

June 2020

# How is COVID-19 changing the relationship between communities and public services?

This report summarises findings from an event held with the New Local Government Network (NLGN) on the changing relationship between communities and public services during and beyond COVID-19.

The pandemic has shown that communities are often best placed to confront crises at a local level through their deep knowledge of local needs, and existing relationships and networks. As a result, many have been called on by public services to support aid efforts. Local Trust asked NLGN to guest-host a discussion which considered what we can learn from the developments during COVID-19 to inform policy and practice in the future. The session explored how community responses to COVID-19 might disrupt the current relationship between communities and public services and how they could begin to shape a different dynamic in which residents have more power and control over what happens in their area.

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## Key points

- In local pandemic responses, the partnership between public services and communities has become stronger.
- Digital technology is bringing public services and communities closer together.
- Sector lines have become blurred, with local businesses stepping up to help public services and fellow members of the community.
- Community activism has gone viral. It presents a real opportunity for public services and communities to unlock community power.

# Introduction

On 14<sup>th</sup> May, Local Trust and NLGN partnered to host an online panel discussion on the question of “**How is COVID-19 changing the relationship between communities and public services?**”.

We heard from the following panellists:

- Adam Lent - Director, NLGN (chaired the discussion)
- Maddy Pritchard – Chair, Big Warsop
- Jon Alexander – Director of the New Citizenship Project
- Amanda Askham – Director of Business Improvement and Development, Cambridgeshire County Council
- Helen Buckingham - Director of Strategy and Operations, Nuffield Trust

The COVID crisis has forced the state to repower itself, and to intervene positively in society in ways unseen in the last decade. On the front line, public service working practices are being forced to evolve rapidly, both to meet new needs and to work around new risks.

In the community sector, the pandemic has led to an upsurge in neighbourly activity, expressed most formally through the creation of a network of Mutual Aid Groups, which cover the length and breadth of the nation, and are ensuring that the most vulnerable receive the support they need in the period of lockdown.

If both public services and communities are being transformed by this crisis, then it seems only logical to assume that the relationship between the two of them will also be evolving.

## Context

This evolution, however, is not taking place in a vacuum. The ten years leading up to the crisis were themselves a time in which the relationship between communities and public services was altered significantly. A decade of public sector austerity had two principle effects in this regard:

1. A major focus of cuts was to increase public service ‘efficiency’. This meant significant cuts to [preventative](#) services – itself meaning that services became things only interacted with in times of acute need.
2. Universal services, such as the NHS, received [relative protection](#) from austerity. Consequently, the burden of ‘balancing the books’ fell to more focussed service offers, with smaller, local, and often deprived communities feeling the cuts most [severely](#).

In many ways, the era of austerity can be seen as the peak of what NLGN has called “[the market paradigm](#)” of public service delivery. **It prioritises “choice” for the public, and treats them primarily as consumers.** Despite this potentially egalitarian logic, it also retains many of the [paternalistic practices](#) of previous, state-led modes of public service delivery – and has been critiqued for lacking an understanding of the importance of “[kindness, emotions and human relationships](#)” in public policy. In recognition of these issues with the current

relationship between services and community, critiques have developed that call for two principle actions:

1. Some – [as exemplified in this report from the Kings Fund](#) – are calling to transform the relationship by [empowering frontline staff within public services](#), freeing them from bureaucratic constraints and allowing them to be more person-centred and collaborative in their approaches.
2. Others, such as NLGN, have sought to directly rebalance where power lies between communities and services by calling for “[a community paradigm](#)” in service delivery. This is a [vision](#) of **a new kind of state built around localisation, devolution and deliberation**, in which communities have the power to shape the commissioning, design and delivery of services.

## Discussion: How is COVID-19 changing the relationship between communities and public services?

There are four main changes in the relationship between public services and communities that we have observed during the COVID-19 crisis so far:

### **1. In local pandemic responses, the partnership between public services and communities has become stronger.**

During the COVID-19 outbreak, most local public organisations have adopted the role of response coordinators rather than directors. They are collaborating with community groups and supporting their work rather than seeking to centralise local responses.

In our event, Amanda Askham spoke of the galvanising effect of people working against a common threat with “shared purpose” and a “consistent battle rhythm.” Maddy Pritchard highlighted the “real sense of pride” communities are feeling in developing initiatives that help others.

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These range from delivery of food to shielded households to street-level befriending schemes. Public services are supporting these initiatives in various ways, such as [County Durham's fire service helping a local organisation deliver meals and food boxes](#) to people in need; and councils like [Croydon](#) and [Tewkesbury](#) setting up new grant schemes for community and voluntary groups responding to COVID-19.

A strong foundation is being developed for public services and communities to continue their closer partnership-working after the pandemic. In our event, Helen Buckingham remarked that the NHS is currently “closer to the public than ever before”, and that it should use people's trust in clinicians to “help build relationships more directly” with communities.

## **2. Digital technology is bringing public services and communities closer together.**

For public services, the imperative to act quickly in response to the pandemic has brought fundamental change in only a few weeks. In our event, Helen Buckingham described how the NHS has changed “almost out of all recognition” in the last three months by rapidly enabling online consultations.

