

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

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## Introduction:

The Community and Third Sector response to the COVID19 Crisis has been well documented and recorded as having made a vital contribution to the reduction in the immediate damage impact of the pandemic. Community groups and organisations supported communities especially the isolated and vulnerable at a level the Public sector could not have achieved alone. This demonstrates better than ever before, the power of co-working.

Community participation has been essential in the collective response to the emergency caused by COVID19 and the ongoing crisis. This ranges from raising understanding of compliance with 'Lockdown' and the continued restrictions to the emergence of community run support services including providing food, pastoral support, assistance with shopping, collecting prescriptions and befriending. These vital services have been delivering outcomes around health and wellbeing and mental health.

It has been widely acknowledged that the impact of this pandemic will result in greater numbers of the population experiencing mental health issues. Issues beyond anxiety and worry for the future, raised stress levels and boredom. Good mental health has strong links to good physical health. These factors are proven to help to sustain positive social and economic outcomes for individuals and society.

Times of crisis often offer the opportunity for change. If we are to look at a fairer society and consider how we build back better, we will start to look at the systems and approaches and whether they will be receptive to proposals for reform and transformation. What approaches or changes should we be looking to adopt in the face of creating more equitable service delivery?

One stark observation made of the response to the crisis is that 'one size does not fit all'. Inequalities which have remained largely hidden within some communities have emerged during the pandemic and the need for an equitable response has become evident as the months have rolled on. At the time of writing this paper, there is an emerging need to examine the current response. It is a fluid situation and the "all hands to the pumps" community response to the emergency cannot be sustained. This topical repair to fundamental causes of need cannot be considered a long-term solution. There is work required to address root causes of food poverty, inequalities, and access to services.

This paper is intended to explore the route to recovery to build back better to create a fairer society and how community participation could be key to making the positive changes we want to see.

## Why Community Participation in the Recovery Phase (and Beyond)

There are still many questions that cannot be answered regarding the future as globally we are still in the grip of the pandemic and communities are still actively responding and reacting to the immediate need. However, thought needs to be given to the way forward

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

and how this experience will inform approaches which will make for a more robust and resilient society committed to fairness and positive change.

It is important that communities are included in the design and implementation of programmes and services to ensure ownership over the recovery process. That same commitment which has been seen in the collective response.

No public agency can know as much about the needs of a community, as that community itself. The challenge is in harvesting it accurately and inclusively, and ensuring communities have full and accurate information in order to help ideas for workable solutions grow.

Furthermore, participation has a positive psychological effect in overcoming trauma. COVID19 impacted all our lives to varying degrees; the mental health impacts will be felt in months to come; economic impacts for years to come. Considering this anticipated increase in mental health related issues, taking an inclusive and participatory approach could be instrumental in reducing the potential impact.

Experience has shown, where community involvement has been encouraged in areas encountering natural disasters, it can produce wide-ranging advantages. The main principles according to the World Health Organization are:

- Communities can and should determine their own priorities when faced with challenges
- Communities have an enormous depth and breadth of collective experience and knowledge in a community which can be built upon to bring about positive change and improvements
- When communities understand problems, they will more readily act to solve them
- Communities solve their own problems best in a participatory group process.

Participation is not a quick fix solution. There are clear principles but not a rigid ideology which can be complex and full of challenges. Any approaches must remain flexible, and sensitive to the local context. Just as with the response, a 'one size fits all' model will not produce an equitable society.

## Exploring the Steps

Effective processes for community participation are hard to establish precipitously. Meaningful relationships between stakeholders should be developed to ensure sustainable and inclusive participation. At a local level, the Local Authority's flexible reaction to support the community response has fostered stronger relationships between the two sectors. This will play a major part in the recovery phase if that trust is nurtured.

