

# Community in a time of coronavirus

*How different local areas are responding to the pandemic  
and government restrictions*



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ONWARD >

# About Onward

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## Thanks

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# Summary of the findings



The outbreak of coronavirus and the accompanying social distancing restrictions have fundamentally changed the fabric of society. The vast majority of people are self-isolating in their homes, most shared spaces in the community are closed, and much civic infrastructure has had to radically adapt to the new normal. The explosion in mutual aid in neighbourhoods, local philanthropy and formal volunteering, most visibly in the NHS Volunteer Responder Scheme, are all testament to the underlying strength of the social fabric.

There are risks, however, that this social revival is both poorly distributed and limited, with benefits felt in some places and not others and the outpouring of mutual support lost if not harnessed effectively. To explore how people are responding on the front line in communities, and to understand the challenges and opportunities during the pandemic, Onward undertook an extensive series of qualitative interviews with local civic and community leaders in three places we are working with as part of Onward's landmark *Repairing our Social Fabric* programme: Govan in Glasgow, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, and the coastal town of Grimsby.

While all are traditional working-class areas, these places have markedly different communities with distinct local traditions and varying levels of social infrastructure. Glasgow, as a major global city, has experienced strong growth in recent years and shaken off its previous reputation for problems around public health and crime, although high levels of deprivation remain in some areas. Barking and Dagenham is London's poorest borough and has one of the fastest-changing populations in the UK, with high levels of migrant settlement and multiple-occupancy housing. The town of Grimsby is a poster-child for the kind of "left behind" town that suffered from de-industrialisation in recent decades and has expressed frustration at the ballot box.

They have also responded to the crisis in different ways. In Glasgow, our findings suggest that the response has been almost entirely bottom up, led by grassroots groups and without much recourse to local government. In Barking and Dagenham, the opposite was the case: the local authority coordinated established charities and local activity through the Barking and Dagenham Citizens Alliance Network (BD Can) initiative and acted as a portal for people to access local groups and services. In Grimsby, there was a hybrid response, whereby the local authority worked through civil society groups to coordinate volunteering, for example, while taking responsibility for other services.

In general, the experience of these places in the first month of the pandemic offer considerable hope but also reasons for concern. In all three locations, civic society groups have rapidly come together, adapted their operations, and found new ways to support the most vulnerable in society. However, in all three areas, we found a number of shared challenges that are worrying local groups, and some clear opportunities to improve the response and secure greater community resilience after the crisis.

# Key challenges and opportunities



- **In the first three weeks of restrictions, the greatest issue of concern was the elderly and vulnerable.** In all three locations, local charities and community groups had tailored responses towards older and vulnerable people they deemed most in need. In Grimsby and Barking and Dagenham, local leaders concentrated on services such as food deliveries, prescriptions and supportive phone calls, much of which had not been offered before. In Glasgow, we found that local leaders took a broader view of vulnerability, to include anyone who could face social isolation.
- **This is compounded by growing concern about the mental health effects of self-isolation.** In all three locations, people referred to the mental health risks from a prolonged period of lockdown, both during the crisis itself and in the longer term. In Grimsby and Barking and Dagenham, activity packages, helplines and socially distant chats and check-ins during food and prescription deliveries have been established to combat this. In Barking and Dagenham, a number of local leaders voiced concerns for members of the community “invisible” to social services, domestic violence victims or refugees.
- **However, the economic impact of the virus weighs almost as heavily as the health impact.** It was notable the extent to which civic leaders in all three areas were worried about the effect of virus on jobs, wages and those in flexible employment. Many expressed concerns for those most in need, including those furloughed, being made redundant and on zero-hour contracts. This was particularly a concern in Grimsby, which had higher levels of precarious work before the crisis began, as a leader of a mutual aid group remarked: “So many people are on zero-hour contracts and temporary contracts... those people will struggle to pay rent and buy food if this continues for a number of months.” In Barking and Dagenham, people were worried about the effect after lockdown and the risk of recession.
- **Many organisations are balancing impossible trade-offs between short term need and long-term financial sustainability.** We heard many stories of local charities and community groups not furloughing staff and “instead have redirected them to help the wider community, but this will have an effect on our finances down the line.” In many cases, the response to COVID-19 has meant putting the present danger before future financial security. One local children’s charity said “We have lost £35 million in three weeks from closing their [charity] shops”. Unlike Barking and Dagenham and Grimsby, many voluntary groups in Glasgow appeared to be relatively secure, with their main asset being volunteers and time.

