

The Sense of Connection

Relationships and strong communities,
in crisis and beyond



RELATIONSHIPS
PROJECT

2022

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relationshipsproject.org

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THE SENSE OF CONNECTION

It's Autumn 2022. Britain is brittle. The couple on the train are both wearing masks. They are tetchy and on edge, tutting at neighbours. They are not alone in their nervousness.

Twice as many people have died from the virus this summer as in Summer 2021 and 'non-Covid excess deaths' are stacking up. The ONS estimate that 2m Britons are struggling with Long Covid. 1.5m report symptoms that are still affecting their day-to-day lives. Almost a quarter, 430,000, first became ill more than two years ago.

Many more are concerned about money, even about putting food on the table and heating their homes. 45m will face fuel poverty by the end of the year and more than two thirds of all UK parents are worried about paying for food, energy and fuel in the coming months.

And now, after a summer of political stasis, we have untested leadership, a new PM and an unfamiliar and inexperienced government.


This is a brittle Britain. Fragile, anxious and uncertain. Past the worst of the pandemic but not over it. Fearing the multiple costs of a hard winter.

If our country was a good friend we'd say stay still, hold close to those that matter, take time, recall the things that work for you, change the things that don't.

Our ability, as individuals and as communities, to prepare for, cope with and recover from disaster depends in no small part on the strength of our relationships. The importance of strong communities was most obvious in the height of the pandemic, but the value of the asset was not unique to the time. Facing new challenges and new opportunities, we must now hold fast to the sense of connection, and put it to work.

This is not only about responding to emergencies but about investing in communities where we are all ready and able to seize opportunity, cope with adversity and support one another in good times and bad.

There's much we can learn from previous disasters about repairing and strengthening the social fabric. In this Review, we draw on the expertise of the After Disasters Network in the crafts of disaster recovery and conflict transformation, and weave this together with all that we've learned from our own network about community development. We set out some things we've seen that worked, some that didn't and some we want to change.

A photograph of a person with long, light-colored hair seen from behind, looking out a window. The person is holding a dark cup. To the left, a curtain with a large leaf pattern is visible. The window looks out onto a blurred outdoor scene with trees and a fence. The entire image has a warm, orange-toned overlay.

“ I used to stare absent minded out of this window whilst I was doing the washing up. Covid changed that. She would pop by most days, with the cordless phone, and we would lean on the windowsill (on both sides) and chat. It meant so much”

- Observatory Contributor

ABOUT

About the Relationships Project

The Relationships Project works collaboratively to enable learning about relationships and relationship-centred practice and to support the application of the learning with communities of experience, tools and training.

Shortly before the first lockdown we established the Relationships Observatory to gather insights and experience from communities across the UK. We asked “what do we need to understand or to do now to be able to look back on 2020 as a time when we not only helped one another in a crisis, but as the year when we changed for good?”.

We have written several reports on the work that ensued:

- The Moment We Noticed, reporting on our learning after the first 100 days
- Turning to the Light, sharing our reflections on the first year of the pandemic
- Citizen's Rising, sharing the stories and experiences of young people, two years on

The unattributed quotations in this paper are all derived from the Observatory, subsequent listening events and bridge building training sessions.

We formed several collaborations at this time. All our work on the bridge builders programme has been in partnership with Neil Denton and the After Disasters Network.

About the After Disasters Network

This report has been co-authored by Neil Denton. Neil is co-founder of the After Disasters Network which helps to solve real-life problems by turning practitioner beliefs and dilemmas into academic knowledge, academic knowledge into policy, and policy into improved practice and delivery.

Founded in 2019 by five leading academics and practitioners in disaster management, the After Disasters Network is a cross-disciplinary network working between Durham and Northumbria Universities.

We are interested in the foundations that support psychological, social, institutional, and economic ‘recovering’.

We want to learn how to support and manage aftermaths without creating conditions that foster post-disaster crises. The timeframe of the aftermath can be long, with many people ‘living with’ disaster and post-disaster conditions for an extended period of time.

Our aspirations are to:

- Put communities at the heart of dealing with the aftermath
- Ensure preparedness is about material, social and human capital - not plans
- Embrace collaboration with as wide a range of people as possible
- Embrace unpredictability and uncertainty
- See the aftermath of disasters through a new lens that gets away from disciplinary silos and poorly defined terms and practices

A WORD ON TERMS

Strong Communities

As we have discussed these ideas over the last three years we have found ourselves using different terms:



These words and phrases don't mean the same, but they do overlap.

In this paper we want to argue that a community with high levels of connectivity or social capital will be better able to respond to adversity, more likely to channel conflict or tension into constructive energy, and best placed to support and sustain the wellbeing of all its members.

We have chosen to use the phrase 'strong communities' throughout to capture the idea that what worked in the Covid emergency is also what will enable communities to deal with adversity and seize opportunity in the immediate renewal and in the longer term. Strong communities are places where we choose to live and work, not until we can do better, but for the long term; where we all have meaningful relationships with people that we can rely upon and confidence in the organisations that we need. Where our lives are anchored with stability and security.

They are places where we connect continuously and constructively not only with the people around us, but also with others beyond our immediate community. Our bridges are plentiful and well cared for.

And they are places where we have the opportunities, and can access the means to reach higher, together and as individuals. When we talk about strong communities in this paper, we are thinking about anchors, bridges and trampolines.

Conflict transformation

Through the course of this paper, we also explore the role that conflict transformation (sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of peace building) plays in disaster recovery and community development.

The theory of conflict transformation originated with American professor John Paul Lederach who was inspired, in his work, to go beyond trying to diffuse or reduce conflicts to transforming the energy that sits at their heart from a destructive energy to a constructive energy. In doing so, the structural causes of the conflict are addressed and the relationship between the conflicting parties transformed.

