communities? Headlines and ideas

- It's important that we don't forget people when things return to normal – new groups with new and greater needs will emerge.
- Language and terminology are very important! Language can be and is stigmatising or disempowering. Communities' spaces are not “charity”, but can enable, empower and be inclusive – offering a warm, welcome, safe space where community members support each other.
- Use existing and established spaces and places to engage with (new) people.
- A blended approach to connecting and providing community spaces will be needed in future, with a mix of online and face-to-face contact to maximise reach, access and participation.
- Really listen to people's needs, aspirations and issues and meet people in their own safe spaces, explore the role of outreach contact.

- Consider how community groups can be integrated into what is mainstream – needs stronger dialogue and engagement with local planners, funders and place shapers.
- More collaboration, partnerships and new approaches – shifting toward joint working with other local community groups to build new approaches and share assets and resources.
- In the case stories (see Appendix 2) we profile the Bestwood project as an example of working to support new communities and intergenerational support.

Theme 2: New connections and partnership working

Many projects referred to the increased opportunities for new connections and partnership working. For some, this involved working more closely with public sector bodies, for others with community organisations and groups – including local churches (eg, around food donations and distribution). The Stone Grove Community Trust case story in Appendix 2 is a good example of forming new connections and building a stronger presence in the community.

There was a sense that, since the first national 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 communities, were seen to be “opening up”, providing opportunities to tap into each other’s expertise and groups more easily.

The emergence of new grassroots organisations was seen as positive for promoting and adding to Space to Connect projects. Forging new relationships via partnership working with different organisations helped break down barriers. There was a mutual 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-19 recovery.

Increased partnership working was also seen as necessary due to funding being restricted in the future. Funders and commissioners are seeking to fund and encourage more partnerships, rather than resource individual small organisations to achieve greater impact in communities. There was a view that funders see 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 examples of Local Authority support include mentorship

schemes that provide a key contact within the Council to support community organisations and working with local health champions to reach people and promote resources.

Some of the identified benefits of partnership working were:

- Better use of resources and sharing of skills leading to greater impact. It can help to map local resources – groups, agencies, etc – to help better understand who's out there for partnering. "Partnerships are about doing things together to achieve our aims *but* also about doing things that are very different that we couldn't do alone."
- Reaching and engaging a wider group of individuals and new communities – "Making relationships with other agencies enables more people to access our services when they may not have approached them individually." Partnerships can be a vehicle or channel of working together for both organisations and individuals – providing an opportunity to involve everyone and be inclusive of individual people and communities. Many people want to help but don't know how to do it.
- Partnerships can help foster trust and build reputation. "Partnerships enable us to be seen as a trusted organisation and more people may access services or support if it's delivered by a trusted partner."
- Increased opportunities for signposting and provision of support - highlighting other organisations and access to support for community members and enabling better signposting to other agencies or support.
- Enabling other smaller organisations to access funding as part of a partnership – where they may be excluded or not have capacity to apply alone.

Some challenges of partnership working were seen to be:

- All on the same page – It's important for community groups to be on the same page, especially when working with local authority partners to demonstrate a joined-up contribution to the issues and opportunities in communities. "It's important to be clear about what we want from partnerships - what impacts we want, what resources we have to share and why we are doing it – to have shared expectations about what the partnership is about."
- Seeking advantage through collaboration - Different partners have their own agenda and objectives that need to be met. In forming new partnerships there is a need to find a way to rub along together and negotiate a way that meets the needs of all partners whilst achieving new opportunities that couldn't be realised by a singular approach.
- Limited capacity and resource - Many organisations have too much going on to be able to develop partnerships. It's a challenge to develop capacity and free up resource to explore and achieve new relationships.
- Behaviours in partnerships – What we say and do matters. "Our behaviour and how we respond is important in new relationships and partnerships - being clear about expectations and roles and responsibilities in partnerships is important."
- Funders and commissioners need to write into their specifications that partnerships are integral, not just desired.

