



THE COMMUNITY WEAVER'S COMPANION

Know-how from the Side by Side programme

About the Companion

- How can we nurture strong communities in the good times as well as the bad?
- How can we sustain the community activity we saw in the early lockdowns without controlling and constraining it?
- How do we build a positive Covid legacy and resist the pull back to old ways?

These were some of the questions that we explored in Side by Side: a peer learning programme for Community Weavers bound by a passion for sustaining strong relationships.

Running over 18 weeks in 2022, we built on the insight shared in our [Active Neighbours Field Guide](#) to support one another in our shared mission of nurturing strong communities.

We've woven together all that we learnt, explored and uncovered in The Community Weaver's Companion. We hope it will offer inspiration and guidance to others who are on a similar journey.

In the Companion



Handy tools and frameworks for translating ideas into action, including models for sensemaking, imagining and mapping



Useful resources for diving deeper into the different themes, including podcasts, blogs, books, papers and websites



Highlights from our wonderful speakers, including Community Weavers, grief counsellors, disaster planners, community mediators, filmmakers & more



Powerful insights, ideas and anecdotes shared by the group, offering practical and emotional support to carry on this important work

Side by Side in numbers

82

Wonderful
members

19

Fantastic
speakers

9

Sessions
together

1

Collaboratively
created
Companion

What we cover

p6-14

Taking stock

Looking back on the twists and turns of the pandemic so far and how our communities have been responding

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Working through grief

Exploring how, as communities, we can work through 'unmetabolised grief' and support one another as we mourn all that has been lost

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Nurturing the conditions

Exploring what's needed to create the conditions in which our communities can thrive

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Searching for a positive horizon

Imagining a better future for our communities, centred around relationships

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Evolving the processes

Evolving the processes that enable safe and effective community activity

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Celebrating our progress

Celebrating the progress we've made, offering our thanks and exploring how we might continue to journey together

Our beginnings

At the end of September 2020, YouGov took a snapshot of the Covid volunteering effort for us. They found:

8.95 million

people (17% of UK population) got involved in some sort of community activity

39%

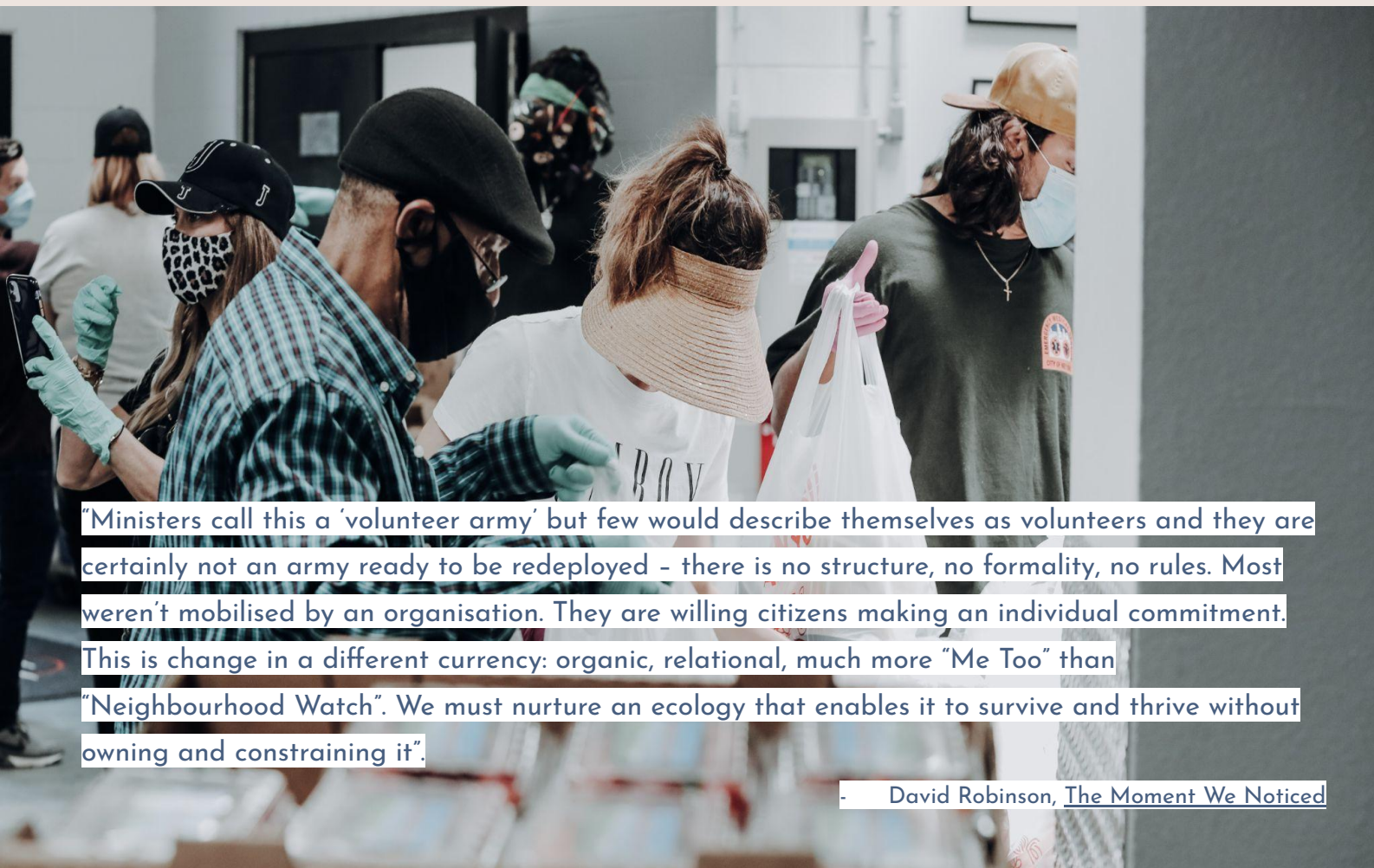
had done little or no volunteering before the pandemic

70%

plan to continue doing the same amount or more once the pandemic is over (that's 6.27 million)

The forms of care, contribution and involvement that we saw in those early lockdoes were largely underpinned by a new set of relationships.

We saw, in the Spring of 2020, a rapid shift from top-down hierarchical relationships bound up in slow-moving bureaucracy and formalised support to more horizontal, agile relationships rooted in local place. And we [noted](#), at the time, that any recovery and attempt to build back better by harnessing this energy must understand this new web of relationships and put them at its heart.



"Ministers call this a 'volunteer army' but few would 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". We must nurture an ecology that enables it to survive and thrive without owning and constraining it".

- David Robinson, [The Moment We Noticed](#)

Our beginnings

In our [Active Neighbour's Field Guide](#), we explored the stories, journeys and experiences of different 'types' of Covid volunteer. We heard about their appetite for staying involved in their communities moving forwards, and the conditions that needed to be in place to enable this.

Introducing our Active Neighbours

The Visionary Disruptor

The big picture thinkers agitating for a new way of doing things

The Everyday Carer

The old hands providing unwavering support to someone close to them

The Neighbourly Empathizer

The sociable companions who found meaning in new neighbourhood connections

The Practical Tasker

The busy doers new to volunteering who thrive on getting tasks done

The Community Weaver

The connectors and organisers building platforms for others to get involved

[Source: Active Neighbours Field Guide](#)

And we learnt that there are many other people grappling with the question of how we can nurture and sustain the community activity of 2020 without controlling and constraining it. From here, we set up Side by Side, a peer learning programme for anyone interested in exploring this question and meeting fellow travellers.

Side by Side

Bringing together...



Peer support



Expert input



Practical resources

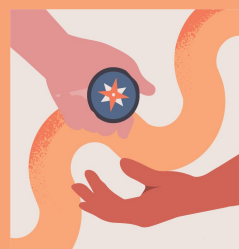
In order to...



Energise



Inspire



Support

1.

Taking stock

Looking back on the twists and turns of the pandemic so far and how our communities have been responding

Summary

From first touch elbows instead of shaking hands, to full on lockdown, to wave after wave, we've now had two and a half years of behaving differently. We heard from experts in disaster and experts in community building to help us take stock of where we have been and all that we've learnt about community, resilience and recovery.

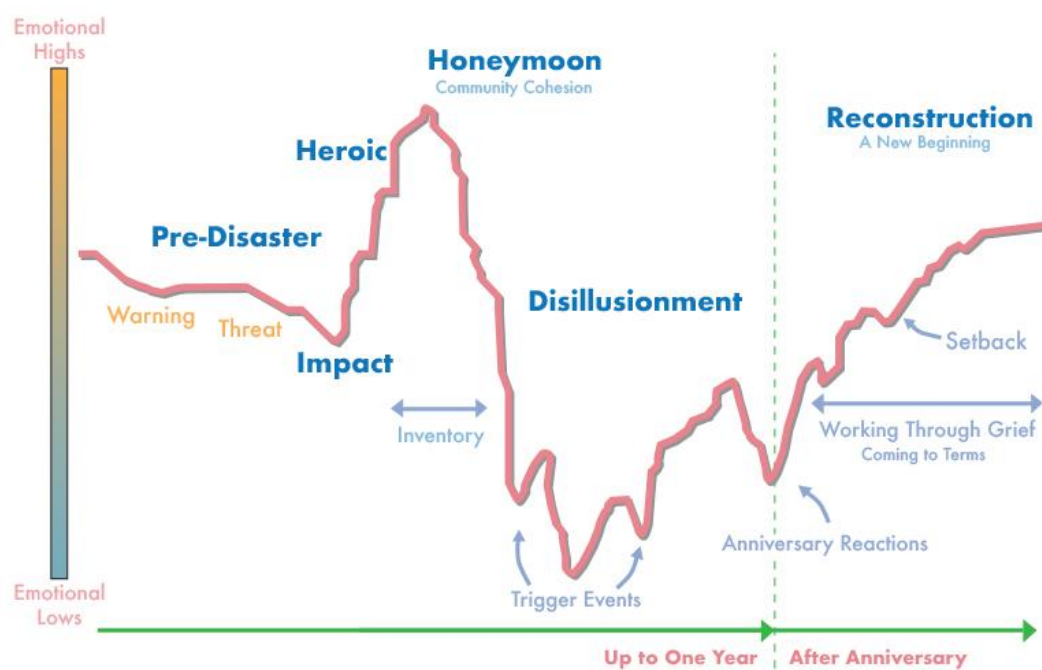
In this section:

- [Typical responses to disaster](#) by disasterologist Kate Cochrane
- [How communities have been responding to Covid](#) by founder of The Relationships Project, David Robinson
- [Lessons from the Christchurch earthquake](#) and Covid by filmmaker and community activist Harry Knight
- [Finding a way forward for mutual aid in Kensal Green](#) by community weaver and researcher Elaine Ho
- [Finding the light whilst sitting with the dark](#) - a group discussion
- [Useful resources](#) for taking stock of the past two years

Typical responses to disaster, Kate Cochrane

Every disaster response, be it global, national, local or individual, follows a similar pattern. Thinking about how our communities have - and are - responding to Covid in relation to this pattern can be helpful in seeing where we are now and where we might be heading.

Kate Cochrane, Head of Emergency Planning for the Falkland Islands and Professor in Practice at the Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience, came along to tell us about typical responses to disasters, drawing on her experience of multiple crisis situations.



Source: [Samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov)

“How many people during Covid met the people who lived alongside them for years, but they never really engaged in that level of local connection? There's a huge honeymoon effect that happens but unfortunately that can sometimes dissipate because people run out of energy.

