

## Background

As a small Voluntary Community Social Enterprise sector (VCSE) organisation with responsibilities to many people and community groups, the Covid19 emergency was an intense challenge. Meeting the different new and increased needs of many vulnerable people all at once was an overwhelming task and, like many other VCSEs, was hampered by many factors, some we had control over and many we did not. Alongside, the instant response of hyper-local community groups was impressive, and, at the other end of the scale, local government were well behind the curve. Despite best efforts the support provided to people and communities was patchy and imperfect in the first critical few weeks.

By mid-April it was abundantly clear that there was a need to share capacity and resources across the sector, to have better communications networks, to capitalise on organisational specialisms, strengths and expertise in key areas and to distribute resources more efficiently and fairly. Whilst this has taken place to a degree there is no system to maintain the links and improvements made on the fly in a consistent and reliable way. An ongoing resourced and practical plan to integrate these on a county level is needed now, in case of further emergence of Covid19 or indeed to other emergencies, in order to

- Reduce inequality of provisioning, to share and distribute resources such as food, medical supplies
- Ensure all vulnerable people get support they need, find everyone, and have their specific needs met, including direct communication, digital resources access, physical, mental and emotional needs
- Reduce the potential strain of responsibility on volunteers in supporting the most vulnerable people in their local area and ensuring complex situations are signposted to professional help
- Reduce transmission of the disease to the most vulnerable people, including people who have become vulnerable through isolation, anxiety and economic circumstances and currently 'unseen'
- Support the triage effort to all support including the NHS, LA and professional services
- Safeguard vulnerable people and protect volunteers from potential harm, intentional or otherwise
- Ensure support networks created are maintained to a high standard for as long as they are needed

The research has been funded by the Gloucestershire Funders Group which concurs that we must

- prompt **immediate** action where disabled people and people with mental health challenges are being disproportionately impacted by the circumstances relating to the coronavirus outbreak.
- ensure that in the instance of future lockdown measures or another outbreak of the virus in the **medium-term**, that Gloucestershire is well prepared to ensure that disabled people and people with mental health challenges can keep strong and retain their rights and choice about their lives
- help a comprehensive understanding within Gloucestershire about the circumstances which meant that disabled people, people with mental health challenges and communities kept strong throughout the coronavirus epidemic, in the hope that this will lead to **long-term** change in how communities, services (including statutory services) and individuals interact.

# RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



## Co-produced research and development plan

We consulted throughout June with people working for or associated with Pagan Hill Community Centre, Stroud Town Council, Stonehouse Town Council, GL11, Grace Network, Creative Sustainability, Climate Action Network, Stroud Coronavirus Community Response and Rodborough Community Mutual Aid Network and drew on additional sources including [We Were Built for This, Locality](#); [OUTBREAK MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR GLOUCESTERSHIRE, Gloucestershire County Council](#); [Mapping the impact of COVID-19 in Gloucestershire, Barnwood Trust](#).

Our principle of co-production allows for key questions, themes and premises to emerge from initial engagement with reference groups, with which to frame discussion and invite commentary from further stakeholders. These came about as follows:

### Emergent Key Questions:

- What was your experience of the last 2 months in terms of support, resources, skills?
- What do you think we need to consider in addition, going forward?
- What common things do all hubs need to be able to do and provide?
- What specialisms could be shared across and between the network?
- What does the geographical model look like?
- How will communication work?

### Emergent Themes

- Training and Skills
- Safeguarding, Health and Safety
- Finance
- Place
- Resources
- Communication

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## **Emergent premises**

- We need to create a place based model, where how we build resilience responds to the specific needs of a community, draws on local knowledge and supports hyper localization of mutual support, rather than a service driven model
- We need to reduce the workload and responsibilities for local groups and organisations, so where some functions can be locally resourced and run, others can be shared across the network, using existing tools, knowledge and skills in organisations able to take responsibility for them
- All types of organisations and groups can be part of the solution and must include volunteer networks and hyper local communities as well as public sector
- Connectivity and communication is essential and a small focus forum with clear communication pathways and regular virtual platform meetings is needed to ensure fair and efficient use of resources, inclusion and collaboration
- Mutual aid groups succeed if they respond intuitively and independently according to hyper local need and merge the role volunteer and beneficiary, as described in the [New Local Government Network](#) report

There followed a number of group meetings online, one to one interviews and written responses. We collated issues and then discussed solutions. Further research and discussion led to recommendations and a suite of practical tools to be identified, at varying stages of development and implementation by stakeholders.