An illustration of a person from the chest up, looking upwards. The person's head and neck are rendered in shades of orange and red, while their shoulders are in a dark blue. The background is a dark navy blue, speckled with white dots representing stars. Various geometric shapes float in the sky: a large orange 'S' shape in the upper left, a textured orange square in the upper center, a pinkish-white curved shape in the upper right, a pinkish-white 'S' shape in the middle right, a textured orange circle in the lower center, a pinkish-white square in the lower left, and a pinkish-white triangle in the lower right. The title 'LOOKING UP' is centered in the middle of the image in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

LOOKING UP

The last three years have been tough - head down, get through it. If we take a moment to look up, we'll see that things have changed.

No disaster follows a linear pattern of crisis, response and recovery. The reality - as we have witnessed during Covid - are times of repair and regrowth interspersed with setback and tragedy. We have described this as “shuffle and repeat”.

In The Moment We Noticed and Turning to the Light, we called for a hopeful reading of the pandemic. We explored the areas of light illuminating the darkness; the hope that could be found in moments of despair. As we approach a difficult winter, those areas of light are harder to find. As we were reminded by an Observatory contributor, “we must sit in the darkness without losing sight of the light”.

Holding those bright moments close, using them as beacons to remind us how far we've come, will help us to guide our way through the difficult times ahead. They also remind us of the importance of relationships - guiding us back to each other - because the darkness is less scary if you're not alone.



WHERE ARE WE NOW?

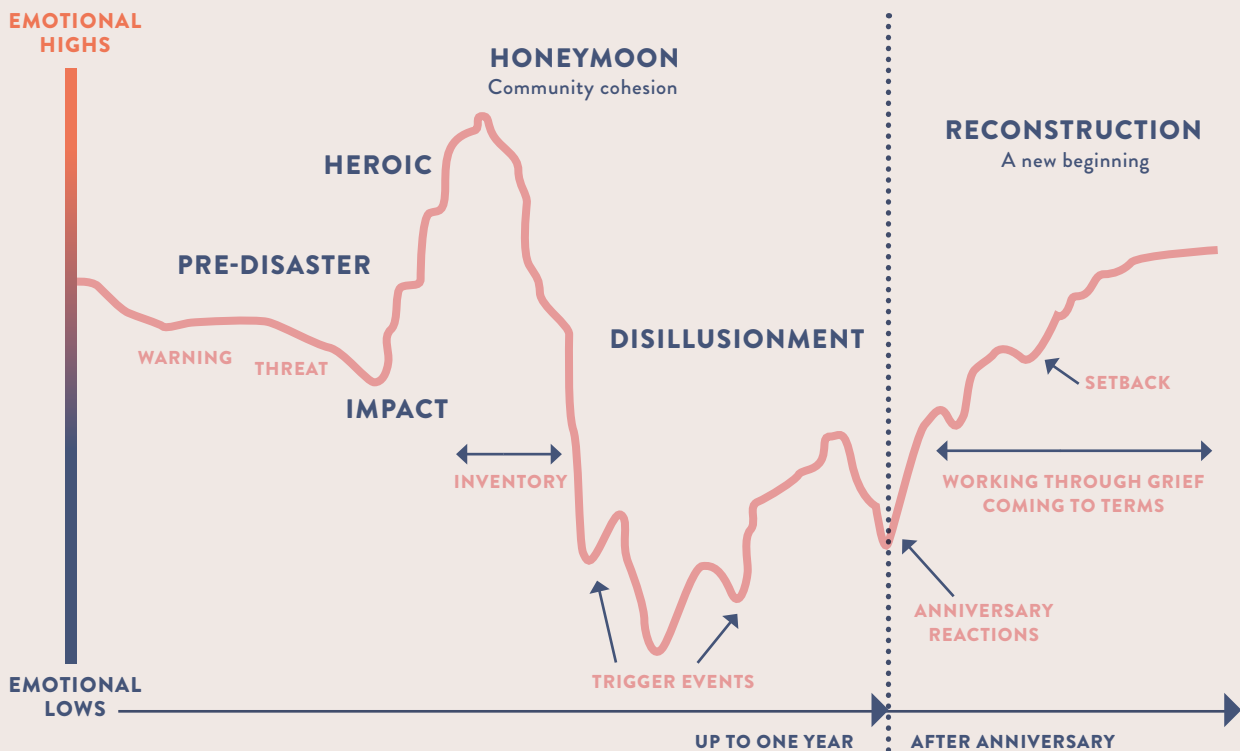
How we communicate and collaborate at a neighbourhood level is crucial to how well we cope with setbacks. Our relationships with, and confidence in, each other, as well as those leading the response is key.

International studies have shown consistent patterns of social behaviour in the wake of disasters elsewhere.

Up to the dotted vertical line the UK experience of Covid has broadly matched this pattern.

In The Moment We Noticed, which shared our learning from the first 100 days of lockdown, we reported on a number of shifting undercurrents - attitudes and beliefs that had shifted in a positive direction: we trusted, supported, and cared for each other more. We were in the honeymoon phase.