As we explore the steps of the Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase, it is apparent that the intention will be to continue a road already identified prior to COVID19. The Local Governance Review and The Community Empowerment Act (2015) have already paved a way through to the Third Sector playing a major role in our place; economically, environmentally, culturally, and socially. We now have the opportunity to expedite the vision in the context of the pandemic and the community response to the

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

emergency. That response, as previously noted, made a massive impact in limiting the immediate damage of the crisis, which the Public Sector acknowledges, they could not have achieved alone. This overwhelming sense of citizenship in a time of community need has the potential to help shape a new way forward in perhaps less urgent but equally challenging and difficult circumstances as we take the cautious steps into rebuilding what has been lost over the past few months. This situation offers a unique opportunity to look at what regrowth might look like. There are many innovative approaches up for consideration including concepts such as Degrowth, Community Wealth, and Local Economics. This dialogue is providing fertile ground to grow an audience more open to Community Participation.

In Step One and Step Three we emphasise essential meaningful dialogue and nurturing a climate of confidence which is more than tokenism. Successful community participation can only work if Community, or Third Sector and Public Sector work together as a partnership of equals. The approach needs to be one of working with rather than doing to communities.

The steps are not unfamiliar to those of us working towards realising the vision set out in the Community Empowerment Act (2015), but they are so pertinent now in terms of dealing with the budgetary challenges ahead.

The consequences of the financial costs of the pandemic are going to impact all three sectors hard over the coming months, if not years. This is the time to consider different approaches including those which support and enable high quality collaboration between communities/Third Sector and the Public Sector to improve the design and delivery of public services to maximise the impact of public investment.

When faced with the inevitable deficits in budgets, it is easy to see difficult decisions coming with cuts and disposals of assets to close the financial hole. It is hoped there will be consideration given to how working in collaboration with different sectors will stem some of the bleeding. We have witnessed the resilience and lead taken by many of our communities to address the needs of people affected by self-isolation, financial hardship, food poverty, mental health and wellbeing and other challenges and this has reduced the immediate damage from COVID19. This citizenship has the potential to find innovative and creative solutions in recovery and to continue to build community capacity which will help our places thrive once again. We are already seeing legacies of desires and willingness to continue community initiatives, such as community larders, where the crisis has brought communities together and have perhaps reached those who were in need prior to the pandemic. It is important that we foster this mood and build back a better and more equitable society which embraces and nurtures this social conscience.

## Step One

### Effective and Inclusive Community Engagement

Public Bodies perhaps need to enter into meaningful dialogue with communities and the Third Sector. This should move beyond simply gathering views and instead build through dialogue and deliberation to fully codesign responses.

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

We need to ensure equalities are being met and that support is not disadvantaging those furthest away from engaging. Experience has shown that local participation can often be captured by local elites and the vulnerable left out of the process. With the potential for more of the population facing economic hardship and security and other issues surrounding mental health, digital exclusion, social isolation and loneliness, these voices need to be heard. Spaces are required to make it easy for people to participate on their own terms.

If we were better positioned in progressing the idea of mainstreaming Participatory Budgeting, we could respond to emerging opportunities that lie ahead to build community resilience through PB. Can PB be relevant at this time?

Early attempts at PB at a local level have been concentrated on more of a small grant giving exercise in an attempt to help communities understand the challenges around making difficult decisions. Unfortunately, the real ideology of PB may have been lost through this process as the small budgets on offer have not allowed for great change to be achieved and diminished the perception of what this approach could do if mainstreamed. Perhaps this is an approach which requires revisiting especially as public services will be cut or downsized due to efficiencies forced by restricted budgets.

During this pandemic, the government has distributed millions of pounds in relief efforts. The approach taken with some of the government funding appointing Anchor Third Sector Organisations has done much to ensure the funds have reached grass roots organisations and this has proven a great demonstration of the value placed on the work of these communities. We now need to strengthen democracy, to ensure future funding is allocated equitably and democratically, and to guarantee local communities, especially our most marginalised and vulnerable populations, have a say in these decisions that will greatly affect them. On a personal level, at times during this crisis, many of us will have felt isolated and helpless; people need a way to feel connection and a sense of control. Participatory budgeting offers both.

