

Building the social stimulus

How to tackle the social impact of COVID-19



ONWARD >

About Onward

Onward is a campaigning thinktank whose mission is to develop new ideas for the next generation of centre right thinkers and leaders. We exist to make Britain fairer, more prosperous and more united, by generating a new wave of modernising ideas and a fresh kind of politics that reaches out to new groups of people. We believe in a mainstream conservatism – one that recognises the value of markets and supports the good that government can do, is unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, and assiduous in supporting the hardworking, aspirational and those left behind.

Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; and for all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster. We will achieve this by developing practical policies that work. Our team has worked both at a high level in government and for successful thinktanks. We know how to produce big ideas that resonate with policymakers, the media and the public. We will engage ordinary people across the country and work with them to make our ideas a reality.

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Thanks

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Summary



Introduction

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Government has introduced a range of unprecedented policy interventions to provide extra capacity to the NHS and ensure stability to the economy, with the aim of saving as many lives and jobs as possible. Since the start of the crisis, Onward has been calling for the Government to act with similar boldness to implement a ‘social stimulus’ alongside the public health and economic interventions that have been made.

The Government has taken some welcome steps. On 8 April, 2020, the Chancellor announced a £750 million support package for frontline charities alongside match funding for public donations made in response to the BBC’s *Big Night In* appeal on 23 April¹. This emergency funding provides a much-needed start, as it offers an immediate lifeline for frontline charities and community groups balancing the trade-off between their own long-term financial sustainability and the urgent needs of their communities.

However, just as the Government has needed to expand its initial economic support package, it should also bring forward further proposals that will benefit society as it emerges from this crisis. Where the initial government support package was aimed at underpinning the charitable sector during the crisis, the social stimulus proposed in this paper is aimed at strengthening the community response to the pandemic and laying the foundations for the recovery.

Background to the research and methodology

This project sits within, and emerges from, Onward’s landmark two-year *Repairing Our Social Fabric*² programme, which launched in early March and aims to explore the state of community across Britain and develop ways to strengthen and repair the social fabric of local communities. The outbreak of COVID-19 has thrown this research programme into sharp relief, raising both positive instances of communities coming together and worrying signs that the crisis will exacerbate existing social problems and inequalities.

This report, and accompanying qualitative research in Glasgow, Dagenham and Grimsby, is an attempt to better understand the challenges faced by communities on the ground, and to develop a number of policy ideas to protect and repair communities’ resilience during the crisis and through the recovery. It sets out the rationale for a social stimulus,

the principles that must sit at the heart of it, and a number of policy ideas that ministers could consider to strengthen the social fabric in local communities.

The report draws on the work that is already underway, including polling we published on 30th March 2020 on COVID-19 and community.³ For consistency, we use the conceptual framework for analysing community strength, which we published in the *Repairing our Social Fabric* launch paper on 4th March 2020,⁴ to organise our thinking. Annex 1 provides more detail on the six threads of social fabric which make up this framework and how each of these is relevant during a pandemic such as the current crisis.

In formulating the proposals in this report, we have been grateful for the input and ideas of an experienced group of policy leaders in the community sector who have access to a wide variety of on-the-ground experiences via their grantees or wider networks. A list of these participants can be found in Annex 2. On 6 and 7 April we held three video conferences with many of our expert participants to understand what they have seen in the community over recent weeks and to discuss what they believe should be done to strengthen our social fabric at this time. These conversations were informed by an initial research paper we produced, which provided an audit of relevant government action so far across Westminster, Devolved and City Mayor Authorities; a snapshot of activities at local level; and, an overview of what key third sector organisations have been doing or calling for.

Rationale for a social stimulus

In the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19, in this country and around the world, the overwhelming priority for policymakers has been to reduce risks to life and to offer some measure of economic security to markets and individual businesses. That is understandable. But there are important reasons why we must support communities and civic institutions as well: to address urgent needs; build on the positive initiatives that the crisis has highlighted; and help restore the ‘fraying of our social fabric created by extended collective quarantine’.⁵

We know from academic literature⁶ that social capital and local connection are strongly correlated with higher levels of physical and mental wellbeing, trust in government,⁷ economic resilience and lower rates of poverty and unemployment - all things that are important in the grip of a pandemic. These are also the qualities that will be needed

during a difficult and potentially staggered recovery, when the opportunities for division and local polarisation could become more prevalent.

Many community groups and charities also face a “paradox of virtue” effect in current circumstances, as they experience an explosion of demand at exactly the moment their funding and resources become scarce. Equally, if we do not act, the pandemic may exacerbate entrenched social problems and existing inequalities in income, race and gender. There is a danger that this may then create a vicious cycle whereby the very places that had a fraying social fabric before this crisis, and were thus less resilient to its effect, emerge from lockdown with even weaker social fabric and less institutional support for their communities.

Finally, as the foothills of the crisis have shown, it is the often small-scale, organic and self-generated activity in communities that is best placed to get people through the challenges of social distancing, self-isolation and remote working. As Onward’s research into community responses in Grimsby, Glasgow and Barking and Dagenham shows, the month since lockdown has been characterised by communities coming together and helping each other. This spirit of service and sacrifice should be treasured and enhanced wherever possible.

Principles for action and headline proposals

Following discussions with our expert participants, we have developed six overarching principles that we believe are an essential starting point in developing a strong social stimulus to tackle the COVID-19 crisis. These are:

- **Local first.** The policy response should be delivered as close to communities as possible, including where possible by empowering communities themselves. This means adopting common principles that can apply to all places and communities but allowing local flexibility in delivery.
- **Work with civil society.** Collaborative approaches that harness the capabilities, energy and experience of civil society are better than government going it alone. We should draw on the spirit of shared service and sacrifice between different groups that has characterised the early stages of this crisis.

- **Don't reinvent the wheel.** Wherever possible, we should use existing infrastructure, established funding mechanisms, and tried and tested delivery routes to deliver policy initiatives. This will maximise the time and resources that can be used to provide direct help to communities.
- **Preserve what's best.** Given the present difficulties that many communities are facing and the potential for a significant number of charities to collapse, it is vital that we do not let die today what we might need to rebuild tomorrow.
- **Address inequality.** Not all communities have equally strong social fabric or civic institutions. The crisis will exacerbate those differences. Policy should aim to level up those communities that need it most so that all places can leverage their social infrastructure in the coming months.
- **Leave a legacy.** While there are undoubtedly ways in which the current crisis is causing ruptures within our social fabric, there are also ways in which it has the potential to make our society stronger. We need to take hold of these positive new developments and turn them into a legacy for the future.

In the light of the above principles, we believe our current national circumstances have created a particular opportunity to recast the relationship between the public sector and empowered communities (especially deprived ones) to build a much more resilient society. The key policies we are calling for in the report are summarised in the tables below, set against the problem which each recommendation aims to address.

Recommendations



Recommendations

Phase 1 Recommendations: supporting community and civic society during lockdown

Problem	What the Government could do to fix it
Furloughed charity staff are unable to volunteer for their charities, despite rising demand for charity services.	1. Allow furloughed staff to volunteer for a specific number of hours per week and require directors or trustees to declare furloughed volunteering as related to the coronavirus response.
The flexibility around Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) does not apply to Charitable Rate Relief (CRR) meaning many charities continue to pay rates while small businesses are exempt.	2. Extend the Government's Small Business Rate Relief scheme to include organisations who already benefit from Charitable Rate Relief.
During the COVID-19 crisis, many charities and community businesses still have contractual obligations to deliver or receive services, which may be impossible to honour, or they may be facing cash flow problems within these contracts.	3. Offer as much flexibility as possible within existing government contracts.
The emergency funding package that the Government has announced is a welcome start but it will not be sufficient to sustain the community and voluntary sector through to recovery.	4. Supplement the emergency funding package announced by HM Treasury with medium-term support from multiple sources. The following sources should be considered: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Charitable loan support from HM Treasury;• Convening endowments to voluntarily pay down a portion of their assets towards the recovery;• The reform of tax reliefs to incentivise donations and social investment; and• The temporary removal of VAT on online advertising for civic groups.

Evidence suggests that the psychological outcomes from the crisis and lockdown are likely to include loneliness, anxiety, boredom and grief, all with well-evidenced deleterious social and economic effects on individuals and society at large. This is likely to be in both the short and long term, as the economic externalities of COVID-19 mean that the effects could be long lasting.

5. Act now to support the mental health of individuals isolating or with reduced social contact. This might include:
- Recognising the link between mental health and purpose;
 - Rolling out nationwide access to NHS-approved digital mental health apps at no cost;
 - Reviewing how access to greater mental health support can be delivered by the civic sector and government services; and
 - Considering the role of social prescribing and civic broadcasting to combat mental illness during the crisis.

Given the extent to which people are relying on digital networks during the lockdown, the ability to access accurate and reliable information is critical in maintaining trust within communities.

6. Provide additional support for organisations that are taking a proactive approach in countering misinformation around COVID-19.

The time taken to set up and register a new charity can be a burden for new organisations seeking to respond quickly to the crisis.

7. Create through the Charity Commission a time-limited fast track registration process for COVID-19 charities.
-

Phase 2 Recommendations: Supporting community as we emerge from the lockdown

Problem

What the Government could do to fix it

Although there are elements of our social fabric that have been strengthened in spite of the lockdown, in many instances this has been a bleak and difficult time for individuals and communities.

The way in which the exit from the lockdown is managed has the potential either to cause further “fraying” of our social fabric, or if done well to lay the foundations for a community recovery.

8. Make strengthening our social fabric an explicit consideration when managing the end of the lockdown. There are three early actions that could be taken as we exit the lockdown to help communities to recover quickly. We believe these three changes could be managed in such a way as to minimise the risk of the virus spreading excessively:

- Reopen parks first;
- Allow contact between family members as a first priority;
- Prioritise those supporting the vulnerable for testing.

Some local authorities have effectively worked through a network of community and civic organisations to reach those in need. However, others have not.

9. Urge local authorities to work together with all community organisations in their wards to build a network of trusted partners.

The crisis has revealed the lack of digital access and technological innovation within the civic and community sector. In addition, a disproportionate number of elderly people do not have access to the internet or digital tools to connect with loved ones. One of the main ways in which the digitally excluded access services and support is through local library networks, which have been shut for at least a month.