## **Issues, needs and learning identified**

### **Training and Skills**

- Volunteers need more support and clear boundaries and communication lines to share issues and get advice, more practical help and emotional support
- The expectation for volunteers to deliver all kinds of help is too great, where there should be signposting to professional help
- Volunteers need better training and support and in anticipation of issues arising rather than waiting until the issues are happening, to a level at which they are comfortable and willing to participate
- GCC Hub made some difference but information needs to be clearer in terms of who is doing what, where and for whom.
- So much repetition of work done to set up training and communication lines, wasting resources and energy
- Those who are new to asking for help are likely to be missed and different ways to reach people are needed – through GPs, Schools, street by street – and include those dealing with severe domestic violence, mental health and alcohol related issues.
- Adapting long term needs to include better access to digital and IT resources for the most vulnerable people, and including older people
- Communities need be facilitated and empowered to grow their connections, capacity and resources, and ground up resilience and supported to do so with resources

### **Safeguarding, Health and Safety**

- Information about vulnerable people and specific problems needs to come from SDC more consistently
- Clear guidance on safe practice with handling materials, masks and gloves
- Clearer guidance for those needing support on how to safely accept that support
- Reaching hard to reach and vulnerable groups requires specialised person beyond volunteer capacity, and volunteers are being put in potentially difficult situations
- Efficient data management systems that work in circumstances involving recruitment and management of large numbers of local volunteers, and that support rapid responses to crisis, are needed

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- Volunteers can be vulnerable themselves and need safeguarding

### **Finance and money**

- Grant applications in the pipeline withdrawn before alternative approaches to funding were defined as emergency funding only
- Community groups inexperienced at funding applications – where to look, how to apply and how to administer
- Small VCSEs with limited personnel capacity to turn around on new emergency grants, combined with loss of core funding overnight making for a patchy response across the sector
- Volunteers unsure about handling other people's money, and orgs nervous too, both physically and in terms of safeguarding
- Need for emergency funds at hyper local level, very unequal access by community groups on the ground
- Need for groups to quickly receive and access funds given, with least possible resistance and for financial resources to be distributed fairly and where needed the most

### **Places**

- Each local place will have their own trusted organization to hold a central role, town/parish council or VCSE organisation, but some will have neither and need to be identified
- Communities need open, welcoming and inclusive physical spaces in their place
- Physical places are necessary for communities to come together over a range of issues and needs, to generate new ideas and pool resources – known as 'sticky places'
- Need to be able to respond fluidly but within a framework designed for the local community as it exists in reality, not one size fits all
- Issues that are potential or growing in specific localities need mitigation plans and should receive a special focus
- Safe storage for supplies and distribution points needed

### **Resourcing**

- Many groups and organisations did not have what was needed in place to step up quickly to the challenge – a website, someone to do the work, IT equipment and access to good software, and reliable systems
- Funding to support emergency work, whilst available, required knowledge, connectivity and capacity to secure, a particular challenge for small hyper localized groups
- Information on what was available in terms of support and referrals came thick and fast from a wide range of sources, was inconsistently received and understood
- The distribution of resources in terms of attention given to specific groups and places was inconsistent, leaving gaps in provision, and left many without the support they needed from the start or vulnerable to being missed altogether

### **Communication**

- IT and access to the internet is not available to everyone
- Process of making and receiving referrals needs to be clearer, systems of communication are varied and many, and referrals to local organisations rather than NHS needs to increase
- Service providers need to work together to address need more geographically, rather than by issue across the county.
- The need to communicate with everyone, particularly the most vulnerable, requires multiple forms of communication
- Access to services needs to be made easier and for more people with new issues, alongside better understanding of how people will ask for and receive help

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- The role of parish and town councils in supporting community resilience needs to grow and the role of the District Council in tackling local issues needs to be clearer and more robust

## Complementary research

The county council outbreak management plan states ‘it is important to recognise the role of elected members in all three tiers of local government and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector in helping to respond in to cases and in the event of an outbreak’. However, there is no indication where the VCSE sector fits in to the plan.