Theme 3: Digital Space – Uses, approaches and inclusion

Most project leads spoke of an urgent transition to online platforms to promote their resources and presence whilst using digital spaces as a place to keep connected to local communities. Leads also spoke of the skills capacity to make these shifts as being a challenge: that is, skills within the project and with local people accessing the project. The Bangladeshi Women's Project in Tipton is an example of such work; a summary of the work is in the case story shown in Appendix 2.

Themes explored in the KIT sessions included:

Digital exclusion

Lack of access to IT devices, Wi-Fi capacity and IT “know-how” has meant many people in communities 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.

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. Signing up for a session with a login and password 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 cafe.

“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 are not mature or trust is still being established.

“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 (eg, time needed to make up and distribute activity packs) and increased cost for materials (eg, 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 and to have some social time together. 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.

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 helped 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, eg 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 would be easier for them to work together in person when restrictions allow.

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

For some projects – particularly those that had a focus on using green space – the digital option was seen as augmenting the project experience, being a bridge into the physical project itself. There was a need to strike a balance on methods of engagement and delivery.

“There are some things digital can’t do... personal contact shouldn’t be lost.”

Resourcing for the digital shift

Given the shift to a digital presence, there is an issue of how this is funded, and capacity and skills need to be secured to make the shift and develop the model. Whilst many projects made inroads into digital presence and delivery, it did impact on finances and going forward had implications for sustainability. New funding sources will need to be secured to maintain and develop further the digital resource, new skills and know-how brought into projects.

Theme 4: Making community spaces more sustainable

During the early phase of the lockdown period, many projects reported that finance was an urgent issue. Project income streams were becoming challenged, and some were relying on contingency funds to maintain delivery and meet new demands for support.

There was also a change in funding availability, and local and national funding resources were becoming more competitive due to growth in Covid-19-related community groups seeking finance.

The Preston Muslim Forum (PMF) is included as a case story as an example of sustainability and growth. See Appendix 2.

The key elements for making community spaces more sustainable include:

Co-production - Building capacity and 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 presented an opportunity to sustain and extend community action and supported efforts around “building back”. One example of this was a project which was ‘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 in Stoke 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 as having multiple benefits for both individuals, in terms of skills; and organisations, in terms of sustainability, capacity and knowledge.

“... [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 was developing a team 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 “reconnecting” with community places and spaces.

Rise in Volunteering – New capacity and approaches

The pandemic has provided opportunities to build capacity through new cohorts of people in volunteering, drawing from people who got involved via Mutual Aid Networks, creating flexible “do what you can and when you can” approaches.

Whilst many older volunteers had to step down due to shielding, many organisations saw 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 also emerged as volunteers from different age groups worked together.

Some organisations that relied heavily on volunteers reported that many were “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 was used as a means of regularly checking in on the wellbeing 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. This was informal and did not require regular commitment.

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

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 and 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. As a result, they reached new demographics and teams. There was a view that the creative arts could be a key partner in cross-sector community development and social action, in that it had the flexibility to respond and be present.

Role of creativity

Community organisations maintaining their profile in communities, seeing their activity being present, and maintaining engagement with people required lots of creative thinking and practical action.

Another project (Independent Arts, Isle of Wight) had sent a quarter 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 local shop windows. This helped people feel part of something and gave them the chance to work on something together 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. The sessions were based on the work of Rob Hopkins, “What If?”. They also had plans for a third phase – RE: Activate – which will bring people together in groups linked to the things they identified in the first two sessions.

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 could go a huge way in small organisations.

Some projects had lost income due to lack of rentals of their physical space (eg, by other providers). 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.

Theme 5: Post-Covid-19 Social Recovery

Many projects were starting to think about and explore plans for post-Covid-19 recovery, and expressed concern about the long-term effects of Covid-19 in communities. The Covid-19 experience had served to amplify and highlight issues already there in many communities – poverty, inequalities, connected/unconnected communities, disparities, etc.