10. Work with telecommunication firms to radically open up digital access. This might include options to:

- Make digital hotspots freely available for community groups and charities or giving vulnerable individuals unlimited data; and
 - If travel restrictions persist, re-open local library networks to give the digitally excluded access to connection.
-

Phase 3 Recommendations: Building the social infrastructure to underpin the recovery

Problem

What the Government could do to fix it

The outpouring of small acts of kindness and support in many communities speaks to the latent resource that for many years has been underappreciated and left to wither by policymakers. There is an opportunity, once the immediate crisis is over, to sustain that civic flourishing.

11. Ensure that the NHS volunteer army leaves an enduring legacy of civic involvement. One way to do this would be to decentralise the GoodSAM App over time, to allow communities to match volunteers to civic demand in their local areas. The App could also be opened up more widely to community groups and charities so that they can post jobs and different tiers of involvement could be introduced.

The emergency funding package that the Government has announced is a welcome start but it will not be sufficient to sustain the community and voluntary sector through to recovery.

12. Launch a Community Recovery Fund, with every £1 donated by members of the public, companies and philanthropic endowments matched by HM Treasury.

- The fund should be an independent endowment, not government-owned.
- The money raised could be open to all types of organisations across civil society but with a particular focus on building resilience in vulnerable communities and places where networks are currently weak or non-existent.
- While the fundraising should be driven as a high-profile, national campaign, the delivery and distribution of the money would be best made as local as possible, according to community priorities.
- Potential sources of funding that the Government could tap into include: the £150-200m underspend from the European Social Fund, £600m of dormant assets; or the £500 million accrued in the National Fund.

In the longer term there is likely to be an increase in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, both amongst healthcare workers and those who have suffered grief or serious illness.

13. Introduce a post-COVID 19 mental health vigilance programme to help track the progress of post-traumatic stress disorder in the community and offer targeted interventions.

While there are undoubtedly ways in which the current crisis is causing ruptures within our social fabric, there are also ways in which it has the potential to make our society stronger. We need to take hold of these positive new developments and turn them into a legacy for the future.

14. Create a What Works Centre for Community Strength.

There are and will continue to be many people across the country who, in a myriad of different ways, are helping in the battle against COVID-19. Some will be picked up on and recognised in the media but many more will not be.

15. Use the honours system to recognise the contribution of people during the COVID-19 crisis.
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The social side of the crisis

How the UK authorities have responded



Impact of the crisis on communities

Organisations facing funding and operational difficulties

The COVID-19 crisis has left the charity sector woefully short of working capital. Charity leaders estimated at the end of March that they would lose £4.3 billion in foregone income over the next 12 weeks,⁸ the National Lottery Heritage Fund estimate that 82% of organisations report high or moderate risk to the long-term viability,⁹ and Social Enterprise UK estimates only 50% of members have more than a few months' cash flow. The grant funding the Government has announced will help in keeping charities and community organisations responding to communities' needs, but it does not yet come close to the amount the charity sector believes it will lose.

There are a number of ways in which revenue for charities and community organisations is drying up.¹⁰ Numerous events have been cancelled. For example, last year the London Marathon alone raised £66 million for charities across the UK. Many charities rent out rooms in their buildings for activities and conferences and this income stream has all but gone.¹¹ Charity shops have had to close, a massive loss of revenue because in 2019 these shops made an estimated £295 million in profits for their parent charities.¹² Most charities and community groups have little access to or desire to use loan support to see them through a crisis of this nature.

At the same time as losing funding, charities and community businesses are still facing costs, in terms of maintaining premises and staff. Many also still have contractual obligations to deliver or receive services, which may be impossible to honour. A survey by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) found that: "less than half (47%) of charities believed that independent funders offered the flexible core funding which NPC expects will be vital to keeping them afloat in the crisis."¹³ 52% of charities have reduced existing or previous levels of service, with a further 12% intending to in the future.¹⁴

In terms of digital activity, 67% of charities have taken action to do more digitally where they can¹⁵ - although that still leaves a third who have not chosen to do more digitally or who have not been able to, perhaps because of the nature of their work. NPC also found just before the crisis that: "charities' confidence in their ability to use digital technology

has dropped by 11 percentage points to 59% from 70% since 2017” and noted that this may leave some “struggling to shift services online.”¹⁶

Action research excerpt – Barking and Dagenham

“The whole way we operate has changed. In closing our centres we have had to think of new ways of operating whilst keeping our clients at the centre of everything we do”

Community networks

One of the notable features of community life during the pandemic has been the willingness of so many people to help each other and the number of mutual aid groups that have sprung up or strengthened around the country. COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK estimates that “there were 1,000 groups set up in the week after the government announced vulnerable people would have to be shielded from the virus.”¹⁷ The organisation’s website now lists 3,350 groups across the country¹⁸. The most effective of these groups, according to COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK, are those that are operating at a micro-level, by street or apartment block¹⁹.

Facebook estimates that, for the period up to 9 April, nearly 2 million people in the UK were members of more than 2,000 local support Facebook groups set up against COVID-19. The membership of these groups increased from 200,000 to 1 million in just one week (the 7 days before the lockdown).²⁰ National initiatives such as #clapforourcarers and the placing of rainbows and other items in windows have also brought communities together in new ways, with more than 350,000 posts created across Facebook and Instagram with the hashtags #clapforourcarers or #thankyouNHS.²¹

Action research excerpt – Glasgow

“We will really focus on how neighbourhoods and communities can help vulnerable people that live in those communities. [We will] work much more on connecting people virtually.”

However, there are major differences across the country in the networks that are available at a local level. The crisis has highlighted the importance of close connections with immediate neighbours but in many areas (and particularly urban areas without Parish Councils) there is patchy civic infrastructure for people to access below local authority level. This can be amplified by the discrepancy between the type of informal networks and support that might be accessed in a community with strong social fabric compared to those where connections are weak. Recent research by Cambridge University has highlighted in relation to mutual aid groups that the number of groups correlates with the socioeconomic profile of the area and that “geographical inequalities seem to reinforce each other.”²²

As Onward polling found in March, people who feel more connected to their community are more likely to offer mutual support during the crisis, pointing to a growing gap between areas with strong social fabric and places where that social fabric is fraying. 85% of those who say they have become more connected to their community in the last month say they are likely to offer support to their neighbours and participate in volunteering, compared to 72% of those who say they have become less connected to their community in the last month. This issue will also be a focus for a recently announced Local Trust research project, in partnership with the Third Sector Research Centre, to explore how 25 communities are responding to COVID-19.²³

Giving and volunteering

On a national level, the response to the Government's call for volunteers to support the NHS has been unprecedented in recent times. Nearly five people per second enlisted in the government's volunteering scheme in the hours after the Health Secretary launched a call for help bolstering the NHS's response.²⁴ At present, at least, it appears that there are far more people who want to help than there are tasks available. Other volunteering programmes have also seen a huge surge in offers of help. For example, national volunteering charity, Volunteering Matters, “reported that 3,000 people had applied to its website in the past fortnight alone” whereas it “normally expects about 20 to 30 applications a week.”²⁵

However, it should also be noted that, in terms of regular volunteering before the crisis, the highest rates were to be found in the 65–74 year-old age group, within which 42% volunteer at least once a year, and 29% regularly.²⁶ NPC has highlighted that, given many

of this group must now self-isolate, “charities reliant on their time will clearly be hugely affected.”²⁷

It is difficult to ascertain precisely how the crisis will affect wider charitable donations from individuals, but as a comparator, individual giving after the 2008 financial crash fell by 11%.²⁸ Figures from Savanta’s *Coronavirus Daily Tracker* show that 43% of people have found their disposable income to have decreased as a result of the pandemic.²⁹ Positive news comes from the successful appeals to the NHS Charities Together group, which has so far raised £55 million.³⁰ And as of 12 April, £25m had been pledged to the National Emergencies Trust’s Coronavirus Appeal, in addition to the further £20m in match funding promised from the Government.³¹

The effect on corporate giving is also difficult to predict. Given the economic climate, many companies are also likely to see a significant decrease in the funds they have available for philanthropy. However, amongst those companies that are doing well during the crisis, there are some encouraging examples of generosity. For example: Tesco has launched a £30 million community support package;³² Barclays has launched a £100 million COVID-19 Community Aid Package;³³ and Martin Lewis (of Money Saving Expert) has offered a £1million fund for small and local charities.³⁴

Mental health

As the COVID-19 crisis progresses, we are likely to face increased levels of depression, harmful use of alcohol and drugs, as well as self-harm or suicidal behaviour.³⁵ In the longer term there is likely to be an increase in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, both amongst healthcare workers and those who have suffered grief or serious illness. A group of 24 mental health experts recently set out in detail in an article in *The Lancet Psychiatry*³⁶ what they believe are likely to be some of the mental health consequences of the pandemic and those who are most likely to be affected. They noted that the SARS epidemic in 2003 was “associated with a 30% increase in suicide in those aged 65 years and older; around 50% of recovered patients remained anxious; and 29% of health-care workers experienced probable emotional distress.” The paper also notes:

“Many of the anticipated consequences of quarantine and associated social and physical distancing measures are themselves key risk factors for mental health issues. These include suicide and self-harm, alcohol and substance misuse,

gambling, domestic and child abuse, and psychosocial risks (such as social disconnection, lack of meaning or anomie, entrapment, cyberbullying, feeling a burden, financial stress, bereavement, loss, unemployment, homelessness, and relationship breakdown).”

Digital exclusion

While many activities and social connections have moved online and increasing numbers of people are maintaining relationships in this way, there is a significant proportion of the population who are excluded from digital activity. According to latest government statistics, “in 2018 there were still 5.3 million adults in the UK, or 10.0% of the adult UK population who either have never used the internet or have not used it in the last three months, described as ‘internet non-users’.”³⁷

This headline figure masks a far worse situation amongst the elderly, which is of particular relevance in the present crisis given that it is primarily the elderly who have been asked to self-isolate. In the over-75s age group, 48.7% of men are ‘internet non-users’ and 62.4% of women. Amongst the elderly, it is also probable that a number of those that do access the internet do not do so in their own home, or if they do use the internet at home they do so in limited ways. This is highlighted by figures in The Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2019, which found that amongst the over-65s and within households, only 57% have a phone; only 50% have a tablet; only 67% have a computer and only 71% have internet access.³⁸

Action research excerpt – Barking and Dagenham

“The whole way we operate has changed. In closing our centres we have had to think of new ways of operating whilst keeping our clients at the centre of everything we do.”