THE TYPICAL PHASES OF A DISASTER



Source: [samsha.gov](https://www.samsha.gov)

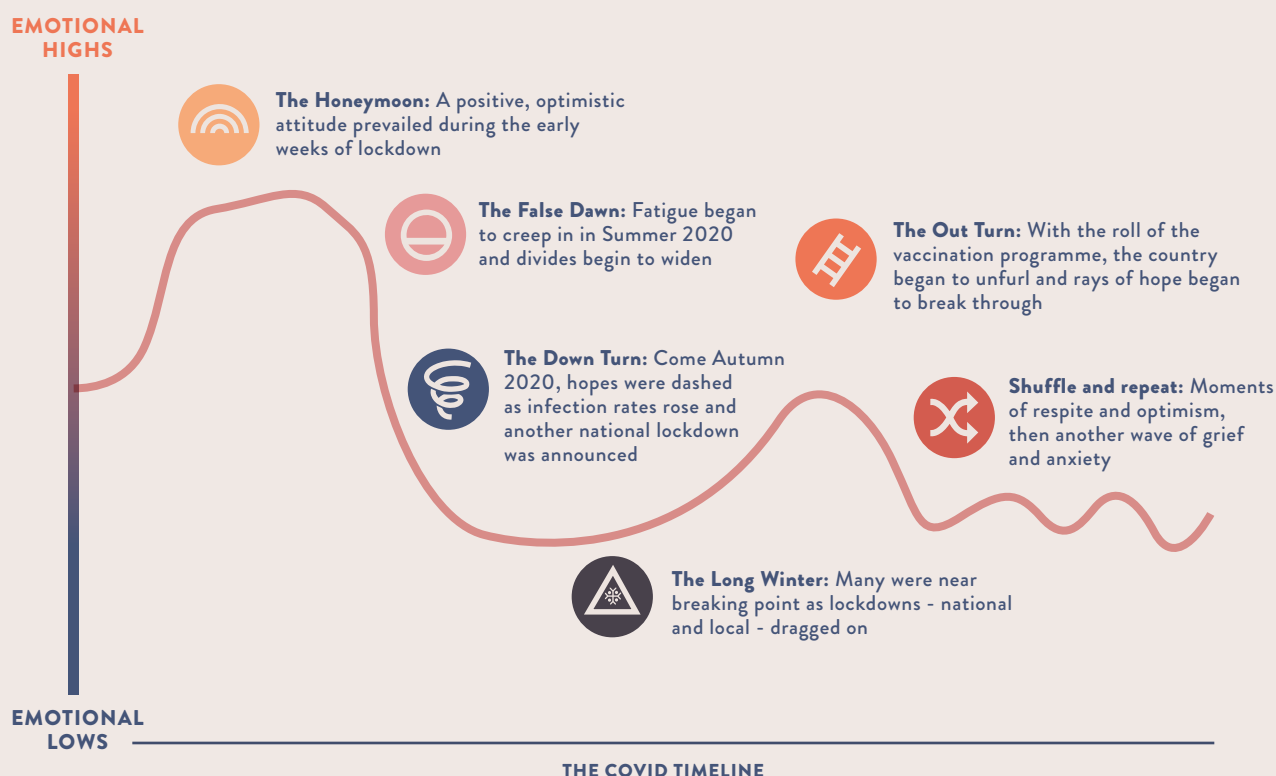
One year on, we reported on the areas of darkness that became apparent as we entered the disillusionment phase. Each setback had an impact on how well we were doing, as well as how we were getting on with each other.

The connective tissue that held us together became tired and started to break down. The bridges between us became weaker, and the gaps between us got wider, making us less able to respond to moments of setback. What was co-operation started to become competition once again.

Patience wore thin, trust became suspicion, and instead of building bridges, we started to build walls.

Now, it feels that we are stuck in a pattern of ‘shuffle and repeat’ – moments of respite and optimism, then another wave of grief and anxiety. We observe a new set of shifting undercurrents. The needle has moved, but in a dangerous direction.

THE COVID EXPERIENCE SO FAR





NOW, TWO YEARS LATER, THE NEEDLE HAS MOVED BACK IN A DANGEROUS DIRECTION

The positive undercurrents have not evaporated entirely. It is unlikely that 17 million people would have turned out for a Jubilee street party had the anniversary fallen three years earlier. We won't unknow the neighbours or forget new skills. The light touch neighbourhood groups on Facebook and Whatsapp have, in many areas, evolved into permanent networks, but the palpable sense of optimism and energy has gradually eroded. Trust was hammered by tales of irresponsibility in the highest places and consensus has crumbled on mask wearing, vaccination, holiday restrictions, returns to work and much more.

Now, as the cost of living crisis drives into the pandemic, those who have been struggling to stay afloat are at risk of drowning. What we were expecting to be a linear, three crash crisis in 2020 - first Covid, then recession and finally a further wave of social consequences - now looks more like a multiple collision with

each crisis, and more, piling into the back of the others and compounding them all.

The diminishing, Covid-led rhythms of 'shuffle and repeat' have been joined by new uncertainties and setbacks. Social cohesion is at risk whilst social solidarity is more important than ever. An edgy and emotional heaviness in many communities presses deeper and deeper.

Mental health practitioners describe such a state of mind in individual patients as "languishing" (as opposed to "flourishing") – a condition that is characterised by anxiety, fatigue and negativity, feelings of emptiness and helplessness, a sense that life is out of control and we are powerless to change it.

A flourishing community is stable, confident, energetic and strong. A languishing community is none of these things.



