

No Longer ‘Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards’? Advances in Local State-Voluntary and Community Sector Relationships During Covid-19

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Abstract

Despite the significant influence of localism on policy discourses in the UK in recent decades, there has been limited evidence of any fundamental changes in state-civil society relationships. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 created a new context for cross-sectoral collaboration, as the local Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and local communities moved to the forefront of the crisis response. This paper draws upon 49 semi-structured interviews with local authorities (LAs) and VCS organisations across England, Scotland and Wales, to explore how the pandemic has reshaped LA-VCS collaboration. Examining the evolution of a range of local collaborative frameworks during the Covid-19 crisis, the article examines what enabled these collaborations to develop, how they operated and what insights can be derived regarding both the conditions for collaboration to flourish and the capacity to sustain this going forward. The findings offer insights into what more progressive forms of collaboration might look like during the transition from crisis and into

recovery. It contributes to broader debates about whether the models deployed during Covid-19 represent a pathway to more consensus-based collaboration after a decade of antagonism between civil society and the state.

Introduction

Political discourses in the UK have been increasingly influenced by localism. In theory, localism is characterised by strong, open and democratic governance principles, which enable the transfer of power to the local level (Filkin et al., 2000). Central to Conservative political narratives has been the restructuring of relationships with communities and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations to ‘empower’ citizens to design and deliver, or ‘co-produce’ public services. This has meant - in discourse if not in practice - a re-cast role for the VCS. Despite a raft of policy initiatives, progress has been slow and research has questioned whether this new localism is creating any fundamental changes in state-civil society relationships (Macmillan and Ellis-Paine, 2020). These debates have been reinvigorated by the emergence of new waves of local authority (LA) and VCS collaboration stemming from the Covid 19 pandemic. Examining these phenomena, this article explores how the pandemic reshaped cross-sectoral collaboration, placing the VCS and local communities at the forefront of LA responses in the UK.

By considering these changes against existing social policy debates, this article builds on pre-pandemic research which identified the potential for more nuanced and progressive LA-VCS relationships despite an austerity-driven national policy framework (Jones *et al.*, 2016; Macmillan and Ellis-Paine, 2020). It demonstrates how loosening the stranglehold of national policy created unique opportunities for new relationship configurations. The article argues that the pandemic represents a catalyst for change in collaboration, creating a significant ‘macroevent’ wherein structures were ‘destabilised by the generalised sense of crisis’ (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 101). Examining a range of local collaborations, it addresses the following questions: How did LAs and the VCS collaborate during the

pandemic? Why and how was this distinctive from prior collaboration? What are the challenges for maintaining these collaborations? Finally, what are the implications for conceptualising LA-VCS relationships moving forward? The findings offer insights into what more progressive forms of collaboration might look like as we transition from crisis into recovery. Consequently, it contributes to debates about whether these models represent a pathway to more consensus-based collaboration after a decade of antagonism between civil society and the state (Brewis *et al.*, 2019; Harris, 2021).

The pre-pandemic UK policy context

Competing national discourses have been important drivers in UK policy regarding place-based and collaborative working. Driven partially by the global economic crisis of 2008 and the pressure for fiscal austerity, a new localism emerged as the panacea to spending cuts under successive Conservative governments; David Cameron's 'Big Society' (2010-2015), Theresa May's 'Shared Society' (2017-2019) and Boris Johnson's 'Levelling-up' (2019). Co-production emerged as a new approach to public services with the 2011 Localism Act bequeathing new powers to local actors while the Care Act (2014) incorporated co-production into its statutory guidance. Other policy agendas such as the Civil Society Strategy (HM Government, 2018) and the Integrated Communities Action Plan (MHCLG, 2019) emphasised place-based development and 'collaborative commissioning.'

This agenda largely redirected the New Labour interest in devolution and collaborative decision-making (Taylor, 2012; Lewis 2005) wherein the creation of Community Empowerment Networks and Local Strategic Partnerships helped to restructure state-civil society relationships, re-imagining the VCS's role as one of a strategic partner (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2003). Under the Coalition and subsequent Tory governments this was significantly redirected. Macmillan (2013) describes this policy era as creating a 'decoupling of the state from the third sector', recasting UK state-VCS relations from interdependence (Salamon, 1987) towards Hayek's marketisation. New Labour's collaborative architecture

was further dismantled by the austerity programme post-2010, placing a renewed focus on community within a significantly restricted local policy environment (Macmillan, 2021).