Many highlighted an 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. For example, job losses in local communities impact on finances, poverty (food, heating, housing, etc) and 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. For example, undertaking a survey of mental health issues in minority ethnic communities highlighted people’s fears and anxiety about Covid-19 and associated stressors such as isolation.

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 local organisations needed to be on the same page around solutions – and work in partnership where feasible – but organisations also recognised the need for associated resources and commitment from commissioners and funders.

A “Covid decompression” phase is needed to better understand the work achieved, the impact of the experience on volunteers and staff, and action to be defined for reopening. Community groups have been involved in local networks to talk about the recovery phase – what can, might and does mean for them?

Managing expectations around pace of change

People may expect instant change or 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

There was a need for a phased return to normality and exploring what this looks like whilst having measures in place to deliver should restrictions return. Some people are not ready to reconnect and move into social gatherings. There was a sense that we need to slow down and move at the pace people are ready to move at – to take time and ask people what they're comfortable with. Project leads expressed a need to reconvene with community members about what they need and want going forward; and agree what we let go of and what we want to keep. Online engagement should remain as part of a blended approach; it meant that some people were not missing out.

Explore how best to support people to return to “new normal” in the Covid-19 recovery phase

For example, 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 organisations 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

Building relationships and delivery at a very local level helps build outwards. There was a sense of needing to ensure developments are from within – recognised by and supported by local people, *not* “solutions” provided by external agents.

Take time to review and reflect

How has the project been refocused? In what ways did it become responsive and reactive?

Reconnecting/storytelling

Capturing stories from people about what the project means to them, to express their experiences of lockdown. Telling stories of experiences and responses in Covid-19 is powerful. Narratives have different purposes and can be used for different reasons. Such stories can inform which elements need to be retained and developed

We have included in Appendix 2 the work of Eastside Community Trust as a case story.

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.”

What's been useful about the LBU support?

- Hearing what others were 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 we've been doing - we 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.

Observations on peer-to-peer learning

1. Facilitated peer-to-peer learning networks provide a helpful space for community projects to develop new ideas and knowledge.
2. Peer-to-peer learning networks can generate insights that can help projects and programmes adapt and evolve.
3. Peer-to-peer learning networks can inform programme commissioners, facilitating dialogue with projects on areas of support to projects.

Appendix 1: The context and approach to the Keeping in Touch sessions

Between 14 January and 6 May 2021, the LBU team ran a total of 12 online “Keeping in Touch” (KIT) sessions for Space to Connect projects. Representatives from 23 Space to Connect projects took part in the sessions. Prior to the KIT sessions, projects were invited to give examples of change events that had occurred during the Covid-19 lockdown. These were detailed in narratives of Most Significant Change. Projects were invited to a series of online network meetings to discuss the stories and agree on key learning. In turn, this process informed the focus of the KIT sessions.

The purpose of the KIT sessions was to provide an open, informal space for projects to connect and share delivery and development experiences with each other. In the context of Covid-19, we felt offering this opportunity to connect with others was particularly important, as projects were refocusing at pace to provide support to people.

For the first round of seven KIT sessions (14 January to 3 March 2021) 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.

In the second round of five KIT sessions (from 17 March to 6 May 2021) the focus was on particular topics that had been raised in round one. The aim of the round two KIT sessions was to reflect and share what we had discussed in round one sessions and to pose some further related questions to explore with projects. The topics covered in round two were:

1. Engaging new groups and communities
2. Working in new partnerships
3. Digital – uses, approaches and inclusion
4. Making community spaces more sustainable
5. Covid-19 recovery – future developments post lockdown

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 12 sessions as related to the five themes above.