And that's where our work comes in, in terms of helping people to sustain that local response - providing the energy, providing the resources, providing the reassurance and security that actually they're doing great stuff. That's probably the most difficult part of the emergency response because that doesn't come with a blue light and that doesn't come with a really big radio.

“When we think about disasters we think about people with blue lights, we think about people turning up with flashlights and very big radios. But when we respond to disasters, the first person that is there to help you is generally the person standing alongside you.

It's the person beside you in the bus queue, it's the person who lives next door when the water starts to overflow out of the river. They're the ones who are going to get you through it they're the ones who are going to be there to help you start it and they're the ones who are going to be with you in the long term, after the sandbags have gone and the blue flashing lights have left and after the media has stopped paying attention.”

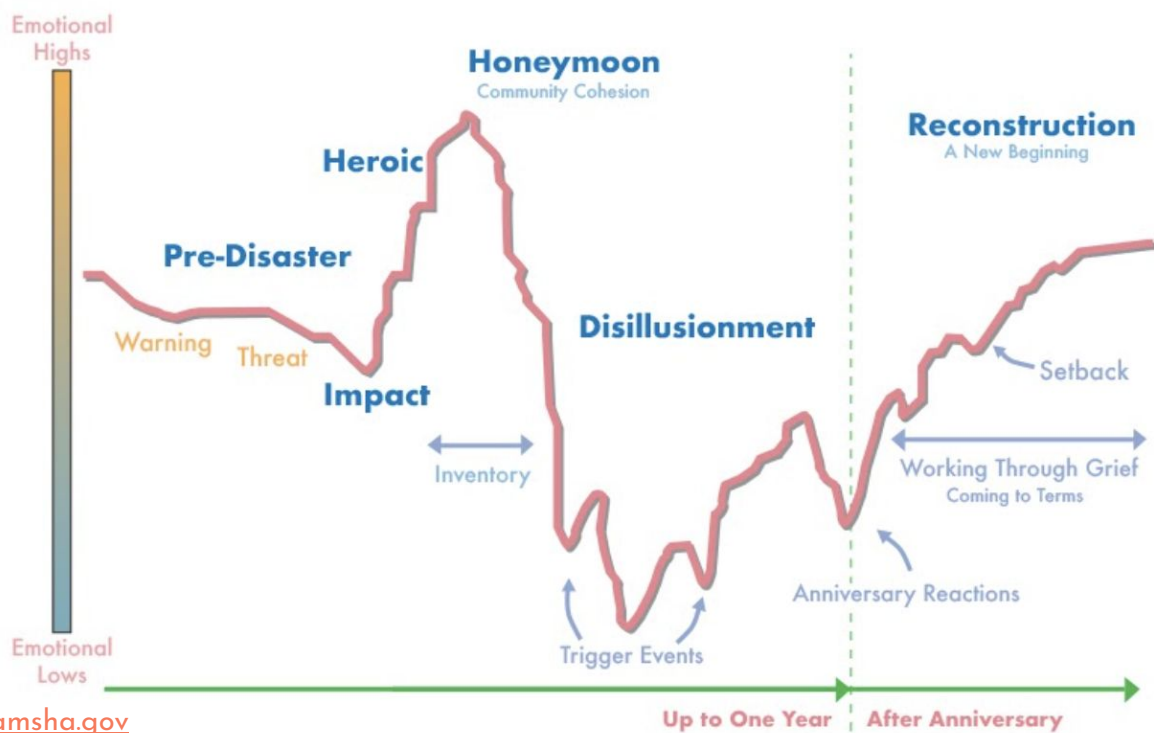
Zero responder and first responder ‘First responder’ is taken to mean many different things, and usually refers to the statutory services that arrive at the scene. The term ‘zero responder’ emerged after the Manchester attacks to recognise the role of the people who are there on the scene, standing next to you or at the end of the phone.

How communities have been responding to Covid: Sightings from The Relationships Observatory - David Robinson

David Robinson, founder of The Relationships Project, shared some of the key themes that have come through The Relationships Observatory - a listening space that we set up back in March 2020 to learn, in real time, about how our communities were experiencing and responding to the pandemic.

[International studies](#) have shown consistent patterns of social behaviour in the wake of disasters elsewhere.

The typical phases of a disaster



Source: samsha.gov

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.

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.

Maintaining and strengthening community relationships to increase our resilience to future disaster

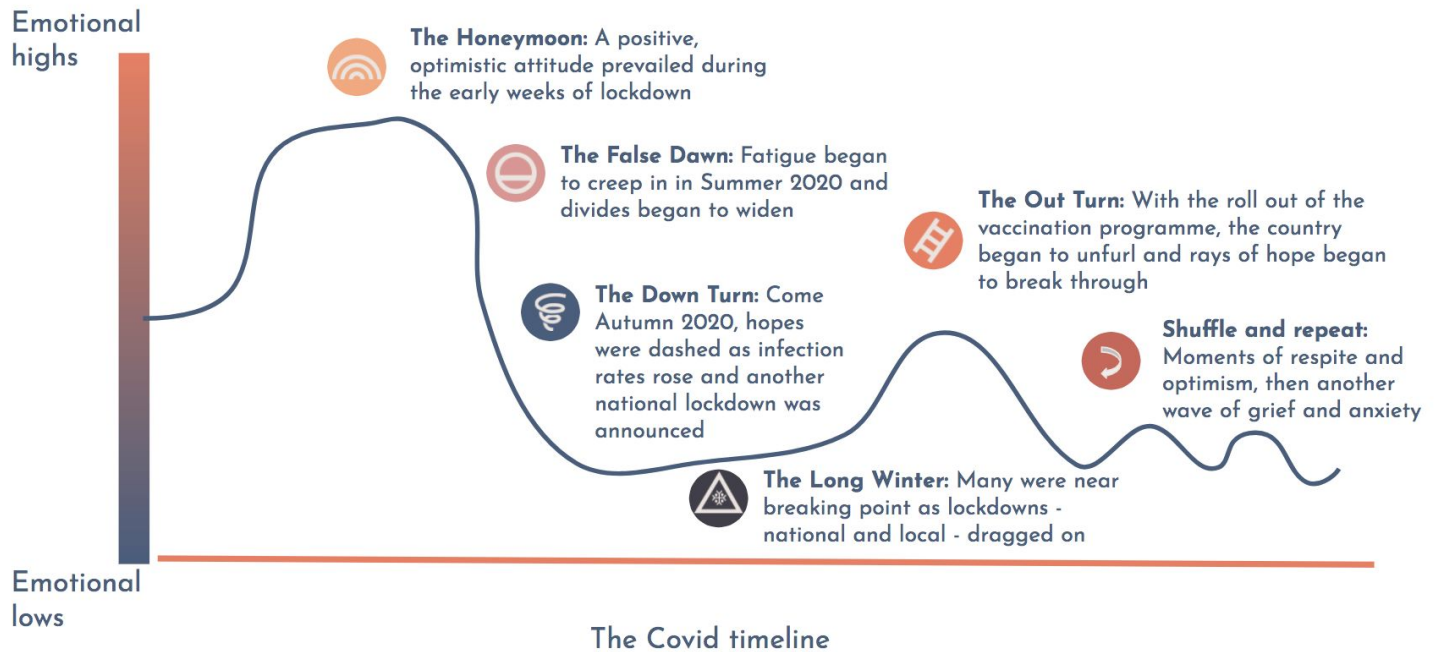
Is part of preparing for disasters strengthening bonds of friendship and relationships within communities? Lots of research shows that a connected and collaborative community is not only a better place to be at any time, it is also a safer place to be when bad things happen.

Covid could affect everyone so we have to be aware and make sure that we have all the tools and support should it happen to anyone that we know. Everyone's solutions are within their communities, you just need to know how to access them.

How communities have been responding to Covid: Sightings from The Relationships Observatory - David Robinson

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



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 and 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.

Community responses to disaster: Comparing Covid and the Christchurch earthquakes - Harry Knight

Harry Knight, a filmmaker and member of the Side by Side group, shared his reflections of the community response to the Christchurch earthquakes to the community response to the Covid pandemic, and reminded us of the importance of grieving and celebrating.

"What was the Community response to the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes? From my point of view, I saw an expert approach or an expert response leadership response, a central government response, and a grassroots response - a community grounded response. I think having those two responses and the tension between them, was actually really healthy. The expert approach was to do a big call out to the Community saying what do you want to see in your city? That engagement period was quite short and it ended quite quickly before they then went on to kind of a closed doors, hundred day blueprint planning, where they plotted out key anchor projects. So there was that kind of timeline, there was also the Community timeline there were some really great organizations and initiatives set up. One of them, GapFiller, is essentially a multidisciplinary group of people that are essentially finding gaps and filling them with creative and playful installations or events.

The role of creativity

Playfulness, creativity and experimentation are lovely to think about in this context. We're drawn to what is lovely and these give us something to gather around, to feel hopeful about, to bring joy and lightness. How could we carry these approaches into the next phases of the pandemic?

"We spend a lot of time being busy, trying to make progress, make things faster, make things better. These events are kind of existential events that make us really ask what's important. My hope is that we can develop the skills to sit with those questions and acknowledge what's important and find ways to express ourselves collectively with play and creativity and experimenting. It's really important to grieve and I think also these expressions can be part of that process. I hope we can acknowledge that celebration and mourning are two sides of the same coin."

- Harry Knight



Finding a way forward for mutual aid in Kensal Green - Elaine Ho

Elaine Ho, a design researcher and member of the Side by Side group, shared her experiences of being part of the mutual aid response in her neighbourhood in North West London and the tensions they're grappling with as they look to the future of mutual aid.

"I'd say that one of the things I think the team did really well was to actually respond to the neighbourhood's changing needs kind of as the pandemic went along. Like many other groups, we started off with help with shopping and errands and a friendly phone call for people who needed it, but we quite quickly branched out to help with broader things like gardening, or helping source big ticket items that people couldn't afford from Facebook marketplace and, in fact, in the end, volunteers even ended up basically running the local vaccines centers. My own role in all of that was primarily in the Community advocacy space, helping folks with more complex needs to get through the system to get the right support.

In the absolute chaos of March 2020 we quickly assembled an organizing committee for the mutual aid group so that 200 people on this whatsapp group weren't talking to each other at once. That was something that was really necessary, but it also meant that quite quickly there became this sense of hierarchy.

Most of my fellow organizers, myself included, come from a relatively corporate background and we are applying some of those same kinds of management or logistics skills to our organizing efforts. And we also fairly quickly adopted the sort of language that's typically used in charities, so things like volunteer, triage, rota. And that language and these concepts worked, if you like, they led us to being super organized - tasks were well distributed amongst 100 plus neighbours and everyone had their individual roles, so no one was no one person was overwhelmed.

But I personally really struggled throughout with this question of how does mutual aid really remain neutral."

Finding new structures for sharing power

Acknowledging where power lies is an important starting point. There's a tendency to go to hierarchical structures because that's what we know. Imagining new structures and ways of working is difficult because we're in crisis and we're exhausted. How do you hold the balance between a horizontal organising structure vs being able to stay organised when you have groups of 100+ people?

We have a tendency to 'do' in crisis rather than just 'be' in support but decisions were as close to people as they could be during the pandemic.

Creating the sense of permission to support one another


Who feels that they have permission or can gatekeep issues? Who feels confident enough to give themselves permission to speak to someone, or to broach something? How do we lower the threshold to have the confidence to do something?