The key challenges identified in the document are as follows:

- The unknown demand for urgent food and medical supplies that may fluctuate in scale at any given time based on the number of outbreaks and specific setting type
- Providing urgent food supplies on the weekends to homelessness settings
- The reduced volunteer pool as many return to work and life as usual though the volunteer pool is still relatively large at present
- How to factor in decommissioning of food distribution parcels and assess what arrangements need to be put in place instead
- Exercise to understand what level of demand the current processes and resources could cope with, and the level of demand that would begin to strain the system

The research done by Locality, *How community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis – and how we can build a better future*, entirely concurs with our findings and discussion points. They report that

- Existing social infrastructure has been vital to the crisis response
- Well-functioning local systems have emerged in the heat of the crisis
- The role of community organisations as “cogs of connection” has been strengthened
- Community organisations have adapted at pace – but need support to meet the challenges of the future

They also describe the need for Community based organisations to be embedded in a plan because they can respond and mobilise immediately to crisis, have deep knowledge of and existing relationships with their community and target interest groups, are trusted sources of support and information in their local place and can respond creatively and appropriately to challenges and needs, new barriers and problems arising, in specific cultural, social and geographical contexts. We look forward to adding to our learning to the research done by Barnwood on these lines.

How these and other recommendations align with responding to a wider range of crises, in particular climate change - flooding, drought, heat impact, disruption of food supplies – merits further research. The Ipsos Publication [Climate Change and Coronavirus](#), proposes that while the connections are complex there is a great deal of pertinent learning taking place.

## Recommendations

**There are two levels of functions needed to create a resilient and sustainable emergency response:**

1. Area network functions allocated to specific hubs according to a hub’s capacity, skills, current knowledge and existing resources, that will be shared and supported across the network by leads in each expertise
2. Localised functions developed by network together, embedded in each hub according to local identity and specific issues including geography, and working directly with other local stakeholders to support their communities

There is a need to understand the geographic scope of each hub. We have identified the 5 phases of development of a community hub, with GL11 in phase 5 as the model for an Area Network Hub. We propose an analysis of the Know

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Your Patch Network using the 5 phases of development as a questionnaire, with a view to mapping existing capacity, potential hubs and areas needing development.

### **1. Area network functions based within a hub according to capacity, skills, current knowledge and existing resources, to share across the network**

- **Fiscal Host:** Access to an open platform to support small unaffiliated groups to control funds, enabling transparency on expenditure and easy reimbursement to volunteers
- **Gloucestershire Funders Group:** facilitating distribution of funds quickly and fairly, an immediate blanket emergency fund recommended, with joined up thinking on further applications and funds to support the network
- **Safeguarding Lead:** The network has access to a designated safeguarding lead and technical specialist building confidence across the network and access to supportive information and safe processes.
- **Policy and Procedures Lead:** assimilating national and regional advice, and recommending amendments to local area policies and procedures, such as Health and Safety, GDPR and Safeguarding that apply to new and emerging circumstances
- **DBS Lead:** designated DBS processor with no cost fast track provision for new volunteers
- **Volunteer Recruitment, Training and Management Lead:** expertise on recruitment procedures, training and management tools, and supporting best practice volunteering
- **Data Management:** open source data management system developed for use across the network increasing efficiency through linked tracking systems that support area hub. System developed based existing GL11 system and adapted for a range of scales
- **Transport and Distribution lead:** to maximise efficiency of delivery and distribution of resources particularly food and essential goods, support individuals with travel planning and transport
- **Health and Wellbeing lead:** designated specialist in mental health support, with knowledge of referral process and wide range of provision and providers for all mental health needs
- **Communications lead:** to continually develop and maintain different forms of communicating information, taking into account IT literacy, literacy, language, sensory impairment, preferences

### **2. Localised functions embedded in each hub, providing community-based response**

- **A physical place that is trusted and known** as the point of contact in a local area, providing a warm welcome and giving the community a sense of belonging and ownership
- **Located with good public transport connections**
- **Provides a listening service** backed up with signposting knowledge and a person-centered approach
- **Has extensive knowledge of local services,** signposting and accepting referrals, supporting individuals to access what they need in terms of resources, information and specialist help
- **Has clear communication pathways** to GCC Hub and Stroud District Council, their local area Know Your Patch network, Community Groups and street representatives, local area social prescribers, schools, GP's and Community Police.
- **Provides diverse forms of communication** with careful consideration for IT literacy, tools and access to the internet.
- **Has a good understanding of inclusion,** specific skills and resources that help everyone overcome physical, social and emotional barriers to accessing what they need, with particular attention to supporting initial steps and people with complex barriers to inclusion
- **Has best practice safeguarding protocols in place,** with clarity regarding roles, responsibility, and procedure for staff, volunteers and community members, and that protect all stakeholders
- **Has a volunteer management system** that shares reliable and current information across the team

