

The Moment We Noticed

The Relationships Observatory and our learning from 100 days of lockdown



RELATIONSHIPS
PROJECT

2020

David Robinson

relationshipsproject.org

Contents

What do we need to do now to be able to look back on 2020 as the year when we not only helped one another in a crisis, but as the year when we changed for good?

Introduction

02

Learning in real-time about how to hold onto the positives from the pandemic

Observations

07

The changes, challenges and practical responses that we've seen on the surface

Undercurrents

15

The shifting attitudes and behaviours that could prefigure more profound change

Invitations

27

Five ways to get involved in the effort to build back better by building better relationships

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The Relationships Project

At [The Relationships Project](#) we believe that everything works better when relationships are valued; people are happier and healthier, and businesses and services are more effective and efficient. That's why it's our mission is to make it easier for every organisation, service and individual to put relationships at the heart of what they do.

THE MOMENT WE NOTICED

From first touching elbows instead of shaking hands, through to full on lockdown, we have now had 100 days of behaving differently. Some of us have suffered loss. Many have been seriously ill. Most of us have been anxious and uncertain. All of us have been separated from ones we love.

These are life changing experiences, shared by us all. What we thought and felt and how we behaved mattered not only in the moment. It will influence how we think and feel and behave in the future.

Reports like this normally start with a confident prognosis and conclude with half a dozen demands, mostly aimed at government and usually calling for fresh investment and new systems. But this isn't normal.

We all need to do a lot more listening before we can properly digest the learning from this, the greatest period of national social disruption in all our lives.

Maybe we will get there eventually but, for now, we need to think about how we spend more time on relationships rather than more money on process and structure.

Making demands of others is out of kilter with the temper of the times. This is the moment to be thinking about what we can do together, rather than what others should do next.

We begin with Observations - everything our observers have seen on the surface. Next we dig into the Undercurrents - the shifting attitudes and behaviours that could prefigure more profound change. We end with 5 invitations and a line of sight on progressing each one. The Relationships Project is rooted in the belief that we can build a better society by building better relationships everywhere, place by place. This report is addressed to all of us.

“ This is very much like what happened to me 4 years ago. Like many asylum seekers, in a short amount of time my life was turned upside down... this mutual experience can perhaps help us to understand each other better... Hope is the only thing that will get us through this. I want you to look at hope outside of airy fairy, happy ending way in which it is so often used. I want you to look at it as a practical strategy and tool for survival. In difficult times, it is the only thing we have and it always works, especially when there is a possibility that the next battle facing us could be harder and we need even more strength to go through it. My question to you, my dearest friend is: who do you want to be after this one passes?”

- Observatory Contributor

We all have a role to play in becoming Relationship Makers in the neighbourhoods where we live, the schools where we learn or teach, the organisations where we work.

Societal change results from aggregating all the small scale activities into a wider framework. It is important to think of this report as the first chapter. There will be more reporting and especially more activity as relationships continue to change and evolve.

We are reporting now because we have witnessed a significant shift from a Me to a We society over the last one hundred days but as constraints are released, we are approaching a critical time.

Social capital surveys in the US in the months following the 9/11 attack showed a 6-month shift from Me to We. Then, just as quickly, back again.

In recent weeks, people have died at home alone and unnoticed. Existing inequalities have been exposed and exacerbated.

The community responses in some areas have been non-existent or largely ineffective. All this is true. But it is also true that 10m willing citizens have been caring for one another and that countless new relationships have flowered and flourished.

None of us will have been untouched by the good or the bad.

As the country moves into a recession, not to mention the possibility of a further spike in the virus, there are choices to be made by every one of us.

There is an understandable impatience to return to normal but amidst the sadness and pain of recent weeks we have also had our best days, the moments when we've noticed one another, as we have seldom noticed before. There will be a short season for locking in new defaults, a season of possibility. What matters now is what we make of it.

THE RELATIONSHIPS OBSERVATORY

In early March - when the spread of coronavirus gathered pace - we began to anticipate some of the possible social consequences of the pandemic and its likely effect on our relationships. After three weeks of blogs and rapid consultation with our network of more than 300 organisations we established The Relationships Observatory. Here we are gathering examples and insights and using what we learn to help sustain and develop the positives beyond the crisis.

This is not an academic exercise. We are focused on a very practical question:

What do we need to do now to be able to look back on 2020 as the year when we not only helped one another in a crisis, but as the year when we changed for good?

The Observatory is designed to learn and report in real time. We think this immediacy is important. If we wait and look back, retrospective coherence will reinterpret the journey, experience will be lost and the world will be moving on (or back to business as usual).

The Observatory has evolved as we've tried to listen to and understand observations that have been brought to our door, a bit like the old red phone box observed in week 3...



“ We have a traditional red phone box which has organically become a place for swapping and dropping during COVID... A box of chocolates was donated and then collected by a little girl who was having a rubbish birthday in isolation. People have left books and magazines, as well as tea bags and other essentials for anyone who might be struggling to get out or just needed something nice. One little girl in Year 6 missed the last day before schools shut, and didn't get her shirt signed by her friends. She was so upset. The shirt is hanging in there with some pens and all her friends are signing it on their daily walk to cheer her up.”

– Observatory Contributor

WE ARE...

WATCHING

A network of volunteer reporters and partner organisations are sharing their observations of relationship-centred responses to coronavirus and all its consequences.

CATCHING

We are curating these observations and sharing them via weekly Sightings and a series of open Zoom conversations.

SUSTAINING

We are co-creating activities to explore, design and embed possibilities for the future, making sure we don't unthinkingly revert to 'business as usual'.

THREE PRIORITIES ARE GUIDING OUR CONTENT...

■ VOICES LESS HEARD

The experience of the home teaching journalist has been well covered in mainstream media, less so the family in temporary accommodation. We are endeavouring to surface perspectives that are seldom heard, the voices most likely to be lost in a retrospective account.

■ LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE

Our emphasis is on content that can inform a different future. It isn't all cutting edge - novelty is not important - but nor is it about business as before. We are focusing on responses which have the potential to alter the way that society operates.

■ ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

It may also be about technology or government or charities or business but all from the perspective of thinking about how, going forward, we can build a better society by building better relationships.

OBSERVATIONS



Many things have happened over the last three months which have never happened before and some things have been noticed which have been overlooked in the past.