Digital exclusion is also strongly linked to socio-economic factors: nearly half of offline people (47%) come from a low-income household and 16% of benefits claimants are digitally disengaged i.e. they have little or no digital behaviours.³⁹

Caring

The lack of access to services during the lockdown has placed an additional burden on those with existing care responsibilities. The closure of nurseries, schools and new places in care homes has also brought new caring responsibilities to many people. Given that 58% of those caring for the elderly are female and 42% are male,⁴⁰ and that women are far more likely than men to adjust their employment patterns to care for children⁴¹, the additional burden of these responsibilities is likely to fall disproportionately on women. This may have implications for society beyond the immediate crisis.

Public opinion on the state of communities during the crisis

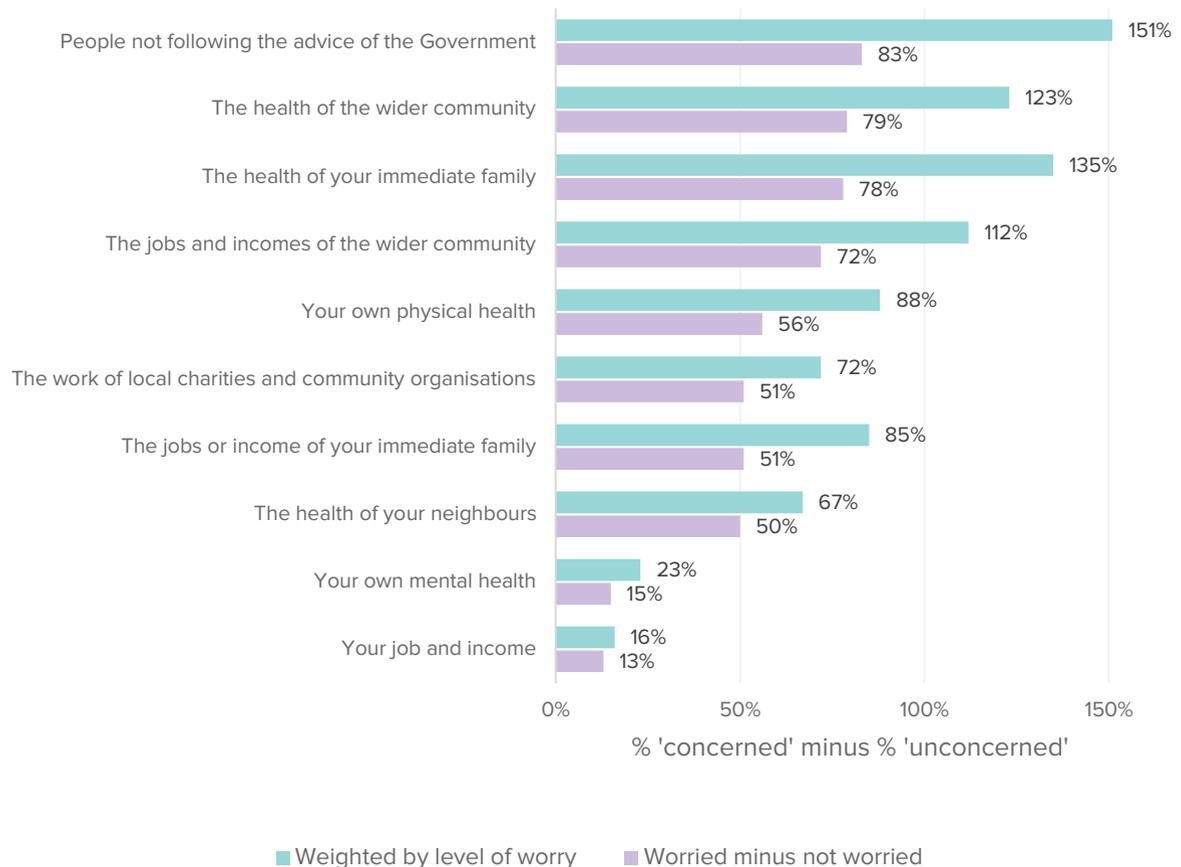
The Office for National Statistics recently found that over half of adults (54.9%) 'have a sense of belonging with other residents in their local community during the coronavirus pandemic' and that over 2 in 3 (67.9%) 'thought people are doing more to help others since the coronavirus outbreak'.⁴²

On 30 March, Onward published polling data which provided a detailed analysis on the state of community in the UK during the COVID-19 crisis.⁴³

People were more concerned about the jobs and incomes of the wider community (net concern +72%) than the jobs and incomes of their immediate family (+51%) or their own jobs (+13%). This was true of every age group, every social class and every region. Notably, nearly a quarter of people (24%) were "not at all concerned" about their own job or income. This was largely driven by those who are not in work - long-term unemployed and retirees. Net concern about one's job and income among employed people (concerned minus unconcerned) was three times higher than for the general population (+40%). This was still lower than concern for others among this group.

Figure 1: How worried are you about the immediate impact of the following?

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



Public-spiritedness was also visible in the polling data when people were asked about the economic impact of the pandemic. More people were concerned about the jobs and incomes of the wider community (84%) than the jobs and incomes of their immediate family (74%) or their own jobs (52%). This was true of every age group, every social class and every region. Three times as many people were unconcerned about their own job (39%) as jobs and incomes locally (12%). A quarter of people (24%) said they were “not at all concerned” about their own job or income, but this fell to 12% among those under the age of 45 years old.

One in five (21%) people said they would not help their local community in any way. Those aged under-35 were least likely to say they will support their community during the crisis compared to other age groups but, those that were, were willing to support in more

numerous and more active ways, for example administering tests for people who may be infected with COVID-19, providing childcare for parents who need to work or are involved in the response, and volunteering in a local hospital or healthcare facility. People who feel that they have become more connected to their community in the last month were significantly more likely to say they will offer support to their neighbours and participate in volunteering than people who feel they have become less connected to their community in the last month.

The poll also revealed strong support for the Government taking steps to harness the power of civic society and community groups to respond to the crisis. Two thirds of people (69%) supported the idea of relaxing tax rules around donations to encourage more people to give to good causes during the crisis, compared to 4% opposed. 66% of people supported the idea of taxpayers directly subsidising the wages of charity workers responding to COVID-19, compared to 8% against. 59% of people were in favour of charities and community groups being asked to administer coronavirus tests in the community, versus 8% against. A plurality of people (42%) favoured using taxpayers' money to take cafes and pubs that go bust during the next few months into community ownership.

The poll revealed strong support for the Government taking steps to harness the power of civil society and community groups to respond to the crisis. The most popular policy tested was the one ministers have already adopted, the creation of a national voluntary force, with only 3% of people in opposition. The extraordinary response of 670,000 people applying to become NHS Volunteer Responders is testament to the popularity of this proposal and the latent potential of civic society amid the crisis.

