

Covid-19 &  
Communities

## Pooling Together: How Community Hubs have responded to the COVID-19 Emergency

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# Introduction

At the start of the COVID-19 emergency community hubs formed across the UK. Bringing a number of public services and volunteers together under one roof, hubs were a rapid response designed to reach people most acutely affected by the pandemic and containment measures. While people were staying apart, services for vulnerable people were coming together in a way not seen before. But do these hubs have a role in the future?

This report contains four descriptive case studies of community hubs that began at the start of the emergency phase of COVID-19 (March 2020) and continued operating until at least August 2020. The case studies explore this learning as a contribution to planning future COVID-19 responses, the recovery and the ongoing need to support people to help each other.

The community hubs built on and strengthened cross sector partnerships. We believe they have the potential to bring service providers closer to communities in the future, and provide building blocks for more local, holistic support services.

## Background

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve wellbeing across the UK and Ireland through policy, research and practice development. For us, wellbeing is more than just feeling well, it is about having what we need to live well now and into the future<sup>1</sup>. Our work consistently shows that some people and places are left behind in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain, but now more than any time since the end of the Second World War many people's access to basic needs and services are threatened. This compels us to look further at how the state and communities can work best together to meet these needs and sustain the wellbeing of communities and society.

Over the last seven years, we have researched and examined how the state can support people and communities to achieve positive change for themselves, and in doing so, ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind. In the *Enabling State*, we outlined the steps necessary to make a paradigm shift in public services to give communities the flexibility and control they

want, while at the same time ensuring that the state delivers what it does best<sup>2</sup>. We have always been clear that this is about giving people the support they want to help their communities more: community activities should not be seen as a way to replace essential public services. During the pandemic, we updated this 'Route Map' with some guiding principles for emergency response and recovery. These principles emphasise what we know from previous work: that people believe strongly in the power of local community organisations to improve their area, and that volunteering is considered the most effective form of public engagement.

In April 2020, with the advent of the COVID-19 lockdown, we wanted to find out more about how communities and public services were responding to the crisis. We wanted to be in touch with people and places we had worked with before, to capture the responses to the pandemic and examples of the Enabling State in action. We began a Covid

1 Carnegie UK Trust, *Wellbeing: What's in a word?* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2018 Available at: <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/wellbeing-whats-in-a-word/> [Accessed September 2020]

2 Sir John Elvidge, *A route map to an Enabling State* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2014 Available at <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/a-route-map-to-an-enabling-state/> [Accessed September 2020].

and Communities listening project focussed on learning about how people helped each other and any changes in the relationship between the public sector (generally local authorities), the voluntary sector and communities<sup>3</sup>. We heard that community hubs were an important, instant emergency response. They were a collaboration between volunteers and the public sector, they reached into communities, and built positive relationships between service providers and citizens.

The Trust is committed to supporting cross-sectoral working in policy and front-line practice. And, as

<sup>3</sup> The overall learning from these conversations will be analysed and published in the last quarter of 2020.

outlined in *Building Back for the Better*, we think the COVID-19 medium term recovery and longer-term transformative change need to include local, holistic, place-based approaches<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, we decided to explore hubs further through producing case studies. This publication brings together the case studies, and is the first report from our *Covid and Communities* project. A full report with analysis of 16 localities will be published later this year.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace J., et al, *Building Back for the Better: A Perspective from Carnegie UK Trust* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: [https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie\\_uk\\_trust/2020/07/22155840/LOW-RES-4643-CUKT-Building-Back-for-the-Better-A4.pdf](https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2020/07/22155840/LOW-RES-4643-CUKT-Building-Back-for-the-Better-A4.pdf) [Accessed September 2020]

**Figure One – The Enabling State: Guiding Principles for Recovery\***



\* Davidson, S., et al, *The Enabling State: Guiding Principles for Recovery* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at [www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/revisiting-the-route-map-to-an-enabling-state-guiding-principles-for-recovery/](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/revisiting-the-route-map-to-an-enabling-state-guiding-principles-for-recovery/) [Accessed September 2020]

**Figure Two – Six Propositions for Building Back Better**



# Method

To develop the case studies, four members of the Carnegie UK Trust staff team interviewed participants in the *Covid and Communities* project in more depth, using a headline interview format. The eight interviews took place by phone or online and were written up in an interview template. The interviews took place at the end of August 2020 and reflect the situation and learning at that time. We choose a subset of the *Covid and Communities* project based on who had spoken about local hubs in previous conversations. The case study areas chosen were:

- Scarborough and District, England (1 Hub), population of 107,900<sup>5</sup>
- Renfrewshire Council, Scotland (7 Hubs), estimated population 179,000<sup>6</sup>
- Three Towns locality, North Ayrshire, Scotland (1 Hub), population 32,915<sup>7</sup>
- Lancaster City Council, England (1 Hub), estimated population 146,000<sup>8</sup>.

For a list of people interviewed for the case studies see Appendix One. These interviews were supplemented with knowledge gained from the more general *Covid and Communities* conversations, which were often with different people in the same areas and organisations.

Some case studies were the perspective on multiple community hubs (Renfrewshire), others on one of several (North Ayrshire), whereas others (Lancaster and Scarborough) were the only hub coordinating support in the area. The hubs in the case studies covered a variety of size of areas and administrative

levels: three are based in towns with neighbouring rural areas, and one in the city of Lancaster. Although they were in both England and Scotland, with differences in containment measures and timing, the areas faced similar issues at a local level, and reveal shared challenges and learning.

The next section of the report highlights some of the key findings from the descriptive studies.

## Key messages

### New structures but based on existing relationships and values

The case study hubs were set up as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of lockdown. They were a rapid response, which, in many cases were set up in a matter of days.

Local authorities have a decisive role in the case studies we explored. They instigated the collaborations and brought their resources to bear on the challenge. But in doing so, they depended on existing strong partnerships between them, the voluntary sector and communities, as well as within the voluntary sector. In three cases councils established the hubs, in partnership, and were keen to reflect exciting, more innovative ways of working. For example, in Lancaster the hubs put into practice key priorities for the 2030 strategic plan around relational working (including kindness) supporting staff 'to be human' and developing co-productive ways of working with citizens.