In this section we focus on the changes that we've seen on the surface - in the context and in the ways in which we've behaved differently and used existing resources in new ways.

OUR OBSERVATIONS INCLUDE...



INEQUALITY

Existing inequalities have been laid bare and sometimes aggravated by the crisis



TECHNOLOGY

The rise in online activity is often linked to loneliness, but the crisis has shown how technology can keep us connected



THE SOCIAL RESPONSE

The crisis has inspired widespread informal and grass-roots responses to local need



BONDING AND BRIDGING

Reports suggest bonds within broadly homogenous groups have grown but tensions between different groups have heightened



A. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT INEQUALITY

The correlations between poverty, poor housing, existing health inequalities and the Covid-19 death rate reveal gross inequalities which the virus didn't cause but has exploited.

Mortality rates in the most deprived areas of England have been twice as high as the least deprived. Insecure housing, employment or caring arrangements may be just about manageable in ordinary times, but the crisis has exposed the scale of these gross fragilities.

Those that do not have adequate housing or their own garden might depend on access to public spaces for their mental and physical health. However such space is unevenly distributed, particularly in poorer communities. Even the usual bumping places: the school gates, the bus stops, markets and street benches have been off limits.

Homes become pressure cookers and relationships suffer, sometimes severely. Refuge, the domestic violence charity for instance, have reported a 49% increase in calls to their helpline.

“The families we work with are used to stress and danger. One mum said to me the other day “Covid is only the third thing on my list of things to worry most about.”

– Observatory Contributor

Those with existing vulnerabilities like ill health or an addiction, may be dependent on services which have closed or been significantly reduced, adding another level of stress and difficulty.

“Living on £37 a week means I cannot stock up on food, especially because of the restriction on items. I am terrified to leave my house, so I am living so hungry now. I have underlying health conditions too - what will happen if I get the virus? I really need to get some support. I need to speak to my doctor and therapist but everyone is closed. I feel so alone.”

– Observatory Contributor

We can see how lockdown has been much harder for some people than others. As one Observer in East London remarked, “Boats? There are people here without a rubber duck.” Relationships have been stretched to breaking point.

We need to recognize that until adequate housing, decent living standards, access to space and universal wifi are understood to be rights rather than selective privileges, making and sustaining healthy meaningful relationships will be much easier for some than for others.



B. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

Technology is often seen as the “enemy of warmth” and the root cause of our tendency to transact rather than connect, but over recent weeks we've learnt that warm relationships can be kept alive, and even built, by technology.

Some people have been able to shop, learn, socialize, worship and work throughout the lockdown.

Software such as Zoom and Mural has made it possible for many to work remotely and more flexibly.

Facebook and Whatsapp have been co-opted as platforms for neighbourliness.

For some, the upsurge in technology has made them feel more connected than ever.

“On a Sunday Morning I go to church with my Dad, though we are many miles apart. Our local vicar, Gareth, in Sunderland streams a live service on a Sunday morning via Facebook Live and youtube. It makes me feel connected to my Dad and to the community in Sunderland. It is really well done with the words to readings and hymns coming up on the screen and Gareth leading the service as he normally would except he is standing in his conservatory.”

– Observatory Contributor

“She said it's a good time for people who are always lonely. She hasn't been able to get to the synagogue for a long time but now people have helped her sort out her phone and join some prayers and other groups online, and they're bringing her home cooked food. She's loving it!”

– Observatory Contributor

Those who can, have learnt fast, adapted quickly, and coped best. According to the Digital Index, however, 22% do not have the digital skills or access to the technology needed for everyday life in the UK. They are missing out on everything.

“My accommodation doesn't have Wi-Fi. I always have to go to town, go to charities or something. Now there is nothing. We can't afford to top up our phones, and we also don't have bank cards. What are we supposed to do? I want to know what to do, I want to be able to talk to people but I can't.”

– Observatory Contributor



C. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE SOCIAL RESPONSE

Whilst local authorities have endeavored to reconfigure services to meet new needs, much of the immediate, emergency response particularly in the opening weeks of lockdown came from informal mutual aid.

Re-neighbouring, forging new and stronger relationships between citizens rather than between citizens and the state or citizens and the market, has been one of the most remarkable features of the crisis.

responses have been highly collaborative and the best collaborations have emerged in areas where there were pre-existing structures and relationships. Growing the connective tissue takes time and is difficult to do well mid-crisis.

10m people, 19% of the adult population, have been giving at least 3 hours a week to care for others outside of their family since the lockdown began.

40% of us now feel a stronger sense of community. 2m have joined local support groups on Facebook alone and 4,300 mutual aid groups are now connecting more than 3m people.

“ A couple of Local Government people have said to me recently they feel ‘let down’ by some of their established voluntary and community sector organisations who have been accessing grants for ages, when it’s informal groups or new organisations who have stepped into the breach.”

– Observatory Contributor

“ I’ve never really been a joiner but I popped a note through the doors round the block. I’m shopping for 3 people now. It isn’t much but it’s something.”

– Observatory Contributor

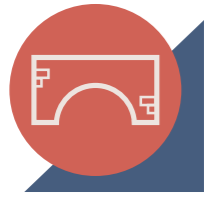
Some local areas have responded to the social need in their communities much faster and more effectively than others, the most comprehensive and successful social

Nimble, new groups have been more effective in many areas than established organisations who have been worrying about losing income, furloughing staff and medium term survival.

The crisis has revealed not only the vulnerability of many individuals who were previously “just about managing” but also the fragility of many of the charities that support them - an inevitable consequence of under capitalizing over many years.

“ I think we’ve done OK here. We started quickly. We knew people and we had good lists by the end of week one. Everybody has worked well together but we were lucky. I don’t see how anybody could do something like this if they didn’t have good relationships already.”

– Observatory Contributor



D. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT BONDING AND BRIDGING

Throughout the pandemic, we've seen a trend towards stronger relationships with those who are 'like us' but, increasingly, a weakening of relationships across some divides.

As travel has been restricted for everyone, the sense of neighbourhood has become more important.

22% now belong to some form of community group. Older people - the traditional leaders of community activity - have been shielded and young people have had the time and the opportunity to step up. Cross-generational collaboration has been a particular characteristic of the crisis response in many areas.

Whilst intergenerational bonds are strengthening in some instances, it appears that lockdown has led us to bond more with people like ourselves.