We still have work to do regarding PB but there is still scope to bring communities into the conversation. Communities need to know their voices will be included in the approach for recovery. This must be significant and open to divergent views. We are and will continue to be living in unprecedented times and perhaps extraordinary approaches and solutions will see us through.

## Step Two

### **Building Strong Communities – Commitment to Sustainable Resourcing and Support of Anchor Organisations**

Anchor organisations are vital in a strong community armoury. Rural Partnerships, Development Trusts, TSIs and other support organisations are the wind beneath the wings of many a great project, initiative, or group. Often this work is hidden so as not to not take credit for what communities achieve. As a result, anchor organisations may not receive the recognition for the real difference they make. In essence without that helping hand, point of contact, experience of others that have tried it before many community initiatives may not be realised.

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

As the level of local action in response to the crisis increased, (groups stepping up and looking out for their own communities) anchor organisations along with partners extended practical support and shared vital information, which enabled communities to deliver support to those in need. There will be a need to harness this community spirit and innovation to help our groups rebuild, albeit on a slightly different landscape, when we emerge from this crisis

There is a need to support the growth of strong communities, supporting sustainability, resilience, and enterprise. To realise and enhance the support of anchor organisations to ensure that vital resource is readily available.

Anchor organisations can be the conduit to develop and support mutual understanding and respectful relationships between sectors. They work to develop social capital – supporting the growth of effective relationships within community groups, between communities and between communities and external agencies.

## Step Three

### Collaboration – Co Design, Co-Production

Policy developments in recent years have further fixed co-production in Scotland's policy landscape. The Christie Commission states that public services need to be “built around people and communities, their needs, aspirations, capacities and skills, and work to build up their autonomy and resilience...”

Co-design provides a basis for transformational approaches and provides a commitment to collaborate not just between services, but to bring services together. If public service agencies become catalysts and facilitators there is scope to create equitable and effective partnerships to radically change the way public services are planned and delivered.

There are opportunities across all three sectors, that is Public, Third and Private, to coproduce services to offer the best value for money, quality of service through knowledge of “lived experience” and innovation. This is especially prevalent across rural areas where communities and businesses can be one and the same, where there are no clear demarcation lines between the two sectors as the next-door neighbour could be one of the local businesses.

Communication is a large factor when considering the practicalities of co-production. We need to ask; How will the community learn about decision making opportunities? What is the quality of communication? Is genuine dialogue being achieved? Are all members of society being reached? Is consultation sincere, managing expectations, focused and realistic? How do we identify the local need? Where there's rejection, are the reasons explained? The rurality and geography of the area are factors for consideration. Do communities have the capacity to take on more local activity and services and where there is a need to build social capital is there the level of support available? How will information be shared and what are the logistics around potential redistribution of resources? Co-production looks to the assets of people with lived experience, how can they be

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

supported to participate? The underlying factor is the need for mutual trust to be in place. Effective and transparent communication could foster more confident relationships.

The conditions which are required for power to be devolved to people from a local authority and/or professionals needs much consideration. There is a need for a change in the way of thinking. Nurturing a climate of confidence with supported community members who have the capacity to be actively involved in the co-productive delivery of public services with a local authority confident enough to let go of the need to be in control. Communities have much to bring to services, but there are questions as to whether they have time and other resources. Also, overcoming the suspicion that working with volunteers is considered a “free option” and how can equity be achieved in such relationships. Mechanisms to ensure advocacy on behalf of vulnerable groups need to be established. There are challenges in reaching some members of the community and effective engagement. The burden of making difficult decisions, how can communities be supported and prepared to cope with such eventualities?

Third Sector Organisations wishing to embrace opportunities for co-design and co-production will have an obligation to step up and be able to demonstrate robust processes and a commitment to fully engage with user groups. This representation of user views cannot be assumed. If innovative approaches are to work, there needs to be a more sophisticated relationship between the sectors.

Whilst not being a straight and easy road ahead, if there is scope to improve the design and delivery of public services whilst maximising the impact of public investment, the time is now.