Figure 2: Willingness to undertake different tasks to support local community

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling

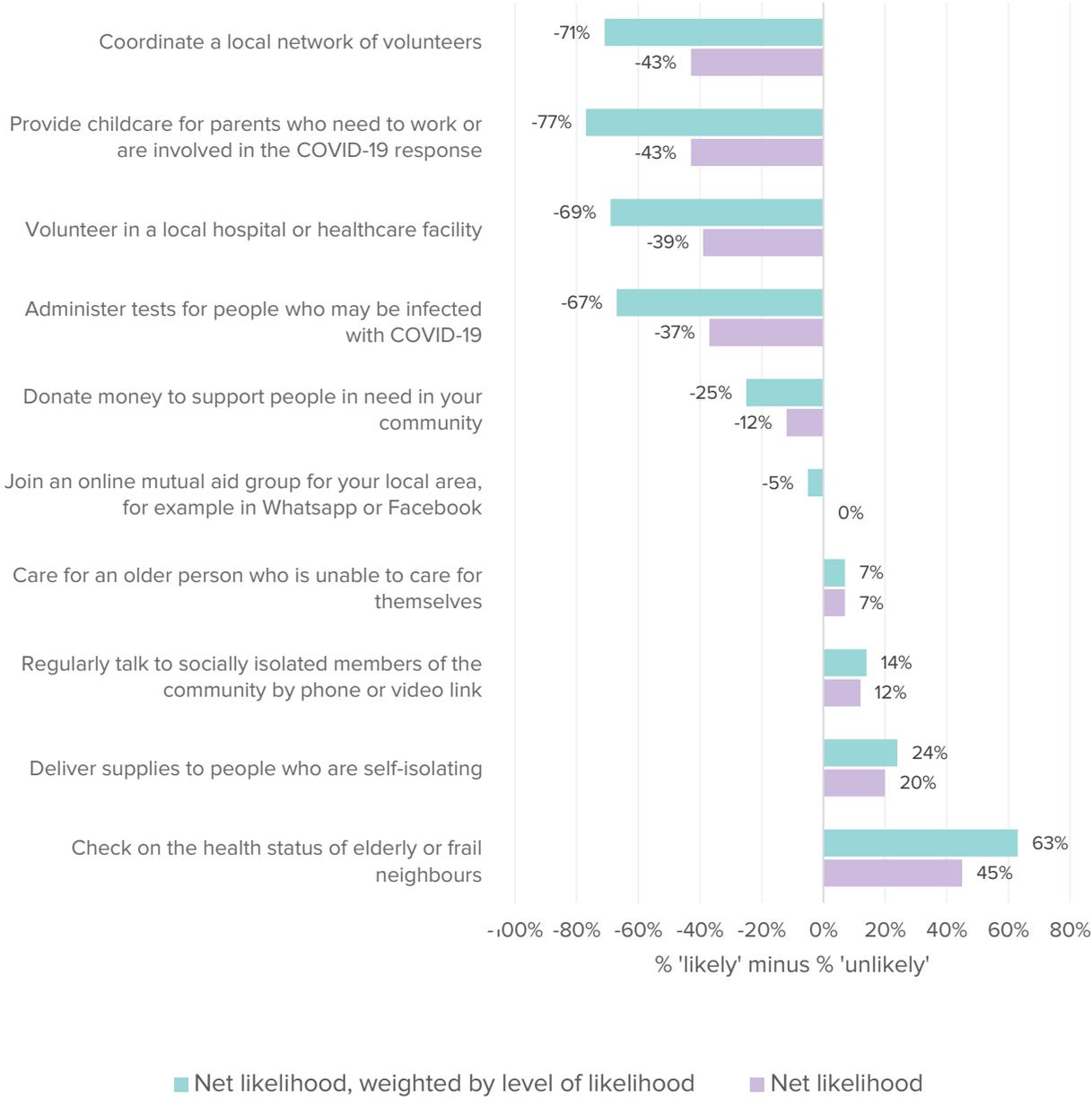
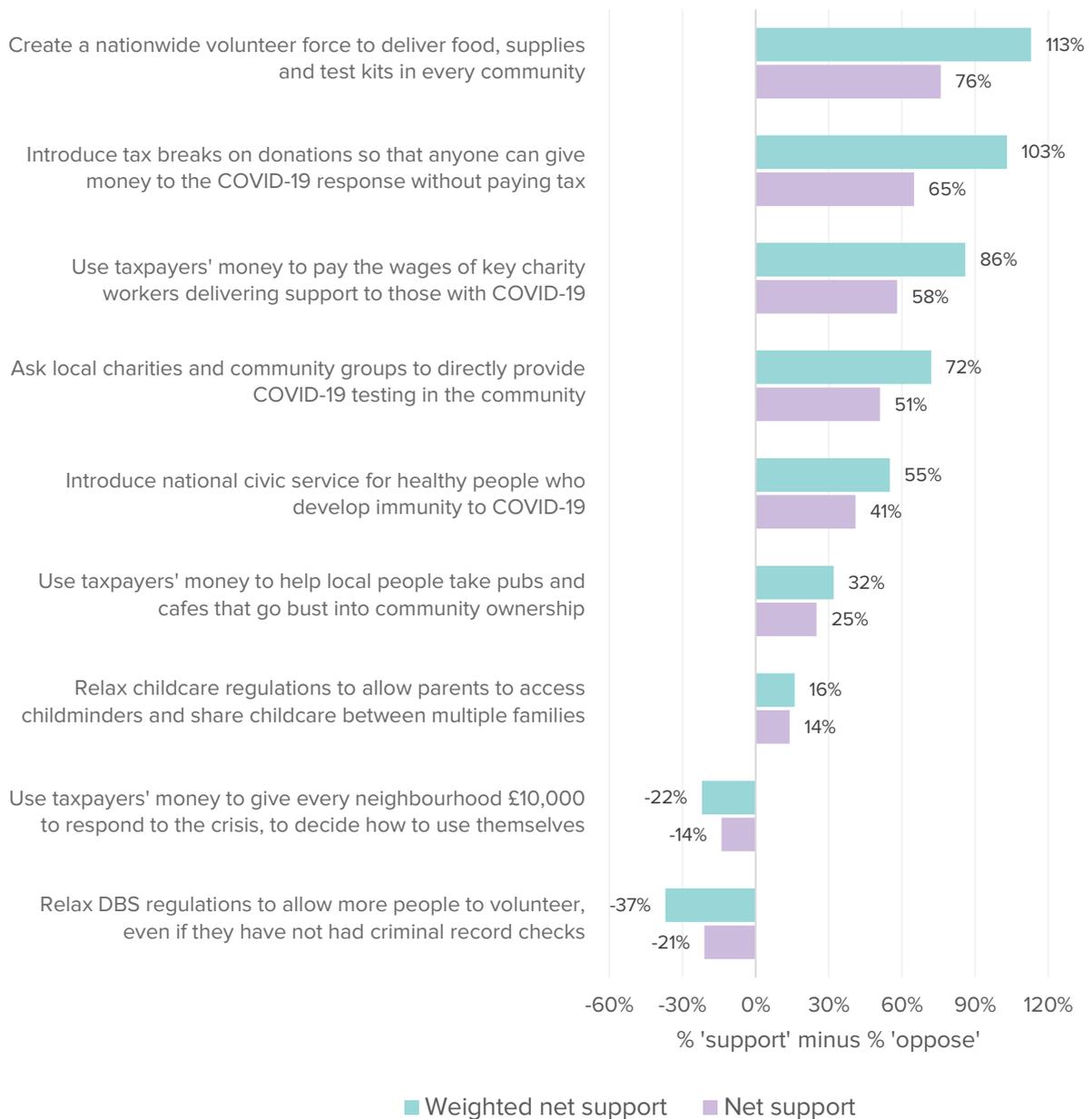


Figure 3: Support for different policy interventions to support civic action

Sources: Onward analysis of J.L. Partners polling



UK Government actions relevant to a social stimulus

The UK Government has already taken a number of welcome steps to support communities and the voluntary sector. We have conducted a review of central government action and analysed how each initiative contributes to maintaining or strengthening the six pillars of our social fabric.

The initiatives that the Westminster government has taken, and which we believe are relevant for consideration, are discussed below.

Support for charities

- **£750 million emergency funding package for frontline charities.** This includes £360 million direct from government departments and £370 million for smaller charities, including through a grant to the National Lottery Community Fund. The Government will also match donations to the National Emergencies Trust as part of the BBC's Big Night In fundraising event up, pledging £20 million as a minimum.⁴⁴
- **Government grants to cover 'furloughed' staff wages.** Charities/not-for-profits are included in the scheme through which government will provide support grants to pay wages. The Government confirmed that: "Any employer in the country- small or large, charitable or non-profit will be eligible for the scheme."⁴⁵ The Government will reimburse employers for 80 per cent of the wages of any employees that they pay through the pay as you earn (PAYE) system if those employees are temporarily not working - what the government calls 'furloughed'. The maximum payment from the government will be £2,500 per month. This will be paid for an initial three months and will be extended if necessary. Employers do not have to pay back the money.
- **£5 million for mental health support charities.** This is for charities to expand support services for those struggling with mental health problems during the COVID 19 outbreak.⁴⁶

Helping each other

- **Rely on friends and family for help.** The Government has repeatedly called on people to turn first to friends and family if they are in need.
- **NHS Volunteer Responders.** The Government has launched the NHS volunteer responders programme to provide a way for people to volunteer to support the NHS. People will carry out ‘simple but vital tasks including driving people to and from hospital, and delivering food and medication’. There has been an overwhelming public response and NHS England has now stated: “Recruitment to this scheme was temporarily paused on 29 March 2020 to process the initial 750,000 applications.”⁴⁷
- **Transferring workers to the NHS.** Skilled and experienced NHS volunteers are to be given protection to leave their main jobs for up to four weeks so they can volunteer.⁴⁸
- **National volunteering effort.** ‘DCMS is working closely with the civil society sector – including National Emergencies Trust, the National Council of Voluntary Organisations and the British Red Cross – on how to galvanise volunteers and coordinate help to those who need it most’.⁴⁹
- **Rules for DBS checks relaxed.** DBS ID check rules for volunteers have been relaxed for a temporary period so that identity documents can be checked using a video link and scanned documents can be used in advance of the DBS check being submitted.⁵⁰
- **£8 million emergency support for adoptive families.** This funding will be available to pay for therapeutic support for families whose adopted children may have already suffered trauma and be made more anxious owing to the uncertainty of the effects of the virus.⁵¹

Digital and Information

- **Public Information Campaign.** The Government has launched an extensive public information campaign, including text messages, a coronavirus information service on What’s App and TV adverts featuring the Chief Medical Officer.⁵²

- **PM letter to the nation.** On 28 March, 2020, the Prime Minister announced he is “writing to every UK household to urge them to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.”⁵³
- **Reinforced *Every Mind Matters Campaign*.** Public Health England has provided new content for its *Every Mind Matters* website, including new NHS expert tips and advice on looking after mental wellbeing. This is supported by a new film narrated by The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to be broadcast on national television from 20 April. The *Every Mind Matters* campaign will also “be supported through social media, digital, national TV and partner support activity, helping to reach the audiences most at-risk of poor mental health.”⁵⁴
- **Measures to tackle the spread of false information online.** The Government has announced that a Cabinet Office Rapid Response unit is taking action against false narratives; working with social media companies to remove false information; and directing people to the government’s *Share* initiative and ‘Don’t feed the beast’ campaign.⁵⁵
- **Support for patients to connect digitally with friends and family.** The Government has announced that NHSx is working with technology firms to help COVID-19 patients stay in touch digitally with family and friends. As part of this, Facebook is providing up to 2,050 of its Portal video calling devices for free.⁵⁶
- **Telecoms companies to support vulnerable customers.** The Government has agreed measures with telecoms companies to support vulnerable customers. These are commitments made by those companies rather than funded by government and include: fair treatment of customers who cannot pay their bills; removal of data allowance caps on fixed broadband services; new and generous mobile and landline packages to support vulnerable customers; and alternative means of communication where possible for vulnerable or self-isolating customers where repairs to broadband and landlines cannot be carried out.⁵⁷
- **£500,000 funding for digital support for those at home.** This funding has been made available for technology companies to come up with digital support solutions for people who need to stay at home because of coronavirus.⁵⁸

- **Online learning support package.** The Government has announced: free laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children in England; 4G routers for families of secondary school children and care leavers without internet; an agreement with telecoms companies to exempt selected educational resource sites from data charges; and a new national initiative to provide 180 video lessons each week, from reception to year 10.⁵⁹

Arts and Culture

- **Arts Council England £160 million emergency funds.** The Arts Council England is offering the cultural sector new financial support totalling £160 million during the crisis. This is divided up into: £90 million for National Portfolio Organisations; £50 million for organisations that are not in receipt of regular funding from the Arts Council; and £20 million for individuals, to support artists, creative practitioners and freelancers.⁶⁰
- **‘Culture at your fingertips from home’ initiative.** The Government has announced digital initiatives to allow cultural providers to offer ways to enjoy the Arts at home, including through the support of the DCMS’ Digital Tech Champions initiative and the BBC’s *Culture in Quarantine* initiative.⁶¹

Homelessness

- **£3.2 million for rough sleepers to self-isolate.** On 17 March 2020, the Government announced that £3.2 million in emergency funding would be available to all local authorities in England to ‘reimburse them for the cost of providing accommodation and services to those sleeping on the streets to help them successfully self-isolate’.⁶²
- **All rough sleepers to be housed.** The Government has asked local authorities to ensure that all rough sleepers are housed during the COVID-19 crisis. They expect the money for this to come initially from the £1.6 billion grant they have made to local authorities to respond to COVID-19 pressures, although they will keep this under review.⁶³

Supermarkets/ food supplies

- **Support system for those who don't have the help they need.** The Government has established a Local Support System for the 1.5 million most vulnerable people who are self-isolating - the so-called Shield programme. Being part of this network includes a helpline and support with food and medicine deliveries. This is intended mainly for those without friends and family to help and is being delivered through a partnership with the groceries industry, local government, local resilience and emergency partners, and voluntary groups.⁶⁴
- **Supermarkets can cooperate.** Competition laws have been relaxed so supermarkets can work together, allowing them to share data on stock levels and cooperate to keep stores open and deliveries going.⁶⁵
- **Supermarket delivery hours extended.** Delivery hours for supermarkets have been extended to help them deliver to more people and to support those isolating at home.⁶⁶