- **Coordination problems have bedevilled the local response.** A leader of a local emergency response group said that coordination between “central government and local authorities has not been good, not updated and [we have] people on standby and ready to go. The people that count are getting their support, but this is where people get missed...We don't want people to fall through the gaps.” In both Glasgow and Grimsby, people urged local government to take a more hands-on approach to coordinating what was happening on the ground, including better guidance on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), funding grants, and organisational assistance for local actors. Many voiced the need for updated information, resources and messaging for the community and volunteers and that there is a clear disconnect between the ready supply of volunteers and information about how they can be used. In contrast, people in Barking and Dagenham spoke positively about the coordinating role that the council has taken in building a network of civic providers, and issuing authorisation for essential civic activity to continue during lockdown.
- **There remain problems with safeguarding checks.** Despite legislation now allowing rapid DBS checks, there remains a lack of clarity around the use of DBS checks for safeguarding. In Grimsby, one voluntary organisation was running its own self-styled volunteer accreditation, using a registration form, photographic ID and recent utility bill. In Barking and Dagenham, local groups were frustrated by the lack of coordination over local DBS checks. The result in all three locations was that many local groups and civil society organisations have largely relied upon existing, known volunteers instead of new volunteers.
- **Despite these issues, local leaders want to sustain a positive legacy after the immediate crisis.** Many felt that the pandemic had brought the community together and had given them the “opportunity to show that we are here to support everyone and we are part of this community response.” We identified a strong desire for the community spirit and cooperation needs to be sustained in the longer term, summed up by a lead volunteer in Glasgow: “we have built such a positive community... and it doesn't have to just be about this pandemic.” This is partly because, as one charity chief executive remarked, “the needs aren't going away, all the needs that the voluntary and charity sector focus on are still here, Coronavirus or not.”
- **This is partly a reflection of the huge latent pool of volunteers waiting to be harnessed.** In all three locations, volunteers have been the driving force behind the local response, with large numbers of local people mobilising at scale and pace.

However, the existing social and civic infrastructure is not set up to utilise this voluntary resource. In Glasgow, some groups felt overwhelmed with the number of volunteers. In Grimsby, local civic leaders worried about not using volunteers as best as they could. This lack of capacity meant some were urging self-generated activity: “We are encouraging community spirit, suggesting people phone each other to beat the isolation and the loneliness, especially at this very difficult time when people are losing loved ones.”

- **Many organisations see the pandemic as the jolt towards new ways of working.** There was general consensus in the communities that the pandemic would have long lasting effects on the working practices of local organisations. Many spoke of how they will be incorporating digital and remote ways of working to increase efficiency and others were warm to the idea of using digital tools to supplement face-to-face contact with their communities. A chief executive of a local community hub revealed: “we have found people that we didn't know of, who in the past maybe have not fit in the normal communication structure and channels and we need to think a little harder about how we reach out to the community.”

# How different areas have responded



The following chapter summarises the discussion from qualitative research interviews with local civic leaders, who are coordinating the response to coronavirus in communities in Glasgow, Grimsby and Barking and Dagenham. Their quotes have been anonymised but are included verbatim.

## **Methodology**

This project forms part of Onward's two-year *Repairing our Social Fabric* programme, which will explore the changing nature of community in Britain today. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many communities to come together to support each other and for many to rely on the social fabric for basic supplies or social support.

To explore how people are responding to COVID-19 at a local level, and the support being offered to the community, Onward conducted a series of qualitative research interviews in three locations we are working with as part of the ongoing programme. Using established links to the local council and local networks, we drew up a list of civic organisations and local groups in each place.

In selecting groups to interview, we attempted to capture a variety of responses on the ground. Some of our interviewees were established organisations. Others had spontaneously emerged in response to the crisis. They focused on a wide range of issues, including homelessness services, peer-to-peer support services and community shops and services, as well as mutual aid groups. In terms of areas of interest, the organisations we spoke to were mostly focused on supporting the most vulnerable individuals in their respective communities.

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each, followed a consistent discussion guide, and were conducted between 26 March 2020 and 17 April 2020, covering the first three weeks of lockdown.

## Glasgow

In Glasgow, we found that the social response has been characterised by informal participation of volunteers, newly formed community groups and support from established businesses and civic organisations. These groups have been providing vital assistance such as food, signposting vulnerable individuals and information during the crisis, alongside local government activity that has focused more on ‘shielding’ vulnerable individuals.