Where the local authorities started the hubs they included organisations like leisure and health and social care partnerships, who often seconded employees into the hubs to work alongside the voluntary sector.

In Scarborough, the hub was set up and led by the voluntary sector, with the local authority funding a Community Support Organisation, including a hub co-ordinator.

- 5 Data North Yorkshire (2020) Population in 2015, for the district including Whitby was 107,902 Available at: <https://www.datanorthyorkshire.org/JSNA/articles/population-in-north-yorkshire/district-population/> [Accessed September 2020]
- 6 National Records of Scotland (2020) *Renfrewshire Council Area Profile* Available at: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/renfrewshire-council-profile.html#:~:text=Mid%2D2019%20Population%20Estimates%20by,0.7%25%20from%20177%2C790%20in%202018> [Accessed September 2020]
- 7 North Ayrshire Community Planning Partnership (2017) *Three Towns Locality Plan* Available at: <http://northayrshire.community/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/170929-Three-Towns-Locality-Plan.pdf> [Accessed September 2020]
- 8 Nomis (2019) *Labour Market Profile – Lancaster* Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157095/report.aspx> [Accessed September 2020]

## Flexible and Responsive

All the hubs were described as ‘responsive’. They were looking to meet local needs. The voluntary and community sector were particularly valued in understanding who might be badly affected by the pandemic. The hubs set up helplines, for example in Lancaster, and publicised themselves encouraging people to come forward with requests for support. They were careful to understand the support that might already exist at a hyperlocal level, and not duplicate, or take over from existing groups and small organisations.

The emergency context supported hubs to act flexibly, removing some of the bureaucracy and longer-term processes that have existed around volunteering and cross sectoral partnerships. However, by August people noticed that there was a decline in the appetite for risk-taking, which might have a negative impact on the flexibility of hubs in the future.

Hubs continued to innovate as they moved through the emergency phase, using their responsiveness to go beyond meeting food needs. In some cases, like Renfrewshire, from the start they were not responsible for delivering (the governments’) food parcels. Rather they wanted to find out about people’s wellbeing and supported that through many activities. Activities ranged from dog walking, to jigsaw and book swaps to daily check-in calls. In Scarborough, in the second week of lockdown a befriending service was started to tackle loneliness. This understanding of wider needs was reflected in the observation by one hub that for people on Universal Credit (before the pandemic), support to manage their finances in the long-term was more important than adding them to food distribution lists that will eventually stop.

It was important to the hubs that they treated people with dignity and respect, recognising that people’s needs differed in the crisis, and although meeting food and health needs was vital, lives were being challenged in other ways. The response was built on the idea of valuing people, listening to them and providing individualised support, rather than generic packages.

## Strengthened Partnerships

Local public services have worked on a shared challenge and goal, which has brought them together when previously they have had separate priorities and targets. This has had a positive effect on staff morale and the delivery of services. For example, co-locating social work and community services in North Ayrshire, with a single telephone line, increased information sharing between services. It was easier to refer people to specialist support and provided a much more holistic response. This is important as many of the citizens of concern to local authority departments and the voluntary sector services have complex needs and are referred to, or use, a variety of services.

A key strength of the hubs was the partnerships between the local authorities, the voluntary sector and communities. This was both at the level of planning and ‘on the ground’. For example, in Renfrewshire the local umbrella organisation for the third sector was given the list of volunteers by the council and developed its existing volunteer database, contacting and supporting volunteers who joined the hub and worked alongside the council staff.

Partnerships with the private sector were started too. The Scarborough Community Support Organisation (CSO) developed a database of local businesses delivering essentials and connected people with local businesses who were delivering free cooked meals.

The co-location and joint working has strengthened local partnerships. Previously, this has been hailed as necessary, but frequently proved hard to achieve. The hubs have shown it is possible, and their designers and managers want to hold onto and build on these collaborations after the pandemic.



## Outcomes

The partnership working in the hubs meant staff from different departments and sectors came to know each other and built respect for other organisations. Several people said that the local public sector's confidence in the voluntary sector grew. There was more acknowledgement of the value of organisations, roles (like council community staff or locality officers) and groups that were connected to and trusted by the community.

The value of volunteering and volunteers became apparent. Although public sector staff set up the hubs in three areas, volunteers were key to being able to maintain a flexible and ongoing service. The hubs have become the foundation of increased volunteering, with an enhanced volunteer scheme and database in Lancaster and Renfrewshire, respectively.

This recognition both of the value of volunteers and grassroots community action alongside the development of these structures provides a basis for a more nuanced delivery of public sector services. The hubs have facilitated an approach where the public sector brings its skills and resources into play alongside supporting the community to do what it does well, such as connecting and reaching out to people who don't readily access public services, like libraries or health improvement.

## What next

Generally, there is an appetite to keep and develop the hubs. Where a hub was developed as an autonomous response, such as in Scarborough where a Community Support Organisation was started to run the hub, this is challenging. It was funded by an emergency (initially three month) grant and found its own volunteers. It has had to continually seek new volunteers and additional funding. In other areas that have developed existing voluntary and council local partnerships, there is more potential to maintain the hubs. It may be that going forward hubs will be virtual rather than based in any one building, but will maintain their flexible and partnership characteristics: this is the ambition in North Ayrshire. In Lancaster, they have moved to operating out of vans, taking the hubs to communities to find out and respond to local concerns.

During the emergency, the hubs' volunteers and staff found many people with complex longer-term issues, often related to poverty. Although the hubs cannot tackle the issues underlying poverty, they have at times reached members of the community who received no support prior to the pandemic.

The hubs' actors are enthusiastic about their impact as multi-agency, cross-sector structures that have reached out, listened to and make closer connections with communities. They want to maintain them to respond to the longer term issues.

## The Case Studies

The case studies start with a detailed description of a hub run by a Community Support Organisation, in Scarborough. This is followed by the two Scottish hubs, which have similarities in that both were formed within the context of Community Planning in Scotland<sup>9</sup>. The final case study is from a city, Lancaster.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on Community Planning see The Scottish Government website, <https://www.gov.scot/policies/improving-public-services/community-planning/> [Accessed September 2020].



# Scarborough and District Community Hub

Told by Lauren Pennycook from conversations with Age UK Scarborough and District and North Yorkshire County Council.