“ An older resident has built a laptop for a young woman with a learning disability who had pawned her TV before lockdown. With the laptop working the lady feels more comfortable staying at home watching DVDs and no longer feels the need to leave the house and into potentially risky environments.”

– Observatory Contributor

26% of us are now closer to our neighbours but in the last few weeks we have become increasingly aware of tensions between communities.

Sociologists distinguish between “bonding” – strengthening the connections within broadly homogenous groups - and “bridging” – strengthening the connections between groups. Hyper local neighbourhood groups are mostly about “bonding”. Here we have seen great progress.

Distinctions between helpers and helped have receded with the emerging recognition that we all need help occasionally and we all have something to give.

“ The leaders in the blocks were all older people. Now they can't get out and the younger people have really stepped up....we've tried to match people up, block by block, so these are neighbours helping neighbours. They will keep seeing one another forever. It's going well.”

– Observatory Contributor

At the same time, and sometimes in the same communities, we are hearing that the “bridges” are deteriorating.

For example, hate crime directed at south and east Asian communities has increased by 21% during the coronavirus crisis.

We weren't aware of these divides at the start of the crisis. This may just be that our antennae have become more attuned, but we think there's more to it than that.

As the release from lockdown moves at a different pace for different groups and as the differential impact of the virus becomes more and more apparent, the potential grows for scapegoating and blame.

“ There's a lot of eastern European guys round here, young guys. They drink outside the houses and play football over the road in quite big groups. They don't bother me normally, but I don't think that's ok. Not now. There's a lot of people 'round here angry about that. I am too.”

– Observatory Contributor

“ The park looked like a pop festival yesterday. It's not fair on us older people. I wanted to go to the shop but I was too afraid.”

– Observatory Contributor

Get in touch

Do our observations also reflect your experience? Let us know by emailing david@relationshipsproject.org or tweeting us [@Rships_Project](https://twitter.com/Rships_Project).

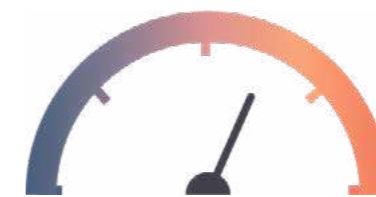


UNDERCURRENTS

While there are some surface level activities we may wish to continue in the future, there's much more below the surface that has the potential to ensure that we 'build back better'.

In this section, we need explore the Undercurrents - the shifting behaviours and attitudes that could prefigure more profound change.

WE'VE WITNESSED A SHIFT...



FROM

- Doubting
- Controlling
- Competing
- Standardised
- If it ain't broke

- >
- >
- >
- >
- >

TO

- Trusting
- Enabling
- Cooperating
- Personalised
- What if?

A SHIFT FROM...



We have seen a shift from doubt to trust in relationships between people, between people and organisations and between organisations.

Whilst trust in government and politicians has fluctuated and then gone down, community cohesion and our trust in one another has “never been higher”.

Neighbours have been lending money to people they barely know, businesses have extended credit indefinitely, home working employees have been freed to work their own hours around child care and home schooling, organisations have been allowing partners and their own staff to take decisions or deploy resources at their own discretion (flexibility in procurement has been a particular characteristic of the crisis response). Thin ties get thicker as people trust one another more. Simple practical tasks or transactions - service coordination, shopping etc - develop into multi faceted and sometimes reciprocal relationships.

Trust in others has become the new currency of compliance. Whilst it might be difficult for me alone to rely on a stranger without the comfort of bureaucratic protocols, I am

“ We see ‘trust’ building, not everywhere but in pockets. Those with more baggage from the past are taking longer, understandably. It’s an important time to reset how we do things and trust is core to building stronger relationships. Stronger relationships are core to genuine partnerships that focus on what we are seeking to do - rather than worrying about who is doing it.”

– Observatory Contributor

adequately reassured by the confidence of my neighbours. Trust breeds trust and when we trust, we’re more likely to comply.

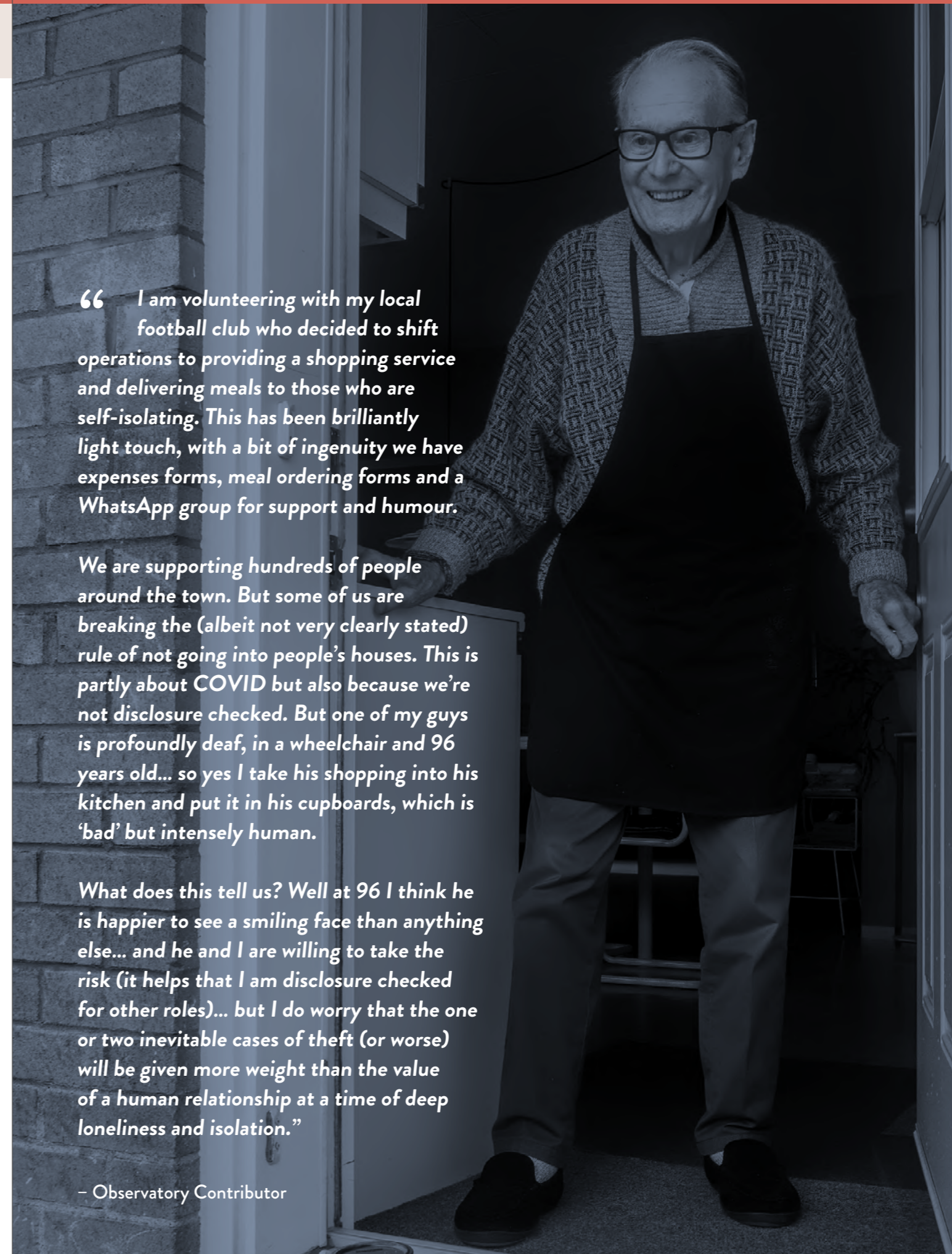
This is the Tripadvisor or Airbnb sensibility reshaping community care. Risks have been recalibrated towards the presumption that others can be trusted rather than doubted or feared. Although it would be dangerously premature to reach any definitive conclusions, we have not yet heard any reports about the abuse of trust.