LAs have faced unprecedented cuts, reducing their spending power in real terms by 28.6% (National Audit Office, 2021), whilst simultaneously being pressured to drive economic growth and coordinate public services that ‘empower’ citizens and communities. The VCS has been positioned as a key actor but has faced severe funding constraints. Public funding has shrunk as a proportion of the sector’s total income from 37% in 2009-10 to 29% in 2020 (NCVO, 2020). The context is further complicated by the Devolution Acts of the late 1990s. Consequently, many policy areas directly related to voluntary action, and which shape state-VCS relationships, involve devolved matters - such as health and social care. Furthermore, the lack of an English Assembly means English policy can be indistinguishable from UK policy.

A number of distinctive characteristics define the regulatory context for the VCS in Scotland and Wales¹ when contrasted with broader UK policy statements. While recent UK policy has provided limited focus on formalised engagement with the VCS, a stronger emphasis on consultation and engagement is evident in both Scotland and Wales. In Wales this is regulated through the Government of Wales Act (2006) and implemented via the 2014 Third Sector Scheme, the commitment to funding Third Sector Support Wales (a combination of national and local County Voluntary Councils) and engagement between ministers and the VCS via the Third Sector Partnership Council. In Scotland, VCS policy prioritises the value of partnership working with funding committed to the sector via Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) in each local authority and Public Social Partnerships involving the sector in the design and commissioning of public services.

¹ This research project only focused upon England, Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland is not discussed here.

Social policy approaches to local state-VCS relationships

The renewed localism agenda offers potential for cross-sectoral collaboration, placing the VCS at the centre of public service development. However, this evolving social policy landscape has produced lively debate regarding changing LA-VCS relationships, and the theoretical implications of closer collaboration. These debates build on broader foundational literature conceptualising the evolving relationships between the state and the VCS.

In summarising approaches to these relationships, Young (2000) outlines three divergent perspectives. First, Weisbrod's (1975) supplementary relations, which conceptualise the VCS as fulfilling demand for public goods unmet by the state. Second, complementary or interdependent relations, developed by Salamon (1987: 38) whereby the state and the VCS are conceptualised as partners via a third-party government which emphasises the 'sharing of responsibilities' and the 'pervasive blending of public and private roles'. Third, the adversarial model positions the VCS as pressurising the state for and the state as seeking to influence VCS behaviour through regulations and by responding to its advocacy (Young, 2000). Debates around the evolving nature of state-VCS relationships have centred upon the relative independence or containment of the VCS as it enters into partnership with both the national and local state, but also as it becomes increasingly dependent on providing contracted services as a key funding stream (Purkis 2012; Lewis 2005). These perspectives can coexist and are not mutually exclusive; as Young's (2000) comparative research suggests, some models are more prominent at certain times, with the boundaries between VCS and the state often blurred.

More recently, social policy scholars highlight multiple challenges facing the VCS in collaborating with the state. These reflect predominantly the complementary and adversarial approaches outlined above. Debates focus on: 1) the tendency of new localism to serve as a 'fig leaf' for neoliberalism (Corbett and Walker, 2013); 2) the reconfiguring of VCS roles

through austerity localism agendas; and 3) the potential agency of local actors to shape LA-VCS relationships.

A 'fig leaf' for neoliberalism

Research suggests that Conservative policy agendas reflect a broader political project, embedding the ideology of neoliberalism within the public sector. For social policy, the pursuit of neoliberalism has led to reductions in spending and the marketisation of welfare state operations (Schram, 2018). In the UK, the simultaneous pursuit of fiscal austerity and a supposedly 'reinvigorated' role for civil society has been dubbed 'austerity localism' by Featherstone *et al.* (2012) and as 'late neoliberalism' by McGimpsey (2017). McGimpsey argues that the public sector has shifted from 'quasi-marketisation' to more closely reflecting the logic of finance capital. Austerity has been used to justify funding cuts and shrinking the local state, enhanced by a policy discourse identifying the public sector as antagonistic to 'progressive' localism agendas. Critical scholars have lambasted policy discourses for constructing austerity localism as univocally positive, imbued with notions of civic enterprise, personal responsibility, and individualised notions of social mobility (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2019).