## Context

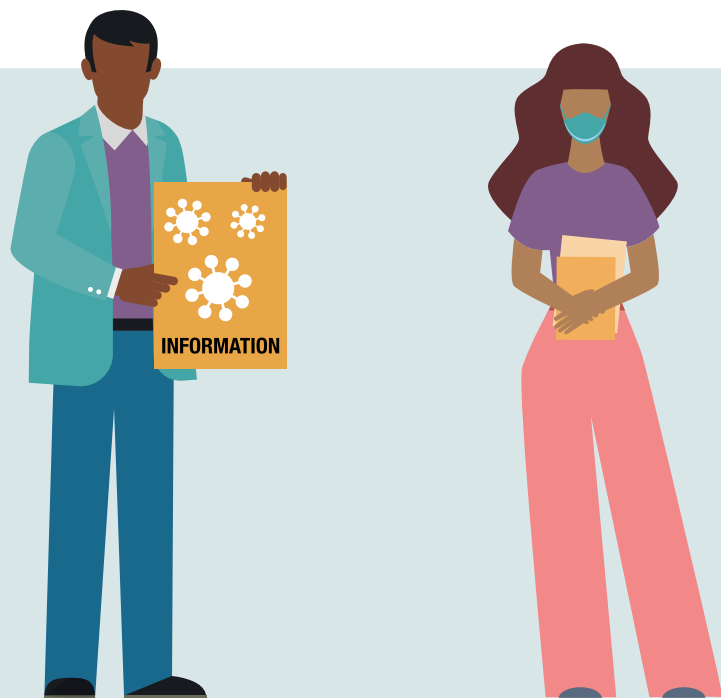
Scarborough and District comprises the geographical areas of Scarborough town, Filey town and the surrounding villages. The self-reported challenges of the district vary by ward, but include having some of the highest levels of deprivation in North Yorkshire; rural isolation; an ageing population; and, in some of the towns, a lack of access to greenspace, with implications for mental health.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a Community Support Organisation (CSO) mechanism was established by North Yorkshire County Council, and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector was consulted on the development of community hubs. The community hubs would draw on and be led by existing VCSE organisations considered to be confident, trusted, connected and reputable by the community. The Scarborough and District CSO is led by Age UK Scarborough and District<sup>10</sup>, with support from Scarborough, Whitby and Ryedale Mind<sup>11</sup> and YMCA Scarborough<sup>12</sup>, in partnership with North Yorkshire County Council and Scarborough Borough Council. The CSO was established immediately following the announcement of lockdown, communicating to residents through traditional and social media, television, flyers, and existing networks, to raise awareness of the community hub and the support services provided. In the first four weeks of the pandemic, 15,000 leaflets were printed by Scarborough Borough Council and delivered in the community.

10 Age UK Scarborough and District (2020) Available at: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/scarboroughanddistrict/> [accessed August 2020].

11 Scarborough, Whitby and Ryedale Mind (2020) Available at: <https://www.swrmind.org.uk/> [Accessed August 2020].

12 YMCA Scarborough (2020) Available at: <https://ymcascarborough.uk/> [Accessed August 2020]



## What happened?

At the onset of the pandemic, the CSO offered residents support with food shopping and the collection of prescriptions, and developed a database of local businesses which were continuing to deliver essentials, or were open for collection. The CSO also worked in partnership with a referral agency for local businesses who were delivering free cooked meals to residents most in need, and food parcels to those who were isolated or shielding. To deliver these services, the primary goal of the CSO in the first few weeks of lockdown was to recruit volunteers, and it was successful in securing over 150 volunteers to assist with the nearly 1,500 inquiries within the first two weeks of operation. Despite the rapidity of the response, health and safety and safeguarding was a top priority for the staff and volunteers. Volunteer packs were developed, with information on safeguarding and guidelines on safety, and volunteer Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certification checks were carried out by CSO staff.

As lockdown progressed, the services developed by the CSO were responsive to the evolving needs of residents. During the second week of lockdown, a telephone befriending service was established and by week three, North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund vouchers were introduced, for those who were isolating and had no access to funds or had experienced a change in circumstances. In response to concerns for residents' mental health, a book and jigsaw swapping service was developed; isolation packs were assembled for children, families, older people, and those experiencing mental health challenges; a support and check in service was introduced; and small jobs were undertaken to support residents as required, such as fixing broken glasses, making improvements to gardens to allow people to use them, and delivering walking aids to elderly residents. The community hub does not confine itself to a prescribed list of support, instead staff and volunteers listen to residents' needs and find a way to support them. Funding was also obtained from the Two Ridings Community Foundation<sup>13</sup> for counselling services; resources were secured for online activities, such as chair-based exercise classes, yoga, crochet, coffee

mornings and arts and crafts; and the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust<sup>14</sup> funded a veteran support worker, for six months. A hub co-ordinator was employed full-time for the first 12 weeks of the pandemic, and for 25 hours a week thereafter, and is supported by other members of staff as required.

A referral system to the community hub was established from the North Yorkshire County Council Customer Service Centre, and self-referrals, or those on behalf of others, could also be received via a dedicated telephone number or by email. A return referrals procedure back to North Yorkshire County Council was also in place for cases which were too complex; required social care; or a package of support, including support from the County Council. The CSO and County Council were in regular communication, with the CSO acting as the conduit between the community and the County Council, alerting it to new and emerging issues as the pandemic progressed, and providing data on the support being provided, to allow the County Council to monitor and understand the needs of local residents.

## Impact

The CSO has supported over 2,700 households, the majority of which includes individuals who are shielding, the elderly, residents with mental health challenges, and, increasingly, those who are self-employed. The services of the community hub ensured that those who were shielding maintained a degree of independence, while light touch prevention strategies to improve mental health, such as providing isolation packs, book swaps and welfare checks, improved individuals' wellbeing. In turn, volunteers, particularly those who had not volunteered before, have developed new skills and confidence from the experience, and have committed to continue volunteering over the long-term.

Community cohesion in Scarborough and District also improved during this time, as the CSO has supported previously disparate communities and small groups to develop and to work together safely. Local businesses have also pulled together,

<sup>13</sup> Two Ridings Community Foundation (2020) Available at: <https://www.tworidingscf.org.uk/> [Accessed August 2020].