“ I am volunteering with my local football club who decided to shift operations to providing a shopping service and delivering meals to those who are self-isolating. This has been brilliantly light touch, with a bit of ingenuity we have expenses forms, meal ordering forms and a WhatsApp group for support and humour.

We are supporting hundreds of people around the town. But some of us are breaking the (albeit not very clearly stated) rule of not going into people’s houses. This is partly about COVID but also because we’re not disclosure checked. But one of my guys is profoundly deaf, in a wheelchair and 96 years old... so yes I take his shopping into his kitchen and put it in his cupboards, which is ‘bad’ but intensely human.

What does this tell us? Well at 96 I think he is happier to see a smiling face than anything else... and he and I are willing to take the risk (it helps that I am disclosure checked for other roles)... but I do worry that the one or two inevitable cases of theft (or worse) will be given more weight than the value of a human relationship at a time of deep loneliness and isolation.”

– Observatory Contributor



A SHIFT FROM...



CONTROLLING > ENABLING

Dependencies have been shaken and agency has developed as direct management has become more difficult, resulting in a shift from controlling relationships to enabling relationships.

We have seen this in relationships between service providers and service users - previous protective assumptions have been tested and re-evaluated - and also between organisations.

Perhaps most interestingly it's not just about doing things together but also leading things together.

Cross-sector collaborations have valued small, nimble, local organisations over cumbersome, distant bureaucracies. The greater flexibility in the government procurement rules has been particularly helpful in this regard.

The small, the fast and the expert by experience have demonstrated the value of qualities which big organisations find it difficult or impossible to replicate.

Power dynamics and conventional organisational models have been disrupted and overtaken by sector-less hybrids and horizontal leadership.

“ We’ve worked together differently in the last few weeks. Sometimes we’ve had money from the council before and we’ve done things but they’ve been in charge. This time we’ve been doing things together and we’ve also decided things together. The leadership is much more equal. That’s the big difference. They know that we know our people better than anyone. If you saw us making plans now I don’t think you would know who lived here and who was from the council.”

– Observatory Contributor

“ I think Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs) offer the potential for mutual aid (at scale) to be something that outlives this crisis and in doing so creates better connected more resilient communities long into the future.

In Hammersmith and Fulham something extraordinary is happening. The council could easily ignore these groups and deal with requests for support through their own resources. They would then demonstrate their value and unwittingly reinforce the unequal power balance between themselves and their residents – aren’t you glad we were able to help you?

But in H&F they are taking a different view – their view is that, where possible, the council should be referring requests for support to local MAGs and in doing so they are using this crisis to build connections in their communities that will nurture stronger healthier communities of the future.

This has not happened by accident but through remarkable cooperation between the council and local MAGs. Clearly there are risks for the council in relying on volunteers in this way but they have taken the view that the benefits of this approach far outweigh those risks. They are starting from a position of trust and giving responsibility (or the ability to respond) to local people.”

– Observatory Contributor

A SHIFT FROM...



COMPETING > COOPERATING

The scale of the challenges brought by Covid has necessitated a shift from competition to collaboration.

No one organisation, department or individual can “fix” the problems posed by Covid and the lockdown. A joined up response has been an urgent necessity.

We have seen this in statutory bodies working with civil society, in cross-faith collaborations and in businesses working together on sourcing and delivery.

We have seen an increase in what sociologists call “linking social capital” – respectful and trusting relationships between people who have different degrees of power and formal status.

“ It used to be frustrating for the local CVS and Council that food banks in Barking didn’t collaborate - some would say they actually competed! During the last 4 weeks, we’ve seen them come together to share excess, help with shortfall & collaborate with referrals. There’s a WhatsApp group to help distribute resources. No one ‘asked’ them to - but the focus became on the needs of the residents, not the organisations.”

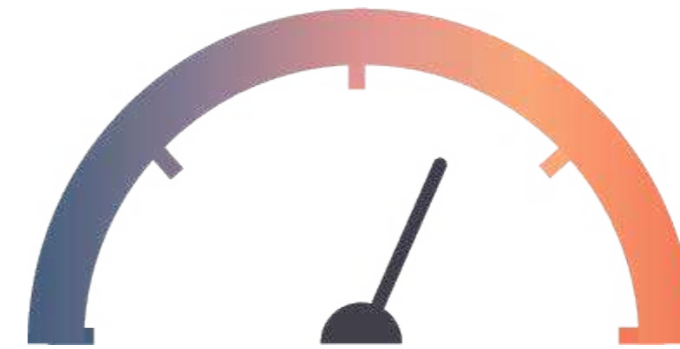
– Observatory Contributor

“ There’s one family here with two kids in a two-bedroom flat. That would be ok, but they’ve let one bedroom to another family. I don’t think they have any other income. The littlest boy is autistic. It must be a terrible strain all cooped up. You can’t expect the council to know that, but we do. That’s why it’s important to work together.”