In every example we came across, no matter how big or small, it was clear the official response has depended on grassroots activity in facilitating services and mobilising people in the local area. In particular, we found that:

- **Online mutual aid groups quickly self-organised to support the community.** The presence of newly-formed volunteer organisations and online groups was a defining feature of the community response in Glasgow. Most of the civic leaders and volunteers that we spoke to stressed that the new community support effort seen in Glasgow was out of necessity and because of the absence of local community support or lack of existing social infrastructure in the locality of Govan. The people who set up the groups spoke of the need to do something to help. One volunteer leader said: “I was sitting there and I was there feeling scared and [saw there] was a way out of this, to do something.” Another said: “I am very aware it is something I can do, and capable of doing, I understand what is going on and I don’t panic. It will help people get through this which means it helps me get through this.” Another reported: “[I set my group up] out of need, there were people struggling and people there ready to help...to help the community come together.”
- **This meant that local people, not established organisations, became the cornerstone of the response.** There was considerable interest from local people coming forward to volunteer for their community. One volunteer group leader said: “It [the recruitment process] has been really easy, as there are lots and lots of people out there desperate to help”. Another agreed: “We have been overwhelmed by volunteers, we can now process them much faster, the response has been great and we have loads”. The organisations we spoke to successfully used a combination of offline (leaflets, posters and banners) and online (Facebook and Whatsapp groups) resources, as a means of recruiting volunteers. However, only offline resources were

effective in reaching the most vulnerable people in the community, who did not typically have access to the internet or the necessary digital tools.

- **The restrictions have forced new ways of working but modern technology has been instrumental in helping local people response.** The outbreak of COVID-19 has entailed a demanding transition for many local organisations, charities and community groups: many were forced to shift to remote working with little notice or pivot their services to virus-related activity rather than previously core work. People have been pragmatic, as one chief executive of a charity said: “we have just had to adapt and change the way we interact with people” and “we changed quickly once the restrictions were announced”. And others have used the changes to challenge the efficacy of their existing models: “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?” Another chief executive of a charity said: “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.”
- **There is considerable concern about rising demand for food banks.** Much of the social response on the ground has centred around the hyper-localised delivery of food, prescriptions and signposting to services for people most in need. However, access to food for the most vulnerable and worries over food supply has proved an enduring problem in Glasgow. Demand has grown for food banks just as supply has been disrupted, due in part to restrictions and social distancing measures. One third sector worker said: “A normal food bank is used to having a few hundred people a week, those figures have tripled or quadrupled and the amount of food donations has reduced.” The same worker worried that “we are hearing folk saying they haven't had food in four days as they can't get out of the house and we don't know how to get somebody to help them.”

## Grimsby

In Grimsby, the response to the virus can be characterised as a hybrid effort between the local authority, civic society, and pop-up mutual aid groups. The local authority has been primarily focused on the most vulnerable population, but has worked through a collaborative network of local charities and newly formed groups to deliver wider services. This on-the-ground effort has relied heavily on the mobilisation of community assets in the form of an existing roster of volunteers, newfound community spirit and good relations between local civil society organisations.

- **The crisis has led to more collaboration between communities, businesses, and charities.** The response in Grimsby has built and grown existing partnerships between different groups, including the North East Lincolnshire Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Alliance. Originally created to foster collaboration and support for civil society, it has enabled different organisations to coordinate their response and mobilise together. As a managing director of a local organisation said: “A lot of our sector would have been unprepared... Community infrastructure is not there and getting people to take part in social action on the ground is difficult. But this [alliance] has changed things.” Others suggested that the partnership would leave a legacy: “Our partnership working is extremely strong and COVID-19 can make it stronger still. The social action projects will naturally occur now...there is a real value in that and beyond this present set of circumstances.”
- **Local volunteers have led the delivery of food and medicine to the frontline.** Community volunteers and charities have focused on community tasks, such as shopping, food delivery and prescriptions, as well as offering phone befriending and chat groups. Those that we interviewed spoke of a difficult and sometimes underappreciated task. A local volunteer said: “We have stepped up, it has been us the community dragging it [the response] forward.” Many organisations set up rapidly in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown, showing how speed is a key advantage of community responses. The managing director of a local charity said: “Less than 48 hours from real to remote... same for the other way round when we return to normal operations.”
- **Community groups have acted as trusted conduits between communities and local services.** Local people in Grimsby established a number of mutual aid groups to support local people, which have mediated information on the virus and services for

the vulnerable. However other groups have taken on a more direct function. For example, one organisation has taken on delegated responsibility for the recruitment of volunteers on behalf of the local authority, adopting a two-tier system of enhanced volunteers with DBS checks to handle medical and cash related activity, and non-DBS checked volunteers focused on deliveries. By taking safeguarding checks into their own hands, the operations manager said: “You hear stories of some individuals taking advantage of offering shopping, but taking the money. It is theft and people are joining with no good intentions. I request a registration form to filter people out, photographic ID and recent bill.”

- **Many hoped that the community action would continue.** Almost all of the respondents we spoke to in Grimsby held up the long-term community ‘legacy’ that could be built from the crisis. This was exemplified by the chief executive officer of a local community hub who said: “Looking at the other end of this... we need to think about how we do something now that builds on people coming together and recognise the strength that community has shown and make sure that is not lost and the sense of spirit.” There was also a sense that the crisis has reaffirmed the purpose of some organisations. A chief executive of a local foundation said: “The core of our organisation is people-led, people focused and will always remain the same and our commitment is to the local people.”