<sup>14</sup> Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (2020) Available at: <https://covenantfund.org.uk/> [Accessed August 2020].

and adapted their services to meet the needs of the community. Several local businesses established a free cooked meal delivery service, local pubs donated food on a weekly basis, and local supermarkets supported the community hub to provide food parcels to those most in need. The community, in turn, were provided with a single, local point of call, and a collective organisation with no agenda other than supporting those in need, with which it could develop trust.

By responding flexibly and rapidly to the crisis, the VCSE in Scarborough District demonstrated that, with the support of the public sector, it is well-placed to respond to the needs of the community. This provided the County Council with the confidence that communities were being supported; provided a two-way dialogue for disseminating and receiving information; and allowed the public sector to reach residents in an agile, responsive way. The greatest impact of the community hub structure has therefore been partnership working and growth – the public sector has a stronger working relationship with the VCSE sector, and organisations within the sector are working better in partnership. As a direct result of the CSO structure, Scarborough, Whitby and Ryedale Mind are now moving into the offices of Age UK Scarborough and District.

## Challenges

As the crisis developed, the CSO faced a number of challenges related to changing circumstances, which required them to adapt and seek additional resources to continue to support the community. Firstly, the CSO has no financial stability, as the funding is short-term, on a three-month rolling basis, dependent on the nature of the COVID-19 crisis. There have also been challenges with capacity. In the latter weeks of the pandemic, as volunteers returned to work, had childcare commitments, and changing circumstances, their capacity to provide support diminished. The

support provided by a number of small community groups, such as the Filey and District Lions Club<sup>15</sup>, also began to wind down. A call for volunteers has been issued on the local radio and in the local newspaper, and CSO staff have worked closely with Scarborough Borough Council and North Yorkshire County Council to identify if further volunteers can be sourced internally from these public sector bodies. The challenges with volunteering have been compounded by reduced staff capacity, as staff begin to return to their organisational roles, resulting in less resource for the community hub.

The complexity of cases and issues which extend beyond the time-limited nature of the support available have also proven to be challenging for the hub. The enduring nature of poverty, both pre-existing and subsequent to the pandemic, does not correspond to the 12 week timescales in which the North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund vouchers can be used. The CSO has therefore been working closely with North Yorkshire County Council to adapt the scheme, and has engaged with Citizens Advice Scarborough and District; Scarborough Borough Council; and the North Yorkshire County Council benefits department, to ensure income maximisation for those in poverty.

Finally, while communication has been challenging during the crisis, weekly conversations between key partners have helped to develop relationships which were not present before the pandemic, and to strengthen existing ones. While there were initially challenges with communicating with some of the community groups in the surrounding villages, links between the hub and these groups were developed and both were able to draw on their relative strengths. The CSO, with access to resources and ability to support complex cases, received referrals from the community groups, which, in turn, were supported on issues such as policies and procedures.

<sup>15</sup> Filey and District Lions Club (2020) Available at: <https://www.fileylionsclub.org/> [Accessed August 2020]

## ↳ Learning for the Future

The lessons from the operation of the community hub and its success in supporting the community relate to partnership working, across sectors and with communities. The rapidity with which the public sector was able to provide funding to the VSCE sector enabled the sector to respond quickly. The CSO structure has also highlighted that the same organisations tend to be involved in supporting the community, and that there is a danger that some smaller organisations are left behind, or do not have a voice. Partnership working which was in place prior to the pandemic, for example, through social prescribing contracts, or has improved during the crisis, such as through the Leaders Group, comprising the CEOs of 27 charities across Scarborough, should be built upon to strengthen links, and new organisations should be invited in to collaborative structures.

The community hub facilitated a way of working which was person-centred, as the services provided and ways of working by the CSO adapted to the needs of individuals, after receiving regular input from them. It has also demonstrated the need to spend more time and resources on complex cases, as there is rarely the funding available to support these individuals and households holistically.

The challenges of short-term funding have also been made clear. The funding available to address the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis has enabled those with complex cases and in poverty to be supported through the CSO, however, funding for the community hub remains short-term and dependent on the progress of the virus. The CSO has reached members of the community who received no support prior to the pandemic, but have thrived from being provided with support such as cooked meals. Long-term funding for multi-agency structures such as community hubs is required in order to reach those with complex needs and in poverty, before their needs become critical.

The support provided through the community hub structure in Scarborough and District has demonstrated the need to consider how to make the model of a place-based, flexible approach to supporting the community sustainable. By working across sectors, community hubs can be the vehicle through which resilient communities are supported and a preventative approach can be taken to enduring issues such as poverty, mental health challenges, and financial hardship.



# Three Towns Locality Community Hub, North Ayrshire

Told by Ben Thurman from conversations with North Ayrshire Council's locality officer in the Three Towns.

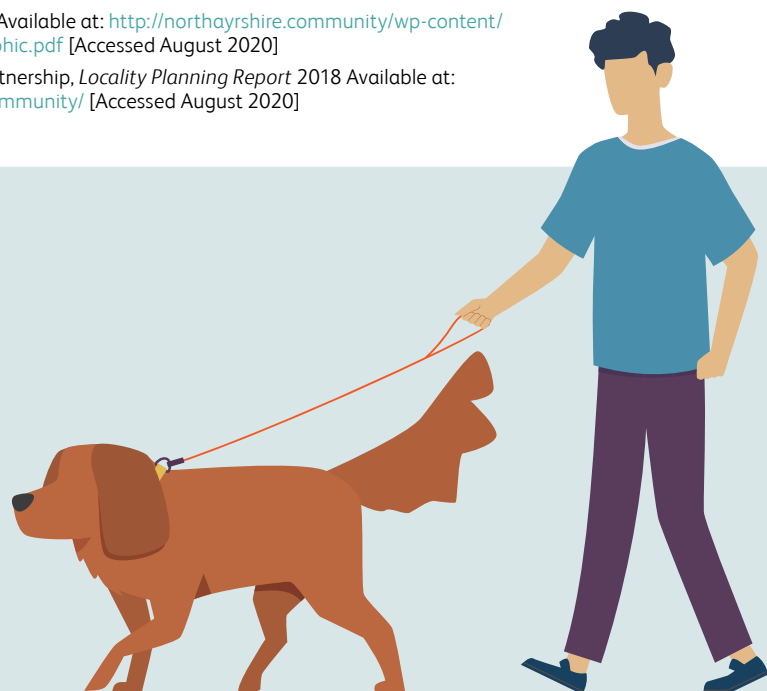
## Context

The Three Towns locality is situated on the West coast of North Ayrshire and home to 32,915 residents<sup>16</sup>. It incorporates the three towns of Saltcoats, Stevenston and Ardrossan. Before the pandemic, North Ayrshire's locality partnership approach had deepened its engagement with and investment in communities and community organisations over several years.<sup>17</sup> The locality partnerships are tasked with improving engagement between local organisations and communities, and have staff from the Council, Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue, and the Third Sector Interface. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the localities were in a strong position to integrate 'under one roof' a wide range of organisations, including community development, libraries, active school staff, social work, health and social care, alongside voluntary sector organisations, like Link Up Scotland and Whitlees Community Centre.