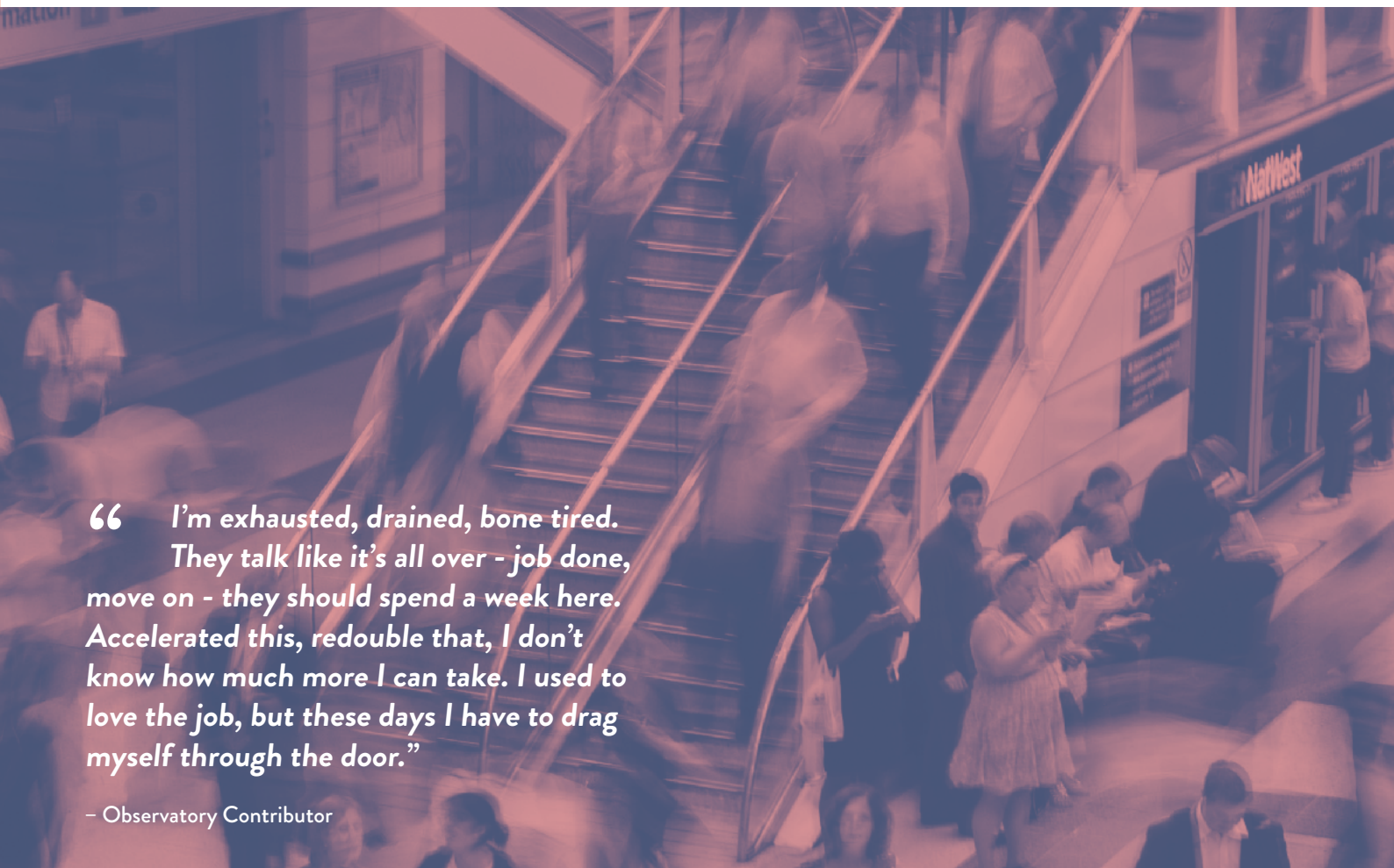
DEEP TISSUE DAMAGE

There is so much pain still being carried, grief not yet metabolised. Loved ones taken away before their time, with hands not held and last words left unspoken and unheard.

Health that will never be restored, careers stopped, nest eggs emptied, energies drained, hopes tarnished, ambitions left to gather dust.

So many have given so much to keep things going and services running. But their tanks are running on empty, and fuel is in short supply.

Breakdowns are becoming more and more common, and the whole network is at risk of grinding to a halt.



“ I’m exhausted, drained, bone tired. They talk like it’s all over - job done, move on - they should spend a week here. Accelerated this, redouble that, I don’t know how much more I can take. I used to love the job, but these days I have to drag myself through the door.”

– Observatory Contributor



66 *Same storm, different boats” said the media commentators.*

66 *Boats?” said a resident in east London “there are people around here without a rubber duck.”*



TINDER DRY TEMPERS

The UK was divided before the pandemic began. As scientists worried about Wuhan the British PM was speaking about the need to “bring the country together” post-Brexit.

Divides related to Brexit and fixed perceptions of who inhabits which part of the political spectrum and what that implies about their values resulted in a discourse reduced to vaguely defined labels of otherness.

‘Snowflake’, ‘gammon’, ‘woke’ and ‘cancel culture’ had all become common parlance in an increasingly angry and disconnected debate about identity, equality, inclusion, freedom of expression and community. ‘Racist’ had become something we used to label an individual or group, rather than describe a behaviour, policy or practice. The anger was palpable, and increasingly personal.

Over the coming months the differential impact of the virus, and of the measures taken to contain it, would reveal inequalities which the disaster hadn’t caused but had exacerbated.

The correlations between poverty, poor housing, existing health inequalities and the Covid death rate were increasingly evident. The unequal allocation of resources, the differing levels of trust that exist between state and community, and the real life implications for communities that are fractured or atomised became painfully apparent. National fissures were ground into clashing local fragments.

Now our tolerance tank is also running dangerously low. Prolonged patience has been met by petulance and provocation from those in charge.

Sparks are beginning to fly on our streets and workplaces where anxiety levels are high and tempers tinder dry. With resentment smouldering and blame fanning the embers, the flames may not be far away.

“ So far today, I’ve been shouted at, sworn at, and when we ran out of diet coke someone hit me with a magazine. You wouldn’t think they’re off on their holidays. I remember the days when you’d walk through the airport and people would smile and wave you past, they are long gone. Still, I never thought I’d see the day when you need to change out of the uniform to get through without being threatened or abused.”