Finding a way forward for mutual aid in Kensal Green - Elaine Ho

I wanted to understand how the neighbours that we support see mutuality. So I picked up the phone and I called them to ask them what makes us mutual aid, rather than just another service.. The answer was relationships.

The fact that we call them and talk to them in normal human being voices and we're genuinely sorry to hear their circumstances. And we respond as needed, as well as we can to their needs, rather than trying to kind of assign a worker or put them into some funnel or system.

What I heard from them was that that kind of relational aspect was a wildly different interaction than the one that they're having with the services they usually interact with. I think the micro interactions really demonstrate the power and the strength of mutual aid.



And I just want to give one tiny example of this. I met with a neighbour who we've been working with for the last couple years she's really struggled with physical and mental health throughout and we're meeting together with her social worker and one question that arose was how do we organize for her to have a hot meal, every day, which was not something that she was doing. So we went round the houses for a little bit discussing meals on wheels services but we realised that actually she has these ready meals already being delivered every week, but what she was lacking was the motivation to get up and heat them up. And so the solution was almost mind boggling simple. For the last few weeks I've just been texting her in the evening saying 'what's your appetite like today? Have you eaten your meal?' And she's consistently been doing that. It's zero effort on our part, but it really impacts her health and her mood.

Finding the light and noticing the dark, Group Discussion

As we took stock, as a group, of all that has taken place over the past couple of years, we found ourselves exploring the areas of light in amongst the areas of darkness. We acknowledged the need to sit with both - holding the hope whilst making space for the grief.

Disappointment, doubt and the tempering of hope

We've come to expect that things might not happen. We're grieving time. There's a tempering to all hope and joy. It's very difficult just to be in spaces of hope - we're now always expecting things to go wrong, to be cancelled.

Disenfranchised grief

We're experiencing disenfranchised grief - grief which is not recognised with our typical attitudes towards - and understanding of - loss. We're grieving the memories we missed out on, the experiences we didn't have, the births that went unattended, the playdates that were lost. But the grief process that our communities are experiencing as a result of Covid maps onto other patterns of - and pathways through - grief.

Anger, justice and collective trauma

Over the past two years we've experienced - or witnessed - injustice, institutional failure and righteous anger. We are "thin skinned", exhausted, and quick to react.

Shifting undercurrents

In the early stages of the pandemic we witnessed a set of shifting undercurrents - attitudes and beliefs that had shifted in a positive direction: we trusted, supported, and cared for each other more. We got to know neighbours we hadn't previously interacted with and we gained greater awareness of the lives that others live

Heliocentricity (following the light)

Sometimes we see the best of our communities when we experience the worst of times.

In times of crisis, the rules and norms are bypassed and those who work in creative and different ways start to thrive.

Social change isn't about waiting for all the stars to align. It is about navigating the uncertainty by the light that we have. In finding those areas of light, together we can create a version of the future that is more fair, humane, and realistic.

We don't want to go back to where we were before Covid. Covid has shown sides of people that we want to encourage and maximise, as well as those sides of our establishments and social structures that we need to inspect and change. We must nurture the 'light' while not shying away from the 'dark'.

The need to grieve and mourn what has been lost

Our grieving processes and comforting rituals and rites have been taken away during Covid. How do we hold spaces for sadness and grief, as well as providing space for a journey towards a better tomorrow? How do we hold space for what has been lost, whilst continuing to move forward?

Resources and activities for reflecting on the past two years and learning from other disasters



[The way we get through this is together](#) by Rebecca Solnitt. A 'zoomed out' piece contextualising the rise of mutual aid during Covid



[Now they see us](#) by Local Trust. A report looking at how communities have responded to Covid, how their relationships with institutions have changed and how their agency can be sustained.



[Springfield Beech Hill Gidlow CommUnity](#). A moving and inspiring account of community activity in Wigan



[The Active Neighbours Field Guide](#) by us here at The Relationships Project. A resource for better understanding the motivations, experiences and needs of those who helped one another over Covid



[Social Capital in Disaster Mitigation and Recovery](#). A talk by Dr. Aldrich in which he explains how social ties are the critical aspect of resilience in immediate survival, mental health, and community recovery



[@LucyGoBag](#) aka Professor Lucy Easthope, Co-Founder of the After Disaster Network and author of [When The Dust Settles](#): stories of love, loss and hope from an expert in disaster



[Where are we now?](#) David Robinson draws on patterns of social behaviour in the wake of disasters elsewhere to explore the question: where are we, as communities and as society, now?



[When the waters recede, the flood has not yet finished](#). Neil Denton draws on his experience working in the aftermath of multiple disasters to share what we can expect next



Working through grief

Exploring how, as communities, we can work through our 'unmetabolised grief' and support one another as we mourn all that has been lost

Summary

Whilst restrictions are now over, there is so much pain still being carried by our communities, grief not yet metabolised. We heard from experts in grief, bereavement and end of life, exploring how to support one another as we work through our grief, individually and collectively.

In this section:

- [Holding space for inclusive grief](#) by community mediator Neil Denton
- [Reintegrating grief and end of life into our communities](#) by Hospice UK's Charlie King
- [Creating spaces to connect around grief](#) by Sally Muylders of St Clare Hospice
- [Practical advice for supporting someone who is experiencing grief](#) by grief counsellor Julie Shepherd
- [Useful resources](#) for exploring the role your community can play in supporting those experiencing grief and bereavement

Holding space for inclusive grief - Neil Denton

Neil is a community mediator and professor in practice at the After Disasters Network at Durham University. He came along to share what he's learnt about grief through his career working as a community mediator

"I've been that person that's stayed away from someone experiencing grief and loss, because I didn't know what to say. Because I was scared of saying something in case it was the wrong thing. Now I'm a person who knows it's really just about being there and turning up. It's not actually the wisdom of words, it's more about the quality of presence and the ability to listen.

My work has taken me to too many places where bad and sad things have happened and loved ones have been taken away before their time. Having now been involved in the aftermath of a number of different disasters, with the opportunity to observe them from half a step away as a mediator, with the privilege of being able to walk alongside people through these difficult paths, some common themes have emerged in my thinking.

Holding circles of shared experience without letting them slip into hierarchies

In grief, we need to share, and often it's helpful to share with those who hold a similar story to yours. But I urge you to be careful: as we place people's sacrifice on a pedestal we're at risk of pushing other people off. Who do I hold most dearly? Is it the doctor who died having served in ICU or is it the uber eats driver that bought me my pizza? Is it the young person whose future is taken away? Or the elderly person whose time had nearly come? Is it the double vaxxed and boosted? Or is it the anti vax? These differentiations are tempting, but they're toxic.

Being alert to the effect of broken rituals

We need to be really attentive to the harm and the effects of broken rituals: the bodies that we buried and burnt that were unwashed, the hands we haven't held, those last words that have remained unspoken and unheard.

Paying attention to memorials and memorialization

I've seen many flowers pinned to many railings. And I've sensed and seen that sense of comfort that they bring to those affected. But we've often stuck wondering what we do when the flowers we pin wilt and wither. And I wonder what we do when the 150,000 hearts on the memorial wall start to fade. For big things like this, we like to think of national memorial days as being something that will bring us together. But so many times I've seen them not feeling inclusive and, for many people, feeling intrusive.



Holding space for inclusive grief - Neil Denton

Conflating justice with blame

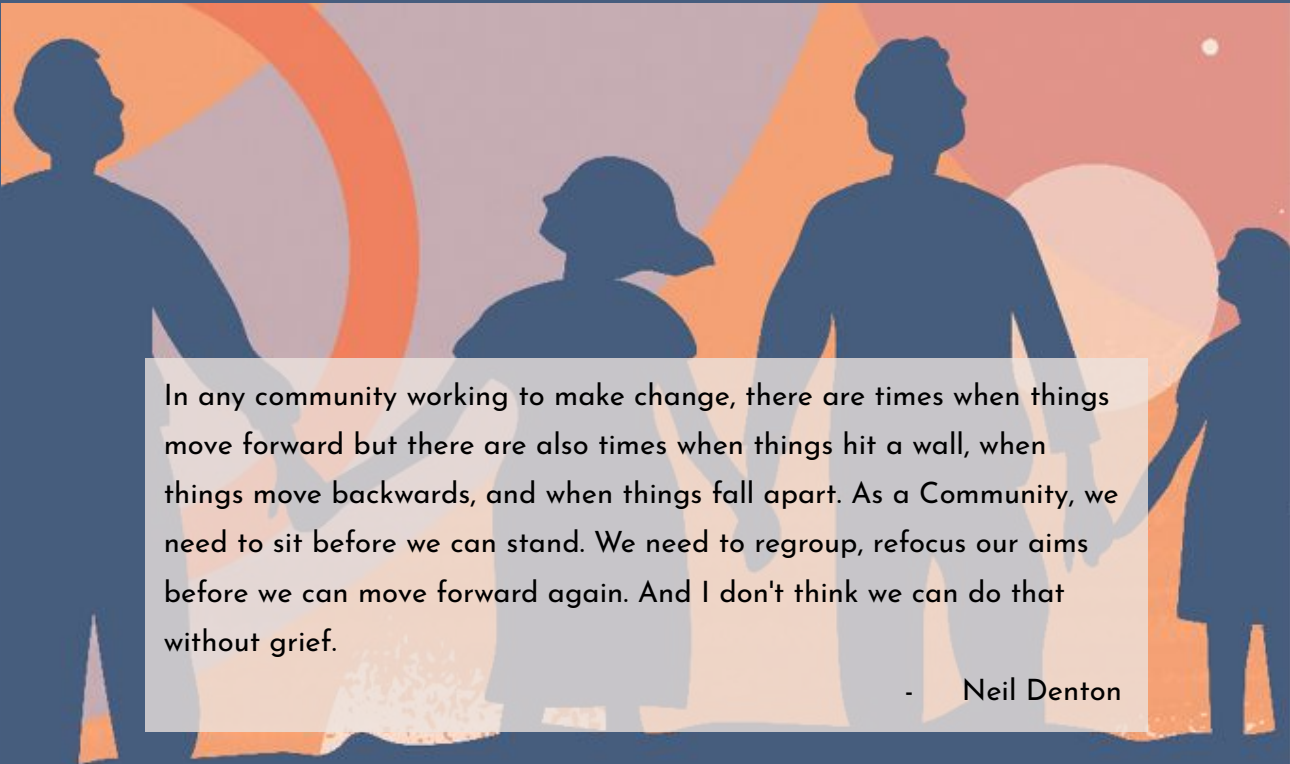
Central to this is a journey for justice and truth. And we conflate that often with public inquiries. I urge caution. Because that's the journey that starts out looking for a better tomorrow, when actually it's an investigation into what went wrong and who's to blame. And I've watched time and time again, as we squeeze our grief into a system that's not designed to meet our morning on equal terms. I think we should be aware of the inevitability of causes and campaigns. People will be drawn to the energy of tragedy so they can highlight a wider injustice. But that can make our grief feel like it's something that's being used and abused.

Being alert to the power of grief to connect

But I also think we should be alert to the power of grief as a boundary crosser and an identity shifter. I have seen from that power strong commonality emerges between those who have seen each other as disconnected, different, or even as the enemy. When I imagine the future, I'd like to see grief and sadness as being part of the Commons; as being an integral ingredient that helps us transform the space we share into an inclusive space.

Allowing time and space to grieve, inclusively

Those of you have heard me speak before know that I bang on about things like points of light and the darkness and the shade. We should look to those points of light but we should not exclude the shade. We cannot have one without the other; they are not only interdependent but they're interchangeable.