The digital switchover during this crisis is already beginning to change the relationship between public services and communities. Firstly, it has (re-)created a preventative approach to public services, enabling people who are not in crisis but in need of some support to help themselves. For example, Kingston Council's Adult Education service [moved its wellbeing sessions online](#) so that people experiencing anxiety in lockdown could benefit from them.

Secondly, technology is helping public service organisations listen to communities. Adur & Worthing Councils are using technology to [analyse data on residents' requests for support](#) and shape their local response.

Thirdly, public organisations are being more creative with social media. From Doncaster Council's [viral Twitter messages](#) explaining social distancing guidance to Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council's Public Health Team tweeting [simple recipe ideas](#), public organisations are revealing a less aloof and more human side in their communications with residents.

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Public organisations will need to continue ensuring that [communities with relatively low internet usage](#) have access to communications in other formats. But their growing confidence in using digital technology will benefit public services and communities for the long term.

## **3. Sector lines have become blurred, with local businesses stepping up to help public services and fellow members of the community.**

In our event, Amanda Askham encouraged the audience to think of businesses in terms of people rather than sectors, as public organisations, businesses and communities are all part of the “fabric of our civil society”.

The impulse to act for the public good has proven particularly strong in small businesses, many of which are based in one location and whose staff and services are rooted in the local community. A few examples: local businesses are working in partnership with Adur & Worthing Councils to [support people presenting as homeless](#); businesses [provided equipment](#) to Gateshead Council officers to help them protect key workers on the COVID-19 frontline; and many small traders have adapted their services to offer home deliveries in their community.

How to revive local economies after the pandemic? In our event, Jon Alexander warned against reverting to business-as-usual approaches. Instead, the UK could turn to [the 'citizen story'](#), where communities reclaim agency and there is “joyful potential” for local businesses to thrive. This will require a significant long-term change in shopping habits and procurement practices, but the reward may be more resilient local economies that are better organised to retain wealth in the community.

## **4. Community activism has gone viral. It presents a real opportunity for public services and communities to unlock community power.**

The pandemic and local responses to it have generated renewed enthusiasm for volunteering and community activism. There is real potential to convert this COVID-19-inspired public altruism into a new drive for community power. As NLGN highlighted in its [pre-event blog](#):

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"If people have got to know their neighbours through community initiatives during the crisis, they are not going to un-know them just because the lockdown ends. Community bonds and infrastructure created today may change as the times do, but they will not disappear."

When lockdown was announced, community organisations and mutual aid groups were among the first to respond. For example, [Brinnington Big Local](#) in Stockport decided to keep their community hub open, despite social distancing concerns, and were inundated with food donations from people and businesses to distribute to those in need.

For public organisations, nurturing community activism means listening to communities better. The crisis has demonstrated that all communities are part of networks in some way, even if those networks have historically been 'hard-to-reach' for the public sector. In our event, Amanda Askham said that councils will need to "step back a bit and leave space" for civil society to flourish. Helen Buckingham agreed that the NHS must "learn to listen" and build a more "longitudinal relationship" with communities to hear their "needs and wants and fears." Maddy Pritchard urged public organisations not to survey and consult communities "to death", but to talk directly to them and support them to take on more ownership of their lives and places.

## What next?

For those who want to see the relationship between public services and communities transformed into something more democratic, the shifts described above offer some cause for optimism. The crisis has stretched state capacity to its limit, and community power has become crucial in responding to the pandemic.

This could lead to some kind of permanent reset of the relationship between these two forces. However, this happening is contingent on various factors, including:

1. The level of desire in the state to avoid returning to 'business as usual' after the crisis. Engrained ways of working often find ways of reasserting themselves, unless there is an active effort to change, including reflection on and reform of the attitudes and practices that underpin the status-quo.
2. The extent to which the state creates space for communities. Once the immediate crisis abates, the state should not simply retreat and create a vacuum. However, it should shift from trying simply to provide for communities, to thinking about how it can facilitate and support them as well. In so doing, communities can be offered both the space and the resources needed to thrive.

At this stage then, the outlook is uncertain. The crisis has created the conditions for a reset in the relationship between services and communities – but seizing this opportunity will require specific efforts from policy makers going forward.

These should include:

- **Retaining the benefits of digital public services:** Adapting public services to online platforms during the COVID-19 outbreak is enabling a more preventative 'help you to help yourself' model of service delivery. But people will not be able to benefit from this if they cannot access online services. Policymakers at national and local levels should prioritise digital connectivity in post-pandemic planning so that everyone in the country has access to the internet at a good broadband speed and the skills to complete basic tasks online.
- **Enabling community power:** The COVID-19 outbreak has seen people from all walks of life play an active role in their community response and get to know their neighbours better. Their appetite for volunteering in the community and having a say in what happens in their place will not disappear as the pandemic subsides. Public services should now nurture and support community power and work closely with communities at all times rather than on an ad-hoc basis. Local responses to COVID-19 have demonstrated that public services and communities working in partnership are a force to be reckoned with. If this partnership is preserved and given space to progress, it will be unstoppable.

## About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place.

[localtrust.org.uk](http://localtrust.org.uk)

## About NLGN

New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is producing this report as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners.

[nlgn.org.uk](http://nlgn.org.uk)

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