The rise of 'resilience' narratives as a response to socio-economic insecurity, has been problematised for reproducing inequalities by offloading responsibilities from the state to individuals, communities and localities (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2019). By appropriating values such as care, relationships and mutuality, the policy rhetoric justifies the retreat of the public sector; discharging responsibility away from the government while creating 'a false impression of citizen power' (Dahl and Soss, 2014; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015). The silence of austerity localism's proponents on the socio-economic context surrounding these policies, is identified as evidence of complicity with an austerity agenda seeking to shrink the state in line with neoliberal principles (Daly and Westwood, 2018).

Reconfiguring the VCS role through austerity localism

Research has examined austerity localism against a backdrop of inconsistent VCS funding and a shift from grants to ‘earned income’ (Aiken and Harris, 2017; McGimpsey, 2017). The sector faces increased demand, while funding cuts - especially infrastructure² funding - have reduced its capacity ‘undermining any wider ambitions to increase their role and contribution’ (Brewis *et al.*, 2019: 3). Clayton *et al.* (2016: 726) question the sector’s ‘capacity to cope in an environment in which their work is championed but not necessarily supported by those controlling resources’, while Garven *et al.* (2017: 37) query whether it is realistic ‘to expect individuals and communities to absorb the gaps... left by potential reductions in state services’. Reflective of adversarial approaches to LA-VCS relations, Aiken and Harris (2017) warn that marketisation risks an ‘erosion of the core features’ of VCS organisations given that survival in a marketised environment results in loss of local knowledge, credibility and support; threatening the sector’s independence, mission and sustainability (McGimpsey, 2017; Osborne and McLaughlin 2003).

The renewed focus on the VCS in public service provision has been perceived by some as a mechanism for combining civil and state institutions to maximise the use of VCS resources (Brewis *et al.*, 2019; Macmillan and Ellis-Paine, 2020). Others warn of the danger of an unproblematised notion of voluntarism (Daly and Westwood, 2018) and of shifting responsibility for delivering public services onto voluntary organisations.

Agency of local actors in influencing LA-VCS relationships

The critiques outlined above are fundamental to understanding the restructuring of LA-VCS relations, demonstrating how national politico-economic policy frameworks constrain what is feasible locally. However, an emerging scholarship highlights the agency of local

² We utilise Macmillan’s (2021a) definition of infrastructure as ‘cross-cutting systems of support, guidance and expertise available to ordinary civil society organisations, such as charities, voluntary organisations and community groups, faith groups, community business and social enterprise’.

actors to develop potentially complementary, collaborative relationships (Arvidson *et al.*, 2018; Salamon 1987). Featherstone *et al.* (2012: 179) note the potential to oppose austerity localism by critically reflecting on how localism is ‘articulated, generated, mobilised and envisioned’. In seeking to deliver more ‘progressive localism’, Williams *et al.* (2014: 2805) suggest LAs and VCS organisations can operate as ‘incubators of resistance’, reworking and resisting the ‘key tenets of neoliberal governmentalities’.

Studies demonstrate how despite the blockages posed by national policy frameworks, LA-VCS collaboration has found ways to flourish. Two English studies highlight diversity in cross-sectoral relationships despite national austerity drivers. Lowndes and Squires (2012) demonstrate how partnerships acted as a ‘buffer’ to the impact of external ‘shocks’ on services and communities. Jones *et al.* (2016) identified how a ‘Blitz mentality’ enabled cross-sectoral collaboration to meet the demands of struggling communities. Research in Sweden (Arvidson *et al.* 2018) identified three pillars to local civil society ‘regimes’: the political orientation of local government; structures for cross-sectoral collaboration; and public funding arrangements for the sector. This framework reflects more complementary approaches to LA-VCS collaboration emphasising the importance of trust, the removal of silos and bureaucracy enabling pooling of resources (Burchell *et al.*, 2020b) and the protection of VCS infrastructure (Farr, 2018). These processes hold potential at local level but national policy continues to pose barriers (Burchell *et al.*, 2020b; Dayson and Damn, 2020). This transition is not possible without genuine shifts in organisational cultures across sectors but particularly within the local state regarding risk, ‘working with’ and a reduced focus on cost-saving (Lent and Studdert, 2019; McLaughlin and Osborne 2000). This article considers whether the Covid pandemic created the environment for the potential transitions outlined above.