## Step Four

### Trust in Community Ownership of Assets and Cooperative Enterprise

At a time when fiscal challenges are great, it is understandable that public assets may be considered a potential income source in the short term. However, the long-term benefits of Community Ownership of Assets are well placed to facilitate Community Participation. Benefits highlighted through the Community Ownership Support Service (COSS) include:

- Delivering Social & Economic Purpose
- Changing Attitudes and Relationships; increasing Community Participation
- Moving towards financial self-sufficiency
- Building organisational sustainability

Further consideration has to be made into identifying the correct mode of service delivery. Explore all forms of asset ownership i.e. leases, management agreements, ownership, coproduction of service alongside cooperative working and enterprise.

Innovative and ambitious ideas inevitably hold risks which become barriers to progress. The challenge is looking beyond the risk and what mitigation can be explored to provide the chance of success. The key is, as we explore in Step Five, is in being prepared to think

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

and do differently. The potential for longer term return on investment through the community ownership of assets has yet to be fully realised in terms of social, environmental, and economic terms. Unlocking this potential will increase community participation in making the positive changes we want to see, now, more than ever.

## Step Five

**Be prepared to think and do things differently – Public Services can be shared to shape, innovate, deliver, and add value.**

Christie Commission – *“innovate, reshape and add value through public services. Work together to address gaps whilst realising the strain public sector budgets are under, and the flexibility (and sometimes savings) that community led, and community owned delivery can bring.”*

This needs to come from a position which recognises that citizens and communities are the lifeblood of our place and that engaged and active communities are not a by-product of a successful place but a prerequisite for its success. It is the community and voluntary activity of local people which builds sustainable and resilient communities. Policies need to support and build on this. Community participation can offer services which are creative and community led, providing added value. Applying this approach to some public services could shape, innovate and deliver outcomes with added value.

The need to be prepared to think and do things differently suggests a change in approach from Public bodies but it is important to ensure the same is expected of the Third Sector. It is a mistake to believe that if it is community it is inherently good or if it is Third Sector it must be better. As within any industry the Third Sector has some remarkable organisations and some that are not so strong or not yet ready. If Third Sector Organisations wish to be taken seriously as an equal credible partner, it is important they are prepared and able to stand up to scrutiny.

Third Sector Organisations are keen to co-produce services because they are in touch with our communities. There is an assumption that TSOs can be utilised effectively for service user engagement. They must be ready to stand up to examination and be able to demonstrate meaningful service user inclusion. If we want to see the Third Sector contribute to the delivery of services at a time of decreasing public funding and increasing demand, TSOs should be focusing internally on improving their own processes and procedures as well as externally improving our partnership and collaborative working to ensure we are making best use of all resources and delivering the best outcomes for our communities.

## Conclusion

As we stated earlier in this document, Community Participation is not a quick fix but if we are looking to build back better and create a fairer and more equitable place, then it is vital that the recovery phase involves the community in the process. The following steps

# The Route Map for Community Participation in the Recovery Phase

are an approach which is continuing on the road we already started prior to COVID19 however, in the context of recovery they are even more relevant.

- **Step One - Effective and Inclusive Community Engagement**  
Create spaces where people can take part on their own terms; move beyond simply gathering views and instead build dialogue and reflection to genuinely co-design responses
- **Step Two - Building Strong Communities – Commitment to Sustainable Resourcing and Support of Anchor Organisations**  
To support the growth of strong communities, that is; supporting sustainability, resilience, and enterprise; the support of anchor organisations is essential to realise and enhance organisations and ensure that vital resource is readily available.
- **Step Three - Collaboration – Co Design, Co-Production**  
Invest in the conditions required to facilitate the delivery of services informed by lived experience and innovation.
- **Step Four - Trust in Community Ownership of Assets and Cooperative Enterprise**  
Changes in approach to risk could unlock potential social, environmental and economic outcomes.
- **Step Five - Be prepared to think and do things differently – Public Services can be shared to shape, innovate, deliver, and add value.**  
It is the community and voluntary activity of local people which builds sustainable and resilient communities. Community participation can offer services which are creative and community led providing added value. Changes in approach could produce policies to support and build on this.