– Observatory Contributor

The background is a solid reddish-orange color. It is decorated with various abstract shapes: a large dark blue circle at the top center, several curved lines in orange, white, and dark blue, and a dark blue triangle at the bottom right. At the bottom center, there is a stylized illustration of a person's feet wearing white socks and dark blue pants. The text "LOOKING DOWN" is centered in the middle of the image in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

LOOKING DOWN

The traditional thinking that underpins government disaster response is unhelpful, but not unusual.

Governments have shaped their response based on the perception that their primary obligation is to provide those affected with the rudimentaries of survival; shelter, sustenance and safety. Governments look down and provide, communities receive.



THE TRANSACTIONAL STATE

Beneath the transactional government approach there is an underlying presumption that human beings are essentially selfish and cannot be expected to behave with consideration and respect to one another. Any policy based on mutual kindness or even a sense of solidarity, would be bound to fail.

This acceptance of ‘Veneer theory’ - the idea that humans will revert to being savages if left uncontrolled by Governments - was seen, for example, to inform the early discussions about a national lockdown when, as ministers have latterly acknowledged, there was a widespread concern around the Cabinet table that such ‘unbritish’ rules would be largely ignored.

Not understanding the shared sense of concern and responsibility that our communities demonstrated in the early lockdowns, and the profound importance of relationships, is a failure of the imagination but not atypical for governments and state agencies and not only in crises. As Julia Unwin has observed, “emotions are the blind spot in public services.”

And this failure has an impact at the community level as we are told to take personal responsibility, to worry about our own budget, our own health.

We are encouraged to keep looking down, focusing on our own problems, and we forget to look up and out towards each other.

Now some politicians talk about ‘getting back to normal’. But a rush to rebuild, an attempt to cover the cracks without addressing the structural flaws leaves us vulnerable to future shocks. A ‘recovery’ journey that aims to simply return us to the “before times” prevents us from being able to learn from what we’ve been through, and to re-imagine a different and better tomorrow.

The journey ahead requires the careful building and rebuilding of relationships - relationships within communities, between communities, and between communities and the state.



“ It’s not just thinking about yourself. It’s looking at what’s out there that you can help with. It’s all about having that sense of community, respecting others and giving more than you take.”

– Observatory Contributor

An illustration of two people, a woman with long pink hair and a man with dark hair, sitting on a dark, curved horizon. They are looking up at a dark blue night sky filled with small white stars. Several large, semi-transparent circles in shades of orange and pink are scattered across the sky. The woman is on the left, wearing a white top and pants, and the man is on the right, wearing a dark shirt and white pants. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

CONNECTING THE CIRCLES

Strong communities can't be turned off and on in good times and bad, but with consistent care and attention, they can be ready for everything.

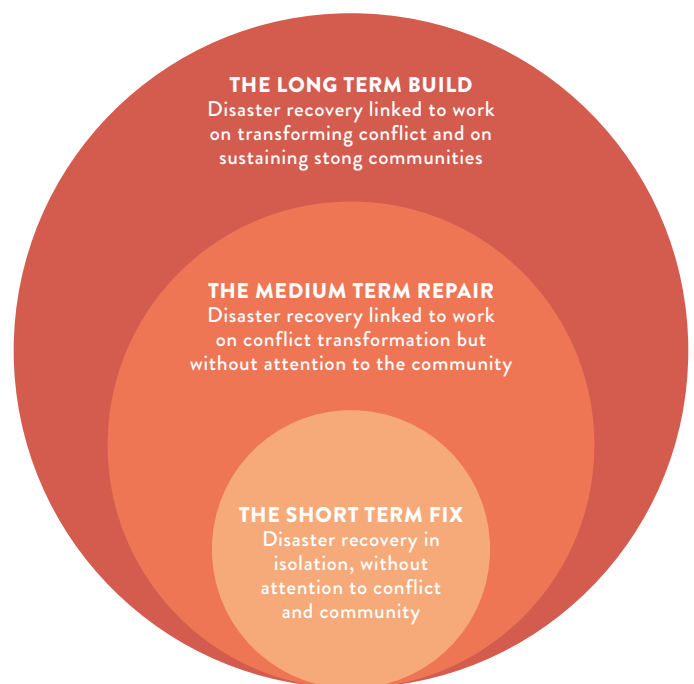
Disaster recovery, conflict transformation and community development are stages in the ongoing lifecycle of any community. They must be woven together in our practice, in our policy and in our thinking.





STAGES IN THE LIFE CYCLE

Disaster recovery, conflict transformation and community development are stages in the ongoing lifecycle of any community.



Disaster recovery in isolation, without attention to conflict and community, is a short term fix. Disaster recovery linked to conflict transformation but without attention to the wider environment is a medium term repair.

A stable, sustainable, long term future is only likely to be achieved by linking disaster recovery, conflict transformation and community development, building bridges, developing social capital and growing strong communities.

If we succeed in connecting the circles, our communities will be able to not only weather the worst of the bad times, but make the best of the good times.

Some of the richest and most productive conversations in our work with community groups and with local authorities have occurred when all three disciplines - disaster recovery, conflict transformation and community development - have been present in the room. Understanding and sustaining the connections will help our communities to recover now and build the resilience to face crises in the future.

To join the conversation, please [get in touch](#)



DISASTER RECOVERY

When we talk about ‘first responders’ in a disaster we often think about the blue light services. In fact the first responder is the person standing next to you.

The emergency services follow with the essential expertise and resources but neighbours, co-workers, communities are there first and also last, still rubbing shoulders and supporting one another long after the professionals have left.

The communities that coped best in the Covid crisis were those where the connective tissue was already muscular and regularly exercised.

Relationships between residents were positive and active, and relationships between citizens and the state were established and often personal.