Collaboration and crisis: LA-VCS relationships during Covid

The onset of Covid-19 in 2020 reframed the context within which relationships evolved. Ansell *et al.* (2020: 1) defined the pandemic as a ‘turbulent problem’ characterised by ‘surprising, inconsistent, unpredicted and uncertain events’. Research into other forms of crisis highlights how they create ‘VUCA’ environments, encompassing Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (Van de Wal, 2020). This makes crises unresponsive to conventional solutions and challenge existing modes of operation. Therefore, presenting opportunities for different forms of decision-making and collaboration as people seek responses ‘to events for which no clear solutions exist’ (Van de Wal, 2020: 760). Consequently, crises can challenge existing power structures and change the status quo (Ansell and Trondal, 2018; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

Governance in crisis theory argues it can produce ‘game changers’ generating pathways for collaboration and innovation; engaging actors in a search for a new emerging order (Ansell *et al.*, 2020). Field theory³ similarly highlights how crises bring a fluidity enabling innovative action and organisation, mobilised around ‘new collective identities’ (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 84). The Covid-19 crisis represents a potential catalyst for change within which collaborations between the local state, the VCS and communities have evolved at pace. It has forced local actors to ‘develop new ways of responding and relating to each other’ (Dayson and Damm, 202: 283); offering a unique opportunity to examine whether the pandemic has driven new collaborations.

Given a context in which existing approaches were challenged and new ways of working were ‘up for grabs’, it is important to explore how the pandemic has impacted LA-VCS relations, the implications this has for conceptualising emerging partnerships and whether this

³ Field theory offers the concept of ‘field’ as a spatial metaphor for domains where actors convene to advance their interests and vie for power (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

includes complementary collaborations capable of balancing both collaborative and adversarial dynamics.

Study methodology

The data is drawn from the Mobilising Volunteers Effectively (MoVE) project. The research examines LA, VCS and community responses to the pandemic, particularly how volunteers were mobilised to meet community needs in England, Wales and Scotland. Findings presented are primarily drawn from data gathered in phase one of the project: 42 semi-structured one-to-one interviews, 7 joint interviews (2 participants) and 4 focus groups, conducted June - September 2020 with LAs, VCS and mutual aid organisers. Participants were recruited via purposive non-random sampling (Mason, 2002) using both existing networks and recruiting new participants through hosting and joining cross-sectoral forums. Participants were selected based on their involvement in coordinating community responses during the first national lockdown. The sample was continuously reviewed for representation across nations, localities and sectors. The emphasis upon VCS infrastructure organisations within this data reflects the project's focus upon examining the collaborative response frameworks, these organisations often acted as the conduit/bridge between sectors.

[Insert Table 1]

The methodology draws from Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Bradbury, 2015), which views participants as partners in the research process, prioritising 'working with' rather than 'doing research on' (Barnes, 2004). PAR was embedded via several processes: using open-ended question frames to build the research around participants' lived experiences; running dialogic webinars which informed interpretation of findings and shaped later research stages; co-designing the research with LA, VCS and community stakeholders to reflect local policy and practice; and working with partners in implementing findings. The research created a space for participants to share and reflect on their

experiences of coordinating community responses. Complying with social restrictions, interviews were conducted via web conferencing and transcribed verbatim. The research received university research ethics clearance, and all participants gave informed consent.

Established methods of thematic coding were utilised to identify emerging themes (Mason, 2002; Spencer *et al.*, 2013). A combination approach was undertaken, utilising inductive data-driven and deductive theory/concept-driven coding (Gibbs, 2018). An initial thematic framework was developed based upon emerging issues with main themes being: existing models, response frame and relationships; patterns of need; dynamics of volunteer supply; lessons and future challenges. Data on collaborative approaches was synthesised and analysed to identify general trends, illuminate variations in collaboration and the conditions underpinning this variation.