– Observatory Contributor

Paradoxically in a time of separation, we have been doing more things together whether it’s caring for the most vulnerable, shopping for one another, running businesses or services or clapping on the street.

A SHIFT FROM...



STANDARDISED > PERSONALISED

Lockdown has affected us all differently, prompting a shift from standardised service delivery to more personalised approaches.

Many big organisations (and some small ones) are so determinedly consistent and, in the narrowest sense, efficient, that they lack the sensitivity to respond to individual needs and assets.

Cookie cutter provision is planned for a smooth process, planned for most of us, most of the time, not designed for all of us, all of the time. Systematic transactions are plannable. Responsive and reciprocal relationships cannot be so easily reduced to recurring algorithms.

This has changed over the last three months as activities as diverse as teaching and shopping, worship and domiciliary care have been reimagined. People who had been overlooked for a long time have been noticed again and also new gaps identified. The most successful responses, in schools and shops, faith groups and public services have been highly adaptive and personalised.

“ A Coordinator was recently introduced to a lady who didn’t speak much English but was due to start ESOL classes on Zoom, though she didn’t know how to use the platform. Another colleague, who was in the community at the time knocked on the lady’s door and they managed to do a practice Zoom session right there and then using their phones at safe distance. With this practical help she got it quickly! It turned out from their conversation that the lady really needed more support. The Coordinator contacted a local community partner, who she knew spoke the same language as the lady, to deliver a food and support the lady with further Zoom practice remotely so they could get to know each other more. Later this week the lady will be joining her first ESOL session, able to use it and with a new supportive connection in the community.”

– Observatory Contributor

A SHIFT FROM...



IF IT AIN'T
BROKE

>

WHAT
IF?

We've seen a shift towards innovation and experimentation; all over the UK people have been using this period of disruption to move fast and make things.

More time and fewer distractions has combined with obvious urgency and need and generated both a tide of goodwill and the "permission" to behave differently.

A window has opened for experimentation, innovation and rapid design.

Nationally hospitals have been built in weeks, homeless people have been housed in days. Locally networked groups have been combining to make personal protective equipment for health workers, cafes have pivoted to deliveries, takeaways and free food for those that need it. Lots of organisations, large and small have moved services online.

Not everything has worked and some of it is just a short term fix, but much of the innovation is good enough to last. The prevailing sensibility characterised by the "too difficult list" or "if it ain't broke" complacency, risk adversity or just unthinking custom and practice has moved towards creativity and imagining better.

“ We need to ask ourselves how much of the old normal was deeply damaging and must be stopped and how much was simply unnecessary and could be replaced by something better. And how much was crucial but criminally undervalued.”

– Observatory Contributor

“ One Local Area Coordinator has been alongside a community group doing crafts online and has noted how many people have been coming who probably couldn't in the physical community. Other members of the group have been safely delivering craft materials to those who don't have any so they can join in.

One lady commented that it was like having everyone in her lounge, but she'd be too frightened to do that. Inspired by the group, the lady offered to run an online seated exercise class for older residents. The Local Area Coordinator and the lady have piloted this together and it has gone well. She is now considering delivering other classes in the future.”

– Observatory Contributor

IN SUM

We have predominantly seen the emergence of behaviours which are principle-led, rather than rules-based, cemented by solidarity rather than compliance, less defensive, more can-do, kinder, more emotionally responsive, personal and human.

These Undercurrents run across and reinforce one another. This is an untidy and unfinished revolution, in fact a barely begun revolution, but at this stage in the disruption the positives outweigh the negatives. New relationships have been made. Existing connections which might have been distant or transactional have become warmer and more human.

We are now not only unhealed post Brexit, but also mid-Covid and pre-recession. If relationships across the UK were a priority in January they are even more important today.

Social capital surveys in the US in the months following the 9/11 attack showed a 6 month shift from Me to We. Then, just as quickly, back again.

Comparisons with 9/11 or other disasters are not necessarily a sure guide. 9/11 was a sudden shock and focused on a particular location and a short period of time.

The pandemic is long lasting and all of us in the UK will have been touched by it in some way, but we should assume that there is a finite season for locking in new defaults, that it won't last long and that the stopwatch is already ticking.

Of course these shifts are the consequence of exceptional circumstances. Needles will move back across the dials in the months ahead but there is no necessary reason why they should settle exactly where they were pre-Covid. Five months ago the Prime Minister was talking about "bringing the country back together" after the bitter and polarizing battles of Brexit.

“ Can we always do this, normal time?”

– Our 6 year old Observer, commenting on the Thursday clapping

INCONSISTENCY AND MESSINESS

We should stress that whilst these Undercurrents are dominant, they are not universal.

In some places the needle has moved in the opposite direction. For every shift there's often a shadow, usually smaller but even sometimes in the same locality.

Neighbours, for instance, may be more trusting of one another but also more hostile to “outsiders”.

Many organisations have been working better with one another but some have encountered tension and suspicion.

And, in recent days, significant numbers have been ignoring the guidelines and crowded into public places with a new disregard for the common good.

Social change is always messy but at this stage the negatives look more like exceptions than widespread, counterveillance.

“ We told the school. They said social services should know, so we told them, but the social worker said the school is supposed to do all this now. I don't know about all that. I just know that someone should know what's going on.”

– Observatory Contributor

Get in touch

Do our observations also reflect your experience? Let us know by emailing david@relationshipsproject.org or tweeting us [@Rships_Project](https://twitter.com/Rships_Project).



INVITATIONS

So, how do we make it count?

Here we set out five sets of questions. Each one becomes an invitation for working together, building on the experiential learning and developing the assets from the first 100 days of responding to Covid. In aggregate they would help to encourage the development of relationship-centred practice everywhere, place by place.

Very little of the change we have observed has been driven from the top. It has been made from the ground up, place by place. Preserving and developing the positives must similarly begin with attention to the personal and the local. Embedding the best and spreading it requires a bigger framework but this must be a careful build. Trust is fragile. Relationships are precious and if we have learnt anything in recent weeks it is all about the power of collaboration.

WE INVITE YOU TO EXPLORE THESE FIVE KEY QUESTIONS WITH US:



1. BANKING THE GAINS

This has been a period of rapid learning and change. We won't abandon what we now know but nor should we discard the tried and tested. The sensitivity of the integration will determine whether we look back on 2020 as an odd blip in social behaviour or a time when we changed for good.