The decision to set up community hubs was taken by North Ayrshire Council the week before lockdown. The hubs were run by locality officers in each of the six areas, as these individuals had strong connections to the community. The purpose of these hubs was to be a local point of contact for community need arising as a result of COVID-19, providing advice, signposting and coordination of volunteers. From the outset, this comprised staff from community development, libraries, schools, social work, and the HSCP. It also acted as the central hub for volunteers and 'local resilience partners'. In the week prior to lockdown, locality officers engaged with communities and community groups to build up a body of volunteers to assist with everything from food and prescription deliveries, to dog walking and daily check-in phone calls.

<sup>16</sup> North Ayrshire Three Towns infographic, Available at: <http://northayrshire.community/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Three-Towns-Infographic.pdf> [Accessed August 2020]

<sup>17</sup> North Ayrshire Community Planning Partnership, *Locality Planning Report 2018* Available at: <http://northayrshire.community/your-community/> [Accessed August 2020]



## What happened?

The Three Towns Hub was set up in four days, opening on the Tuesday after lockdown was announced. The hub was run by officers from North Ayrshire Council and the HSCP, and operated out of the Council's community development office. Space was created when the Kilwinning and North Coast teams moved out to set up hubs in their own localities, and the office was split into different 'zones' for, for example, the call centre and food packaging, to ensure physical distancing while providing essential services.

Initially the focus was on practical support for those in the shielding category: the hub catered for a variety of requests, from food parcels, pre-cooked food and prescriptions, to picking up a mattress and buying pet food. As things settled into a rhythm, the focus broadened to wider wellbeing issues, particularly becoming more responsive to concerns around the rising impact of loneliness and mental health. The hub distributed mental health packs, with activities and signposting; initiated 'touch-in calls' targeting those who might be shielding and isolated; started online recovery cafés and distributed donated devices for those who lacked digital access; and, in general, became more responsive to people who contacted them for practical support, using drop-off deliveries as a vehicle to check whether there were any wider social needs.

The hub was built on the strength of pre-existing relationships with communities. Where community organisations were already supporting people that were known to them, the approach was to give them what they need to maintain that support and relationships. As well as volunteer groups taking on food and prescription deliveries to those in the shielding category, the hub provided organisations like Link Up Saltcoats with mental health packs, ex-library books, and bedding plants to support the wellbeing of the communities they know.

Initially, there was a high volume of calls from people who didn't need immediate support but wanted to 'register'; and also receipt of 'referrals' from other services. It took some time to clarify the messaging to both partner organisations and public that the hub would provide emergency support for

those that have no other help; and that existing services and organisations should continue to support those that they work with.

It also took time to embed the process, both within North Ayrshire and in relation to national provision. At first, due to the speed with which the crisis developed and its impact on communities, the hub was responsive and drew on a community development approach. In time, a process was established so that when people contacted the hub they took down their details and arranged to call them back, so that they could find their records, access the Scottish Government shielding list and check whether they had been in contact before. Once this system had been embedded, hub staff were able to focus their time and effort on providing support for more complex cases.

## Impact

The presence of a wide range of partners allowed the hub to respond at pace to a high volume of requests and need in the initial phase. Having, for example, social work in the same building allowed the team to put things in place and respond much faster than had previously been possible. Often these wider needs are met by community organisations – both existing organisations that had been part of the locality partnership before COVID-19, and mutual aid groups that came together in response. In one case, the hub thought that someone sounded 'maybe not right' on the phone, and asked volunteers to check they were okay when dropping off a prescription. Upon finding that they hadn't seen anyone in weeks and felt forgotten about, they contacted a community organisation who were able to deliver a soup and sandwich lunch from the next day, and on a daily basis, to maintain human connection. Through this kind of partnership there is a sense that the hubs have shown a different way of working together that has empowered communities and community organisations as equal partners.

More broadly, the hub provided a focal point for the community response that, anecdotally, has boosted civic pride. The sustained numbers of volunteers, the donations from individuals, community

organisations, and local businesses – and the way that this has been coordinated and directed towards a collective endeavour – has built the sense of community spirit, belonging and wellbeing.

## Challenges

After several months of operation, perhaps the biggest challenge relates to sustaining this energy. The core Council and HSCP staff at the hub worked almost continuously for three months, and began to recognise the emotional toll of increasingly complex cases. As well as beginning to mandate that people take days off, and days working from home, the morning briefing and end-of-day debrief has provided a space to check in on people's emotional wellbeing, as well as the more practical necessities of ensuring that work remains joined up.

Such a high profile service also created challenges around directing people to the most suitable, long-term source of support. The hub was contacted by many people who were struggling, not directly due to COVID-19, but due to living on very low incomes (often on Universal Credit). For these people, while short-term provision of food is a kindness, it does not address the fundamental issues. The hub team report having to be 'quite tough' with some of these people to ensure that they engage with the correct support services, such as money advice or social work.

## Learning for the future

Although North Ayrshire is moving out of the hub as a physical space, with Council staff moving back to substantive posts, they are doing so in a way that builds on the ways of working that were established in the pandemic response. Maintaining the phone line as a single point of contact and the multi-agency approach to supporting people, the Council is transitioning towards a 'virtual community hub'.

