We are Communities Inc - a social enterprise passionate about tackling inequalities faced by the most disadvantaged groups.

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

COMMUNITY FUND

Building Stronger Communities is a project that empowers people to overcome discrimination by building their skills to better support and understand each other. We want to build resilience within the communities affected by hate so that they are part of the solution in addressing the decline of community cohesion.

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Sharing the load: Community Development during COVID-19.

Communities Inc

On 23 March 2020, the UK went into lockdown to limit the spread of COVID-19. Suddenly our lives were transformed and many people began to work from home, were furloughed, or lost their jobs.

For those organisations on the frontline, delivering services became even more challenging as they attempted to navigate ever-changing rules and restrictions. Some organisations had to make painful decisions to close, but those who could adapt achieved amazing work within an atmosphere of tremendous community spirit.

During this challenging time, we ran two dialogues to enable community organisations to share and learn from each other's experiences and to discuss how we can take these lessons forward.

In the first dialogue, we discussed issues that community organisations are facing and explored solutions. In the second, three speakers discussed how their organisation adapted to COVID-19. These speakers included:

Dr Irfan Malik: local GP and member of Ahmadiyya Muslim Association.

Adam Baker: Director of Refugee Roots

Cllr Sajid Mohammed: Co-founder and Director of Himmah.

Community organisations have worked extremely hard to adapt and provide vital services to the community and the pandemic has highlighted the difference it makes when we all work together. But the fight is not over. As lockdown eases, new and previously suppressed problems will continue to surface and we will need to carry on adapting as we go. We need to ensure the lessons we've already learnt are not lost - that they continue to inform and inspire the work we do.

We have created this Dialogue Debrief to share the information and advice that we gathered during these discussions, in the hopes that it will also support your organisation's efforts to grow and adapt to the challenges we face in this pandemic.

Key issues:

• **Accessibility:** Online conferencing and meeting platforms have become crucial to continue working. Although this allows people to join in from further afield, it alienates people who do not have access to technology, creating information bubbles.

• **Community tensions:** There has been an increase in COVID-19-related fake news and hate. Chinese and East Asian communities are particularly affected with a 21% increase in hate crime carried out against them.

• **Scamming:** As services became disrupted, scammers increasingly targeted vulnerable adults.

• **Mental Health:** Many people are experiencing unprecedented levels of isolation and struggling with mental health issues. Many have not been able to access support, as many mental health services are on hold.

• **Volunteer numbers:** Students going back home and others shielding caused volunteer numbers to drop at first. Thankfully many others offered to volunteer due to changed arrangements or a desire to contribute.

Recommendations:

• **It is crucial to assess and adapt early, carry out risk assessments, and reevaluate effectiveness.** Actions include; frequent communication between staff, establishing need and applying for appropriate funding, advertising for new recruits.

• **Organisations need to listen and frequently communicate** with service users about their needs, and with other organisations to avoid duplication and concentrate effort where it is needed most.

• **Take calculated risks to deliver services more effectively.** That includes working with emerging and relatively unknown organisations, a quick adaptation of services to alternative technologies, like virtual classes etc.

• **Utilise existing networks** such as mutual aid or community groups, do-it.org or charity jobs websites to find volunteers and extra help.

Good practice:

• **Refugee Roots** - a charity that helps asylum seekers and refugees build a new life in the UK - spoke to their service users' about their needs at the beginning of lockdown, secured funding and created a response. They set up an online/phone befriending service and have been sending out art boxes to create art at home. They continued their English classes online, by phone and post. They have been signposting participants to help and providing supplies through food banks. As students relocated and people started shielding, Refugee Roots lost many volunteers. Still, they managed to effectively recruit new volunteers online, often from outside of the local area, which would not have happened before the lockdown.

• **Himmah** - an initiative tackling poverty, racism and social exclusion - in early March explored which of their services added the most value to the city and focused their efforts on the food bank. Their 100% donations model wasn't applicable anymore, and they quickly had to switch to 100% purchasing while navigating purchase limits. Volunteers made frequent shopping trips and fundraised for the cause. They had to do service reviews every 12-24hrs as opposed to every six months and increased communication with beneficiaries and partners. They took calculated risks and began working with new partners to be able to help more people. They approached restaurants to create an open kitchen, where Himmah provided ingredients, then Nottingham Cars delivered most of the hot meals. They also started adding hate crime awareness resources provided by Communities Inc to their parcels.

• **Dr Irfan Malik - Elmswood Surgery** has found lockdown challenging. Things were changing very quickly, and guidance wasn't always coming through. They lost more than half of the staff at some points due to possible COVID-19 symptoms. They decided to go to a phone triage system but never closed the doors as other services still took place at the centre. Their Patient Participation Group moved online. Through Nottingham COVID-19 Mutual Aid Facebook group, they recruited new receptionists and put a call-out for PPE for other primary care services and care homes, which people quickly produced.

• **Notts Police, Nottingham City Council and Communities Inc** have produced a COVID-19 hate crime awareness campaign targeted at Chinese and East Asian communities. Resources in several languages are shared both on and offline.