Charity Commission/ regulatory measures

- **Advice on safe giving to charities.** The Charity Commission has issued advice to the public on how to ensure any funds they donate are given to genuine charities and they are not subject to scams or exploitation.⁶⁷
- **Charity Commission guidance for the charity sector.** The Charity Commission has issued guidance for charities⁶⁸ on how to operate during the COVID-19 outbreak and has a webpage which it is regularly updating with answers to common questions. These include: whether a charity's existing charitable objects allow it to assist with COVID-19 work; how reserves and restricted funds can be used; and whether rules about face-to-face meetings can be relaxed.
- **Financial reporting guidance for charities.** The Charities' SORP committee (the body that issues the Statement of Recommended Practice (SORP) for charities for their financial reporting) has issued guidance for charities on how COVID-19 may affect their financial reporting.⁶⁹

- **COVID-19 guidance for Community Interest Companies (CICs).** The Office of the Regulator of Community Interest Companies (CICs) has announced guidance for CICs on how to access government support and flexibility if they cannot ‘provide normal services and meet the community benefit that they were set up to serve’ during the crisis.⁷⁰

Parks

- **Parks must stay open.** After many local authorities closed public parks early on in the lockdown, Communities Secretary, Robert Jenrick, announced on 18 April that he had ‘made it clear to councils that all parks must remain open’.⁷¹

Onward’s *Repairing our social fabric* programme

The research conducted as part of Onward’s *Repairing our Social Fabric* programme has led to the conclusion that six aspects of social fabric are particularly important to ordinary people and essential to understanding what is happening in local communities. These six threads are: relationships; physical infrastructure; civic institutions; economic value; cultural behaviours; and pride and belonging.

These threads are described in more detail in Annex 1. Together, they provide a conceptual framework that is highly germane to thinking about how communities are responding to the current crisis. As it is an extensive description of what makes up a community today, this taxonomy should be an invaluable tool for understanding how exhaustive policy to support communities through COVID-19 is, and where possible gaps are.

The impact of the Government’s measures so far on the six threads of our social fabric can be seen in the following ways:

Relationships

Firstly, the public have been encouraged to rely on friends and family for help. A degree of support has been made available to assist with this, particularly the support that has been announced for patients to connect digitally with family and friends, the funding for digital support for those at home and the support package in place for adoptive families.

Measures of this nature are important, both in terms of providing immediate relational support for those in need and in ensuring that key relationships are maintained in the longer term throughout the crisis. Secondly, the emergency relief funding for frontline charities should support them, at least in the short term to sustain relationships with those in need of their services. Thirdly, volunteering initiatives, including the national NHS volunteer responders programme, have been hugely well received and should have a positive impact, both immediately and in the longer-term, in connecting those willing to help with those in need, strengthening the relational fabric of our communities.

Action research excerpt – Glasgow

“We have been overwhelmed by volunteers, we can now process them much faster, the response has been great and we have loads”

Physical Infrastructure

The emergency relief funding announced for charities and the volunteering initiatives that have been put in place also contribute to maintaining physical community infrastructure throughout the crisis. However, it is in relation to physical infrastructure that communities are most suffering during the lockdown. Our social fabric has weakened significantly in this regard, as places where people usually come together such as pubs, community centres, places of worship, and playgrounds have been forced to close. A welcome exception was the announcement made by the Government on 18 April that parks must reopen or remain open, although this guidance has not been followed by all local authorities. Two other notable exceptions to the weakening of physical infrastructure are the support the Government has provided for the homeless, which has significantly exceeded what was previously available, and the measures taken to allow supermarkets to cooperate and extend their delivery hours to help households access the supplies they need. However, despite the limitations placed on most physical infrastructure, there has been a surge in the use and development of digital infrastructure, in some instances backed by government support.

Action research excerpt – Glasgow

“The digital thing is clear to me, there is something about reaffirming everything we know - can be more flexible with staff. Do we need premises? How can we do things in the sector in a digital way? We have a lot of network meetings, training events - could we work smarter?”

Civic Institutions

The NHS is the primary civic institution to which government measures under consideration here are relevant. While our health service may be extremely stretched in terms of resources, it appears to have been strengthened through the crisis in terms of public support and the public trust placed in it. Another notable initiative is the Prime Minister’s decision to write personally to every household in the country. This was an unusual act, forging a one-off, but direct link between individuals and the highest office in our nation. The Government’s wider public information campaign, measures to tackle the spread of false information and help to ensure safe giving to charities also largely appear to be sustaining public trust and satisfaction with decision making, at least at present, as our polling described above shows.

Economic Value

Like physical infrastructure, economic value in communities is taking a heavy hit during the pandemic, although the Government’s wider economic package will help to maintain it to some degree. In terms of the government measures we have been considering, which have more direct social impacts, the key initiatives the Government has taken include Arts Council emergency funding, the digital support measures mentioned above (including those to support online home learning) and the package of support for the homeless.

Cultural Behaviours

Relatively few of the Government's initiatives relate to cultural behaviours. However, those that do - primarily the public information campaign and attempts to tackle the spread of false information online - are quite significant in that they have been designed to support an enormous and very swift change in our cultural behaviour during the lockdown. It has been interesting to see how readily the majority of the population have made this shift, with many even calling on the Government to go further. The £5 million support announced for mental health charities is also relevant to this pillar of our social fabric, in supporting people to maintain healthy patterns of behaviour.

Pride and Belonging

As with cultural behaviours, there have been fewer government initiatives relating to Pride and Belonging than in relation to other pillars of our social fabric. There have been some limited proposals intended to reinforce belonging to family structures (asking people to rely on friends and family for help, support for patients to connect digitally with families and support for adoptive families). However, on a national level, the NHS Volunteer Responders scheme is significant. While, in the short-term, it is taking time to get off the ground, in the medium term it has the potential to reinforce people's feeling of being part of a national effort and strengthen our sense of collective identity.

Initiative	Relationships	Physical Infrastructure	Civic Institutions	Economic Value	Cultural Behaviours	Pride and Belonging
Central Government/ England						
Support for charities						
£750 million emergency funding package for frontline charities	✓	✓				
Government grants to cover 'furloughed' staff wages		✓		✓		
£5 million for mental health support charities	✓				✓	
Helping each other						
Rely on friends and family for help	✓					✓
NHS Volunteer Responders	✓	✓	✓			✓
Transferring workers to the NHS.			✓			
National volunteering effort	✓	✓				✓
Rules for DBS checks relaxed	✓	✓				
£8 million emergency support for adoptive families	✓	✓				✓
Digital and Information						
Public Information Campaign			✓		✓	
PM letter to the nation			✓			✓
Reinforced Every Mind Matters Campaign	✓				✓	
Measures to tackle the spread of false information online	✓		✓		✓	
Support for patients to connect digitally with friends and family	✓	✓				✓
Telecoms companies to support vulnerable customers		✓		✓		
£500,000 funding for digital support for those at home	✓	✓		✓		
Online learning support package	✓	✓	✓	✓		

Initiative	Relationships	Physical Infrastructure	Civic Institutions	Economic Value	Cultural Behaviours	Pride and Belonging
Arts and Culture						
Arts Council England £160 million emergency funds		✓		✓		
'Culture at your fingertips from home' initiative		✓		✓		
Homelessness						
£3.2 million for rough sleepers to self-isolate		✓		✓		
All rough sleepers to be housed.		✓		✓		
Parks						
Parks must stay open.		✓			✓	
Supermarkets/ food supplies						
Support system for those who don't have the help they need.		✓				
Supermarkets can cooperate		✓				
Supermarket delivery hours extended		✓				
Charity Commission						
Advice on safe giving to charities			✓		✓	
Charity Commission guidance for the charity sector		✓				
Financial reporting guidance for charities		✓				
COVID-19 guidance for Community Interest Companies (CICs)		✓		✓		

Initiatives taken by the Devolved Administrations

We have also analysed initiatives taken by the devolved administrations to provide support to the charities sector and to communities in the wake of the crisis. A number of the central government initiatives have national reach and so are also applicable to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; where matters are devolved, actions taken by the devolved administrations have been similar to those taken in England, although often brought forward sooner.

Scotland

The Scottish Government has announced a £350 million “welfare and wellbeing” fund to be “made available to councils, charities, businesses and community groups and designed to be flexible, cutting down on red tape to enable them to respond swiftly.”⁷² The fund includes a £25 million reserve “to allow swift and flexible responses to rapidly changing circumstances.” It is otherwise made up of:

- **£50 million to support local authorities.** This is “to support their own local resilience, support and hardship plans.”
- **£45 million to support those “in immediate need.”** These funds will be added “to the existing Scottish Welfare Fund which makes Community Grants and Crisis Grants available to those in immediate need. This more than doubles the current £35.5 million fund, which is administered by local authorities. They will be given more flexibility in how it is used to ensure they can fully support people in financial crisis, including workers in the ‘gig economy’.”
- **A £70 million Food Fund.** This is to “help organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors address issues of food insecurity.”
- **A £50 million Wellbeing Fund for charities needing additional capacity to work with those affected by the COVID-19 crisis.** This is to include the homeless and those suffering from fuel poverty.
- **A £40 million Supporting Communities Fund.** This is “to support the rapidly growing and inspiring community efforts at a local level.”

- **£50 million for increased social security costs.** This is “to meet an anticipated increase in applications for the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Scottish social security benefits.”
- **£20 million for “a Third Sector Resilience Fund.** This is to help ensure the health and continued viability of the third sector organisations affected by cash flow and other problems, which have a key role to play in our national response.”