Appendix 2: Case stories from the Space to Connect sites

These case stories are organised to correspond to the five themes set out in the full report, these being:

- Engaging new groups and communities
- New connections and partnership working
- Digital spaces
- Making community spaces more sustainable
- Post-Covid social recovery

The stories also indicate that project leads and teams were thinking and planning for the social recovery phase post Covid-19: exploring new relationships and collaborations, funding streams and methods of delivery.

Theme 1: Engaging new groups and communities

Bestwood Miners Village Institute is based in an ex-mining community that does not have a lot of services. Bestwood has received Explore and Expand funding from the Space to Connect programme.

The Explore funding allowed Bestwood to carry out consultation with the community, which was used to inform the group's actions. One of the needs identified was a space for different generations to come together. The group aimed to set up a space in the community centre for older and younger people to have dinner together but, because of Covid-19, this was not possible. Instead, the group set up a service delivering meals to elderly people in the community. They aimed to deliver 50 meals per week, but averaged around 70 meals per week.

Expand funding went towards renovation work on the community centre and continuing to provide the meal service until the end of the year (2021). In addition to Space to Connect funding, the community centre renovations – including new floors, refurbished kitchen, new heating system, and setting up a recording studio/practice room – have been funded by charity funds and funds from local government. The group received a further £150,000 funding from Sport England to renovate the local village hall. The group has about 40 volunteers and works closely with the local parish council and neighbouring borough councils.

Changes in community needs and how the organisation responded

Due to Covid-19, the group was not able to set up a space for older and younger people from the community to come and eat together. Instead, they adapted the service to provide meals at home for elderly people, people self-isolating, and people struggling to feed themselves due to financial difficulties. The group felt their activities were addressing social isolation, particularly among older people. Delivering food provided an opportunity for social interaction – “to have a chat”.

The group also started providing ad hoc telephone support to older people in the community, which they had not set out to do. They found that many older people were phoning the meal-delivery telephone number just for someone to talk to.

“There’s probably about 20 of them that just ring [Chef Ian] up for a chat... to say thanks for their meal, but really it’s just for a chat.”

During lockdown, the group noticed a change in the people they were supporting through meal deliveries: “People were coming who you wouldn’t expect [to] need free food.” The group was supporting people who had been put on furlough, whose hours had been reduced, or who could no longer work overtime. In addition, the group also became aware of the ongoing isolation of a lot of the older people in the community.

Several of the group’s other planned activities were delayed because of Covid. Bestwood had funding to run a youth club for a year and a “parent and child” group. These had not started, but will get going when Covid-19 restrictions allow. The group has been able to do outdoor activities, such as organising local football teams and a “boot camp” on the community green space. Many of the activities were volunteer-led. Bestwood volunteers said: “We all live here... everyone is just trying to do good stuff.”

Ongoing challenges

The group described no significant ongoing challenges. Whilst Covid-19 has meant face-to-face services had to be adapted (eg, the food delivery service) or put on hold (eg, the youth club), the group has benefited from the time and space afforded to them by lockdown. They have been able to progress with renovating the community centre, which would have been more complicated and taken longer had the centre also been open to the community. The group has also benefited from more volunteers – people that have not been able to work and have extra time on their hands. For example, tradespeople have been volunteering their time to support the renovations.

“I don’t know if you can say something positive has come out of something so awful, but as far as community cohesion and people helping out and getting together and working, it’s helped.”

For many people involved in the group, the work was less challenging and more enjoyable and rewarding than their day jobs: “It’s a bit more fulfilling... it’s more sort of a legacy thing.”

What difference has Space to Connect made?

Expand funding provided security for the Bestwood group to keep providing the food delivery service until the end of the year (2021). The funding gave the group more “space” to focus on service delivery rather than having to worry about applying for more money. Without the funding, they probably would have continued the service, but not as regularly or for as long.

Following two rounds of Space to Connect funding (Explore and Expand), the group gained experience of applying for funding and are now in a better position to apply for other funds. They have a track record of being funded, which made them less of a “risk” to other funders.