Findings on changes to LA-VCS collaboration during the pandemic

The pandemic sparked a major overhaul in patterns of LA-VCS collaboration as they created rapid community responses (Van de Wal, 2020; Ansell and Trondal, 2018). The data presented here, examined experiences across 43 UK LA settings and focuses upon three central questions: How did LAs and the VCS collaborate during the pandemic? In what ways and why was this distinctive from prior collaboration? What are the challenges for maintaining these collaborations? Unless stated, the themes and quotations summarise the views of multiple participants.

LA-VCS collaboration

A range of approaches were developed by LAs and their partners to identify need and mobilise humanitarian support structures. Although established to respond to immediate needs during the first national lockdown, they continued to provide the primary mechanism for community support throughout the pandemic. Despite some specific local features, a series of core underlying processes were identifiable. The choice of approach was influenced

by various factors, including geography, the nature of pre-existing relationships, investment in collaboration, and the impact of informal community responses. Importantly, the need to create processes that could respond to such a unique context drove collaborative innovations.

While each approach involved significant cross-sectoral engagement, operationalisation divided into three main forms. First, a collaborative approach utilising a local VCS infrastructure organisation as the primary coordinator/broker. Second, channelling support through place-based community hubs. This emerged more frequently where the response was coordinated across a large geographical area. Third, channelling support through a diverse network of community mechanisms, including local infrastructure organisations, VCS organisations and groups but also informal movements like mutual aid (see further detail Cook *et al.*, 2020). Two key processes underpinned these approaches: the creation of cross-sectoral response cells and enhanced collaborative working and information sharing.

Coordination of community responses often occurred through cross-sectoral response cells: multi-agency collaborative command structures which represented a marked departure from traditional silo working. Participants highlighted the value of this place-based approach, with VCS participants highlighting improved levels of engagement with both NHS and LA structures. A willingness to work flexibly, collaboratively and to share information and resources was identified as key to its success. Given the scale of response needed, collaboration was vital in providing the necessary capacity to deliver support. LAs often recognised they were not best placed to provide support, ceding control and devolving responsibilities to VCS organisations.

In other areas you can just see the council is kind of retrenching and saying, 'well, we need to deal with all these people ourselves.' Here, they didn't, they said 'we can't deal with this ourselves, but these guys can' (INT 30, LA participant)

Authorities often undertook enabling roles, acting as the ‘safety net’ and providing back-up to other organisations delivering ‘hands-on’ support. Existing community embedded structures such as Local Area Coordination⁴, social prescribing⁵ and other Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) models⁶ offered strong place-based frameworks that were utilised, where available, to help provide local knowledge and coordinate responses.

What was distinctive about LA-VCS collaboration?

The study highlighted several changes implemented to enable effective collaboration. These experiences offer new approaches for future collaborative models that may produce different configurations of localism and place-based working, avoiding some of the pitfalls of austerity localism (Williams *et al.*, 2014). Four main strands predominate: i) The ability to move collaboration forward at speed, ii) the role of VCS infrastructure, iii) the implementation of flattened power structures, shared decision-making and permission to act, iv) creating organisational cultural change through removing bureaucratic barriers.

i) Collaboration at speed

A consistent theme centred upon the advances made in localised, collaborative working. Many discussed how the pandemic represented a catalyst for accelerating partnership working, creating genuine community engagement.

Like never before, we came together as a system, and I’ve never seen that work so well, where people kind of transcended organisational boundaries (INT 17, LA participant).

⁴ Local Area Coordination is a strength/place-based approach focusing on voice, empowerment and building community resilience.

⁵ Social prescribing refers people to link workers, who connect them with community groups and statutory services for practical and emotional support.

⁶ ABCD models build community interdependence by connecting people to shared interests, skills exchange and resources so communities can take action on issues that matter to them.

It's made things speed up. .. we were probably on a couple of years' timeframe in terms of implementing this, ... Covid has forced our hand ... moving to a place-based model now makes the most sense for those communities which have really suffered over the past 12-18 months (FG 2, LA participant #1).

Echoing other studies (Chaney and Sophocleous, 2021), the findings show that LA-VCS collaboration was built upon pre-existing (sometimes embryonic) relationships. Across most of the 43 areas, participants explained how time spent building these partnerships pre-pandemic provided the foundations for collective working. Summarised by participants:

Because we'd spent a lot of time building... [the] environment that enables us to have open conversations and a good dialogue with our sector, it didn't feel like it was our problem, it was a collective problem (INT 15, LA participant).

