

Community Building in a Pandemic & Beyond: What We Have Observed & Learned - June 2022

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Wellbeing Exeter Community Builders have worked at a neighbourhood level in the city for five and a half years, and in every ward for the last three. The role of the Community Builders is to talk to residents about what they love about where they live, and what they would like to take action to change, and to support them to do this. The aim is to help enable thriving, inclusive local communities that make the most of what they've got, come together to make things better, and welcome everyone to join in.

This long-term perspective on community life up close puts the Builders in an excellent position to observe the changes the pandemic has produced at a local level, and to help us understand what the longer-term impact of this period might be for the way neighbours connect and take action together.

We've heard a lot recently about explosions in volunteering, new ways of connecting with neighbours, many more people working from home long-term. Are these changes temporary, or will some stick? What does all this mean for the communities we live in? In this report, we bring together what we have noticed over the last two or more years, and suggest what this might mean for the next two (or more).



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There is Local & There is Hyperlocal

Community Builders are intimately aware of the different areas within their patches – the complex micro-geographies of belonging. More than one Exeter ward, for example, consists of an original ‘village’ with more recent satellite developments, each with distinct identities. The pandemic has, in many instances, encouraged people to connect more intensively, or more systematically, with other residents in a much more immediate area – often a single street. There are many examples of WhatsApp groups relating to individual streets, apartment blocks or housing developments having been set up during the lockdown to provide practical and emotional support. It has been very handy to be able to ask a neighbour to collect a prescription, or to offer to lend a power tool, or just to share a joke.

Informal neighbourly groups like this are very different from the ‘traditional’ model of being active in the community – being a committee member for a community association for example, or even volunteering to help at a one-off event at a community centre. Builders have noted how many people have been involved in them who did not previously have much to do with their neighbours or community activity. Several people expressed enthusiasm for the way in which the pandemic appears to have given them ‘permission’ to take low-level neighbourly action of this kind.

Perhaps more important is the erosion of the idea that being involved with your community is about ‘helping people’. The common experience of the pandemic has in some contexts gone some way to replacing ‘helping’ with ‘mutuality’ – sharing resources, skills and capacity rather than inhabiting fixed roles as giver and receiver. This is not true universally, but where it is, it is potentially a more significant shift for the longer term than the much-heralded army of ‘volunteers’. One Community Builder, considering the longevity of some resident-led phone circles in his neighbourhood, notes: "It was surprising how many came forward wanting to 'do something good' by offering their time to chat with others, and the difference between that group of people and those who were actually looking to chat for their own wellbeing. The groups that lasted longest were the ones who felt everyone was getting an intrinsic value out of the phone calls themselves."



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“ *From all walks of life and of all ages we came together becoming a real community, in many ways a ‘family’. A family that included everyone involved: volunteers, customers and donors. We have all given and we have all received.*

Volunteer, St Katherine’s Priory Community Larder

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Informal links do not always last, nor should we expect them to. It can be tricky to maintain at the same level of intensity for long because it is built not on structures and organisations, but on interpersonal connection, which needs constant re-enacting and renewing. As time has gone on and restrictions have lifted, some of these groups have understandably become less active, but others have continued, shifting from crisis support to more generalised functions relating to local information, social connections and issues of concern.

“ *I came up with the idea at the beginning of lockdown and popped a message on the local FB St Thomas page to see if anyone wanted to join a street WhatsApp group so that we could look out for each other in times of need really. It’s been a fantastic way of getting to know our neighbours, some of whom have become friends since, and we all just seem to look out for each other and swap things we don’t need or provide meals to anyone wanting one that’s going spare, or giving away free veg from our allotments etc. It is something I’m sure we will continue for many years!*

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Often those groups that have lasted have developed an in-person aspect mixed with the online link. They seem overall to have been most successful when focusing on an extremely small area. At such an intimate scale though, they have the potential to feel invasive – WhatsApp groups make people’s phone numbers commonly available, and a hyperlocal focus means individuals’ home addresses are also not difficult to deduce.



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Opening up your life to others can sometimes be slightly in tension with personal privacy, and this can be uncomfortable for some. The more durable hyperlocal networks are often those which were founded not by an individual, but by a small group of people – even only two or three. This can shift the emphasis from a personal connection to a neighbourly one, and this is an important distinction for many.