Since receiving Space to Connect funding, the group has secured £150,000 from Sport England to renovate the village hall, which builds directly on their experience from their Space to Connect activities.

“All kinds have come from us doing the initial thing with the meals... the people that want to fund us for everything else that we’re doing is really because they liked what we were doing with that.”

They found Co-op to be very supportive and encouraging during the application process for the Expand funding: “Them being so helpful and encouraging really spurred us on to crack on.”

Theme 2: New connections and partnership working

Stonegrove Community Trust is a relatively new organisation established to support residents on a completely regenerated estate. It is, in effect, a new community with new and older people. The Trust is entirely resident-led. It is based in the church and includes a community-interest-run cafe and a nursery run by a private company.

Changes in community needs and how the organisation responded

There was some impact financially and the nursery had to close down. The Hive Foundation lost funding and the cafe closed. The Trust shifted very quickly to focus on responding to essential needs, in particular cooking and distributing meals. By the end of 2020, the Trust had two full time drivers - primarily providing cooked meals.

“When you take someone a cooked meal it shows you care.”

The centre eventually became a food bank. During 2020, the trust raised £80,000, which included £12,000 from individuals and £5,000 from corporate giving.

By December 2020, the trust had provided the full year equivalent of 130,000 meals delivered by volunteers. The trust was helped by the footballer Mesut Özil who, provided leadership.

Ongoing challenges and next steps

The crisis has helped to build relationships with other local organisations and communities; in particular the Jewish community, who provided significant support during November’s “Mitzvah Month”; and also Cherry Lodge Cancer Care. During the crisis, the Trust has worked with 100 community groups.

The Trust has tried to refocus on its core aims. This includes trying to move back to a focus on building on the community’s assets and strengths. The work the Trust undertook during lockdown helped tremendously. The Trust have now piloted an introduction to community organising - the first local organisation to pilot this community organiser-led course.

Together with Clitterhouse Farm, they created a hub for the Community Organiser Social Action Hub. Stonegrove are the 23rd Community Action Hub. This means the Trust will be able to run the training as a social action model and to sell these opportunities based on an organisation’s size. The Trust currently has interest in the model from two housing associations and three councils.

The Trust has used the Co-op funding as a subsidy to frontload this training, with a view to setting up the training as a standalone business.

The Trust is intending to do a community listening exercise, aiming to speak to 600 people and talk to them for 30 to 45 minutes each. This is not research. It is mainly collecting people’s stories – What do people care about enough where they want to take action? What are people interested in changing? – to help inform next steps.

The Trust have talked to the housing association landlord (Peabody) about micro-grants for residents - £500 for each one. Peabody have agreed initial funding of £8,000. The Trust team have worked with them to develop an easy-to-use mechanism to provide feedback on activity and impact, and have agreed to explore using WhatsApp for this.

They have been putting in large-scale funding bids – pushing on the community organising, residents coming up with ideas, and big support from local faith organisations (synagogue, church and others).

What difference has Space to Connect made?

The grant award has enabled the Trust to invest and frontload areas of activity and development the Community Organiser training.

Theme 3: Digital space – Uses, approaches and inclusion

The Bangladeshi Women's Association (BWA) works in the town of Tipton. It is based in the Tipton Green Ward, which has the highest proportion of South Asian households of the three wards in Tipton. The BWA supports approximately 2,500 people in Tipton a year.

Changes in community needs and how the organisation responded

Like many other voluntary organisations during lockdown, BWA had to reduce some aspects of the service that they would normally provide. The services that were suspended were highly valued, for example youth services. The youth club was suspended, although it did try to continue online. Similarly, other services, such as employment support for women, social clubs, and lunch clubs, were suspended.

A lot of people in the area continued working during the pandemic, including those who work in the care sector; and people not in skilled jobs, such as taxi drivers and restaurant workers. They have faced a range of issues, including a lack of training. For example, in the restaurant industry, people have not been getting paid the minimum wage, people have been working “below the radar”, and employers have kept employees' money.