In any community working to make change, there are times when things move forward but there are also times when things hit a wall, when things move backwards, and when things fall apart. As a Community, we need to sit before we can stand. We need to regroup, refocus our aims before we can move forward again. And I don't think we can do that without grief.

- Neil Denton

Reintegrating end of life and grief into communities - Charlie King

Charlie King is head of communications and engagement at Hospice UK, who run the Dying Matters Campaign which seeks to create an open culture in which we're comfortable talking about death, dying and bereavement.

Charlie came along to the session to share three things that are front of mind for Hospice UK as they develop and evolve the Dying Matters campaign.

1. While formal grief support is really important, most grief support is given informally

Most of us get support from our friends, colleagues, neighbours when we are experiencing grief. This is not to minimise the importance of those superb professional support services, but is to recognize that it's community support and community conversations and between families neighbours friends that really underpin any change in terms of the culture in this country around and grief and bereavement.

2. The framing, language and imagery of grief and bereavement is narrow and doesn't work for everyone. Clinical services can't drive all of the conversation and define the lexicon

If you picture yourself for a second in the grief section of a greeting card shop you'll probably immediately think of a certain set of language and a certain set of imagery that's associated with this topic and it's pretty narrow and it conforms to a certain sorts of expectation that probably works for some people, but probably very much doesn't work for other. I think lots of organisations actually are guilty or have been guilty - and I include ourselves in this as well - in the past of contributing to that sense that the imagery and language around this topic is quite stiff and quite formal. This contributes to what Neil talked about around the rules of what you can and can't say and contributes to this fear of saying the wrong thing. For us as a campaign or project that is drawn from the healthcare sector, we're increasingly mindful that it's not clinicians or doctors and nurses that are going to have all the answers here.

3. The process at the end of life impacts on the grief process. The system needs to shift to enable a smoother process

A final point from me is on another thing that we're doing with the campaign at the moment, which is to connect it better to our wider work that hospice UK are doing on improving the end of life care system. That might not appear immediately relevant here, but what we believe, as an organisation, is that people's grief and bereavement process is helped if the process of someone's death is as smooth as possible. It's clear that the healthcare system is not able to deal with everything that happens at the end of life and so we are encouraging people to talk more openly in advance of the death of a loved one to make plans to express preferences, etc, knowing that that can be a helpful thing when it comes to dealing with the grief. The cultural change around grief and bereavement needs to be linked to a change in the system. Our health service is not very good at talking about death and bereavement. This is a real challenge that needs to be worked out, given the huge role that the health system plays in our lives."

Building in circles of support in the run up to death

A lot of predictors of how people experience grief is also apparent in the precursors to the person dying. As someone gets progressively more poorly, people often experience the comorbidities of loneliness and social isolation. We need to build in circles of support in the lead up to death to support the bereaved through the grieving process. Julian Abels and the team at Compassionate Communities are doing great work around this. Death and dying is a social process - we need a community involvement approach to death and dying.

Creating spaces to connect around grief - Sally Muylers

Sally Muylers is communications and involvement manager at St. Clare Hospice in Essex who set up bereavement cafes to support and connect people who are experiencing grief.

Sally came to the session to share the key characteristics of bereavement cafes and the support they can provide to those who are experiencing grief.

Bereavement cafes

"What I learned quite quickly was that we were having more people than we could help calling us up asking for support with their bereavement. We also had more people declining the therapy that we were offering them than were taking it up. It was clear we needed to do more.

What we knew was that some of the best support that you'll get when you've been bereaved is talking to and spending time with other people who've been through similar experiences. Bereavement has been medicalised in society and it's been hidden from view. Local people want to volunteer in their local hospice. They want to support people but they're completely debilitated by the fear of saying the wrong thing.

So what we wanted to do was to turn that on its head and be able to offer people the opportunity to provide meaningful support. So we found a model in Bury St. Edmunds that completely bowled us over. We adapted it and launched our first bereavement cafe in March 2019. Partners were falling over themselves to be involved, we had to expand sessions because so many people turned up. We trained 35 local facilitators in year one and saw 750 people come to our sessions. And we were about to launch a youth bereavement cafe just as the pandemic started. We were able to pivot some of the support online, onto Facebook and Zoom.

Key characteristics of bereavement cafes:

- They have a space in which people can come together, engage and talk and share in the experience of resonance that you get when you spend time talking about an experience that's happened to you. It's high quality peer support.
- It's entirely facilitated by local people, who are the volunteers and they host them and help people operate in the space without too much intervention.
- We do things like a welcome speech and midway speech, which encourages people to move. And we do a goodbye speech which tells people if you've been talking to someone and it's been interesting, take their phone number now because our main outcome is that people can find and build supportive relationships.
- Key is that they are for anybody who's been bereaved at any time. We don't ask questions, it's a drop-in, we ask you to put your name on a sticky label that helps with introducing people, but you can make that up so it's no registration.
- Ultimately it's visible to the public - it's in cafe's, theatres, bars.
- We've found a way for local people to provide meaningful support to one another.

We're now thinking about how we can provide social models of care in other areas of the hospice.

Practical advice for supporting someone experiencing grief- Julie Shepherd

Julie Shepherd is a grief coach and set up [Heartbroken to Healed](#), a grief support service which uses an evidence based toolset and lived experience to guide people experiencing grief towards lasting recovery.

Julie joined us to share some of the myths around grief and practical tips for supporting one another through it.

"A decade ago I was thrust into widowhood swiftly and unexpectedly. For a year, nothing I tried eased the pain of my grief. It was discovering a process called the grief recovery method that transformed my life and it's from that process that I'd like to share some practical things that I learned.

Grief is the normal and natural reaction to loss of any kind. It's the change in or end of a familiar pattern of behaviour. It could be caused by the breakdown of a romantic relationship, the loss of a job, a miscarriage, an abortion, loss of trust in an abusive relationship, moving school or home, illness, separation, change in finances. It can be one of more than 40 losses that create a grief reaction.

Even though grief is normal and natural, a lot of what we learn about it is not normal, not natural and not helpful. Traditionally, death was a community experience, where the deceased was cared for in the home until the funeral, often in an open coffin. Listeners would gather around and share stories and memories of the deceased.

Given that grief is caused by undelivered communication, removing the body from an environment where people traditionally gather has reduced the opportunity to grieve collectively. This has created a cultural shift and many people now resist even showing up at the house, they simply send a card and perhaps attend the funeral.

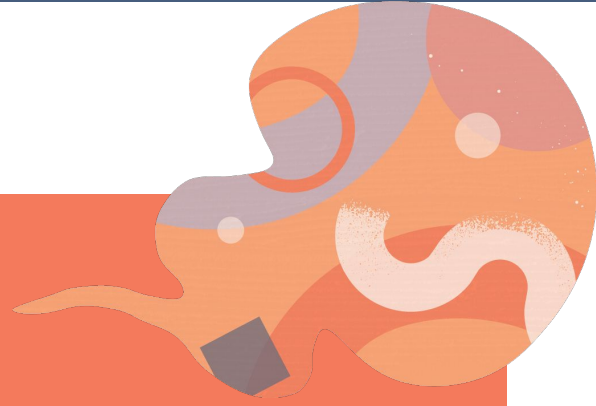
The reality is that everyone who shows up brings a helpful benefit. Alongside the memory sharers, there are gardeners, childcarers, shoppers, practical taskers.

The greatest help you can give to a griever is to park your own emotions, just for a moment, and let them be heard. When someone is in mourning there is little you can say to alleviate their pain. However, there is something you can do that can make a significant difference: you can be present and really listen. The level of listening that a griever needs goes beyond our everyday listening skills but it can be learned. Here are some pointers:

- Be fully present and remove any distractions from your mind
- Remove any judgement, comparisons and expectations. Everyone's grief is unique- no two people will experience it the same
- Practice empathy. It can be one of the hardest things to learn and can be uncomfortable because it means walking a mile in their shoes
- Feel comfortable with silence. Silence doesn't always need to be broken. Left alone, it can be an opportunity for your loved one to collect their thoughts or work through their feelings.

Practical advice for supporting someone experiencing grief-


Julie Shepherd



Top tips when speaking to someone who is experiencing grief

When we do talk to griever, we frequently see things that may not be particularly helpful and there's perhaps a top five:

1. **'At least'** - 'at least they're out of pain' - maybe so, but maybe you're not. These phrases can minimise the significance of loss for you. It's like saying you shouldn't feel that sad.
2. **Pointing out the positives** - it's rarely a good idea telling you to practise gratitude or see the positive side; that you're amazing, you're stronger than you know. It can all feel like they're telling you to ignore your real feelings and ignoring your pain can do more damage than good.
3. **Comparing losses** - all grief is unique, so when someone starts trying to help by telling you about their similar experiences, it can turn into a grief competition.
4. **Trying to fix** - grief is an emotion - you're not broken; you don't need a cure. "You'll meet someone else; you can try for another baby; ask the doctor for some antidepressants". In reality, you just need to be heard and acknowledged.
5. **Disappearing acts** - possibly one of the biggest blows of grief is losing family and friends - the ones you thought would show but didn't. Unintentionally, people can feel awkward about what to say so they don't show up and the more time that passes, the more awkward they feel about talking to you.



"We separate out grief by the language we use and the pictures on the cards and we put it in a place that belongs to the health service or some other kind of professional. What we're hearing a lot about today is how we are going to need to reclaim that and think about it as something that we've all experienced at some point in our lives, and we should think of in the common places; the bumping places, the places where we meet, whether it's a cafe, a cookery club, a library or something else."

- Side by Side member

Resources and activities for exploring the role of your community in supporting grief, bereavement and end of life



The Value of Death: bringing death back into life is a report by the Lancet Commission exploring how relationships and networks are being replaced by professionals and protocols in death and dying



We all know how this ends by Anna Lyons and Louise Winter is a moving, thought-provoking and practical book on how to prepare for and talk about death. Drawing together advice stemming from the first hand experiences of dozens of contributors, it covers a breadth of scenarios with compassion and care.



Death positive libraries aim to remove barriers around talking about death and dying and create a safe space and practical support to help people to speak openly about death and dying



Dying Matters podcast by Hospice UK which interviews people who have learnt through personal experience how important it is to talk about our wishes before it's too late



Guide to Loss by Julie Shepherd builds on the Grief Recovery Method to offer practical tips on the experience of grief and helping people through it



Compassionate Communities offers a range of support and services for building compassionate communities



Searching for a positive horizon

Imagining a better future for our communities, centred around relationships

Summary

In processing our grief and working through the trauma we've all experienced, we need to have sight of a positive horizon - a better future that can give us the hope to fuel our journey. We explored where we want to go, and the shoots of possibility we can start by nurturing.

In this section:

- [An exercise for imagining a better future, built on our shared experiences of lockdown](#) by Phoebe Tickell
- [Sharing our hopes and dreams for our communities](#), as a group
- [Useful resources](#) for bringing people together to explore a positive horizon

Imagining a better future, built on our shared experiences of lockdown - a guided meditation by Phoebe Tickell

With the support of Phoebe Tickell, founder of Moral Imaginations, we took some time to imagine a positive horizon for our communities. Why not try it for yourself?

Deep breath and deep breath out. Take a moment to sense into your body.

Feel the weight of your body if you're sitting.

Take your mind to the place where your body meets the chair.

Feel the weight of your body on the chair.

And tune into your feet on the ground.

Continue to follow your breath.

What does it feel like to be in your body in this very moment?

You might be able to feel or sense your own heartbeat.

Take this moment in our busy days to just relax everything and relax our bodies and our minds and allow a bit of spaciousness to emerge.