One of the key learnings from the Three Towns is how the relaxation of rules has enabled Council staff to be more responsive. They acted as flexibly as they could within data protection and safeguarding

laws, and staff have received backing and trust from senior management. As there was no time for Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) membership and procurement processes, locality officers were given responsibility to assess risk and make decisions based on their understanding and relationships with people in the community. Instead of turning down volunteers who didn't have PVG membership, they were found roles that didn't require it. This 'letting go' has resulted in staff having more autonomy to provide the support that people need at speed, without needing to seek approval, for example, being able to buy a microwave on the day for a person whose cooker had broken and had no way to cook their food delivery.

Tied to this, having representatives from across the Community Planning Partnership 'under one roof' facilitated much closer partnership working between statutory services; but also much more effective collaboration with communities and community organisations, for example, working with Link Up to distribute Council bedding plants and check-in on residents' welfare. While services have returned to their previous offices, the multi-agency approach is continuing because those relationships have been cemented through the pandemic.

The sense of common purpose and equal partnership within the hub model has generated energy and fulfilment among those involved: people are motivated by being part of something, and in the knowledge that they are able to solve problems themselves. The approach has strengthened the relationships that they had already built up in the locality, evidenced by displays of gratitude from those in receipt of support and the sustained level of volunteering and collaboration with community organisations and local businesses.

This approach based on partnership and community empowerment was fast-tracked by the emergency nature of COVID-19. Now the systems and process are more stable, but there still is a sense of flexibility and partnership working in the way that the hub works with volunteers and statutory agencies to provide a more holistic response to individual cases. In ongoing discussions about what recovery looks like for North Ayrshire, there is a desire to sustain the approach after the urgency of the emergency has dissipated.



# Renfrewshire Neighbourhood Hubs

Told by Pippa Coutts from conversations with Renfrewshire and Engage Renfrewshire.

## Context

Renfrewshire Council is in the West of Scotland, with a population of approximately 179,000. The main town, where most Council offices are located, is Paisley, which has a population of around 77,000, but there are also significant rural areas, small towns and villages.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Renfrewshire Council had seven neighbourhood hubs spread over three locations, from March 2020 until at least August. There were seven because, at start of 2020, seven Local Partnerships were formed in Renfrewshire<sup>18</sup>, which mirror community council boundaries.

The hubs have been run in partnership between the Council, the HSCP and the third sector. The third sector interface in Renfrewshire is Engage Renfrewshire<sup>19</sup>, who are the conduit for links to other third sector and community organisations. In Scotland, third sector interfaces (TSIs) offer a point of access for support and advice for the third sector within local areas<sup>20</sup>.

Many councils have used hubs for food distribution, but in Renfrewshire this was done separately through expansion of services provided by FareShare<sup>21</sup>, with additional funding from the Scottish Government, through the Food Fund. Alongside this, providing food and distributing medicine to people who were on the nationally generated shielding list was coordinated through the Local Assistance Team, which was set up by the Council overnight. Therefore the hubs did not take responsibility for these activities: they were set up in recognition of a gap in support to people who faced different challenges during the emergency and may not have been on the shielding list. They were also to respond to the large number of people who wanted to volunteer.

18 What are the Local Partnerships? Renfrewshire Council, 2020. Available at: <http://www.renfrewshire.gov.uk/article/8177/What-are-the-Local-Partnerships> [accessed August 2020].

19 Engage Renfrewshire, 2020. Available at: <https://www.engagerenfrewshire.com/> [accessed August 2020].

20 Scottish Government, 2020. Third Sector Interfaces. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/third-sector/third-sector-interfaces/> [accessed August 2020].

21 FareShare: fighting hunger, tackling food waste, 2020. Available at: <https://fareshare.org.uk/fareshare-centres/glasgow-west-of-scotland/> [accessed September 2020].



## What happened?

The hubs were designed on the back of previous partnership working in the seven areas, and in the context of a push within the Council for more relational, and kinder services. They were not an add-on to an existing service, rather a ‘brand new’ way of working. This, coupled with the fact the hubs didn’t need to provide a list of services (FareShare and the local assistance team were doing that), meant they could be reasonably flexible. They were designed to respond to local needs.

People from the Council, HSCP and Renfrewshire Leisure were redeployed in days, rather than the weeks or months it would typically take. The public sector staff managed the hubs and worked alongside volunteers supported by Engage Renfrewshire. Volunteers were recruited and supported with induction training with the Council led by Engage Renfrewshire. Engage had all the necessary processes for volunteer support in place. In the hubs, volunteers were supported by public sector staff, but also could go to Engage for independent advice and grievance resolution, although the latter was not used. There were generally two managers to every three to four volunteers.

The local authority recognised the expertise of the third sector interface in volunteering and asked them for guidance and advice on a range of areas, including safeguarding. Volunteers were recruited in an intense three to four weeks, by the end of April. This included transferring those who had signed up to the national volunteering campaigns to Engage’s own COVID-19 Volunteer Reserve. This amounted to around 1,000 people. In this process, Engage asked potential volunteers to sign a statement to say they may not be needed, or may be asked to volunteer at short notice. There are now 700 volunteers in the reserve bank: some interested just in helping around COVID-19, some more generally.

Volunteers were told their roles could change over time, to encourage a flexible approach in the hubs that reflected local needs, and could differ between areas. For example, one hub was in Ferguslie Park, where there was already strong community action and groups, and so it joined up with the local environmental project. Generally, hub volunteers have provided dog walking, wellness and kindness

calls and delivery of prescriptions. The hubs aimed to go beyond providing basic needs and wanted to support people in a dignified manner, including giving people a choice of support, for example, toys alongside, or instead of, food. The hubs had 60 volunteers, and received no independent funding, relying on Council and volunteer resources.

The hubs were set up this way because of the belief in supporting wellbeing in the round, providing people with opportunities for control and decision-making, advocated for by Participatory City<sup>22</sup>, and kindness in public services.

The hubs were responsive as the Council did not want to duplicate what was already in place in communities. When the hubs were established there were already grassroots and established voluntary sector responses to the emergency. It was important that the hubs recognised this, did not duplicate existing provision and adapted to what existed locally. Some villages or small areas with a strong sense of community and collective responsibility were not supported by hubs as they had their own groups.

The seven local partnerships are quite new in Renfrewshire, but their existence facilitated the set-up of the hubs as an emergency response.