Wales

- **‘Looking out for each other’ campaign.** This “provides practical guidance about how everyday tasks, like running errands or simply staying in touch, can be done safely, without physical contact to minimise the risk of contracting coronavirus. It will also share information about how to stay mentally and physically active.”⁷³
- **£500 million economic Resilience fund.** This aims to “plug the gaps in the support schemes already announced by the UK Government.” It will be available to “firms of all sizes, including social enterprises, with a focus on those which have not already benefited from the coronavirus grants already announced by the Welsh Government.”⁷⁴
- **£24 million for Welsh voluntary sector.** This will provide “immediate support for Wales’ most vulnerable and help coordinate the thousands of willing volunteers wanting to help others during the current crisis.”⁷⁵
- **£15 million for home deliveries to the self-isolating.** The Welsh Government aims to “ensure people in Wales who are not able to leave their home are able to get direct deliveries of food and other essential items to their door.”⁷⁶
- **£18m support for the culture, creative and sports sectors.** The Welsh government has announced an £18 million fund to “help support the sector, safeguarding businesses and jobs” in the wake of COVID-19. This comprises: £7 million for arts; £8 million for sports; £1 million for grassroots music, TV and publishing; £1 million for museums and libraries; £750,000 emergency relief for the smallest organisations; and £250,000 for digital library resources.⁷⁷

- **£10 million for rough sleepers.** The Welsh Government has announced this funding to “enable local authorities to secure the accommodation needed to ensure those without a home can be protected, supported, and isolated if necessary.”⁷⁸

Northern Ireland

- **Plans for a community contingency fund.** The Northern Ireland Department for Communities (DfC) has announced that it will “bring forward very quickly a COVID-19 related Community Contingency Fund.” The aim of this is “to make sure that funding will be available where it is needed by groups who are supporting people who are socially isolated, struggling financially or who can’t access food supplies.”⁷⁹
- **Living expense support for those infected by COVID-19.** The Northern Ireland administration has introduced grant payments “to assist with short-term living expenses where a person, or a member of their immediate family, has been infected by COVID-19 or told to self-isolate. There is no limit on the amount of an individual award, which will be calculated based on individual circumstances.”⁸⁰
- **£1million fund for arts.** The Northern Ireland administration has provided an initial package to the Northern Ireland Arts Council worth £1m to provide “much-needed support for creatives and individual artists.”⁸¹
- **Early release of funds to support the sports sector.** In Northern Ireland, government funds have been released early to the sports sector to help them through the difficulties incurred through having to cease events. The Northern Ireland administration is also planning to provide initial emergency financial relief to ensure that grassroots sports organisations can continue to function.⁸²

A snapshot of Local Authority activity

Given the vast number of local authorities across the country it has not been possible to consider the situation in every area. However, we have drawn together a snapshot of local authority community activity during the pandemic and identified some relevant trends. One thing that is clear, is that there is wide variation in the extent to which local authorities are working with the community sector in their areas to help provide support. Local authority initiatives we have identified include:

Dedicated Phone Lines. Generally local authorities appear to be providing a dedicated phone service for residents and community organisations. Amongst other things, these are being used for vulnerable people to reach out for help and to enable individuals to volunteer to help others in their community.

Dedicated Information Pages. These appear to be provided by all councils to give information on the effects of COVID-19 in the area. They notify residents about any changes to local council run services, current medical guidance and signpost any local organisations that can give support during this time. Most also detail how to volunteer safely.

Funding support. Some local authorities and Mayors are offering support to community organisations worrying about solvency. Examples of this include:

- Mayor of London: £1 million emergency support fund for civil society organisations.⁸³
- Nottinghamshire Council: £1 million for existing organisations to continue to do the work they are doing to help vulnerable individuals.⁸⁴
- City of York: £1.25 million emergency relief fund.⁸⁵
- Norfolk Community Response Fund: Each recipient can receive up to £1000. This is run by the Norfolk Community Foundation. However, the council has donated £100,000.⁸⁶
- Brighton and Hove Council: has pledged £150,000 for community organisations.⁸⁷

Lifting charges. Many councils are reducing the financial requirements placed on residents. Some are cutting parking charges or changing the requirements for council tax.

Coordination. Many councils are working to coordinate efforts between voluntary and community organisations in their area. Mostly, this coordination is happening in places where it existed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Calls for action from the voluntary sector

Funding is the major concern of the voluntary sector. The Government's £750 million emergency relief package has been widely welcomed, but there is also widespread feeling that it is insufficient in relation to the £4.3 billion the sector estimates it is losing over the twelve weeks from 20 March.⁸⁸

There remains concern around how economic measures that have already been announced apply to the voluntary sector and community businesses. There are calls for some sector-specific adjustments, particularly in relation to the furlough, loans schemes and the changes to Small Business Rate Relief.

There are a number of different campaigns that have been organised. One of the most prominent is the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' (NCVO) #EveryDayCounts campaign, which it has launched in partnership with sector representative bodies and which is backed by charities up and down the country. It is calling for: '(1) Emergency funding for frontline charities and volunteers supporting the response to the coronavirus crisis, especially where they are alleviating pressure on the health service or providing support to people suffering from the economic and social impact of coronavirus; (2) A 'stabilisation fund' for all charities to help them stay afloat, pay staff and continue operating during the course of the pandemic; and (3) confirmation that charities should be eligible for similar business interruption measures announced by the chancellor for businesses'.⁸⁹

Another notable initiative is the letter of 25 March organised by Stephen Doughty MP, which was signed by over 240 other MPs and Peers and received significant backing in the press. The letter called for: emergency and stabilisation funding for charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises; clarification as to if and how economic

measures apply to charities; and for the Government to work with funders in the charities sector to identify grant funding that could be made available.

An online petition has also been launched: [savecharities.org](https://www.savecharities.org). As at 17 April, it had been backed by 100 charity leaders and is calling for a “Charitable Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CCJRS) to retain staff and allow them to continue delivering vital charitable work” and a “Summer of Giving” to “incentivise public donations to rebuild charity finances” by doubling “Gift Aid to 50% on all donations received between 1st March and 31st August 2020”. In addition, a number of organisations have been calling for increased support around safeguarding as more and new people become at risk.

A social stimulus for the UK



It is clear that a social stimulus is needed to ensure society emerges stronger from the pandemic than it was before. Central, devolved and local governments have taken some steps towards that goal. But further steps, and more radical policies, are needed to both safeguard existing community and civic responses and to shape the outpouring of community spirit into the social foundations for the recovery.

This chapter sets out a range of policies that ministers, local government and civic and community groups themselves could adopt to that effect. It is split into the three distinct phases of the pandemic: the current lockdown, the gradual reopening of society, and the eventual recovery. It is also clear that many recommendations overlap and are mutually dependent.

Phase 1: Supporting community and civic society during lockdown

The current social distancing rules and considerable number of people self-isolating places particular pressure on communities and the civic and voluntary groups that support them. As evidenced in this document and the accompanying research, many civic organisations have repurposed their operations and staff to meet new demands, are experiencing severe funding pressures, have struggled with the government schemes designed for businesses, and are worried that volunteers and community groups are not being harnessed effectively. Therefore, we recommend a number of urgent steps that could be taken today to complement the emergency funding already announced by ministers:

Recommendation 1: Relax restrictions preventing staff furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme from volunteering to support the frontline response to the virus.

Many charities, especially small community-led organisations, are furloughing staff to avoid insolvency despite rising demand for their services. While it will not be possible or desirable for government to subsidise the wages of all voluntary sector workers in the UK while allowing them to continue to work as they were before, there is a case for furloughed charity workers being permitted to volunteer in a limited capacity to deliver services that support the frontline pandemic response. There are number of ways that

ministers could offer support to charities to redeploy furloughed staff without opening up a vast liability for the Treasury, or blurring the lines between charities and the State:

Allow furloughed staff to volunteer for a specific number of hours per week. An estimated 9% of charities employ paid staff, meaning only 16,000 charities would potentially make use of the furlough anyway. Allowing volunteering back into previous roles, but for a only specific number of hours per week, would reduce the risk to the taxpayer that charities or community groups would furlough staff except where this was absolutely necessary for financial reasons.⁹⁰ This could allow for the continuation of vital services so that people with the right expertise are able to continue working, albeit in a limited capacity.

Require directors or trustees to declare furloughed volunteering as related to the coronavirus response. The Charity Commission already uses fit and proper persons tests to assure themselves of new trustees. This system could be extended to require charity trustees to declare that any claims for furloughed volunteers' time are in line with the organisation's charitable purpose and are directed towards delivering services that support people through the crisis. The Charity Commission would ensure compliance.

Recommendation 2: Extend the Government's Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) relief scheme to include organisations who already benefit from Charitable Rate Relief (CRR).

The flexibility applied to certain businesses around SBRR, for which a 100% discount is available this year, means that community and civic organisations who would be eligible for SBRR but who in normal times applied for CRR (worth 80% of commercial rates topped up by some local authorities) may be paying business rates when commercial organisations are not.⁹¹

Recommendation 3: Offer as much flexibility as possible within existing government contracts.

The charitable and community sector is a trusted supplier of public services, at both national and local level. Many organisations gain around a third of revenue from independent funders but rely on contracts and grant funding from government sources to make up the remaining two thirds of their revenue base. This funding mix has become more prevalent in recent years given major contracting decisions, for example the Work

Programme and Transforming Rehabilitation. Government therefore has considerable ability to support organisations through its contract and procurement terms.

In order to safeguard organisations, ministers could: immediately move to monthly rather than quarterly payments to aid cash flow in voluntary organisations; relax or suspend outcome targets where justified; or pay contract fees in advance rather than in arrears. An additional measure might be to automatically extend contracts that are due to expire for three months to avoid the costs of re-tendering at a time when civic and community organisations could be focused on supporting vulnerable people.⁹²

Recommendation 4: Supplement the emergency funding package announced by HM Treasury with medium-term support from multiple sources.

The emergency funding package that the Government has announced is a welcome start, but it will not be sufficient to sustain the community and voluntary sector through to recovery. While it may be necessary for the Government to provide further stabilisation funding, we recommend that alternative ways to make funding available to charities, social enterprises and community businesses are also considered. The Government could:

- **Introduce charitable loan support.** It is welcome that charities are now exempt from the requirement that 50% of the applicant's income must be derived from its Trading Activity to access the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) introduced by HM Treasury. However, many civic organisations still face difficulties accessing this scheme due to the costs of capital applied and greater potential uncertainties than those faced by many businesses around their future revenue. There is a case for introducing a charitable equivalent of CBILS to offer interest-free financing of up to 10% of revenue to organisations with charitable or social enterprise status. Given the annual £50 billion income of the UK charitable sector, the costs of loaning 10% of turnover at 0% interest, and assuming a 50% take-up rate would be £2.5 billion. The Welsh Government scheme may provide an interesting model: it offers a 75% grant alongside a 25% interest free loan.⁹³
- **Convene endowments to voluntarily pay down a portion of their assets towards the recovery.** The combined assets of the biggest 300 endowments is £67 billion. Even accounting for the outsized contribution of the Wellcome Trust, a five per cent paydown would elicit £2 billion of immediate financing. This is not without its

challenges, not least given the effect of market turmoil on many funds and the illiquidity of many holdings, but there is an opportunity for the main financiers of community and civic activity to come together to respond to the emergency. This would not be out of the ordinary for many endowments: US funds are required to pay down five per cent of their funds each year to take advantage of tax support. Given many endowments have trusted and established networks of grantees, there is a ready-made distribution network for this funding.