And in this state of relaxation I just invite you to imagine a very gentle rocking back and forth.

It might be a very micro movement, not even visible to the eye.

And in your imagination you realize that you're rocking because you're sitting in a rocking chair.

And you can feel a cool breeze on your skin.

You can feel some sunlight on your right arm.

The sun is streaming in.

And you can smell freshly cut grass.

And you realize you're sitting in a room with windows and one of the windows is open.

And you tune into the sounds around you and you realize that there's murmuring voices, you can hear people speaking and chatting and every now and then kind of scream of a little child. He's running around laughing.

You can hear the general clink of glasses and people chatting and eating and drinking.

And in this imagination you open your eyes and you look around you.

And you see that you're in some sort of celebration.

And there are people that you recognize the faces of.

You see, friends and colleagues and neighbours.

You see someone you know from your local allotment.

And you see lots of young children running around.

And look around you can see trees outside and smell recently cut grass and flowers blooming.

Imagining a better future, built on our shared experiences of lockdown - a guided meditation by Phoebe Tickell

You look to your right, and you see a big cake with the numbers 4-0 on it.
And you remember that this is the 40th celebration of your community's Community hub.
It's been 40 years since this new Community hub was built out of the pandemic.

These people around you are people from your community.
You can see people are very proud and there is a lot of celebration happening in the space.
And you look around and you see a young girl who is wearing a pink dress with her hair in pigtails.
And she's waving her way through the crowd, knocking the odd person as she moves her way
towards you.

Almost spitting a drink at one point, luckily saved just in time.
She's running around and has quite a mischievous look on her face. She is clearly having a very
good time.

Eventually she makes it over to you.
And she says,
'Hello it's so good to see you. I've just been talking about how this Community Centre got built with
my friend, Sarah and we've been learning about the great pandemic at school and how many
things were born during that time.

And she says granny or grandpa could you tell me more about what that time was like. We know
that it was a really scary time and people lost a lot of loved ones, and it was dangerous but we're
also learning about how many good new things came out of it as well.

And we were just talking about how there were new ways of organizing and new places for young
people to learn and do really exciting things together.


And mummy was also saying that the relationships changed, that there was a big change in what
happened here in this Community, and now we're here forty years later and there's this amazing
Community hub.'

And she asks,
'Can you tell me how things changed? What was it like to be in the pandemic and what came out
of it, and what did you keep doing and was it really hard?'

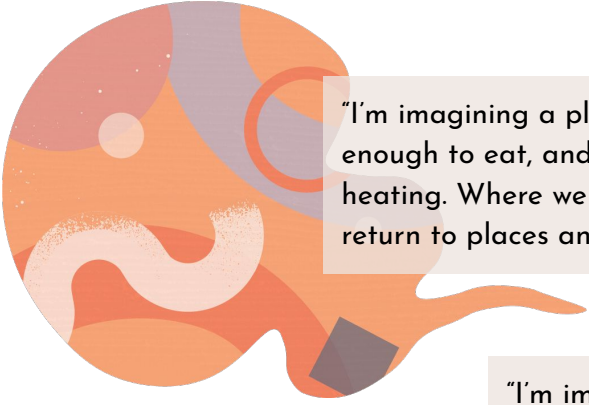
And you take a deep breath.
You think oh my gosh, a lot has happened and there's a lot to say.
So you start to tell her about some of what happened during that time.

Sharing our hopes and dreams for our communities, as a group

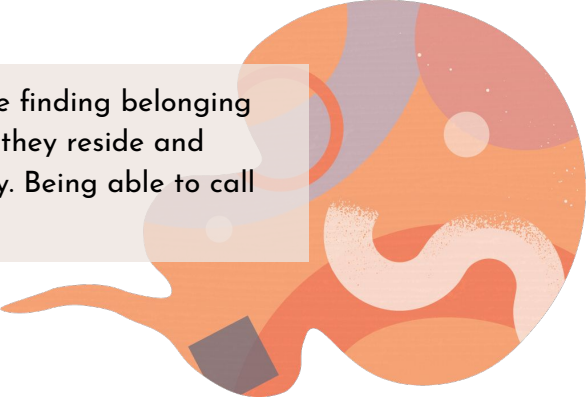
The guided meditation exercise helped unlock and surface our hopes and dreams for our communities. Here are some that were shared amongst the group




"I'm imagining a future where communities are taking an active role and we are tackling social and environmental issues alongside each other"




"I'm imagining a place where we have enough to eat, and money for petrol and heating. Where we regain the confidence to return to places and meet new people"




"I'm imagining everyone finding belonging within the place where they reside and actually living contently. Being able to call somewhere home"



"I'm imagining somewhere that recognises that people who were most isolated in the pandemic were also isolated beforehand and will be afterwards. Simply sustaining the neighbourliness would be worthwhile"



"I'm imagining a future where communities are properly empowered (resources!) to bring future visions for their places to life"



"I'm imagining keeping the mutual aid community spirit going, building neighbourhoods that care rather than moan about parking, designing new houses that encourage community integration rather than 6 foot fences and no room to talk out front"

Resources and activities for getting your imagination firing



[The story of the impossible train](#): Another powerful imagination exercise by Phoebe Tickell which helps us to see the world we have built around ourselves from a new perspective



[Cultivating Everyday Imagination](#): A summit exploring as individuals, we might boost our capacity to think outside the box and reimagine our lives



[Moral Imaginations Manifesto](#) by Phoebe Tickell lays out why we need more collective imagination and radical creativity to tackle the great challenges of our times



[Who gets to imagine the future - RSA panel](#) This panel event brings together a range of speakers to discuss the role that social imagination could and should play in helping communities to realise their ambitions as we look ahead past the pandemic



[Can we reinvent democracy for the long term?](#) By Roman Krznaric. In this article for the BBC Future series, Roman Krznaric explores how we might reimagine the 'rampant short-termism' of our current political system



[A World of Good Relationships](#) lays out our long-term vision, at The Relationships Project, and the steps that we are taking in that direction



Nurturing the conditions

Exploring what's needed to create the conditions in which our communities can thrive

Summary

Strong communities do not exist in a vacuum. They are enabled and disabled by the forces around them. We explored the key influences on our communities, and the conditions that help them to flourish.

In this section:

- [Understanding the key influences on our communities](#) - A model from the field of conflict transformation
- [Creating the conditions for community friendships](#), by Avril McIntyre of Barking and Dagenham's Community Resources
- [Creating the structural conditions for community relationships](#), Farah Elahi, Community Engagement Manager at the Greater London Authority
- [The transformative power of courteous listening](#) by Gateshead's Christine Frazer
- [The Local Area Coordination approach to unlocking potential](#) by Nick Sinclair
- [Useful resources](#) for nurturing the conditions in which communities can flourish

Understanding the key influences on our communities - A model

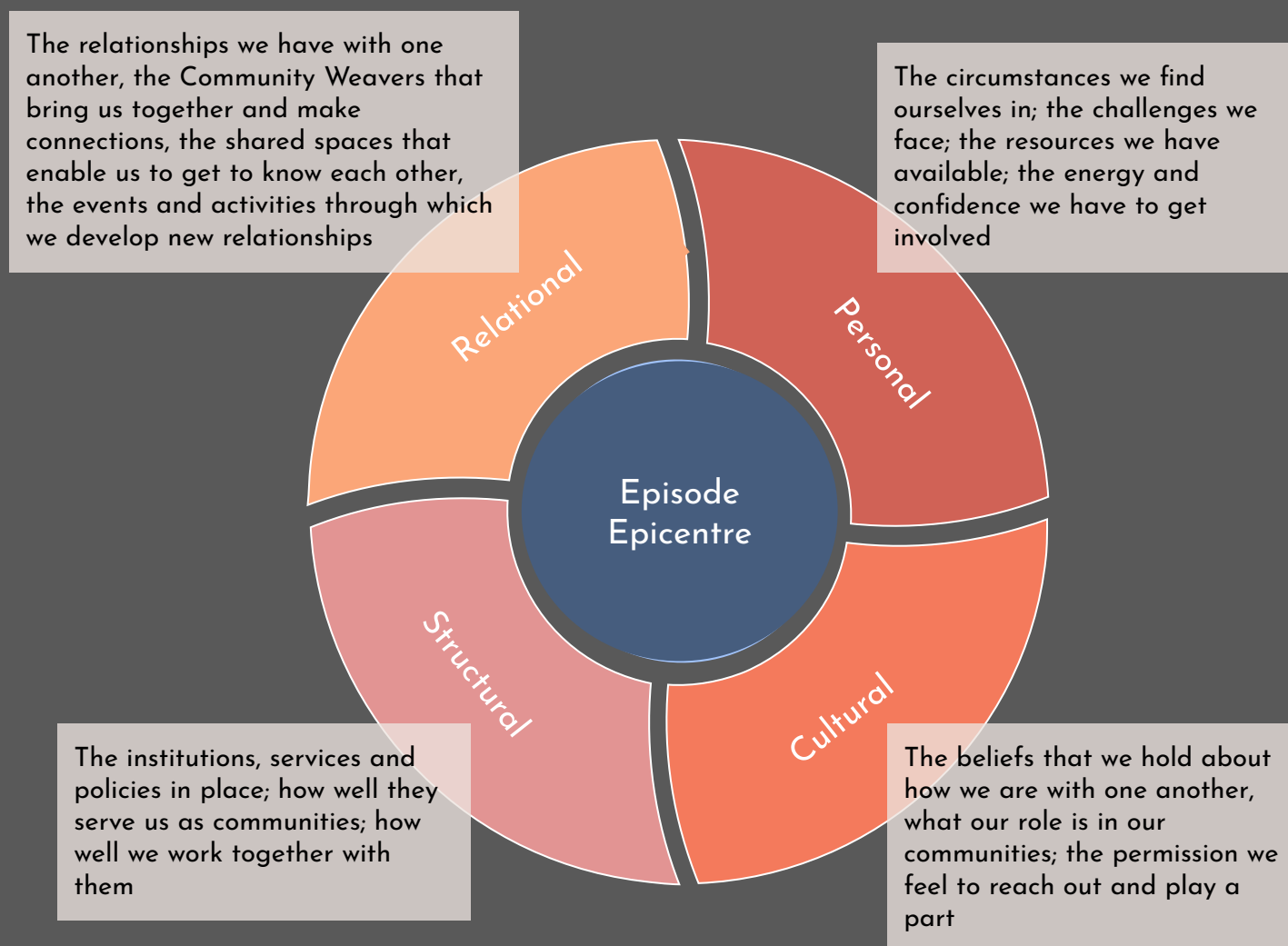
Drawing on the craft of conflict transformation, we developed a model for thinking through the different types of influences on our communities.

Neil Denton told us about a model that he frequently uses when working with communities that have been affected by disaster. It's a model that was developed by Jean-Paul Lederach, the 'father' of conflict transformation.

When something happens that affects us all we tend to focus on the centre, on the episode. Jean-Paul Lederach encouraged us to use that episode as a window to look through and see what are the really important things and what are the unmet needs.

He breaks these down into four spheres, not to say you have to think about all of these four parts, but to say that it doesn't matter if you can't affect them all because each one feeds into the other.

We spent some time thinking about the key influences on the strength of our own communities



Creating the conditions for friendship - Avril McIntyre

Avril McIntyre, Director of Community Resources, Chair of the Barking and Dagenham Collective and long-time community organiser shared her musings on the importance of friendship in establishing strong and connected communities.