How can we best embed new relationships and new activities alongside the things that worked before the pandemic?



2. ASKING THE 10M

The temptation to institutionalize and industrialize anything that seems to work in the community is very compelling but also very unlikely to succeed. We need to ask not just what happened but why, then we can set out suggestions for sustaining and growing.

Why have people behaved as they have over the last three months? Why have attitudes shifted? Where might they go next?



3. MAKING OUR STORY

We become the story that we tell ourselves. If we tell ourselves that we were divided and diminished by the pandemic we will emerge divided and diminished. Many organisations and communities have a different, far, far better story to tell.

What are the truths that will inspire our better days? How are we to understand and weave our story together? How do we hold it and carry it forward?



4. DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

Local change begins with small acts, and distributed players in multiple locations. Societal change takes off when we start to see this local action in a wider framework. There are necessary roles for government, local and national, and also for other institutions.

What is the appropriate statecraft, in style and substance, for enabling and supporting something so intrinsically personal? How does the state open possibilities without undue risk and raise the game without controlling and constraining?



5. NOTICING MORE

Social change doesn't work to a timetable. Politicians in particular are keen to hurry on and close the book but we need to notice more, hear more from the people we're not hearing from enough and follow the learning for longer.

Who is still on mute? What needs to change and what gives hope? How do we use what we are learning to build a better society by building better relationships?



1. BANKING THE GAINS

- How can we best embed new relationships and new activities alongside the things that worked before the pandemic?



FIRST, UNDERSTAND, DON'T RE-INVENT

Many organisations responded to lockdown quickly and effectively, reconfiguring what they do to sustain existing activities, often in new ways, and to meet new needs. Typically the quickest and most effective...

- Were already embedded in their communities with strong local leadership
- Had positive relationships with people working in other organisations and statutory services (good personal relationships have seemed to be much more important than the formal liaison structures)
- Were accustomed to relational working, to exercising initiative and to collaborating
- Were confident and financially secure.

Organisations like [Grapevine](#) and the [Barking and Dagenham Collective](#) didn't need to be invented because they were there already.

There isn't one perfect model in the sector but there are recurring principles, not least around building and sustaining relationships.

This is a time for understanding those models, not for reinventing them.

Supporting the local application of these principles may be less politically attractive than a sexy new programme but it is what works.

SECOND, SUSTAIN THE CONNECTIVITY

Many local partnerships have delivered the kind of "joined up services" which have long been an aspiration but rarely delivered.

Now that relationships and light touch protocols have been established it will be easier to sustain these collaborations than it might have been to set them up in more settled times. This will require continuing commitment.

Our [Spirit of Lockdown storybook](#) can help to make sense of what has happened, what has changed for the better and how you might sustain any desired changes.

“ What we face now should not be seen as a binary choice - to stay as we are or go back - but rather that we have created something new and different. The ways in which we have responded – both psychologically and socially – should mean ultimately a larger relationships toolkit – which should enhance our understanding of relationships. The better we can articulate the things we are learning now, the better we will be able to make choices about what should be in our new “blended” lives.

– Observatory Contributor

THIRD, BLEND THE PHYSICAL AND THE DIGITAL

For many the internet pre-Covid offered a cold web, a mechanism for effecting transactions, rather than for enabling a warm web of meaningful relationships.

Over recent weeks organisations like [The Cares family](#), [Mind](#), [Relate](#) and [Camerados](#) have broken new ground by imaginatively deploying basic apps and programmes to facilitate purposeful connection.

Others like the [Local Area Coordination Network](#) have been teaching and supporting individuals to use the technology, and groups like the thousands of new mutual aid groups have shown the potential of a blended web, combining Whatsapp or Facebook with doorstep conversations.

The most effective organisations in this space have managed to create meaningful connections and expand their activities.

Finding the right balance between the digital and the physical might have taken a generation. Necessity has accelerated progress. We need to build on this fast learning and develop the use of the new connective tissue, not to replace the face to face but to enhance and complement it. We need to learn more about how to bake together the digital and the physical and we need to share the recipes.

“ Tech where it matters. People where it counts.”

– Observatory Contributor

Our first invitation:

Join us in exploring how to blend the digital and physical together.

Together we'll:

- Surface examples of 'what's working and what's missing' in blending the digital and physical
- Redesign with one another to blend successful digital innovations with the reintroduction of real-world activities as lockdown ends
- Create 'recipe cards' and some practical tools to share what we learn with others who are about to embark on this journey

To get involved, RSVP [here](#).

2. ASKING THE 10M

- Why have people behaved as they have over the last three months?
- Why have attitudes shifted? Where might they go next?



Ten million "willing citizens" have chosen to spend at least 3 hours a week caring for one another, not because they have any contractual commitment or extrinsic motivation.

Attitudes weren't reshaped and, for the most part, activities weren't driven by the state or other big organisations. None of the shifting undercurrents are the product of government policy or systems thinking. They are an aggregation of 10m moral choices.

78% say they want to carry on. Ministers call this a "volunteer army" but few describe themselves as volunteers and they are certainly not an army ready to be redeployed - there is no structure, no formality, no rules. Most weren't mobilised by an organisation.

They are willing citizens making an individual commitment. This is change in a different currency: organic, relational, much more "Me Too" than "Neighbourhood Watch".

The experience of the NHS volunteer scheme is instructive.

An initial ministerial target of 250,000 volunteers was increased to 750,000 in response to enthusiasm and the new target was also swiftly achieved.

There was no shortage of goodwill but converting good intentions into local action proved to be much more difficult and it seems that the experience for most of these volunteers has been a disappointing one. Brokering relationships between neighbours is not best done by a Whitehall bureaucracy and doing it badly is worse than not doing it at all.

“ I told my friends I'm a volunteer. I was pleased about it. Now they ask me how I'm getting on. I feel silly. I wouldn't do it again.”

– Observatory Contributor

Trying to catch and preserve the spirit of the 10m with systems and structures is like trying to catch a butterfly in a jam jar – there is a likelihood that we kill or damage that which makes it beautiful.

This is potentially, however, a valuable legacy from the pandemic and also a necessary one for the next phase. As the lockdown continues for many people well into the autumn, and as the net effect of reduced services and increased pressures continue to impact on family relationships and mental and physical health, the need for neighbourly care and support may change but it won't diminish.