## Impact

Up to the end of August, the hubs responded to 320 requests for support ranging from grass cutting, to food assistance, to digital support; and engaged 60 volunteers. The hubs have supported volunteering and increased the number held (with consent) on the Engage database of volunteers. Engage has found that people they have recruited to the hubs have gained a different perspective on the emergency from volunteering, with many saying that it has been a positive and rewarding experience.

The hubs have supported people who have not engaged in existing health, social care or wellbeing-type services: people who have not turned to the

<sup>22</sup> Participatory City (2020) Available at: <http://www.participatorycity.org/> [Accessed September 2020]

Council before. They have provided support to people who felt isolated, with a limited support network or no access to friends and family. The support has uncovered many people experiencing mental health issues. The individual feedback from hubs has been good, with members of the community feeling supported.

The experience of working together in the hubs has helped to *'reframe the relationship between the Council and third sector'*. It has been a positive experience, devoid of tension in a difficult period. People in the third sector feel that although there was a good working relationship before, this has been improved because Council staff have seen volunteering in practice and more fully understand the benefits of volunteering. One reflection from the third sector was it has been a *'collaborative and community-based approach'* and *'a really, really great way of getting to know about council and how we can work together'*.

## Challenges

Engage has identified several challenges to maintaining high levels of volunteering, and supporting volunteers. Firstly, people had more time as well as more desire to volunteer at the start of the emergency. It is not clear if those people will have the energy and the capacity to volunteer in the future.

Renfrewshire would like to develop volunteering as part of a wider approach to developing civic participation. It is likely that unemployment will grow in the short to medium term, and partners want to encourage people to volunteer through periods of under employment or unemployment, to support their dignity, provide a purpose and social connections. However, this could be challenging, especially if, as time goes on, there will no longer be a 'common goal', which will decrease people's desire to volunteer.

If hubs continue and increase their reliance on volunteers, for example introducing volunteer managers, these individuals should be able to access a range of advice, including training on supporting the mental health of volunteers.

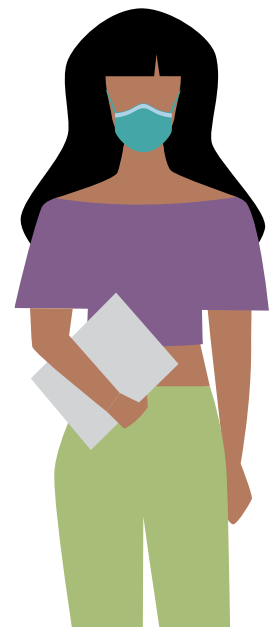
## Learning for the future

When reflecting on the hubs, questions were raised about how the Council can support Engage Renfrew and the capacity of the third sector. Related to this, it is not yet clear whether or how funding for the third sector will vary as a result of the costs of the pandemic.

In Renfrewshire, there is a desire to continue to test different models of service delivery. The third sector, specifically Engage, wants to keep the flexibility of the hubs and the way of working to establish and maintain them, but the fear is that this will be overtaken by a return to more bureaucratic ways of working. Already, there is a view that the Council's processes are starting to get slower than there were in the emergency phase.

Interviewees in the Council recognised this challenge around the recent change in the appetite for risk. In the emergency the biggest risk was the lack of access to basic needs, but now the Council has had to restart everyday processes around risk, which staff *'flew past quicker in Covid'*. During the emergency, groups could be set up and tasks completed in a day. By August staff were reporting that risk assessments, particularly with regard to bringing people back together, became more frequent again.

A practical issue is that if the hubs are to maintain a physical presence, a new home has to be found for them. The Council is looking into the possibility of using a leisure premise, community centre and a town hall, but there are still questions about their accessibility and how the hubs will work in those places.



# Lancaster City Council Community Hub

Told by Hannah Ormston from conversations with Lancaster City Council.

## Context

Local government in the Lancaster district is made up of three tiers: Lancashire County Council, Lancaster City Council and the Parish (Town) Councils. This case study relates specifically to Lancaster City Council, which operates at a district level. Responding to the needs of a population of approximately 146,000 people, Lancaster City Council is one of the larger councils in Lancashire, Northern England. It delivers services to those living in the historic city of Lancaster, seaside town of Morecambe and several sizable rural parishes in the neighbouring areas. With two large universities within the city and a large proportion of people living in the rural surrounding suburbs, the community's needs are diverse.

In the emergency phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lancaster City Council promptly restructured their services, tailoring them to the specific areas of need within the district. They agreed that their three priorities should be delivering vital services; protecting vulnerable people; and supporting businesses.<sup>23</sup> While the Council's overarching strategy relating to COVID-19 was regarded as essential for responding to the emergency, it was also future focused and designed to contribute to their longer-term priorities. Within the Communities Directorate, these priorities focused on building community power, engagement, and resilience; the climate emergency; community wealth building; and building more kind, relational ways of working.

<sup>23</sup> Lancaster City Council Cabinet meeting papers, 9 June 2020 Available at: <https://committeeadmin.lancaster.gov.uk/documents/g7607/Public%20reports%20pack%2009th-Jun-2020%2018.00%20Cabinet.pdf?T=10> [Accessed September 2020]



## What happened?

Aware that the pandemic was proving to be a very difficult time for many living in the area, the Council set up a Community Hub with an associated helpline and email address.<sup>24</sup> Members of Council staff working in a range of roles prior to the pandemic, such as car park staff and leisure centre staff, were seconded to work as ‘Community Connectors’ in the Community Hub. During lockdown, the Hub remained open both in office hours and during evenings and weekends, so that members of the community could request help when they needed it.

Lancaster City Council see their role as an enabler or a facilitator, *‘the mortar that connects all the different materials that are out there in the district’*. One of their early concerns was that the initial ‘clinically vulnerable’ list issued by the UK Government in March 2020 overlooked many residents who, although not ‘clinically’ vulnerable, may have other vulnerabilities associated with the corresponding social and economic crises that have emerged as a result of COVID-19. In partnership with other locally operating public sector organisations – such as the NHS, United Utilities, Adult Social Care, and Lancashire Fire and Rescue – they developed their own list of potentially vulnerable people, and sought to proactively contact them, by phone, letter or on foot, to check they had everything they need.