One question for the future is what the longer-term legacy of these hyperlocal groups will be. Given that they tend to link people in similar accommodation, do they have the effect of connecting people with other people like themselves, rather than with others nearby with whom they may share less demographic common ground? In other words, can they actually have the paradoxical effect of making communities more insular, providing fewer opportunities for developing bridging social capital? Or are there ways in which these hyperlocal groups can form the building blocks of wider connections? An example might be the proliferation of neighbourhood free libraries in some parts of Exeter which, although independent of each other, do link together to coordinate events and are even reaching out to Libraries Unlimited. Can such groups, for example, take the initiative in reaching out to others? An ongoing source of tension in parts of Exeter – especially Duryard, around the University – is relationships between students and permanent residents. Perhaps locally connected groups of this kind can help mediate between different kinds of neighbours, to everyone's benefit.

Communications: It's a Mixed & Dynamic Picture

One of the most obvious ways in which community building has changed as a result of the pandemic is the ways in which Builders communicate with residents. Although all Exeter Community Builders used email newsletters and social media to an extent before Covid, the restrictions imposed by the lockdowns have forced some substantial changes. Previously, online communication supplemented in-person interaction as a way of sharing information about community activity, and linking together residents a Builder had met who shared common interests.



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In-person work would include attending group activities and pop-up listening events in public spaces, to get to know people locally and understand how to support their ideas. Under lockdown, electronic communication had to do all these jobs.

Builders have responded creatively, convening social Zoom sessions to bring people together, and finding ways to replicate the 'micro-connection' work of a nod and a smile in the street. One Builder described how he would send out birthday greetings to people he linked with on Facebook. Another explained how she made sure to update specific people on what was planned for the Zoom chat meetings. What was clear was that, while often these communications went unanswered at the time, and the Builder was left 'sending things into a void' and wondering how they were received, there was often indirect and after-the-fact feedback that assured them this effort was not in vain.

Builders have also noted how remote communications have transformed the potential for local organisations to link with others, and to reach out to the residents they work with. The Exwick Community Association held a very well-attended AGM on Zoom, which generated lots of ideas for future community activity.

Apple Hour

Some Exwick residents had wanted to organise an apple pressing event during the pandemic. After a discussion on Zoom they concluded it would be too difficult to manage safely due to Covid restrictions. They then decided to create an online apple event 'Apple Hour' – a fun, informal virtual afternoon tea with apple themed activities being shared and some apple jokes thrown in for good measure! Apple Hour was a great success. There was a variety of activities, crafts, jokes, stories, and an apple peeling competition. It was a relaxed, fun event with lots of interaction, and plenty of positive feedback. Following this event, residents were encouraged to organise a virtual Halloween Hour!



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Many Builders observe that virtual communication works best when it builds on and supports an existing in-person connection. This is as true as we move into a new phase with the pandemic as it was during the lockdown. As a result, Builders are looking towards a model of communication that continues to use a variety of methods going forward. It is recognised that different methods reach different groups of people, but also that a mix of methods helps support community activity in different ways.

Community Activity – Response, Pivot & Revival

Community Builders have been very well placed to observe the effect of the pandemic on regular community activity, and to assess the longer-term legacy of this interruption to business as usual.

The lockdown affected day-to-day operations for just about every community activity. Some groups chose to suspend operations completely, feeling either it was too challenging to reconfigure their activity for the changed conditions, or that people's attention was elsewhere. Others found ways to adapt their activity, either developing an online format or, when restrictions allowed, moving indoor activity outdoors or into socially distanced formats. Some have found that, while there was initial enthusiasm for 'remote' connection, this did not always last as Zoom fatigue set in and a recognition that there are some elements of community connection it is not possible to replicate online.

“ *I'm still able to work full time from home though and I'm finding being on Skype all day pretty draining, so I'm not sure how much spare energy I'll have to commit, but let me know what you're working on!*

Local responding to the possibility of setting up local response team (March 2020)

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A smaller number of community groups and organisations have pivoted their activity to meet the new needs of people within their community, for example a running group that volunteered to support vaccination efforts, or a fitness group who became involved in making deliveries to people who were self-isolating. It is interesting to think about what these organisations have in common.

What makes an organisation consider community need over its own initial interests and priorities? And to what use can the experience of doing this be put going forward? One such organisation's leader explained that this wasn't necessarily a conflict: their social mission was the most important thing, and exactly how they achieved that was less important. Groups with the confidence and agility to swivel like this in an emergency are also those that are more likely to be imaginative about how they achieve their aims, and open to new ideas the rest of the time. The experience of stepping up like this, whether dramatically changing course or rapidly expanding provision, is likely to be a valuable lesson for the future.