We must nurture an ecology that enables it to survive and thrive without owning and constraining.

Relationships not job specifications are the secret of sustainability but we need to know if incentives, regulatory easements or additional practical support would help or hinder. For some, perhaps, the experience of recent weeks will have led them to think about alternative or additional voluntary commitments.

We need to know what information, training or pathways might be helpful and what might actively discourage.

“ *Some will stay involved and some won't. But I would say don't try to tinker. We can make the introduction. That's important. We can help a bit. Then it clicks or it doesn't.* **”**

– Observatory Contributor

There are likely to be a range of answers but if we don't take steps now to understand the 10m better they will slip away just as the much smaller number of Olympic volunteers largely did in 2012.

We are inviting partners to join us in asking the 10m and in developing a set of “typical” personas.

We want to then build out from this research a set of practical pathways enabling local communities to answer for themselves: “What do we need to offer on our patch to carry on the caring?”.

Our second invitation:

Join us in asking the 10m how to carry on caring.

Together we'll:

- Do a deep dive into the motivations, needs and energy of those who have cared together through lockdown
- Surface opportunities and obstacles in maintaining energy and commitment
- Develop pathways to inspire and guide local organisations to help maintain this commitment in their patch

To get involved, RSVP [here](#).

3. MAKING OUR STORY

- What are the truths that will inspire our better days?
- How are we to understand and weave our story together?
- How do we hold it and carry it forward?



“ Stories are the secret reservoir of values... change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and we change the individuals and the nations. If they tell themselves stories that are lies they will suffer the future consequences. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths they will free their histories for future flowering.”

– Ben Okri

References to the “Blitz spirit” have been commonplace in the [Observatory](#) and in wider conversations. Very few who use the phrase have any firsthand memory of the war, but we all understand the meaning of the shorthand.

Stories normalise, legitimise, celebrate and carry forward alternative ways of behaving. What will we mean when we use a new shorthand in the years to come and say “remember what we did in 2020”?

This matters, just as the war narrative mattered, because it shapes the way that we think about ourselves, our capabilities and our future. If the story is a positive one, as it has become about the Blitz, we are empowered by it and inspired.

We’ve noted that the relational revolution in recent weeks is the aggregated sum of countless moral choices. Only stories can hold those values, carry them forward and “free our history for a future flowering.” We need to fill our secret reservoirs.

Serious people will say that this isn’t a serious project, it’s not about structures and systems and funding. We say it isn’t a choice because there is no value in a road map without a compass.

How would our place change if trust, participation, collaboration, inclusion, individuality and kindness were our guiding stars, not only for the duration of the emergency but for good and for all? Our place could be the block we live in, the class we teach, the city we run, the shop we manage, the organisation we lead. It matters only that it matters to us, that we can ask the questions and that we can act on the answers.

Our third invitation:

Join us in telling the story of how we’ve responded to Covid-19.

You’re invited to:

- Download our simple [Spirit of Lockdown storybook](#)
- Bring together others in your organisation, neighbourhood or network to make the story of how you responded and the spirit you want to take forward
- Share your Spirit of Lockdown using [#SpiritOfLockdown](#) or emailing us at hello@relationshipsproject.org and encourage others to do the same

To get involved, [RSVP here.](#)



4. DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

- What is the appropriate statecraft, in style and substance, for enabling and supporting something so intrinsically personal?
- How does the state open possibilities without undue risk and raise the game without controlling and constraining?



Community responses have varied from place to place. A wider and stronger framework is needed to support and grow the community activity without owning or controlling it. Local government is the best placed public institution but we all vote, pay rates and have a part to play in influencing the local agenda.

To help sustain the activity, and to prompt councils who may have been less interested, we are...

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

We're publishing a [discussion paper](#) alongside this report to start the conversation. We're seeking feedback and will be organising opportunities to evolve the ideas together.

CHAMPIONING 10 TO DOS

We're suggesting 10 measures from the discussion paper for progressing now. It's a sort of human stimulus package for sustaining and generating social capital.

Council budgets have been hit hard and will be under great pressure in the months ahead. Government is expected to consult shortly on the details of the Shared Prosperity Fund which is replacing EU funds. There is strong case to be made for applying some of that money to supporting this local work and also, perhaps, an argument for repurposing some of the funding currently directed into NCS. However our agenda for the second half of 2020 isn't depend on new money. It uses resources differently but costs little or nothing more.

1 PUT THE STRENGTHENING OF COMMUNITIES ON A PAR WITH FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND SAFEGUARDING DUTIES.

Strong communities and effective relationships are not a "nice to have", less important than other policy priorities. They are the way that an effective local authority delivers. Clear dedicated leadership is a strong start.

WE SUGGEST: Designate one chief officer with a duty to preserve and sustain a thriving community.

3 TRUST THE COMMUNITY.

The "general power of competence" gives councils the ability to do anything that is not proscribed in law. A matching community power would be similarly liberating, providing the right for citizens to, for example, use public space and resources unless councils can show why they shouldn't. For example a community group might close a road for a street party, inform the council and neighbours and then proceed rather than, as at present, apply for permission, pay and wait.

WE SUGGEST: Include a Community Power of Competence in the forthcoming White paper. Start adopting the approach now.

2 SHIFT THE OBSTACLES.

Energy is often wasted in the navigation of public bodies but the blockages may not be easily visible to a Council. A mechanism is needed for locating and shifting the obstacles. Examples of a more enabling approach might include the sharing of data and information, proportionate requirements in the use of GDPR or DBS checks or permissive use of public space and buildings.

WE SUGGEST: Establish a community easement function to take up cases or examples of obstructive process and resolve them.

4 UTILIZE EVERY TOUCH POINT.

Council officers have hundreds of touchpoints with their community. Each one is an opportunity but some staff need support in understanding how to foster better community relationships or how the unintended effects of public sector actions can support or inhibit community activity. This could be tackled by reintroducing neighbourhood management teams and, more immediately, by training to integrate a relationship building approach into 'core business', for example housing management staff, safer communities officers, parks and leisure centre staff etc.

WE SUGGEST: Establish core workforce training to integrate relationship building into every touch point.