If we hadn't had those real firm foundations in place before COVID, we'd have struggled to get [name of response] off the ground (J INT 1, VCS participant).

ii) The role of VCS infrastructure

In many cases, VCS infrastructure organisations acted as a vital bridge between LA staff, services and community organisations. The willingness and capacity of the infrastructure partner to undertake a coordinating role, commit resources, and be flexible in their activities, was often pivotal. The below quote reflects that in areas where LAs had continued to invest in VCS infrastructure, this shaped successful collaboration.

We never disinvested in infrastructure organisations in [country] ... organisations such as the CVSs (Community Volunteers Services) ... having those, good to go, ...strong relationships... and that historical strength and trust that we have with each other, having that in place was of absolute paramount importance (INT 17, LA participant).

Strong cross-sectoral relationships were common but not universal. In some cases, disinvestment in local VCS infrastructure had left gaps in provision or rifts in relationships. One VCS infrastructure organisation with a 'poor' LA relationship, described being excluded from community hubs and how the council redeployed its own staff and repurposed their own community spaces.

...we were told, these [hubs] have been set up and this is what we're going to do. If they had asked us, we would have said "we will identify your local community group in all those five areas"...I think that the decision... to establish these hubs ...was a significant waste of money ... Because you could have done probably ten times more with the same amount of money by using a local community group (INT 43, VCS participant).

Even in these situations, interviewees felt relationships had improved during the pandemic with some fractured relationships beginning to repair:

Our relationship with our community infrastructure organisation wasn't that great prior to Covid, ... because of the cuts they were chasing finances... The relationship with the community infrastructure organisation is really significant. ...the way in which they've been brought into having a central role ... the reconnection of that relationship is really important (INT 12, LA participant).

This supports Chaney and Sophocleous (2021) research which found that in some locations the crisis helped break down pre-pandemic barriers to co-operation.

iii) 'Flattened' power structures and shared decision-making

Research has highlighted how limited power-sharing and the unequal distribution of resources between partners restricts shared decision-making (Farr, 2018). The cross-sectoral, multi-agency community 'bronze' response cells⁷ represented a significant transition away from this imbalance. VCS organisations spoke of increased levels of engagement, voice and access afforded through participation in decision-making structures. Collaboration within cells created a successful coordination framework and enhanced cross-sectoral understanding. Senior level permission to work flexibly and collaboratively was key:

⁷ In many areas, Bronze cells formed operational level of the emergency governance and decision-making structure. The Gold command assumed the top-level strategic decisions, sitting above the Silver level, a tactical level responsible for planning and coordinating the response.

There were more than enough meetings that involved our sector and statutory organisations, ... we'd gone from one extreme to the other, we'd gone from not speaking, to literally, ..we could have sat... in meetings from 9 til 5 every day, .. so we were invited into the big tent (INT 27, VCS participant).

I was given permission to go into that space, and to have lots of influence..., having a seat at that table, and really designing that together,...so that in itself made a real difference to being able to mobilise things quickly, make decisions together quickly and the right decisions (FG2, VCS participant #1).

Elements of co-design, pooling of knowledge, resources and decision-making characterised LA-VCS relationships. Mobilisation of volunteers and resources was facilitated through flatter, decentralised organisational structures both within the LA, with the VCS and with other public services.

LAs who adopted a strong collaborative model, emphasised 'enabling' and 'facilitating'. Where the response was devolved to local level, LA staff were given permission to 'get on with it' and command and control structures were either flexed and/or operational practice and strategic decision-making was integrated. Having the VCS at the table with senior LA managers who 'understood the importance of place-based working' mattered:

Because it was chaired by a Strategic Director, who was given permission "to get on with it", it meant that a lot of the bureaucracy that traditionally had got in the way, moved out of the way, ... to move at pace (INT 12, LA participant).