Formal “infrastructure” consisting of address lists, committees and data was helpful but personal relationships were much more useful.

Feeling comfortable about ringing the council officer when they are working in their bedroom is not the same as knowing the number of the helpline.

Daniel Aldrich has shown that this is not unusual. Following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan 2011, community relationships were a significant factor in immediate survival and longer-term recovery of affected communities. It was the strength of the community, not the height of the sea walls, that determined the level of human destruction.

Disaster recovery works best where relationships are strong. Strong relationships are nurtured through community development and conflict transformation.

“ 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



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Over the last two and a half years our communities have shopped, fed, and cared for each other. Thousands of little bridges have been built connecting us beyond our usual bubbles.

These bridges are powerful things - they're the infrastructure of new friendships and, in aggregate, the engineering of stronger, more resilient communities.

New groups of collaboration are emerging. Getting together to walk off the lock-down lard. Using photos, stories and art to share our struggles and our hopes. Putting our heads together to see how we can make the local park safer, more welcoming, and fun. The clusters of mutual aid groups that first got together to survive, now collaborating to change their neighbourhoods.

This non-crisis activity creates reserves of willingness and reciprocity that will hold us together when the next storm hits and not only manage disagreement but, at best, turn it into something positive.

The heavy lifting of collaboration is done when we use the energy of difference and disagreement to gain new insight and find new ways of working.

Now the bridges that we have built over the last 3 years are under great strain.

We need more than ever the careful business of community development, the day to day work of local organisers and connectors and the intentional support of the local authority.

In lockdown it became very clear that strong and connected communities are most likely to flourish in an environment where:

- There is strong local leadership
- There are positive relationships between formal and informal community organisations and statutory services
- Community members are accustomed to exercising initiative and collaborating with one another
- Everyone feels confident, respected and secure

“ We should nurture those who have seen their neighbourhoods in a new light having met the person and not just read about problems and poverty. Many we live alongside have been in a form of isolation that both pre-existed and will persist after the pandemic. That being ‘seen’ is a universal need, and to turn our ‘seeing’ into ‘speaking’ is a positive action.”

– Observatory Contributor



CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

OUR BRIDGE BUILDERS PROGRAMME

Whilst some relationships flourished over lockdown, others came under significant strain. Our Bridge Builders Programme tackles the question of how a community experiencing destructive conflict can become a community that is ready and resilient.

We think relationships and practical solutions are equally important to resolving conflict and to achieving meaningful and sustainable change. Enemy thinking - when we stop being curious, start being critical, and see the dilemma as either/or and win/lose - clouds our thinking and blocks our imagination.

Hearing and thinking using the language of judgement and blame makes us conclude that a wall might be better than a bridge. We must take the time to really listen to each other, to see the situation from the other's point of view, to acknowledge the strength of feeling that exists on all sides, and to use that strength to find ways of solving the problem and increasing our understanding of each other.

Connecting and healing won't happen without a catalytic intervention. Those who feel unheard, and whose unmet needs remain unacknowledged, will express their disquiet with escalating anger, blame and aggression. If we are to respond - instead of reacting - we must provide opportunities where 'dangerous' dialogue can happen in 'safe' spaces.

We cannot deconstruct the current reality, promote the emergence of shared expectations and negotiate the way forward without fostering the skills of reflection and discursive action. We will not see the tangible societal change that

these discussions will describe without providing a platform of process and structure that can turn aspiration into reality.

Our Bridge Builders Handbook and subsequent training combines methodologies and experience from Conflict Transformation, Peacebuilding and NonViolent Communication into practical steps, ways of working and guiding principles for making positive and meaningful connection with other groups. It is designed for use by community groups, local government and non-governmental organisations to support the creation of bridging social capital and trust between low-conflict or unconnected bonded communities.

The Handbook can be used without assistance but we have been extending its reach and application over the last 18 months with guided learning, peer group support and one off training sessions. We have walked alongside many passionate individuals, mutual aid groups, more established charities, local authorities, and strategic partnerships from across the U.K and further afield who want to build bridges between communities and with organisations.

If you are interested in learning more, we'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch with hello@relationshipsproject.org

An illustration on an orange background featuring several stylized human figures in white and blue. The figures are interacting with large, light-orange geometric shapes: circles, squares, and triangles. One figure on the left is reaching up towards a circle and a square. Another figure on the right is reaching up towards a circle. A third figure at the bottom is reaching up towards a circle. A fourth figure at the bottom right is reaching up towards a circle and a square. The background is filled with small white dots, suggesting a starry or abstract space.

NEXT STEPS

Connecting disaster recovery, conflict transformation and community development reveals a bigger picture and some steps that we might now take together:

- **Give it time** - extending to one another the patience, kindness and curiosity to process our grief and find our way towards one another
- **Hold the hope** - embedding memorials of hope into our local communities to guide us to a brighter tomorrow
- **Bottle the essence** - sharing what it takes, in your place, to sustain meaningful relationships and build strong community
- **Teach the craft** - developing our relational muscle through our formal schooling and beyond
- **Trust the people** - creating an environment in which communities can support one another, learning from the Covid experience
- **Dare to dream** - using this moment to re-imagine a future we all want to be a part of, putting relationships first



GIVE IT TIME

With the cost of living piling into the back of Covid, it's tempting to shift our focus to the coming crisis.

But communities, families and individuals have suffered the kind of deep tissue damage that needs time to heal. Grief is as yet unmetabolized.


In our rush to respond to the immediate crisis, we must also make space to grieve, to think about recovery before response, to process trauma and repair relationships.

In the Side by Side community we worked with Community Weavers who are exhausted. We will lose good people if we don't give ourselves and one another permission to pause. This work requires patience as well as energy.