To adequately resource the Community Hub and reach as many residents as possible, the Council recognised that they needed a system to enable volunteers to both be easily recruited, and identified by members of the community. Hope Church and Lancaster District Community and Voluntary Solutions (CVS) had already established an online referral platform. This system enabled residents to both request help, and offer their support. By May, over 750 Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked volunteers had been recruited, which exceeded demand.

24 Lancaster District Community Hub (2020) Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwKx65Xe5as&ab\\_channel=LancasterCityCouncil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwKx65Xe5as&ab_channel=LancasterCityCouncil) [Accessed September 2020]

## Impact

The early, anecdotal evidence collected by the Council shows that this approach has worked well. It has resulted in increased engagement with communities, partnerships focused on delivering outcomes for people living in the district, practical support for businesses, and a real transformation in the way that the Council works.

By July, the Council had undertaken over 28,000 welfare visits and calls – checking in with people, asking if they needed any assistance, and making referrals for additional support when they were required. The Council worked closely with Morecambe Bay Foodbank, providing them with financial resources to provide additional food parcels, increase staffing, and a base in the sports hall of a large leisure centre which was out of use during the pandemic<sup>25</sup>. Between May and July, Morecambe Bay Foodbank had delivered over 17,000 boxes of food to over 5,000 households. The food delivery network also engaged with other food banks and food clubs, such as EggCup, who worked tirelessly to ensure that surplus food – particularly from closed restaurants and local businesses – went to those who needed it the most.

The regular communication and conversations with different partners across the public and community sector has increased partnership working and developed working relationships. Although there were already established practices in place before the pandemic, having a mutual aim and shared focus has enabled these partnerships to flourish, and relationships to be formed.

The vital role that communities play has been evidenced during the COVID-19 emergency and community engagement has been an integral part of both the response to the crisis, and ensuring the Community Hub ran efficiently. The Council is now working to build on this capacity and engagement, hosting community conversations.

25 Lancaster City Council (2020) ‘Partnership launches to provide food parcels to vulnerable people’ Available at: <http://www.lancaster.gov.uk/news/2020/mar/partnership-launches-to-provide-food-parcels-to-vulnerable-people> [Accessed September 2020]

## Challenges

Having an increased dialogue with members of the community has – while strengthening relationships – exposed challenges for the Council. In some cases, the calls and welfare checks highlighted ongoing issues that existed before the crisis. In addition, negotiating the need to respond to the rapidly changing circumstances created by COVID-19, with restarting and amending ongoing services, and ensuring the wellbeing of staff, proved to be a difficult balancing act.

Although the Hub worked hard to ensure that as many potentially vulnerable residents were contacted as possible, the Council were aware that they struggled to reach some groups, such as the Gypsy and Traveller community. This highlighted a need to further work in partnership with the voluntary and third sector.

The proposed restructure of local government within the county of Lancashire in 2021<sup>26</sup> – and the ongoing consultation in preparation for it – made it very difficult for the Council to plan for the longer term. It also caused ongoing anxieties for staff about the future of their positions, during a time already characterised by high levels of stress and uncertainty.



26 Spineless (2020) *County Council plans to merge Lancaster City Council out of existence* Available at: <https://spineless.uk/county-council-announces-plans-to-merge-lancaster-city-council-out-of-existence/> [Accessed September 2020]

## Learning for the future

In previous emergencies which the Council has become accustomed to responding to, such as the mass flooding caused by Storm Desmond in 2015<sup>27</sup>, once the emergency had been dealt with, an effective recovery plan aimed to return things to how they were as quickly as possible. However, in the case of COVID-19, Lancaster City Council was aware from the offset that the effects of the emergency would likely be more long-term. Returning to ‘normal’ was neither a desired outcome, nor an option, as in many cases, this could make the wellbeing of communities worse. With this in mind, sustainable ways to continue the community hubs, and respond to the needs of the district are continuously being developed.

For example, to ensure that the Hub remains responsive to the district’s diverse needs, the Council have planned a remote model for autumn 2020, taking it via a van to different neighbourhoods and locations, such as village pubs, parent and toddler groups, and local parks. In partnership with public service providers and community and voluntary organisations in the area, such as the NHS, Lancaster Fire and Rescue, and Citizen’s Advice, sessions will be focused on various issues of local concern.

They hope this new way of working will help them to build on the approach developed during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, moving away from a customer service mind set to developing relationships with members of the community to enable communities to flourish.

27 The Guardian (2015) ‘*Hammering, grim, blameless*’ – How Storm Desmond hit Lancaster Wednesday 9 December 2015 The Guardian (online) Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/dec/09/storm-desmond-lancaster-floods-chaos-power-neighbourliness-ian-martin> [Accessed September 2020]

## Conclusion

When the COVID-19 emergency hit the UK, the exceptional level of need was matched by an exceptional response from local communities. Community hubs are an arm of this response, where public services have worked with voluntary organisations and local groups to respond quickly and sensitively. New partnerships have emerged, and long-standing barriers to agility and flexibility have been overcome.

The case studies reveal that where hubs came from an emergent desire to 'do' public sector service provision differently, they have promoted that, developing kinder services and a shift of power to communities. This is very much in line with the Enabling State approach and the guiding principles for recovery (see figure 1). Community hubs are one vehicle for resetting the relationship between communities and the state to be more mutually supportive and effective.

By working across sectors, community hubs can be the vehicle through which resilient communities are supported and a preventative approach can be taken to poverty, mental health, and financial hardship. As we move through the pandemic, public services will need to consider which elements of their emergency response they wish to retain, and how to build this into their normal practice in a sustainable way.

We will be following the development of hubs in the coming months. If you would like to send us any of your stories and experiences of operating and sustaining hubs, please contact us via [info@carnegieuk.org](mailto:info@carnegieuk.org).

## Appendix One: Interviewees

### Scarborough:

Karen Atkinson, North Yorkshire County Council  
Julie Macey-Hewitt, Age UK Scarborough and District

### Renfrewshire:

Annabelle Armstrong Walter, Renfrewshire Council  
Alice McBride, Engage Renfrewshire

### North Ayrshire:

Shirley Morgan, Locality Officer, North Ayrshire Council

### Lancaster:

Mark Davies, Lancaster City Council  
Erica Lewis, Lancaster City Council  
Suzanne Lodge, Lancaster City Council



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