What I think was unique about [location name]'s response was each of those strands of the bronze group... none of them were led by the council. They were all led in partnership ...we didn't direct any of it (INT 44, LA participant).

iv) Shifts in organisational culture

Existing research identifies organisational culture as a powerful barrier to collaboration (Burchell *et al.*, 2020a; Lent and Studdert, 2019). Uprooting these barriers was core to

enabling collaboration during the pandemic. Importantly, this period offers evidence that both LAs and VCS organisations can adapt when necessary, removing barriers to risk, data sharing and funding (See also Dayson *et al.*, 2021).

...we didn't have procurement crawling over us, we didn't have legal crawling over us, we were just allowed to crack on (INT 45, LA participant).

Some things which were thought to be absolutely vital to protect us from risk ...are now maybe not so vital, but that's probably because we have to take risks, because there's no risk greater than what we're faced with the pandemic (INT 9, VCS participant).

Stringent risk and data sharing protocols were overcome, allowing organisations to better understand needs and access vulnerable groups. LAs managed to prioritise data sharing, finding ways to offset risk.

We'd had a year in [initiative name] where we were saying, we all want to be able to work more closely together ...the answer was always "You can't, because of data" ... all of a sudden, we found a way around it. So, it was almost like the crisis knocked what we were previously seeing as challenges out of the park (INT 23, LA participant).

Action was also enabled through greater funding flexibility through repurposing existing contracts, opening new access to funds and finding flexible ways to direct funding to hyperlocal groups via community infrastructure organisations:

We discovered that there is a secret fast track [payments] process that we never knew existed ... Our finance team facilitated that ... we managed to turn around the money very quickly, and normally it's a very bureaucratic process (INT 21, LA participant).

The easing of bureaucratic barriers was not universal (Macmillan, 2021; Wilson and McCabe, 2021). A minority of participants spoke of bureaucratic blockages, particularly where there had been limited pre-existing investments in collaboration or where there was no VCS infrastructure organisation who could facilitate this. Here, VCS organisations and

mutual aid groups faced rigid command and control blockages. This was not unique to LAs, as some VCS organisations were equally hindered by internal organisational inflexibility, and safeguarding concerns about 'informal' volunteers. Research has highlighted how health and social care systems also struggled to respond in an integrated way (Stein *et al.*, 2021).

Challenges for maintaining LA-VCS collaboration - the 'new normal'? Covid-19 provided a testing ground for cross-sectoral collaboration. In removing existing obstacles, the pandemic reshaped the context for local relationships enabling sectors to collaborate to coordinate support. Some of these changes will be difficult to reverse. Early signs point to LAs, already on this journey, seizing the momentum to expand place-based collaboration and embedding these advances. Equally VCS organisations are keen to maintain their newfound 'seat at the table'.

In examining the resilience of collaboration, participants reflected on the potential of 'post-pandemic realities' to limit innovation. These included: first, that LAs may retrench to traditional decision-making models. Second, collaborations embedded in people rather than practice may be lost if jobs are cut. Third, questions over the sustainability of many VCS organisations may reduce their collaborative capacity. Analyses of austerity illuminate the challenges for embedding collaboration, highlighting how progressive agendas emerging from the pandemic face being co-opted, colonised or diminished. For example, the economic fallout may usher in new waves of austerity limiting the power and resources of the local state (Featherstone *et al.*, 2012; McGimpsey, 2017). This may reinvigorate the adversarial role of the VCS and tip the balance away from collaboration (Young, 2000). Consequently, the capacity to resist these pressures and maintain collaborative relationships is key (Williams *et al.*, 2014). Two areas are pertinent; i) resource depletion; and ii) embedding collaboration into organisational practice.

i) Resource depletion

Resources across sectors are diminishing as we move beyond the pandemic and face the ramifications of debt, economic crisis, food and fuel poverty and the impact of war in Europe. There was consensus amongst participants that the VCS is overstretched and suffering from volunteer fatigue, escalated by spiralling demands and constrained resources. NCVO's 2021 survey of UK VCS organisations revealed how the pandemic has unevenly impacted the sector. Income from trading activity is expected to drop more than 17% during 2021/22, and two in five organisations reported having just six months reserves left (Nottingham Trent University, 2021: 10). Most participants were concerned about VCS sustainability, explaining how the demands of engaging in collaboration strained capacity:

Unless you prioritise the key infrastructure organisations in the sector, like CVS, you won't have a voluntary sector infrastructure because the cash flow is that bad (INT 20, LA participant).