The path to "recovery" is not linear, it is not straight, and it is longer for some than for others. Indeed, for many, it will be a journey too long to complete. How we choose to make that journey, who we choose to wait for, who we leave behind in the rush, how we help each other along the way – will define what our recovery really looks like.

How do we build a recovery that provides the space to be sad, the time to heal and includes grief and loss as a "part of the commons"? How do we re-calibrate mental health support away from downstream crisis intervention, towards an upstream, day to day part of community activity?

We don't have all the answers, but we think it's a question worth taking the time to talk about it. If you think that talking to others would be useful, we would be pleased to hear from you and maybe broker some conversations with groups who are trying to meet these needs.



“ A four year old boy saw his Grandad crying in the garden for the first time. He had just lost his wife. The little boy went over and gave his Grandad a cuddle.

Later, during bathtime, his Mum asked him what he did with Grandad that day. He said, ‘I just let him cry because nobody else had let him cry.’”

- Observatory Contributor



HOLD THE HOPE

What can we do, what should we seek to build, to make sure we don't lose sight of the fact that in the midst of our worst times, we caught a glimpse of our best selves? As we remember what we lost, how do we remember what we discovered? How do we memorialise these moments and memories of hope so we don't forget?

There are many such living memorials in construction or already in use. Some are set in stone, in the re-opened and repurposed buildings for community use.

“ It was only during Covid, and with everything going on-line when we realised we must do more to help people have access. The new computer room opened last week. We already need a bigger one.”

– Observatory Contributor

But many of our hopeful memorials are harder to see. They are held in the memories we made, and the moments we noticed.

We need to embed the stories of hope in the landscape of our lives as much as the stories of anguish.

“ The food parcels started during mutual aid, since then it's grown like crazy! We've opened the community kitchen, and the community larder. God knows what's next, it's sad to think this is where we've come to as a society, but it's also really exciting. Everyone looking out for each other, paying it forward.”

– Observatory Contributor

The beauty of memorials of hope isn't only in the practical value of the thing itself but in what it represents, what it says about us, here, in this community. They are beacons of light, that remind us of the hope that shone through the darkest of days. By the telling and the sharing of our stories, our memorials of hope, we can connect these points of light and create a constellation.

What is the story you would share? What is the moment you want to hold onto? Perhaps together we could create a 'rough guide' to the memorials of hope springing up in communities across the UK. We would love to include and celebrate yours. Please **get in touch**.



“ I remember that day so clearly, we should try never to forget it. We’d been doing the mutual aid thing for a few weeks, and coming out to clap. But that day something changed. We realised it could also be fun. Dafties dressed as superheroes doing shopping trolley surfing down the lane, it cracked us up, and pulled us together.”

- Observatory Contributor



BOTTLE THE ESSENCE

Successful disaster response, attention to division and long term community building are all underpinned by social capital. When our relationships are strong we are ready and able to cope with adversity and to seize opportunity.

Defining strong communities using objective measures is challenging and a work in progress, but we all know good relationships when we see and experience them, when we feel them. We know the difference between a GP practice which prioritises good relationships compared to one that doesn't. And we know which one is likely to have better patient satisfaction, higher staff retention and better health outcomes.

Stitching together what we intuitively know about building good relationships, place by place, reveals a bigger picture of the fundamental components and enablers of a strong community.

This picture then becomes a guide, helping us all to see our role in creating the conditions in which good relationships can flourish.

Later in the Autumn, The Relationships Project will be hosting a series of collaborative enquiries exploring what it means to make relationships the first mile, not the extra mile and beginning to bottle the essence. We don't expect this work to give us precise metrics or clever measuring machines. We think it will reveal some consistent principles and adaptable protocols and especially some better ways of explaining and assessing ideas that many find instinctively attractive but difficult to nail down and lock in.

We define "place" very broadly. It might be a neighbourhood or it might be a school, a hospital, a playgroup. You know your place better than anyone. What does it look like to put relationships front and centre? What change does it unlock? We'd love you to join us. Please **register your interest** in taking part.



TEACH THE CRAFT

Whilst we all know good relationships when we feel them, building and sustaining meaningful relationships is a craft that, like any other, can be taught and learnt and gets better with practice and yet is almost entirely ignored in our educational systems.

We can't rely on our instincts alone to build relationships in a world teeming with difference and diversity. We must nurture the skills and practice of relationships for our modern world.

Schools should be valued for their ability to support students to build their relational muscles from developing skills of self reflection

through to growing confidence in engaging across differences. 'Valuing' also intentionally implies a role here for Ofsted.

Relationships shouldn't be a minor strand in the PSHE curriculum, which is itself pretty marginal. Relationship Education should be the fourth R, right at the heart of learning from preschool to year 13.

And the learning shouldn't end there. Lifelong training as a community connector, organiser and mediator should be as widely available and as commonly accessed as first aid training.

New ministers looking to make their mark on the programme of a new government in the autumn of 2022 would do well to consider these and other similar approaches. Investment here would transform the look and the prospects of the levelling up agenda.

Perhaps you are already involved in work of this sort or perhaps you would like to connect with others thinking about or doing something similar. If this is the case, we'd love to join you for a collective exploration. Please **get in touch**.



TRUST THE PEOPLE

Statutory agencies, governments, local and national, can't make social capital but they can create an environment in which communities thrive.

Such an environment is as much about not doing some things as it is about doing others.

In lockdown, local councils in particular were bold and creative in flexing rules and exercising new levels of discretion. The effect was liberating.

There isn't one perfect model - every community, every relationship, is different - but there are recurring principles. This a time for

understanding those principles, not for reinventing them, and for allowing the freedom to adapt to local circumstances. Working on the practical and local application of the tried and tested may be less politically seductive than a brand new, centralised programme but it is what works.