Ongoing challenges and next steps

The BWA undertook a community survey in October and November 2020 to capture the experience of people in Tipton Green during the pandemic. The findings have now been published in the report “Tipton Communities and the Impact of COVID-19”. Key findings included a negative impact on employment and household income during the pandemic period. There was also a corresponding increase in levels of anxiety and depression.

What difference has Space to Connect made?

Despite having to suspend some services, BWA also introduced other services in direct response to the pandemic. For example, the move to digital channels, keeping people informed through Zoom calls, helped them to keep connected with older people.

While the pandemic meant that community centres were closed, the BWA used this as an opportunity to refurbish them completely, including an IT suite.

The pandemic presented a real challenge to continue to serve people in Tipton. This is because of the importance of face-to-face contact with the populations that BWA serve.

The pandemic has meant that BWA developed better digital resources. However, there remains a need for key services such as youth work, welfare rights and trainers - keeping these important staff and using digital tools are both important.

Finally, the pandemic highlighted the importance of partnership working. Again, the pandemic left a legacy of better partnership work that they did not have before – previously it was more competitive, now the focus is on working together for the betterment of communities. This joint work was helped by a positive and productive relationship with the Local Authority and the public health team.

Theme 4: Making community spaces more sustainable

Preston Muslim Forum (PMF) works in the inner-city centre wards in Preston, some of the most deprived in the country. The organisation aims to improve the lives and wellbeing of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and the community at large by fostering understanding and co-operation between communities. They provide a range of services, including advice and information, benefit support, employment support, training courses, wellbeing and social activities, and volunteering opportunities.

PMF have a long-term lease on their building from the Local Authority. They have completely refurbished and extended the building. They want to take responsibility for the outside areas as well, in order to transform it into a more meaningful space for the community, including green space, a community garden, outdoor gym equipment, and multi-use games area (MUGA). The whole site would then complement the services provided: user groups could use the gardens; luncheon clubs could do some light physical activity. The MUGA would be hired out in the evenings and at weekends to generate income to sustain the facility. Explore funding was used to consult user groups, residents, and other stakeholders about plans to develop the site, and finished in March 2019.

Expand funding was being used to commission an external consultant to produce more detailed plans for developing the outside space (ie, feasibility study, design, business case). Further consultation with the community will take place once the plans are produced: “We will be having further conversations with the community.” The plans will also be a means of negotiating with the Local Authority to take over responsibility of the whole site and better position the organisation to secure external funding to develop the site.

While PMF’s Space to Connect projects have largely been unaffected by Covid-19 – Explore was completed just before the first “lockdown” and the start date of the Expand work was, with Co-op’s approval, pushed back until April 2021 – aspects of their “core work” have been impacted. Access to the community has been limited, but the organisation has adapted – “repurposed ourselves” – to try to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on the community.

Changes in community needs and how the organisation responded

During the pandemic, PMF had to largely “[close] our doors to the community”. They continued to provide advice and guidance to community members as one-to-one appointments in a Covid-19-secure way, rather than the normal drop-in centre. During the first “lockdown”, there was a particular need in the community for advice and guidance around benefit entitlements. People were losing their jobs, businesses were closing, and people didn’t know their rights. During 2020, PMF supported clients claimed around £850,000 of benefits. At the same time, there was also a demand for advice and guidance about the EU Settlement Scheme from families from EU countries who needed support with access to housing, benefits, schools, and medical care. This spike was attributed to Brexit and EU citizens having to apply to remain in the UK by the end of June 2021, rather than the pandemic.