As we now move into a period where activity is less restricted and people and organisations are beginning to consider how best they can live with the virus, we have seen a revival of many pre-existing community activities. Some will simply pick up where they left off. Others will seize the opportunity for a rethink or a change of personnel – a number of organisations have reported long-standing volunteers have seen the break as the moment to step down.

Some have found it more difficult to revive: parent and toddler groups across the city have found this especially challenging as they are often parent-run, and the pre-pandemic leaders' children might now be school-age, with the usual succession and induction of new leaders having been interrupted by the hiatus. In some cases, especially more disadvantaged communities, it might be important to support 'gap-filling' groups quite deliberately, or to seek support from other neighbouring areas.



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Use of Green Space

With more limited options for lower-risk social interaction and exercise, and limits on travel to more remote locations, many people in Exeter have taken a second look at their local green spaces. Ludwell Valley Park, which adjoins Wonford, was not used by local residents as much as it could have been before the lockdown. It has been a revelation to some residents to walk in the space, and see their area, literally, from another angle. In Newcourt, a horticulturalist resident who was spending more time at home than usual spotted the potential for growing food in some of the less-loved small corners of green space in her area.

In other places, activities that had been conducted indoors relocated to the park with the result that they were more visible to other potential participants, without that potentially limiting obstacle of needing to step over the threshold to see what is happening. It's possibly wishful thinking, but it has been observed that the heavier use of green spaces, by a wider range of people, during the pandemic, has meant they are less attractive as locations for anti-social behaviour. Certainly, the importance of green space for personal wellbeing but also for community life, has been confirmed, and projects that were underway before the pandemic hit, such as the new community hub in Heavitree Pleasure Gardens, run by Parklife Heavitree, were welcomed all-the-more warmly on completion as a result.

Being confined to very local areas has encouraged people to explore lesser-known green spaces nearby instead of travelling to 'destination parks', and, in some cases, to hatch plans to improve 'the local offer', with campaigns to improve play equipment in unloved mini-playgrounds, or action to plant wildflowers in overlooked corners. The flipside of this has been a re-engagement of near neighbours with those 'destinations', when they were no longer flooded with outsiders. Residents of St Davids East found the lockdown an unexpected opportunity to 'reclaim' the area around the Quay and canal from the usual crowds of visitors (and a degree of anti-social behaviour), previously felt to be a space 'not for us locals'. Although the visitors have now returned, the chance to look at their area in a new way has led to residents having a growing interest in improving the environment for locals.



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It has also had a hand in developing a wider sense of local belonging in an area of the city that has traditionally not had a strong collective identity, partly because of the atomised, inward-looking arrangement of its housing. Switching the focus to shared outdoor space was the change needed to help bring people together. The Community Builder is actively supporting this, and linking people with similar ideas, so a wide range of voices can join the discussion.

Who's Not Out & About? Anxiety, Absence, Habit

Community Builders have always been very conscious of the people they do not see physically, while hanging out in the park or at local bumping spaces. Examples include those who work during the day, those rushing between childcare and care for older dependents, and those uncomfortable about leaving their homes. These people do not generally have a chance to contribute their voice to listening exercises, more so at a time when door-knocking is not feasible. The lockdown, and new forms of communication, have allowed Community Builders to reach out to a certain number of these people, although only those who use social media and other online means. And it's true that some more anxious or isolated people have welcomed the increased understanding and solidarity the pandemic has brought them, albeit temporarily.

Builders acknowledge however the considerable anxiety that remains for many people in going out and mixing in less regulated environments. For those who were already managing anxiety before the pandemic, the break in the physical routine of attending a regular event has been for some hard to overcome. We all know that feeling of being reluctant to go out and do something, but feeling better once we've done it. Without the back-up of habit – 'I do this every Wednesday' – it can be hard for some people to motivate themselves. The interruption the pandemic has provided in this respect should not be underestimated.



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The flipside of the 'circuit-breaker' aspect of the pandemic is of course that it did provide an opportunity to form new habits for many residents, prevented from continuing with their previous ones. Exercise (especially outdoors) and active travel are obvious examples. One resident explains how a local community garden provided the location for his new routine: "ten laps around the garden is 400 up and down steps, plus tending the garden is ensuring I have some exercise."