- **Reform tax reliefs to incentivise donations and social investment.** Gift Aid is an established mechanism for individuals to offset their tax against donations, increasing donations to charities considerably. However, the rules around Gift Aid on corporate donations, which are paid gross without the deduction of income tax and are deductible from the company's total profits, have arguably complicated corporate giving. As corporate efforts to provide the NHS with equipment or to manufacture hand sanitizer have demonstrated, many corporations are keen to contribute to the crisis effort. Simplifying and extending incentives for corporate donations could generate considerable financial support for charities and community groups. A complementary policy would be to commit to the renewing and possibly expanding Social Investment Tax Relief (SITR), which is currently due to lapse in April 2021.
- **Temporarily remove VAT on online advertising for civic groups.** The Government could use emergency powers to temporarily remove VAT for charities advertising online to encourage more to use social media and online search advertising to fundraise during the crisis. Without live events or the ability to trade through retail and other outlets, many charities are without their main sources of fundraising and will need to use innovative routes to gain new funds.

Recommendation 5: Act now to support the mental health of individuals isolating or with reduced social contact.

As we set out previously, evidence suggests that the psychological outcomes from the crisis and lockdown are likely to include loneliness, anxiety, boredom and grief, all with well-evidenced deleterious social and economic effects on individuals and society at large. This is likely to be in both the short and long term, as the economic externalities of covid-19 mean that the effects could be long lasting. Government has acted quickly to support the physical health of the population; we must now act to support people's mental health.

We propose a kind of ‘mental health airdrop’ to help those who are already experiencing problems and prevent others at risk (e.g. the self-isolating) from slipping into difficulties. The benefits of doing this sooner rather than later would be enormous. This might include:

- **Recognising the link between mental health and feeling useful.** Volunteering is good for both the individual receiving help, and the person giving it. For many, a furlough from work will come with a lack of purpose, and the ability to feel useful in the community could be hugely beneficial.⁹⁴ We will set out what we believe should be done in more detail below, as part of our proposals on volunteering, but it is important to note that those proposals will also have positive repercussions for many people’s mental health. To support this, the Government could usefully extend the free mental health helpline established for NHS staff to include all community workers providing frontline support.
- **Rolling out nationwide access to NHS-approved digital mental health apps at no cost.** Digital solutions now exist to provide mental health support, often utilising cognitive behavioural therapy, for most conditions. A large number are already assessed by NICE and approved for use by the NHS, including Sleepio, Ieso and Big White Wall. While these solutions will not be appropriate for some more severe issues, they represent an important route to mental health for the majority of people at scale and with little direct cost. The NHS should make these apps available to everyone, for free, immediately, and advertise their availability widely. For example, GPs could use existing text messaging services to signpost these services to members of their community.
- **Reviewing how access to greater mental health support can be delivered by the civic sector and government services.** At the same time, the Minister for Mental Health should urgently consider how existing organisations, volunteering initiatives and community networks can help those at risk to access preventative mental health support during the crisis, as well as professional mental health services where these are needed. Mental health services have been moving towards a community-based setting for several years, and crisis cafes, community-based places of safety and drop-in centres offer valuable spaces in many areas for those suffering a crisis. They are now, largely, closed and those who might usually use them are isolated in their homes. The NHS should support these organisations to transition their services online wherever possible, while also considering expanding access to government mental

health support, including IAPT. This may require investment to scale Digital IAPT, which was underfunded and under-resourced by qualified professionals even before the outbreak began.

- **Consider the role of social prescribing and civic broadcasting to combat mental illness during the crisis.** While many social prescribing initiatives may be disrupted by the restrictions, it remains a tried and tested method for treating a variety of conditions. The Royal College of GPs should work with their members and the NHS to explore ways for social prescribing to be used to counteract the inevitable mental health consequences of the lockdown. In a similar vein, ministers could also work with public service broadcasters to allow more content to be made available during the pandemic to support people's mental health. This would be particularly useful in providing material that those who do not have internet or smartphones (predominantly the elderly) could access.

Recommendation 6: Provide additional support for organisations that are taking a proactive approach in countering misinformation around COVID-19.

Given the extent to which people are relying on digital networks during the lockdown, the ability to access accurate and reliable information is critical in maintaining trust within communities. The Government has already taken some welcome steps to counter misinformation. We believe more support could be provided to those civil society groups that are taking a proactive approach in this area.

Recommendation 7: Create a time-limited fast track registration process for COVID-19 charities through the Charity Commission.

The time taken to set up and register a new charity can be a burden for new organisations seeking to respond quickly to the crisis. This would enormously help groups like Meals for the NHS, for example, which raised £1 million in its first two weeks but is not able to register a charity and has therefore missed out on Gift Aid.

Phase 2: Supporting community as we emerge from the lockdown

A managed exit from the current lockdown will be enormously challenging and will need to be guided first and foremost by the latest scientific research and the need to protect our NHS from becoming overstretched. It is clear that allowing the economy to revive will be a high priority. However, within that framework there will also be political decisions to be taken about what to permit or reopen first, and many of these decisions will affect the kind of behaviours that make for a positive civic and social life.

Recommendation 8: Make strengthening the social fabric an explicit consideration when managing the end of the lockdown.

Although there are elements of our social fabric that have been strengthened in spite of the lockdown (notably the emergence of local groups supporting each other and those in need and the willingness of community groups to take activities online), in many instances this has been a bleak and difficult time for individuals and communities. The way in which the exit from the lockdown is managed has the potential either to cause further “fraying” of our social fabric, or if done well to lay the foundations for a community recovery. There are three early actions that could be taken as we exit the lockdown to help communities to recover quickly. We believe these three changes could be managed in such a way as to minimise the risk of the virus spreading excessively:

- **Reopen parks first.** Parks and green spaces are some of our most important community physical infrastructure, particularly in the summer months. They are shared spaces which can be enjoyed together, even while maintaining social distancing. It is well documented that spending time exercising and enjoying the open air is hugely beneficial for our mental health. Denying access to these spaces has had a disproportionately negative impact on those living in overcrowded or substandard housing and on those without gardens of their own. We believe parks and green spaces should be open for all uses (including any indicated under social prescribing for an individual) within the social distancing guidelines in place at any particular time. If parks and green spaces become too overcrowded, then access could be limited to particular groups at particular times of day, as has happened with supermarkets. We welcome the Government’s announcement on 18 April that all

parks should be open. However, some Local Authorities have not fully complied with the request to reopen their parks and others have closed parks since the Government's announcement - for example Middlesbrough and Bridgend.

- **Allow contact between family members as a first priority.** There is strong evidence that, in general, family ties protect individuals from myriad harms and support them to achieve health, wealth and happiness. They are often the place where social bonds are at their strongest. For many people, having to avoid seeing close family members has been one of the hardest aspects of the lockdown. Early permission for family members to visit each other (perhaps only in groups of limited numbers and perhaps while maintaining appropriate distance in the case of the vulnerable) would help enormously in reducing many people's isolation and in strengthening feelings of belonging.
- **Prioritise those supporting the vulnerable for testing.** Some of those who have found the lockdown to be the most challenging are: those without family support structures; those who live alone and already suffer from loneliness; those with pre-existing serious difficulties in their mental or physical health; and those in extremely challenging economic circumstances. It is often local charity or religious workers or local authority staff who provide vital support for these people in their day-to-day life. Even before the pandemic there would have been many people in this group who were teetering on the edge of serious crisis. Having only online or telephone contact with the outside world risks being the last straw that pushes them over the edge. To avoid disproportionate repercussions for these people, early access to COVID-19 testing should be made available to local charity workers, religious workers and local authority staff who support this group to allow them to return to direct support.

Recommendation 9: Urge local authorities to work together with all community organisations in their wards to build a network of trusted partners.

It is clear from Onward's local research that some local authorities have effectively worked through a network of community and civic organisations to reach those in need. However, others have not. We recommend that all local authorities use the crisis as a spur to work together more effectively with local groups to commission services locally and build lasting, trusting links. This would enable the local authority to better understand the response to the virus in every hyperlocal community, and to collaborate with community

groups providing support to vulnerable residents in the absence of formal council activity. The ‘Keep it Local’ initiative⁹⁵ offers a framework for working with local community organisations.

Recommendation 10: Work with telecommunication firms to radically open up digital access.

While many organisations have developed new channels and acted creatively to stay functional, the crisis has revealed the lack of digital access and technological innovation within the civic and community sector. DCMS has already secured agreement from telecommunication companies to support vulnerable customers. The Government should work to extend this commitment to ensure a wider level of access for civic and community groups. This might include options to:

- **Make digital hotspots freely available for community groups and charities or give vulnerable individuals unlimited data as a temporary measure to ensure they can find connection and support during the lockdown and its aftermath.** In the first instance, we recommend that DCMS convenes the telecommunication providers to share infrastructure, as supermarkets are doing in relation to food distribution, in order to ensure high quality digital access for as many people as possible and to look at ways companies might engage with the voluntary sector on a pro-bono basis.
- **If travel restrictions persist, re-open local library networks to give the digitally excluded access to connection.** A disproportionate number of elderly people do not have access to the internet or digital tools to connect with loved ones. One of the main ways in which the digitally excluded access services and support is through local library networks, which have been shut for at least a month. Early opening of libraries as we emerge from the lockdown - perhaps initially only to at risk groups - could help. Once testing becomes available, it may also be possible to offer COVID-19 ‘clean’ mobile library services to bring to vulnerable people in their homes and volunteers may be able to assist more in helping more people acquire the skills they need to use digital technology.

Phase 3: Building the social infrastructure to underpin the recovery

In the longer term, the crisis offers a timely reminder of the need to repair our social fabric. Meanwhile the outpouring of small acts of kindness and support in many communities speaks to the latent resource that for many years has been underappreciated and left to wither by policymakers. There is an opportunity, once the immediate crisis is over, to sustain that civic flourishing. We recommend, first and foremost, that the Government does not lose sight of this fact. It would be a tremendous waste for communities' enthusiasm and commitment to be lost. To ensure this does not happen, we recommend a number of specific steps:

Recommendation 11: Ensure that the NHS volunteer army leaves an enduring legacy of civic involvement.