“ During Covid we have seen the huge power of community and neighbourly relationships and inspiring examples of councils nimbly adapting to support this new activity. As we look beyond the pandemic, we must nurture these new relationships, enabling them to flourish into the networks of support that will enrich and strengthen our community life. Councils must be at the heart of this.”

– Observatory Contributor

The Relationships Project [Kit for Councils](#) includes many examples of good, replicable work in this space and our Councils Practitioner Network run with Barking and Dagenham council is [sharing the learning](#).

If you work for, or with, a local council or other statutory body we would love you to join us in the Practitioner Network. For further information please **[get in touch](#)**.



DARE TO DREAM

When things break, it is sometimes better to think about redesign than repair. We think it's time for a new conversation.

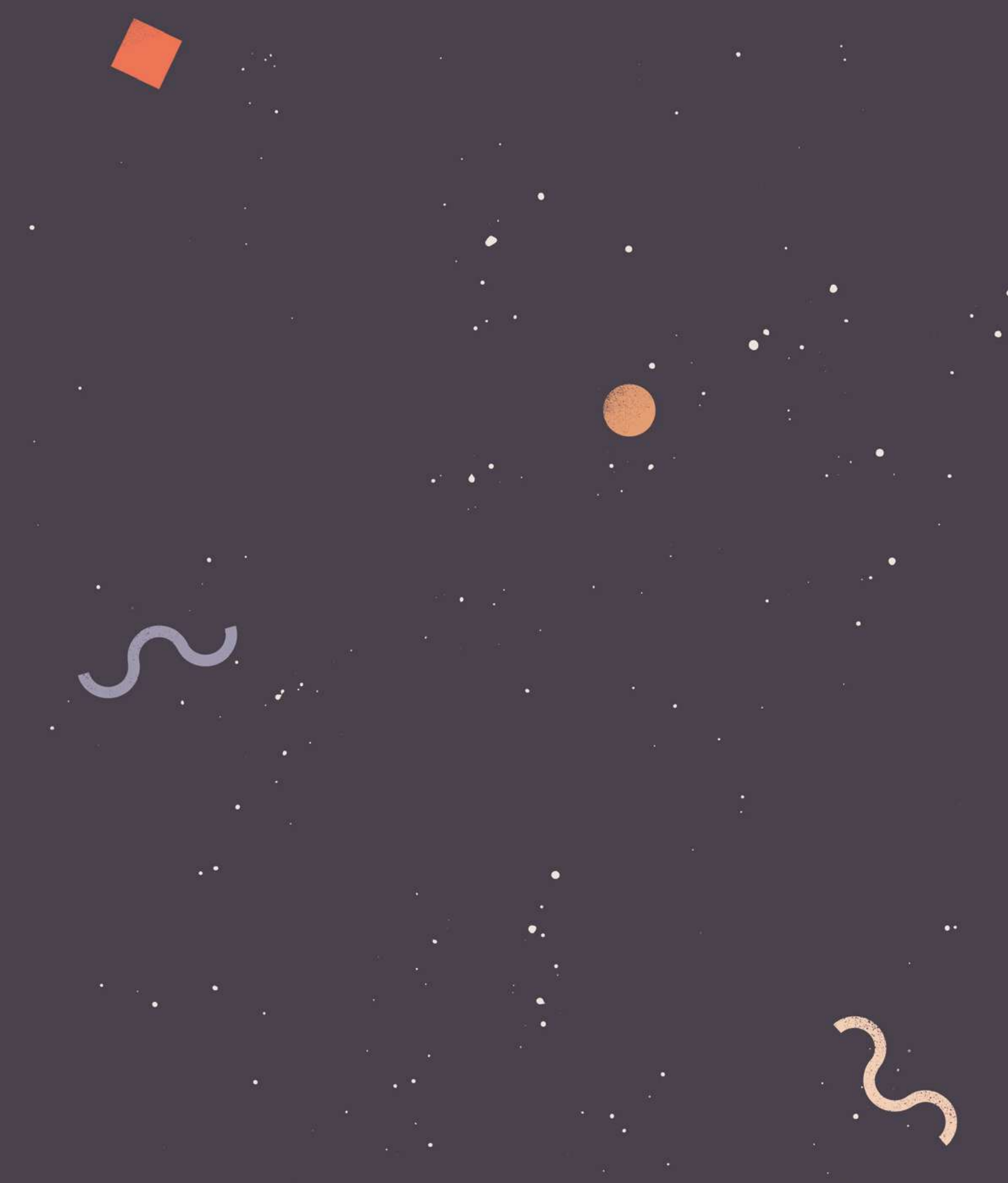
We won't meet the challenges of the next year, let alone of the next generation, with a continuing approach to our shared lives that is bureaucratic and codified, defensive, distrusting and fearful, transactional and centralised and impersonal.

These are the behaviours of the society we have built. They are not the defaults that will enable us to thrive in the future.

Seizing this year, this crisis, for a fundamental, sustained shift towards a world that is permanently characterised by kindness, solidarity and trust, a world that was briefly prefigured in the early days of Covid, would not be without risk but how much better would it be to get the right behaviours wrong every now and then, than to hobble on, getting the wrong behaviours right over and over again.

It is time to focus instead on the primacy of relationships between citizens. They are our greatest natural resource and should be at the centre of public policy and practise, designed in rather than, as too often now, designed out.

We are convening thinkers, doers and enablers to explore collaboration between the fields of Disaster Recovery, Conflict Transformation and Community Development. It is a small step in the right direction, but we have a long way to go. If this is a journey you are on, or beginning to contemplate, we would be honoured to walk alongside you. Please **reach out**.



RELATIONSHIPS
PROJECT

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relationshipsproject.org