The Changing Face of the Volunteer

Much has been made nationally of the huge enthusiasm for volunteering that emerged during the lockdowns, especially from those who were not regular volunteers previously. The Builders have first-hand experience of this enthusiasm through their involvement in emergency response initiatives, dealing with requests for assistance and matching these with those offering help. They say that the 'bite-sized' aspect of offering to pick up some shopping, or walk someone's dog, combined with greater flexibility timewise with furlough and homeworking made it easy for would-be volunteers to get started, with minimum forward commitment. Although many people are of course now just as busy as they ever were, and much of this initial activity has fallen away, there have been some valuable legacies. In some cases, relationships between volunteer and the person they were linked with to provide support have endured (in Wonford, the Community Builder remarked on the number of these initially 'one-off' links remained active for months). In others, the experience of being involved with other people has been unexpectedly rewarding. One resident in Duryard explained how they hadn't realised the value to their own wellbeing of knowing and taking an interest in the lives of their neighbours.

With their wide, hands-on knowledge of community activity in their patch, Community Builders have been able to direct would-be volunteers to a range of opportunities beyond the immediate emergency response, and have therefore been able to build on the initial momentum. It is unclear how much of this enthusiasm will 'stick' long-term, but it has certainly been a positive experience for many that hopefully will be a reference point for the future.



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“ For me it has given me a new community of people I wouldn't have got to know. It replaced my volunteering that wasn't possible during lockdown and gave me social connections during a difficult time. It was very special spending Christmas Day in the grounds of St Katherines in the sun when we couldn't be with family and friends. It is sad that it needs to continue but I know I would miss it and all the people involved. Volunteer, St Katherine's Priory Community Larder, which has welcomed over 50 volunteers during the pandemic ”

Some of the 'legacy' of this wave of volunteering will obviously be in terms of the value of the work to others in the community. Some will be in the boost to wellbeing that volunteering inevitably brings to the volunteer: "I believe that friendships have been formed that will long outlive any pandemic," says one. In other cases, the longer-term outcomes are more diverse. The huge success of the Sylvania Community Store & Cafe in Pennsylvania has been achieved by harnessing the energy of local volunteers mobilised through the pandemic and keen to extend their community involvement. This has greatly helped drive the project forward.

Networks, Umbrellas & Coordination Groups

Although the pandemic has in many senses kept us apart, it has in others brought us together in new ways. One example is the number of new networks and umbrella groups that have emerged, often initially to bring together representatives of the public, private and voluntary sectors to coordinate emergency response across a local area. One in Newtown and St Leonards includes headteachers, priests, councillors and community association leaders. Another links neighbouring areas west of the Exe, and another, which is citywide, brings together those who run community centres. Initially these were set up, remotely, as a way of passing on important information, or ensuring the best distribution of services. However, participants have found they've really valued the chance to link up for a wider range of reasons. One Community Builder admitted she'd never have been able to get such a range of busy people in one room in person.



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Now that there is a less urgent need to share information, and key people and groups have returned to their initial focus, several of these coordination groups meet less frequently. But there is real ongoing value in continuing to come together, and in finding ways to maintain this momentum. One Builder noted how facilitating regular contact between two well-established community-focused organisations who could be said to have a mildly rivalrous relationship pre-pandemic as part of a wider Covid Coordination Group has begun to have the effect of building familiarity and understanding, evidenced through small shifts such as one organisation lending the other some tables for an event.

Again, it is too early to say this has resulted in a seismic shift in community relationships, but it is hoped that improved communication of this kind can lead incrementally to increased collaboration, or at least mutual support rather than competition. There is also potential for links between wards/neighbourhoods to help identify issues of common importance, be that observations on the challenges of running community buildings, or sharing experience of communicating effectively with developers.

Even for those groups no longer actively involved with networks in this way, new connections have been made. Builders also observe the effects of heightened understanding of other perspectives and priorities: organisations for example might be more consciously inclusive in their activities as a result.

Conclusion

The pandemic has affected almost every aspect of community life, from the way we communicate, to where and how we meet, what we do together and what is important to us in our neighbourhoods. It has compelled us to adopt new habits and new ways of working, and introduced us to new people. It has accelerated some social processes, and brought others up short.



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Some of these changes have been very temporary, and people and organisations have already snapped back into previous well-worn patterns. But the experience of other ways of doing things, even if the adaptation itself doesn't last, often has enduring effects. It plants a seed, creates a link, opens a mind. The hope that we don't let things go back to the way they were doesn't mean that we are expected to remain in emergency mode for evermore. Wellbeing Exeter's Community Builders have seen that this turbulent period has the potential to stimulate communities to do things differently, and to be receptive to new ideas, new people and new possibilities. The Builders are uniquely well placed to respond to this. We don't yet fully understand what the impact of that might be, but we're looking forward to finding out.