## Barking and Dagenham

Unlike Glasgow and Grimsby, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham did not witness a flurry of mutual aid groups being set up in response to the outbreak. Instead, the borough's response centred on the coordinating role of the local authority, building on plans in gestation for several years. These efforts leveraged the coordinating power of the local authority but harnessed the local networks, volunteers and relationships of charities, the local mosque, and community organisations.

- **The local authority acted as the lynchpin for the community response.** The local authority brought forward the planned launch of the 'BD Can' network by a month, and used it to create a web of support through trusted community and charitable organisations. At the centre of this has been the use of known and established organisations. One civic leader said: "We only use people we know already. If we just need people to unpack boxes they don't need to be DBS checked, for example, so that could be a way of working with new volunteers." Another chief executive of a charity remarked: "Whenever you don't know the people helping I think that is a concern ... but I think you will find there are more people out there that want to do good than bad".
- **Demand on local civic organisations has risen, especially from the most vulnerable in the community.** The priority of many local organisations, groups and charities has been to support the most vulnerable during the crisis, primarily through food and medicine deliveries. As one charity worker put it, "immediately we need to support those in need by distributing food, medicine and truthful information. People can't be left in the dark." One mutual aid group convener said: "I have been so impressed by the amount of people that have gone out of their way to buy food and medicine for people they would never have come across if it wasn't for this group." However, in many cases, existing local groups have had to suspend ordinary operations to extend their reach and redirect resources to vulnerable groups that they did not already cater to. One charity leader said: "I could have furloughed more staff, but I have kept them on to help in other ways across the community."
- **More people are coming forward to volunteer for their community.** We found that there has been an unprecedented level of informal volunteering in the last month, from both existing and new volunteers, and online and offline. Supply of volunteers was not the challenge, rather many local groups and third sector organisations felt

they were only able to rely on known volunteers due to the nature of work and the vulnerable people that they serve. There was optimism that the surge in voluntary activity would continue. One said: “If we work this right, we can see an advancement in the social fabric rather than a further degradation of it”. Another leader of a mutual aid group said: “I’m hoping this will carry on. Especially after Brexit as Barking and Dagenham is very multicultural, there was this element of people being a bit aggressive with each other, there was animosity. It is an awful thing this virus but, at the end of it, it might just bring people together.”

- **Local organisations have embraced a new way of working.** Across the local organisations and charities we spoke to, many had closed physical premises and changed the way that they provided services to the local community in response to government advice on social distancing measures. One charity worker said: “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.” Many charities focused on providing an online space to continue supporting the most vulnerable individuals in the community - the elderly, disabled, young, faith and ethnic groups. In other cases, many stopped offering their traditional services altogether to help support the community effort against COVID-19.

# Conclusion



These qualitative interviews are necessarily a partial perspective on a fast-moving and complex public health crisis. But the experiences they reveal offer a valuable insight into the activities of local civic and community groups on the ground, and the challenges they are encountering.

It is impossible to read these interviews and not be struck by the ingenuity and commitment of people to the people they live among. The crisis has undoubtedly brought about a renewed sense of community. It has also exposed the challenges of coordination, funding and guidance for many organisations operating in a markedly different, and more difficult, environment. There are many lessons to be learned, and quickly.

It is clear there is enormous latent potential in Britain's communities that is not yet being leveraged. Confusion around DBS is preventing many organisations from deploying volunteers they do not know. A lack of coordination between local and central government and civic organisations means volunteers are not being targeted at demand. And the perennial issue of funding means many organisations are struggling to balance the immediate needs of their community with their institutional future.

The differing approaches in different areas expose the way existing social infrastructure is making some places more, and less, resilient to the disease. In Barking and Dagenham, the local area has stood up an effective response through a well-established network of trusted organisations. Govan in Glasgow has not had that luxury. Grimsby has some civic resources but they are not yet as coordinated as they might be. This is compounded, it appears, by the relationship between government and civic organisations. As a leader of a local mosque said: "There tends to be a paternalistic relationship between organisations and local and central government. This crisis has shown that they need us possibly even more than we need them and they should start recognising us as equal partners."

Finally, people are essentially optimistic about the legacy from this crisis. This may change, as the restrictions wear on, but for now there is general positivity about the outpouring of community spirit, true in all of the areas we studied. As an operations manager of a local group said: "When this is all over and there is a sense of normality, you would hope that there is a legacy with the sense of community that has been built and the way that people are looked after each other now." That is the enduring challenge for policymakers and civic leaders.

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