5 ENABLE THE WILLING CITIZEN TO BE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER.

Mutual aid has been seen as part of a national effort but we routinely underestimate its impact. There are other crises that are not universal or so visible. Councils could share the challenges more transparently and invite community action by, for example, showing the links between the isolation of older people, hospital admissions and money for everyone in the NHS. Neighbours and statutory services might then work together on social care circles to keep people happy and safe in their own community.

WE SUGGEST: Share the top concerns and open up the possibility of residents being part of something bigger.

6 PROVIDE THE KNOW HOW.

Lots of us can do a bit of shopping or put the rubbish out. Not so many know where to go for help with parenting problems or with getting grab rails in the bathroom. Short course training like this new [health champion programme](#) in Newham or this [programme](#) in Frome turns a willing neighbour into a [community connector](#).

WE SUGGEST: Run regular community connector training programmes.

7 EMBED THE 2020 GAINS.

Almost half of all local authorities have set up community hubs. Most have worked well with a smart combination of relationships, resources and light touch process. Collaborations have been particularly assisted by flexibility of procurement.

WE SUGGEST: Sustain for a year the hubs, the collaborative organising relationships and, especially, a more open approach to procurement. Talk about evolving to meet other needs and review in 12 months.

8 USE THE LEARNING ABOUT STAFF.

Many council staff have been redeployed to work on the community response to COVID. Where have we missed their empty substantive roles? Has their community role, and the relationships they have made, been more impactful than what they had been doing?

WE SUGGEST: Commit to this redeployment for a further year. See what gaps emerge and what should stay in the community. Review in 12 months.

9 REFLECT TOGETHER.

The stories that communities and organisations create from this period will be important. Councils could use their convening ability to facilitate neighbourhood level forums which allow communities to consider what they thought was valuable and should continue. They might use our [Spirit of Lockdown storybook](#). This would help to build an appreciation of small scale community activity and transition it into our post-covid lives.

WE SUGGEST: Call the conversation with a round of neighbourhood forums.

10 TALK ABOUT PROGRESS.

Council officers and members have a million things to think about. Some requirements for accountability on this agenda will keep it front of mind.

WE SUGGEST: Talk about progress. Report in one year and then annually on this agenda.

Our fourth invitation

Join us in developing the framework for relationships to thrive. Together we will:

- Build on the [discussion paper](#) to shape and share a practical approach for government
- Support activity on the 10 To Do's for 2020 and learn from the outcomes
- Hold one another to account

To get involved, [RSVP here](#).

5. NOTICING MORE

- Who is still on mute?
- What needs to change and what gives hope?
- How do we use what we are learning to build a better society by building better relationships?



There is a contested theory that habits can be formed or broken in 21 days. When, for instance, a travel route is temporarily unavailable, commuters learn new ways of getting to work and never look back.

Similarly, shoppers change habits when a favourite product is unavailable. However these are relatively simple adjustments. We have now been behaving differently for a hundred days or more but we are still learning.

This is, in part, because the context is also changing and dividing. Some people are moving out of lockdown, some will be shielded for much longer. Some are going back to work but significant numbers are likely to be unemployed as the economy moves into recession.

This isn't one crisis with a long tail. This is a three hump crisis. First the pandemic, then the recession - the Bank of England estimates that the economy will shrink by

14% in 2020 - and then the further wave of social consequences – the economy got 6% smaller in 2008 and the IPPR estimated that this was directly or indirectly responsible for 130,000 deaths.

The social context for all our relationships will continue to churn for many months, maybe years with many further complicating consequences.

We don't yet know what will be the long term effects of lockdown on our health and wellbeing. The increase in domestic violence and family breakdown, for instance, may only become fully apparent when services resume and children return to school. By then those services will be wrestling with long waiting lists as well as new needs.

The enforced separation and shutting down of relationships which protected us from physical harm may also have had other impacts.



Psychoanalyst Anna Freud concluded her post war study of London children with the observation that they were “on the whole, much less upset by bombing than by evacuation”. We may see something similar in the weeks ahead.

“All of the meaningful day to day services have been on hold. For the most vulnerable children it is often attachment and trust that need to be built. The sudden detachment will take a long time to repair” said one headteacher (Barnardo's Time for a Clean Slate, May 2020.)

Lenin thought “there are decades when nothing happens and weeks when decades happen”. These have been such weeks, and there will be more in 2020 and beyond. We can't wait for a settled state before moving forward and building better relationships, but nor should we stop noticing the ongoing change. Too many are still on mute. Their mouths are moving but they aren't being heard.

We will be keeping the Observatory open to hear more from these voices and to talk more about how we channel the learning into some of the challenges that lie ahead.

Over the next three months, we'll be listening and holding conversations, with further Sightings and Zoom conversations and then another publication in the Autumn.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR THE NEXT THREE MONTHS:

- What are we learning from our collaborative work on understanding the 10m and on blending the digital and the physical? How can we help others to use this learning?
- We have seen that neighbours can care reliably for one another in an emergency and collaborate with statutory services. Are there clues here for the development of more community-based, relationship-centred social care? What would need to change and what support would it require?
- We know that the re-neighbouring was at least in part a consequence of people being at home and having more time, and that many employers developed new, more flexible protocols for employees working from home. We know also that there will be more unemployment in the months ahead. Relationships need time. If time is unevenly distributed, so are good relationships. What are the implications for rebuilding the economy in ways which work better for us all?
- Our mid-crisis policy suggestions are pragmatic but the greatest disruption in our social lives for a generation or more should also stimulate deeper reflection. How do we not only adapt local government in the light of the lessons learnt, but re-found it?
- The crisis that has shown the best of us has also exposed our greatest weaknesses. Without adequate resources our relationships will always be strained and often broken. When 6 out of 10 people want the government to prioritise health and well being over economic growth post Covid and when the former editor of the Daily Telegraph Max Hastings is moved to write in the Times “the polo season, figuratively speaking, is over” it feels like it might be the moment to lead the conversation about relationships and re-neighbouring into a bigger one about relationships and social justice.

Our fifth invitation:

Join us in opening up the conversation.

Together we'll:

- Listen out for the voices less heard
- Look ahead, particularly to the pending recession
- Keep working on building better relationships to build back better

To get involved, [RSVP here](#).



Stay in touch

We would love for you to be involved in our deeply collaborative work, and really do welcome you to get in touch.

Whether you have ideas, critiques, resources or something else to offer, we'd love to hear from you.

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hello@relationshipsproject.org





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