PMF launched some new activities during the pandemic to support community need. They started a telephone helpline “phone and chat” service, which involved proactively contacting the most vulnerable clients and members of the community once a week for a chat and to offer support with, for example, shopping or collecting prescriptions. This helped to address social isolation: “A lifeline...they were isolated, they’d not seen anybody, they just wanted to have a chat.” The project worked with local mosques, Preston Muslim Burial Society, and hospitals, to support the burial rights of members of the community who had passed away during lockdown, including grieving support. They also offered pastoral support online to families with relatives in hospital, and arranged for two Imams to have chaplaincy rights to visit patients in hospital and connect them with families and friends.

The project provided food parcels to vulnerable people in the community and, in conjunction with local business, provided cooked meals during Ramadan – not just to their “own” client groups, but also to care homes and international students with no other support. PMF were also involved in providing public health messages to the community, making sure people were getting up-to-date and consistent information about the virus and then about vaccinations.

“There’s a lot of conjecture and myths going around, especially around the vaccinations... we’re providing a lot of information and key messages.”

PMF’s Covid-19 response relied heavily on partnership working with local organisations and businesses (eg, Asian supermarkets to provide food for food parcels). “Without the collaborative working, we’d not been able to deliver the support.” They also relied heavily on volunteers. They became a “hub” of volunteering locally, utilising around 80 volunteers to support with cleaning and food preparation, for example. To recognise volunteers’ contribution, PMF held a celebration event in February 2021. This took place partially remotely and in-person.

Ongoing challenges

An ongoing challenge for PMF was around resources and finance. At the start of the pandemic, they had just come to the end of three years of grant funding from the Lottery. Although follow-on funding had been secured, this was not due to start for 12 months: “We had to cut our cloth accordingly.” They received some emergency support from the National Emergency Trust, a Covid-19-specific Lottery fund, and the Local Authority. PMF did not furlough any staff, but staff all agreed to work fewer hours.

What difference has Space to Connect made?

Space to Connect has allowed PMF to move towards realising their long-term aspiration of taking responsibility for the whole of the site they operate from and turn it into a more purposeful community space – “given us aspirations to look beyond ourselves”. It has provided funds to start developing plans, which can be used to leverage more funding.

The Explore phase helped PMF connect much more with residents. Whilst they are routinely in contact with the community about actions affecting them – through focus groups and an annual community event – Explore was a very specific consultation activity, which enabled PMF to reach out much wider than normal.

Theme 5: Post-Covid social recovery

Eastside Community Trust are a community organisation working across two wards in inner-city Bristol. They are a local community development project focused on supporting social connections and social cohesion through helping to create helpful and playful neighbourhoods.

The Space to Connect Explore funding was used to create a community research project, which involved recruiting different community members to undertake a series of interviews.

Changes in community needs and how the organisation responded

The pandemic meant that the organisation refocused - with all resources concentrating on supporting people who were shielding, those who were in impermanent employment and could not afford food, and helping people access essential items such as prescriptions.

The project did some work online. However, many residents struggled to access online activity. Challenges included families prioritising home schooling and language problems, as well as challenges using technology.

Ongoing challenges and next steps

Those living in the most challenging conditions in the community were affected much more by the pandemic than others. People living with children in small flats had limited access to parks and green spaces - partly because of Covid-19 related restrictions, but also because there are not many public spaces left in the area.

For Eastside Community Trust, it was tactically important to mobilise people to use these spaces more and to lobby more to ensure that these are protected.

The Trust also learnt that digital exclusion is a massive problem.

“Digital is not an answer to everything – but it is also a must – doing a little bit more around that is also really important – push for more structural changes – for example better internet access in tower blocks. “

There was also a need to think more about food security and ways to make the community a bit more sustainable in terms of food. The Trust worked with a local pub – all the staff were on furlough – to set up a local “veg box” scheme, with groups organised to deliver boxes to local residents. It helped that people were on furlough as they had more free time and some financial security.

The Trust needed to consider what the needs and issues will be post Covid-19, such as unemployment and financial hardship.

The Trust expected there to be an increase in stress. Children, in particular, were really struggling, learning on their own and not going to school. The Trust thought this might have an impact on children’s mental health and behaviour.

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