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- **Has comprehensive understanding of referral systems** and pathways to specialist advice
- **Provides public access to the internet** including devices available for use
- **Links with their local area food bank and food providers** including producers and commercial outlets, food parcel providers and with local schools. Some hubs may have storage or a café, community fridge or space to support food bank and other food collections and direct provisioning.
- **Supports their local stakeholders and communities to access all the specialist provision shared by the network:**
  - Fiscal Hosting
  - Funding
  - Safeguarding support
  - Policies and Procedures
  - DBS applications
  - Volunteer Recruitment and Management best practice
  - Data Management tools
  - Transport and Distribution intel
  - Health and Wellbeing provision
  - Communication tools
- **Makes training available for volunteers and staff** at local area hubs
  - Mental Health First Aid
  - Safeguarding
  - Sensitive Data Handling
  - Volunteer Management System
  - Listening
  - Making and accepting referrals and signposting
  - Network functioning and contacts
  - Communication
  - Inclusion and participation
  - Food handling
  - Money handling

We entirely concur with Locality’s conclusion that ‘The committed and agile way communities have responded to the coronavirus crisis points the way to a new future that’s built around community power. But to be truly transformative, policymakers need to catch up with the innovation that’s happening locally - and help embed it as the “new normal” as we emerge from the crisis.’ Their recommendations to support a proposal such as this one for Stroud District include embedding procurement flexibility introduced since lockdown and supporting partnership working and shifting from competitive tendering to community collaboration; provide funding to protect, strengthen and grow existing community organisations and mutual aid groups. In addition, they propose community ownership funds and economic development funds led by the sector.

The same strategic approach and response is equally applicable to other emergencies, particularly climate change, and a long-term support package to maintain and enhance a system once it is established would be astute.

## Next Steps

1. We are inviting stakeholders to add any issues or commentary, feedback on the recommendations and take a shared responsibility for the draft plan going forward.

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2. To map the local area networks and invite organisations to consider an Area Hub role, appendix A
3. To finalise a toolkit that meets the practical need for area hub resources and invite organisations to identify a specialism that they could potentially adopt and develop, appendix B.
4. To finalise a phased development approach and invite organisations to feedback on the process we have outlined, appendix C.
5. Further research in to the specific barriers for people and communities to access institutions that hold resources and control over them.

Please contact Anna Bonallack, CEO

E: [anna@cscic.org](mailto:anna@cscic.org) M: 07734086879

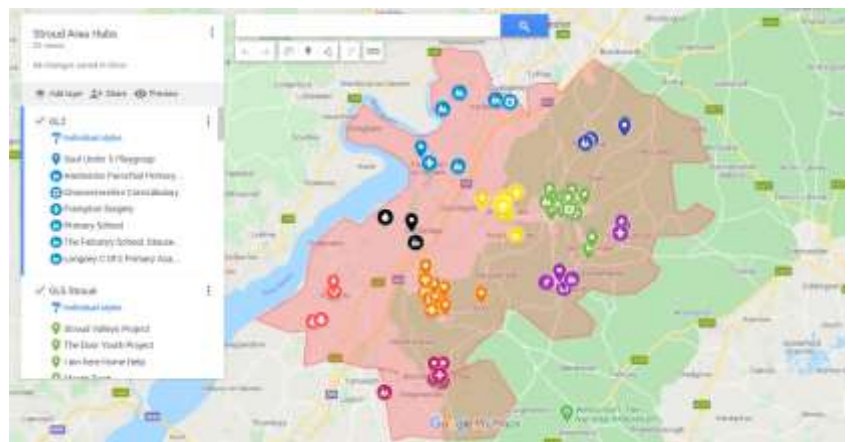
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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Mapping local area networks - Ongoing process

[Live Link](#)



### Appendix B Toolkits - *In development best practice examples identified*

#### 1. Training and Skills

Inclusion Gloucestershire

- Easy Read Courses
- Inclusion training
- Safeguarding level 1 and 2
- Mental Health First Aid

#### 2. Communications

[Principles of Inclusive Communication toolkit:](#)

[EFDS Guide](#)

#### 3. Travel Planning

[Think Travel GCC Toolkit](#)

#### 4. Volunteers

[GL11 training pack](#)

[GL11 coordinator guide](#)

#### 5. Community Resilience Building Projects

Participatory City Foundation's ['Every One Every Day'](#)

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## Appendix C

### Localised Functions for Stroud Area Hubs - Phased Development