The willingness of the public to volunteer to help during the COVID-19 crisis has been striking, both in terms of the immense public response to the call for volunteers to support the NHS, and the micro-level community mobilisation that has happened in many neighbourhoods. There is a real opportunity to use civic participation to supplement the governmental response and build lasting community-led networks at a local level. At the same time, there is a historic responsibility to sustain and grow volunteering, long in decline, well beyond the immediate crisis and in places where the social fabric is weakest.

Other schemes, both in this country and abroad, provide inspiration. These include: the 2012 Olympic Gamesmakers; the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership; and the establishment of AmeriCorps in the United States, from which Teach for America and other schemes span out. While these schemes are all centralised, the government should try to instill a culture of local volunteering, in communities themselves, rather than try to manage a national database of volunteers from Whitehall. One way to do this would be to decentralise the GoodSAM App over time, to allow communities to match volunteers to civic demand in their local areas. It could also be opened up more widely to community groups and charities so that they can post jobs and different tiers of involvement could be introduced, from 'odd jobs' to longer-term commitments such as mentoring vulnerable young people.

Recommendation 12: Launch a Community Recovery Fund.

Launch a Community Recovery Fund, with every £1 donated by members of the public, companies and philanthropic endowments matched by HM Treasury. We propose a national call to arms, along the lines of big fundraising programmes like Live Aid. This could build on the match funding commitment given by the Government to the BBC's *Big Night In* initiative, but with a specific goal to support the national recovery. We believe this fund would work best with a big, ambitious, target of donations, such as £1 billion⁹⁶, with clear characteristics to ensure long-term success:

- The fund should be an independent endowment, not government-owned, along the lines of existing proposals for a Community Wealth Fund, which are supported by an Alliance of over 200 civil society, public and private sector organisations.
- The money raised could be open to all types of organisations across civil society but with a particular focus on building resilience in vulnerable communities and places where networks are currently weak or non-existent.
- While the fundraising should be driven as a high-profile, national campaign, the delivery and distribution of the money would be best made as local as possible, according to community priorities. This would ensure that the funding gets to where it is most needed and is equitably spent.

Potential sources of funding that the Government could tap into include: the £1 billion underspend in the European Social Fund⁹⁷, for which precedent exists in the form of EU permission for cohesion funds to be used to fight COVID-19⁹⁸; the £600m of dormant assets identified by the independent report by industry champions and highlighted by Rob Wilson⁹⁹, the former charities minister; or the £500 million¹⁰⁰ accrued in the National Fund since its establishment after an anonymous donation at the end of the First World War.¹⁰¹

Recommendation 13: Introduce a post-COVID 19 mental health vigilance programme to help track the progress of post-traumatic stress disorder in the community and offer targeted interventions.

This could be developed in a similar way to the mental health programme launched to help those affected by the Grenfell Tower disaster and draw on lessons learned through that programme.

Recommendation 14: Create a What Works Centre for Community Strength.

This could be based on the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth or build upon the work that the Young Foundation is doing to rebuild the Institute for Community Studies. There are a number of research projects already looking specifically at issues of importance to our social fabric that have arisen from the COVID-19 crisis. Having a science-based centre that could institutionalise the lessons learned would be a valuable way of ensuring that social resilience is built for the future.

Recommendation 15: Use the honours system to recognise the contribution of people during the COVID-19 crisis.

There are and will continue to be many people across the country who, in a myriad of different ways, are helping in the battle against COVID-19. Some will be picked up on and recognised in the media, for example Captain Tom's fundraising appeal for the NHS, but many more will not be. We recommend that the Government uses the honours system to canvas the public for coronavirus heroes who should be recognised for their outstanding contribution. This would undoubtedly include many key workers, not least those tirelessly working in the NHS, but would also include those who have supported communities directly. As with other initiatives, we believe this initiative should have a particular focus on actions taken to help vulnerable or left-behind communities.

Conclusion



This crisis has shown the best in society at the worst of times. The actions of many people and organisations in communities up and down the country have supported the most vulnerable and helped prevent a public health crisis becoming a crisis of connection. But it has also revealed some of the weaknesses in our social fabric, and the need to pay far greater heed to the institutions and networks that underpin our places in future.

The pandemic should therefore be the start of a national conversation, about what kind of society we want to live in and how we can strengthen the ties that bind us together at a local level. This conversation should take inspiration from other initiatives, for example the Weave Project, initiated by the Aspen Institute and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, to champion those people and organisations, including nonprofits, schools, libraries, activist groups, media, and businesses, who weave together the fabric of society.

Because this crisis will not be the last. It may only be the first wave of this pandemic. It is essential we strengthen the civic and social infrastructure to ensure we are more resilient and better equipped for the next crisis.

Annex 1

Repairing our Social Fabric programme



For those fortunate enough to avoid the disease, the daily battle against COVID-19 is being waged on micro-scale in thousands of communities across the UK. It is fought through acts of kindness, compassion and mutual support: reaching out to vulnerable neighbours, donations to local food banks, and the reliance on friends and neighbours to follow social distancing. While the circumstances are not ones that any of us would choose, there are signs of the rebirth of civic activity after years of decline.

As highlighted in Onward's *Repairing our Social Fabric* launch paper, there have been widespread concerns across the Western world that public spaces are dying, civic institutions are decaying, and social relationships - the family, the workplace, the neighbourhood - are fragmenting. Many people no longer put down roots in the same way as they did previously: home ownership is only just beginning to rise again after 15 years of decline, fewer people settle in a single area, and levels of cultural and civic participation are in decline. However, as the last few weeks have shown, Britain comes together in a crisis. There are weekly claps for carers, a three times oversubscribed NHS volunteers scheme, the 100 year-old war veteran Captain Tom Moore who has raised over £30 million for NHS charities (and became an honorary colonel in recognition of his achievement), and spontaneous acts of kindness found daily in local newspapers. These welcome responses are perhaps something we might not have expected when Onward's previous polling found that 71% of people believe that community has declined over their lifetime.¹⁰²

The civic response to the crisis is as significant as the health and economic responses. Consequently, it is essential to both understand the role communities are playing in the crisis and to make sure they are supported properly to provide the support that so many people urgently need. And yet community and belonging are contested concepts; there is little agreement on which elements of it matter, much less how to revive it in the places and among the people where it is in decline. This is partly because community is both imagined - a complex and interrelated web of feelings, relationships and personal commitments - and real - the places, institutions and activities that substantiate our sense of belonging. Community strength has also proved hard to measure: the threads of our Social Fabric stretch from bingo halls, mum and baby groups and working men's clubs to cricket pitches, school governing bodies and the family dinner table.

The purpose of the *Repairing our Social Fabric* study is to go back to communities, to understand how they are changing, which features are especially valued or important, and where policy action or political leadership can strengthen community. Unlike other

studies, it will not only diagnose problems but provide options for reform and remedial action, giving policymakers a series of practical, popular and evidence-based steps to reimagine and renew Britain's social fabric. We expect many of these solutions to come directly from communities themselves, drawn from in-depth qualitative work in different communities in all four nations of the United Kingdom.

Six threads of social fabric

The research done as part of the *Repairing our Social Fabric* programme has led to the conclusion that six aspects are particularly important to ordinary people and essential to understanding what is happening in local communities. These six threads provide a conceptual framework that is highly germane to thinking about how communities are responding to the current crisis. As it is an extensive description of what makes up a community today, this taxonomy should be an invaluable tool for understanding how exhaustive policy to support communities through Covid-19 is, and where possible gaps are:

1. **Relationships.** The membership of formal groups in a community and their participation in activities with many people. Examples include volunteering, charitable giving and membership of community organisations. Many communities rely on the older generation as the backbone of volunteering in the area, however with this group being at particular risk of Covid-19 it is important to understand how these communities are mobilising other individuals. Although there have been many organisations set up in the wake of Covid-19, many existing organisations have had to pivot resources and activities to meet new needs. Therefore, understanding how new patterns of relationships are forming, and how they relate to existing ones, is important.
2. **Physical infrastructure.** The physical resources and infrastructure that are present in communities which facilitate, structure and organise people within a community. These are critical to the facilitation of community activity of all kinds. However, due to social distancing measures people are having to reimagine the infrastructure over which they deliver services. Digital technologies are thrust to centre stage, but access to these is not evenly distributed across the population, raising issues of equality.

3. **Civic institutions.** The health of democracy and governance at both the local and national level in the community. We will look at the quality, trust and satisfaction of people with public institutions in the community in which they live. Examples include: locally provided services, local influence of local and national decision-making and contact with official representatives. Many communities are basing COVID-19 support around local government services,¹⁰³ with the council acting as a signposting body to ensure there are no repeat services and those who need help get it. The quality of their relationships both upwards, with devolved and national government, as well as downwards, to parish or town councils and civic groups, will be critical to how well communities respond.
4. **Economic value.** The tangible assets which hold a monetary and/or economic value to an individual or family within a community. Examples include: stable housing, industry, occupation, type of employment, skills and training, income and other life expenditures. Many of these factors have an impact on the ability of people to react to a crisis. Areas with differing economic strengths will require different responses.
5. **Cultural behaviours.** The personal well-being and cultural attitudes on everyday life, society and living structures of the people in a community. This includes people's wider habits, such as marriage and relationships, life satisfaction, household structure, crime, health, education, social trust, drugs, alcohol and smoking. Pre-existing cultural factors impact on willingness to help out in their community, either through giving of time, money or other contributions. As funding tightens, community organisations will rely on volunteers more than ever and so an understanding of current willingness to help, as well as future trends, is crucial.
6. **Pride and belonging.** The identification with, and feeling of belonging to, a neighbourhood area, friends and family. This is different from other aspects as it considers the feelings of individuals regarding their immediate local area, neighbourhood and neighbours, as well as the prevalence of social isolation, the diversity of the community, neighbourhood satisfaction, neighbourhood safety, trust between neighbours, and settledness. This could indicate to areas particularly likely to rally round at-risk individuals and those that may need more support to do so.

Annex 2

List of expert participants



We are very grateful for the ideas and input of all the experts who have participated in this project, including:

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Matt Leach, Chief Executive, Local Trust

Vidhya Alakeson, Chief Executive, Power to Change

Will Somerville, UK Director, Unbound Philanthropy

Endnotes



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