"Over the course of my many years working in community development I've always seen relationships as being really vital. When I look back I'm really very dissatisfied because I realised a lot of that was actually interpreted into the relationship that was built with us as a community group, in a voluntary sector setting. We become the connectors and we see ourselves as the end of the line."

Avril shared an anecdote about a time when a group of Mums whose children all have autism came together. The 'connector' introduced two Mums, one of whom suspects her daughter has autism but has not yet been diagnosed. The other mum turned to her and asked: "and how many times a day do you find yourself crying?" A support worker would never ask that sort of question. As Avril explained, "those mums meet together and there's just a different depth of conversation happening. They don't need anyone else involved, other than an introduction".

Based on dissatisfaction in seeing support workers as the end point in connection, Barking and Dagenham are piloting something called 'Neighbourhood Networks' which has the following underlying principles:

1. **IT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO CONNECT THAN 'FIX':** interventions, services and support are all vital but if we don't have a friend to walk through the different issues you have, we know ourselves how much harder that is. The qualities of connection matter - 'signposting' can be soulless and worthless if not done well
2. **MOST RESIDENTS RESOLVE THEIR OWN CHALLENGES WITH FAMILY, NEIGHBOURS AND INFORMAL SUPPORT. THIS IS VITAL TO BUILD ON.** Part of our role as community organisations is to develop connection points and spaces where people can really get to know one another and build friendships. Avril shared the story of Agnes who was isolated before the pandemic and became even more so during it. She came along to a coffee morning, met Dave and Tracey who live up the road, and a friendship developed. "It sounds simple but there was a magic happening"
3. **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST IS A FOUNDATION FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD WORKING.** The laundrette man, the fishmonger, the cafe owner are all fantastic connectors. They just need to know where to point others to to access the support that they're looking for. And they need to be able to point them to an individual rather than to an organisation because "if I say go to the home and money hub that's terrifying but if I say I can introduce you to Jill at the money hub that can really make all the difference
4. **THE FOCUS WILL BE TO MAKE HELP EASIER TO ACCESS AND MAKE GIVING HELP MORE FULFILLING.** We're exploring what it means to connect up the places where there's already connection, relationship and trust. Someone might trust the laundrette man in a way they might not trust me.
5. **INNOVATION IS KEY. WE WILL TEST, FAIL, LEARN, ADAPT, REPEAT AND THEN SYSTEMATISE THE BEST IDEAS.**

Being friends is such an obvious thing but we don't create a world where it's easy to be friends. One Side by Side member shared an anecdote about a small but effective initiative to encourage friendship and conversation in an everyday community space.

"The laundrette man came in the other day and said, 'do you know what, I've been thinking about our conversations and I'm going to put a kettle in the laundrette because I think it'll help people to chat to each other while they're waiting for their washing. Quite simple. Do you think it'd work?'"

Creating the structural conditions for community relationships- Farah Elahi

Farah Elahi, Head of Community Engagement at the Greater London Authority and member of the Side by Side community, told us about the brilliant work they've been doing to develop a civic strength index for London, and what they've got planned next to help turn the insights from the index into action.

"When we initially started having conversations with people it was clear that people are not interested in a top-down agenda coming from the Mayor on what it takes to build a strong community.

Local government doesn't build strong community - it emerges from the grassroots and is supported and scaffolded (by local government). The vision can't be set by them.

So the GLA hosted the [Festival of Ideas](#): an open invitation to Londoners to shape the Strong Communities mission being funded by the Mayor and run by the GLA. At the same time as the Festival of Ideas, the GLA worked on developing a [Civic Strength Index for London](#). One of the key challenges that we face in making the case for investing in strong communities is a lack of data. The Civic Strength Index aims to help plug this gap.

Three key domains were identified as being essential to civic strength. You can explore each of these domains at the borough-level:

1. Relationships and social capital: opportunities for community life, social support, trust, social cohesion, community action
2. Democratic engagement: institutional trust, accessible engagement, civic responsibility
3. Public and social infrastructure: public services, financial resources, community spaces, safety

It's much easier to say what it takes to build strong community but it's much harder to know what you do then. Three questions to help with this:

1. What can individual agencies do to foster the conditions for strong communities?
2. How do we coordinate the activity taking place at a city level to maximise interdependence and resources?
3. How do you nudge people to act on a core set of factors that we know contribute to building strong communities?

None of us can do this by ourselves. How do we support the coordination of activity that happens across the capital that is geared towards building strong communities? How can we maximise interdependence and resources? What are the properties of strong communities that we need to nurture within the work we're doing so it acts as a kind of mirror to the kind of city that we're trying to create?

The transformative power of courteous listening- Christine Frazer

Christine Frazer is a community developer working in Teams and Dunston, a suburb of Gateshead. She joined us to tell us about how she's been helping to nurture relationships between different parts of the system in Teams and Dunston to create the conditions for thriving communities.

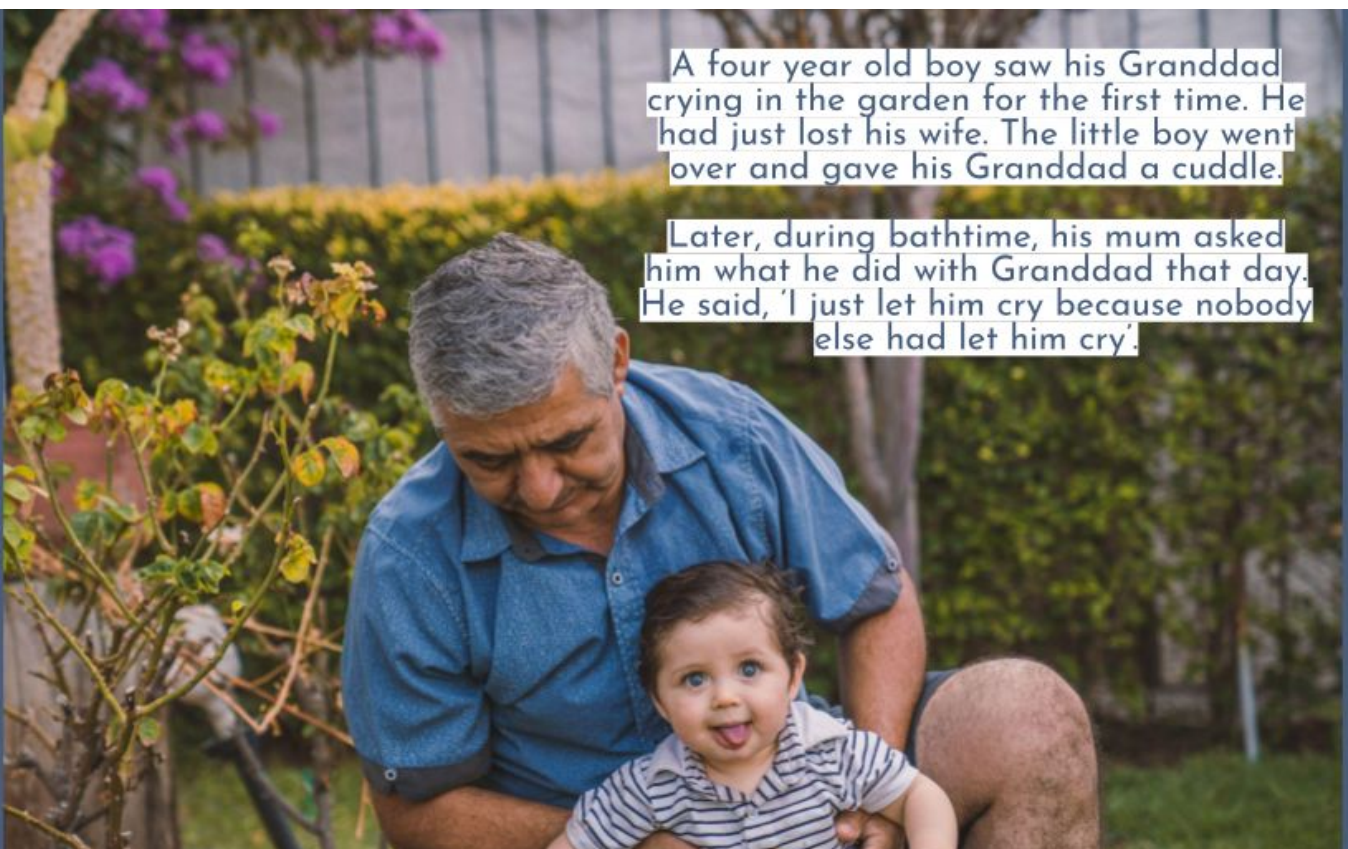
"Peace, love and happiness. They are the three core things that I bring to my work as a community developer. I'm looking in my community at what's strong and what's wrong. The way that I do that is by genuinely listening and genuinely caring.

My role is to unpick the very person-centred approach and attempt to feed back to the family, to feed back to the services that surround the family, to feed back to the system surrounding it all. I try to see what positive change we can make in community to make life better for other people.

I want to talk about courtesy. To quote Neil Denton, 'We need our local services to act as if they are guests in people's homes'. The act of being a guest implies that you are courteous, you are polite, you present your best self. I don't see that in a lot of the local councillors and council ideas that are going on here.

Courtesy was lacking recently in the FA Cup final where there was a minute silence for the Hillsborough Disaster. The fans from Manchester chanted through it, even though they had a minute of silence and a round of applause for Ronaldo who lost his son. That mutuality is incredibly important. Mutual aid has been incredibly important to the work that I did pre-pandemic and well as now.

For me, everything that I do is about the courtesy of listening deeply and doing things with peace and love and happiness. And being able to then come back to the services, come back to the academics, and saying here's some new ideas, some new ways of being, some new ways of thinking and it's working in Teams and Dunston. Come and see us. Come and visit."



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

Later, during bathtime, his mum asked him what he did with Granddad that day. He said, 'I just let him cry because nobody else had let him cry'.

The Local Area Coordination approach to unlocking potential - Nick Sinclair

Nick Sinclair is Director of the Local Area Coordination Network and came along to tell us about the model and share some provocations on how we can nurture the conditions for thriving communities.

"A Local Area Coordinator is employed by a local authority to work in and alongside communities in a very different way to how our services normally evolve and develop. Relationships are fundamentally at the core of the core principle of how we work.

There are ten core principles that go behind local area coordination and there are quite a few design features that surround it as well. But essentially it's about being in and of the community, taking instructions directly from local people who might be struggling for whatever reason with something that might be getting in the way of their vision for a good life, helping them to articulate what that good life means to them, then being alongside them as they go on that journey of discovery to achieve that. The way we do that is by helping people to reconnect and connect with their own gifts and strengths and assets and those that their local community have in place.

What part services play within that is an important question.

Fundamentally, can people draw upon their own solutions first, from within their own life, rather than requiring a service solution which probably isn't there anyway. In what ways can all of this help to build new relationships within a community setting?

Sometimes that work takes local area coordinators into the space of helping people to establish groups and activities and new organisations, but for the most part it's about working alongside individuals and families, helping people to overcome the things that may be stopping them from playing an active role within their community. That can be anything related to disability, mental health, sense of belonging, connectedness, housing situation, finances - there are no criteria or eligibility thresholds for accessing the support of a local area coordinator, rather just an introduction that can come from anywhere - from the kebab shop owner, the Church, someone who lives next door.

Confidence and trust in the progress we've made

We don't always trust - or believe in - ourselves to play a role in our communities. We've created hierarchies which make people feel they don't have a voice and don't have anything to offer. Often, we need to be reminded of the skills we have and the value that we can bring to our community

Recognising and celebrating the progress that we make together, the things we achieved together, is a way of helping us believe that we can carry on doing that. How can we visibly show the change that we've created?

