



Community Partnership: the Key to Building Back Better Together

Reflections and Recommendations for Government and Funders

“Communities and COVID” captures uplifting accounts of how grassroots groups in Northern Ireland have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also offers valuable pointers to government and funders on how to better support and partner with communities to build back better together.

Reflecting on the pandemic crisis, this is what we have heard and learned from people across communities.

[Check out their stories including further analysis of what people said and short film here].

What worked well in our Communities?

Ahead of the game

Local knowledge, connections and credibility as a trusted point of contact enabled community leaders to quickly get organised and deliver volunteers and support on the ground.

Nimble response

Communities were agile and hugely creative in their response to meeting the diversity of those most in need in their local areas. They provided basic essentials, practical support, much-needed connections to households, young people, migrant communities and more. Clear and trustworthy information was collated and provided to help dispel fears and misinformation.

Essential workers

As people went into lock-down, community support opened up and became even more visible to local people. Community activists and volunteers assumed their role as essential workers with courage, resolve and solidarity in the face of fear, uncertainty and unprecedented need.

Common cause

Peacebuilding and reconciliation work has taught us that there are more things that we have in common, than divide us. The goodwill and established relationships within and across communities were leveraged to share information, pool resources and solve problems together.

Partnership support

Flexibility and collaborative working between government, funders and communities were essential to empowering communities to respond effectively as the crisis took hold. Many government departments, service providers and funding bodies were purposeful and timely in supporting community efforts to get the right resources on the ground to respond to the different needs of local people identified by community leaders.

What got in the way of the Community Response?

Funding conundrum

Historical community sector funding issues impeded the community's ability to respond to the immediacy of the pandemic crisis. Year-to-year budgets, short-term contracts, competitive tendering and multiple funding sources have weakened the community infrastructure that is needed on any given day, and especially in times of crisis.

Frustrated efforts

Community responses were sometimes delayed and often hamstrung by unnecessary bureaucracy, inflexibility in redirecting resources, lack of clear information and onerous requirements placed on them by some government bodies and funders in a changing and uncertain context.

Gravity of need

In many ways, the deep-seated issues and service support needs that community and outreach workers faced during the crisis already existed around mental health, youth detachment, homelessness, financial hardship, domestic violence, racism, sectarianism, isolation. However, people working on the ground were shocked and overwhelmed by the sheer depth of unmet need and vulnerability that the crisis exposed across the communities, and with particular groups including the young, migrants, older people, the unemployed and women.

What practical steps can Government and Funders take?

From before and during this crisis, the pivotal role that communities play in identifying and responding to the diverse needs of local people has been recognised by government and funders. There are some strategic and practical steps that government and funders can take to strengthen this community collaboration, empowerment and response. Put simply, to build back better together.

Community investment

Strategic and collaborative approach by government and funders to increasing investment in community infrastructure and groups, that enables long-term planning to build community wellbeing, inclusion and reconciliation. Reviewing funding models that move away from contracting and tendering culture to supporting core costs and sustainability. Investing in building and strengthening community leadership, capacity and resilience.

Trusted partnership

Open engagement and collaborative working between government, statutory bodies and communities.

Better together

Creating the space to listen and learn, share and exchange information, crack hard problems, recognise and celebrate achievements, encourage and show solidarity.

Focusing resources on targeting need and addressing inequality

Investing in and working alongside communities to tackle the root causes of social need and inequalities, and setting and meeting clear and measurable targets to address these. Informed by a honed understanding of the diverse and specific needs of local areas, and supportive of innovative solutions and approaches.

Clear the barriers

Intentionality to empower communities and find the right balance between accountability and trust. Some things government and funders could do: take away unnecessary bureaucracy and paperwork, simplify and streamline procurement and tendering, find ways to share information to better support community response.