The Local Area Coordination approach to unlocking potential - Nick Sinclair

Nick finished up by sharing some tricky questions to explore when developing community-centred roles and activity.

- What overall difference are you hoping to make and why?
- What conversations have and haven't taken place already and who were they with?
- Who is *broadly* trying to achieve the same outcomes already, and how will this add to or complement that?
- How much of the activity is going to be rooted in a place - i.e. a neighbourhood / community of place that local people recognise?
- What are your starting assumptions around what is strong and wrong? What 'labels' are commonly mentioned and why?
- How will a need for funding impact positively and negatively on this in the short, medium and long term?
- Who will "own" this and where does the power sit in reality? Does that fit with the wider vision?
- Will this activity build on and foster relationships, neighbourliness and natural support (directly or indirectly)?
- What are the beliefs and assumptions around "risk"?
- How sustainable is this and what are the dependencies?
- Will this inform wider learning and change somehow? How will the story of this be told and to whom?
- What more might you need to explore and how?

Resources and activities to help you nurture the conditions for connected communities



More Human: A platform for hosting events, get-togethers or societies in your community, without the stress



Better Conversations Guide: A guide for helping neighbours, friends and colleagues to have better, more enriching conversations



Public Living Rooms: A free box from Camerados which contains everything you need to set up a no agenda space that brings together people in your local community



Lightening the burden of fear: Christine Frazer shares how she experiences, faces and overcomes fear in her community development work in Gateshead



The Community Power Podcast: Episodes showcasing what inspiring individuals across the UK have done to energise their communities around topics like heritage, mental health, and climate.



"You never know when you need relationships, but when you do, you need them fast": Great blog by Fabian Pfortmüller on the importance of 'weaving the relational web'



Sociable Curiosity: Paper by Richard Phillips on how curiosity can help build bridges across divides and lay the foundations for stronger communities



Kit for Councils: A set of principles and resources to support local authorities to work relationally and support thriving communities



Evolving the processes

Evolving the processes that enable safe and effective community activity

Summary

Having safe, effective and enabling processes is essential in helping us to connect and support our communities well. But oftentimes, our processes feel like they're hindering rather than helping. In this session, we were joined by Esther Foreman from the Social Change Nest who shared the work they're doing to help enable and transform grassroots activity.

In this section:


- The rub of red tape: exploring the tensions and conflicts created by certain types of processes
- The story of the Social Change Nest - Esther Foreman
- Fiscal hosting: a service supporting transparent money management for grassroots groups
- Other support offered by Social Change Nest: governance, incorporation, safeguarding and decision making
- Useful resources for developing and evolving enabling processes to support thriving community activity

The rub of red tape: Exploring the tensions and conflicts created by certain processes


As a group, we explored the challenges that we face in working humanely and relationally, whilst adhering to policies and protocols that we are bound by.

Throughout the course of this programme so far, we've heard and witnessed the intense humanity which characterises the work of Community Weavers. We've stories of powerful community connection- from the little boy who sat on his granddad's lap and just let him cry, the laundrette owner who put a kettle out to encourage customers to sit and chat, and the bereavement cafes that connect people who are experiencing grief.


And alongside these stories of care and compassion, we've heard frustration at the bureaucracy and red tape which at costs those at the heart of this work time and energy and, at times, stops them from doing doing their work in the way that they know it should be done.



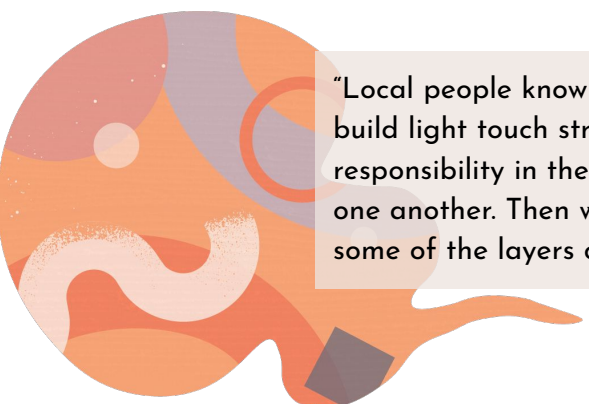
"We need to decolonise the neighbouring that's been captured as volunteering. I don't need a DBS and a risk assessment to turn up in my street!"



"Risk assessments are going to get in the way of someone helping someone in need and maybe even saving their life. It feels like the system exerting its last bit of control."



"It matters who is asking for the background information, risk analysis etc. If we ask it of ourselves it feels (and is) very different from if the council requires it. How we then gather this information and develop our procedures is really important."



"Local people know one another. We need to build light touch structures which share responsibility in the group and place trust in one another. Then we can begin to take off some of the layers of regulation."

The story of the Social Change Nest - Esther Foreman

Esther Foreman, CEO of the Social Change Nest, shared the story of how it came about and the needs it seeks to fulfil

“At The Social Change Nest, we’re radically transforming the funding landscape. We nurture grassroots groups and enable funders to support frontline social action. As a community interest company (CIC), we’re the non-profit sister to The Social Change Agency.

We really believe in the power of using networks and working together to create impact, so we combine community organising, technology, research and all kinds of different communications and marketing to create a model of change which involves everyone, all together, to systems at a local, regional, national or international level.

We were always on the hunt for how we could improve our support to movements and, as we worked through supporting lots of different types of movements, we realised that movements in general lack the resources to meet the systemic infrastructure problems that they encounter - things like not being able to open a bank account, and not being able to find funding to tackle creating boundaries around them, such as safeguarding and fundraising strategies.

Often grassroots groups are volunteer led, so they're often time poor and cash poor. So working in that context we've always been thinking about where's the gap that will truly transform how people do civic leadership together in groups, collaboratively, to change in their communities.

So we did loads of research and then the pandemic hit in 2020. And we realised that this was our moment where we could actually provide a proper service to the thousands and thousands of community groups that sprung up in order to help their Community deal with the impact of Covid and lockdown. So within a matter of about a month we created the Social Change Nest - an asset locked business - to help grassroots groups manage their funding and finance in a transparent and accountable way and in order to also help funders donors to support frontline social action.”



Fiscal hosting: transparent money management

Esther Foreman told us about the fiscal hosting service that Social Change Nest has developed which enables grassroots groups to manage money easily and transparently

“As the pandemic hit we licensed a piece of technology called [Open Collective](#) which enables transparent bookkeeping with groups. It's a service that we offer to groups across the UK and we now have almost 300 groups using it, from beekeepers to bar keepers. We can host money for these groups using the transparent bookkeeping service so we can send and receive money on the group's behalf, whilst everything is always fully in the group's control.

We take on the admin burden and process all transactions on your behalf. It's entirely transparent, with every transaction clearly shown and accounted for. Anyone in your area or as part of your group can click on your site and see what is being spent. It is possibly the most transparent way of bookkeeping and you know if things are transparent, you can't really have fraudulent claims - people can't accuse you of pocketing money, people can't say we've lost a fiver, because every spend and every receipt is recorded and open for everyone to see.

And it is collaborative, so in order for you to open up an account list, we need a minimum of three people from your group to act as administrators on the system.

And so what this does is it helps us to help you to manage your money. And once that's done, you can start to focus on other things, like how you grow, how you get more money, how to support people in your community.

You don't have to be a legal entity to be able to do this, and I think that's the beauty. It means that you can delay or spend a bit more time thinking about if you do want to incorporate and what legal structure you might require.

And because we're a CIC, foundations and other donors are very happy for us to receive your grant money on your behalf and we're very able to sign grant agreements on your behalf.

Social Change Nest takes 5% off donations that come into your Collective account, or 7% if it's a grant. It's higher for a grant because they sign the grant agreement meaning they take on all of the risk. All surplus gets funnelled back into helping the groups that don't have access to support or funding.”

Over £4.3 million

the amount of funds channelled to **over 300** grassroots groups and changemakers



Other services offered by the Social Change Nest

Esther also told us about the support that they can offer around incorporation, decision making and safeguarding

Incorporation

Incorporating can sometimes be a distraction to your impact and sometimes people get really obsessed with who's going to be the manager or the treasurer or the chief exec or the chair and actually what they should be focusing on is what we're doing and what kind of impact we're making.

So we exist to really help take or delay that type of conversation until you're really ready to have it. And when you are ready to have it we've got resources and people to help you do it.

Network building

SCN have developed a network building canvas which is designed for you to run through with your own network. It helps you find the strengths and gaps in your network from an infrastructure perspective.

Decision making

SCN has also developed a decision making framework which helps you make decisions about how decisions are made. It stops people making really important decisions on whatsapp because it tends to be a terrible platform for decision making, resulting in upset and arguments. The decision making framework is there to help you really think about what kind of decisions you're going to make and where are you going to make them and how are you going to make them so once that sort of clear with everyone, you can get on with the business of doing the business.

When there is no decision making framework there is no boundary - you can't say who is in and who is out. This makes it difficult to ask someone who is causing problems to leave the group because there's no mechanism for doing so.

Case Study: Lambeth Portuguese Wellbeing Partnership

The Lambeth Portuguese Wellbeing Partnership is a grassroots community network of over 40 local groups and community members. They approached us to help them adopt a more decentralised organising approach to how they were working in South London.

We helped them bring in a decision making framework which enabled them to involve their 40 members and local groups to all feel that they had an active voice in what was being decided and when. It stopped people feeling like decisions were being made behind people's backs.

We also helped them through our fiscal hosting service to employ their first coordinator to help support their communications, the administration etc so they've grown from strength to strength and now they're still there in South London doing great work.

Resources and activities to help you nurture the conditions for connected communities



Accountable: A fiscal hosting service by The Social Change Nest which gives unincorporated groups a safe and transparent way to receive funding and manage their money



Top Tips for Decision-Making in Self-Organised Groups: A short guide by Social Change Agency to support self-organised groups make decisions about how to make decisions



Mutual Money: A report by Social Change Agency on how they helped Mutual Aid groups manage their finances and stay accountable to their members and neighbours.



Better Evaluation: A wide-ranging set of resources to support you in monitoring and evaluating the impact of your group's activities



The Measurement Challenge: We've begun to collate useful resources and ideas for approaching measurement in a more relational way



People over process: Insights and reflections from our Relational Councils convening on moving from being process-led to relationship-led



Design Kit: A set of resources to help you identify, develop, test and scale great ideas



The power of touch: A reminder - via the Guardian - that while touch is discouraged or even banned in many professional settings, it has real power



Celebrating our progress

Celebrating the progress we've made, offering our thanks and exploring how we might continue to journey together

Summary

As this programme came to a close in Summer 2022, energy bills were on the rise and our political leadership in turmoil. We spent our final session together taking stock of the changing world, celebrating the progress we've made together, and exploring where we might head next, together.

In this section:

- Reflections on a changing world - thoughts on how the world has changed since Side by Side began in early 2022 from David Robinson
- Continuing our journey together - steps we might take together as we move into a long, hard winter
- Celebrating the journey - sharing thanks for all that we've learnt and gained from one another over the past few months
- Useful resources for holding the hope and looking to the future

Reflections on a changing world - David Robinson

David Robinson kicked off our last session together by sharing some reflections on how the world - and the work of our communities - has shifted over the six months since the Side by Side programme began.

The Doings of the Dustbin

"A silver dustbin appeared outside number 52 at the very beginning of the first lockdown, collecting food for people in our street. It then quite quickly in that first spring expanded out for people to put food in for a food bank. Then, while it continued to still be there, it sort of faded over the course of last year. And then it started to fill up again when the notice on the front changed and talked about collecting stuff for Ukraine. And then a bit after that quite recently, it changed again to be stuff for the food bank for local people who were struggling economically."

The journey of that dustbin is really the story of the last two years and a reminder of the relationships, the community infrastructure, the resilience, and the community will that we've developed over that time"



"I've been thinking about the silver dustbin outside number 52 in our road which appeared at the very beginning of the first lockdown, collecting food for originally people in our street quite specifically - really hyper local. Then quite quickly in that first spring it expanded out for people to put food in for a food bank which was serving the wider neighbourhood and that continued successfully for several months after that. But then while it continued to still be there it sort of faded over the course of last year. And then it started to fill up again when the notice on the front changed and talked about collecting stuff for Ukraine. And then a bit after that quite recently, it changed again to be stuff for the food bank for local people who were struggling economically.

And I was thinking that the journey of that dustbin is really the story of the story of the last two years and thinking about in particular how it has been repositioned in the time that we've been meeting over the last few months. So, going from being something that appeared to be fading out, then people becoming much more aware of what was happening in Ukraine and feeling perhaps a bit desperately that they wanted to try to do something, to make some sort of expression of solidarity. And then the cost of living stuff really biting quite deep and beginning to think about whether we could help one another, again, in coping with that.

So, from a sense that the pandemic was 'over' to the recognition that, first war and then very severe economic pressures, would test our communities and our relationships again.

I think there's a danger that the first thing we think is that it's just one damn thing after another and we can't cope with all this, and so we retreat and we give up on the kind of ideas and the work that we've been talking about in this group.

Reflections on a changing world - David Robinson

But the Jubilee Celebrations have shown us that there's still a desire to come together to rub shoulders. 16.75 million people attended a street party over the weekend. Now there are nowhere near 16 and three quarter million Royalists in the country, so this is much more about a desire to come together to relate to one another, even if it's in a wet tent in the field.

And I do have a gut feeling now after four and a half decades as a community worker, I think that that desire is stronger than it has been for a long time. My take on that is that a lot has happened over the time that we've been meeting, to quote that Lennon line about decades where nothing happens and weeks where decades happen, certainly these have been those such weeks and continue to be.

But I feel that we are carrying forward a stronger commitment to community in many communities, not as strong as it might have been a year ago, but still a strong commitment. I don't think it would have been 16 and three quarter million people turning out for a street party two years ago.

I think we carry forward also a kind of soft infrastructure: we have relationships with people that we didn't know before, we have an enhanced understanding of each other and use of basic technology that we haven't used previously to help us to communicate with one another locally. The doings of the dustbin have been chronicled in our street on a whatsapp group that wasn't established before Covid. We have some loose organising mechanisms - our street party, like many others, started by the group that ran mutual aid - and possibly also we have a degree of resilience that we didn't have before - a sense that we can handle some bad stuff together.

I recognize that all this is kind of best case stuff, it is not universal. But I think it does point us in the direction where we need to look and that it feels to me that optimism in community development isn't only a moral duty, it's an operating imperative and, in these times of rapid and many transitions I do think there's quite a lot to be optimistic about."

**"Optimism in community development
isn't only a moral duty, it's an operating
imperative"**

- David Robinson



Continuing the journey together: Six invitations

A few months on from the end of the programme, and nearing the challenges of the long hard winter ahead, we share six steps we might take, together, to support strong communities in crisis and beyond

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 the cost of living crisis, political turmoil and more driving into the back of each other and compounding them all.

In our latest report *The Sense of Connection* - which draws on insight shared by this group - we set out some steps that we might take, together, to steady the ship and find our feet again. These steps cannot be taken alone in the context of such complexity and instability. It is only by walking together that we will be able to navigate the path ahead. We invite you to join us to:



GIVE IT TIME

The work of community development and bridge building requires patience as well as energy. [Join us](#) in creating space for grief and time to heal



TEACH THE CRAFT

We can't rely on our instincts alone to build relationships in a world teeming with difference. [Join us](#) in exploring ways to nurture the skills and practice of relationships



HOLD THE HOPE

For all the pain and grief of Covid we have also had our best days. As weariness takes hold and challenges mount, [join us](#) in embedding stories of hope in the landscape of our lives as much as the stories of anguish



TRUST THE PEOPLE

Statutory agencies and governments can't make social capital but they can nurture it. [Join](#) our Practitioner network to explore how we can create the conditions for relationships to thrive



BOTTLE THE ESSENCE

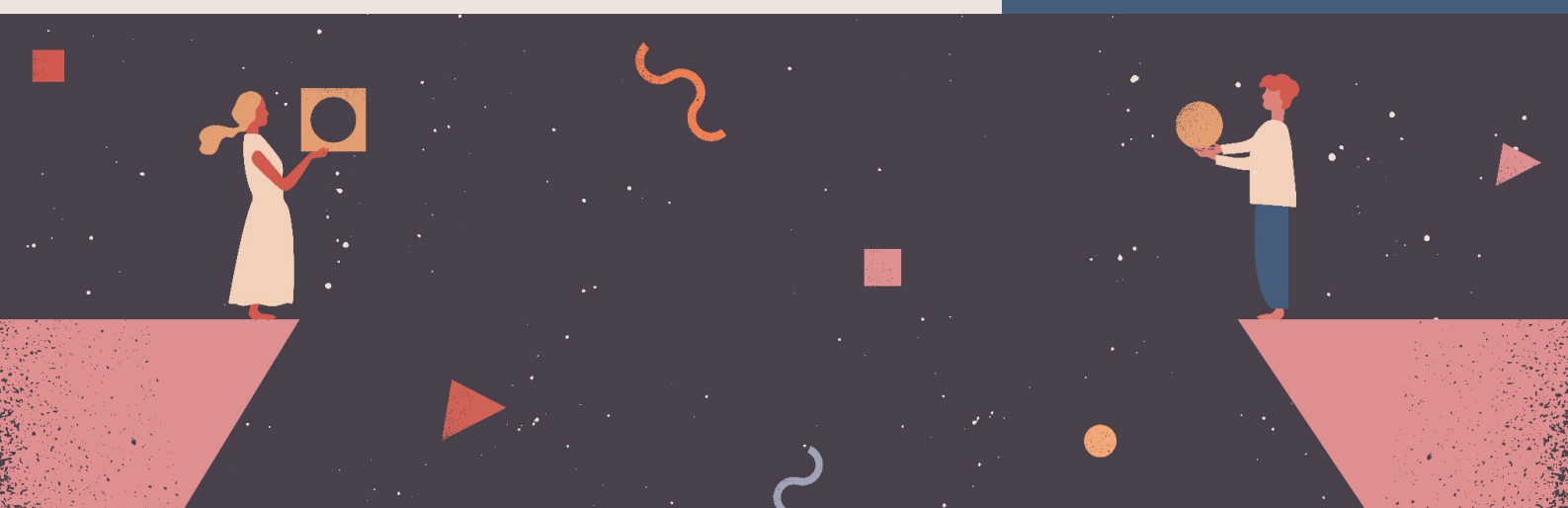
We all know good relationships when we see them, when we feel them. [Join us](#) in pooling and sharing our collective knowledge about building strong communities



DARE TO DREAM

What we've experienced will affect our tomorrows, but the direction we chose to take is in our hands. [Join us](#) in building bridges with other crafts to achieve a better tomorrow.

Source: [The Sense of Connection](#)



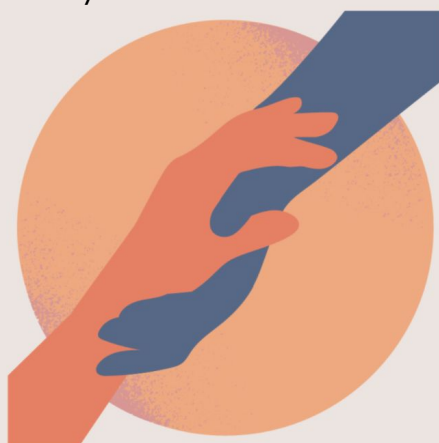
Celebrating the journey and sharing our gratitude

We wrapped up our time together by sharing thanks for all that we've learnt and gained from one another over the past few months

"I gain such strength from this group and the people in it and the action that comes when we all gather together. I love all of your storytelling and the compassion with which you speak about the people that you obviously know very well. This personally for me is a very important part of my month so that you everybody." - Side by Side participant

"I've thoroughly enjoyed this experience and it's helped me no end in terms of confidence and feeling a part of something meaningful. You've played a huge part in this" - Side by Side participant

"It's certainly given me a lot to go away and think about. I can't tell you how much I enjoy these sessions. So much valuable information and the connection with people all over the country has been so useful" - Side by Side participant



"It was brilliant to be part of today - thank you for the opportunity - it was really interesting and inspiring." - Side by Side participant

"I'm feeling restored and inspired" - Side by Side participant

"Professionally this project has kept me going. To have some direction, to meet regularly with like minded people. To have the opportunity to share my thoughts, to be treated as an expert" - Side by Side participant

"A great programme and lovely bunch of people. Thank you for the opportunity. I've come away with a glow" - Side by Side participant

"A wonderful blend of the profound and the practical" - Side by Side participant

"Really enjoying it, thank you for all the care that goes into it. You bring a real authenticity in the way you hold / create the space for us - thank you." - Side by Side participant

"As a result [of Side by Side] I have not felt so alone in my work. I feel inspired and challenged." - Side by Side participant

"I really love it and feel lighter after the discussions" - Side by Side participant

"[What I enjoy about these sessions is] 1) Meeting other practitioners and hearing about their work; 2) The tone set for the conversations - warm, open and thought-provoking 3) The diversity of the content and speakers 4) The space built into the sessions to reflect and do your own work 5) The camaraderie and support - it can be lonely and draining work and I get a sense people are really valuing having a support network" - Side by Side participant

We would like to say a heartfelt thanks to everyone who participated in the programme. It's been an honour and a pleasure working alongside you and learning from you over the course of the programme. We'd also like to say a big thank you to each and every one of our speakers for sharing their insights, wisdom and time. We are hugely grateful to Linda Woolston, Kate Weiler, Neil Denton, Grace Sodzi-Smith and Morven Loh for helping to facilitate the space. And we thank the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Tudor Trust for their generous support of this work.

With kindness, Immy and David

Resources and activities to help you nurture the conditions for connected communities



The Sense of Connection: Weaving together the crafts of community development, conflict transformation and disaster recovery, our latest report looks ahead to a long hard winter and the steps we can take, together, to prepare



If not now, when?: David Robinson explains why this crisis, and our collective response, must be a turning point. More than “just for now” crisis management, we need to reimagine and refund.



Building A Bigger We: 36 essays from the Better Way Network setting out big ideas for bringing about change. We might be biased, but we particularly like the chapter on Putting Relationships First



How We Rebuild In The Wake Of Disaster: A moving conversation between Lucy Easthope and Rowan Williams on how the human spirit carries us through our greatest losses



Garden Mind: A thought-provoking paper by Sue Goss advocating for a mindset shift a new mentality and new approach for government, from ‘controlling’ to ‘tending’



This Is How To Have A Long And Awesome Life: An entertaining excerpt from Eric Barker’s new book Plays Well With Others on why we can’t live well without good relationships



Springfield Beech Hill Gidlow CommUnity. We’ve shared this moving and inspiring account of community activity in Wigan before, but we think there’s no end of heart to be taken from it





Stay - or get - 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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