The challenge has been to be at all the right tables for the VCS without burning our organisation out... it has doubled our workload overnight (INT 30, VCS participant).

LAs are also facing resource depletion. In December 2020, 12% of Chief Finance Officers from single tier authorities expressed a lack of confidence that they could avoid a section 114 notice in 2021-22.⁸ With the costs of the pandemic on LAs estimated at £9.7 billion, 94% reported needing to cut service budgets (National Audit Office, 2021). One LA participant summarised this dilemma:

We were one of the councils that were thinking we might have to issue a 114 notice,.. the latest government funding has made us a bit more stable, but that threat hasn't gone away ... so then it's how do you give the

⁸ A Section 114 notice is issued when a council faces serious budgetary challenges. It bans all new expenditure with the exception of safeguarding vulnerable people and statutory services, whilst the authority develops a balanced budget.

right resource to communities to be able to respond, if that can't come from the councils where is that going to come from? (INT 18, LA participant)

Many LA staff are exhausted from working seven days a week for much of the crisis, yet the impact of Covid on the working lives of LA and VCS staff is largely absent from public discourse.

Despite these pressures, staff across sectors have worked tirelessly to plug the gaps; offering hope that the relationships, skills and shared learning established through collaboration may not be easily relinquished. The big question remains - how will this drive to collaborate be carried forward at local level? If collaboration is rooted in relationships - typically embedded in people rather than systems - retaining these people is vital. The below quote encapsulates this situation:

Being forced to make decisions to choose between the rock and a hard place could potentially mean that everything that we've done together and everything that we've learned is lost, ..., if some of the key... community groups, charities, are not here in a year's time, then that's a huge loss to the system, but equally if some of the key ... local authority workforce, are not here., then there's a huge amount of organisational memory, and relationships that are gone (FG 2, VCS participant #1).

ii) Embedding LA-VCS collaboration

Another risk comes from the challenge of embedding new ways of working and preventing organisational systems reverting to type. Some interviewees expressed concerns about sustaining these changes.

Everyone works much better in a crisis... everyone's saving the people, but once the people are fine, you're going back to saving your own organisation (INT 9, VCS participant)

What you're going to have now, is the big accountability questions coming in: how much was spent? Who made that decision? ...What needs to be cut to be able to pay for this going forward? That is going to breed a return to accountability, covering your back, ... risk assessment.. etc. so the freedom we had with lockdown... is going to retract (J INT 3, LA participant).

In the aftermath of the first national lockdown, experience of collaboration had been relatively short-lived but partnerships became embedded as the pandemic extended through 2021, making collaboration less of a short-term crisis response and more an established way of working. Many participants saw the embedding of cross-sectoral collaboration into organisational culture, practice and policy as essential:

The pandemic does not end with everyone getting vaccinated....the only way we will get through the next couple of years, is by continuing to work as a team, right across the partnership...across our community groups to ... support the most vulnerable people in society (FG 2, LA participant #1).

Another participant illustrated how cuts to VCS would save small amounts of funding but lose significant added resources:

[Collaboration] what it's allowed us to do is to get better value for money, ... making sure we don't disinvest in the places that will end up costing us more, we need to hold onto that. So, investing in the infrastructure, ..., is critical, because that levers in a significant amount of other support. ..we're not investing stacks of money in that, but the output is significant (FG 2, LA participant #2).

For this LA team, the solution was embedded in collaboration with their VCS:

If we continue to work like we have done, and combine our resources - brain power, human power, system power, finance power - then you know, we'll look for a solution to this and try and make something work (FG 2, LA participant #3).

Most participants highlighted the importance of maintaining collaborative ways of working. In particular, they emphasised how collaboration had reduced protectionism amongst the VCS created by marketisation, and had challenged the asymmetric power relations that had restricted previous relationships (Chaney and Sophocleous, 2021;

Purkis, 2012).

Discussion: new possibilities for conceptualising LA-VCS relations

This article has demonstrated how the Covid-19 crisis created a unique opportunity for a rapid expansion in LA-VCS collaboration as the foundation for localised humanitarian responses. It has highlighted the underlying conditions facilitating collaboration and identified a series of changes enabling collaboration to develop, innovations to be applied at speed and long-established barriers to be removed. These experiences raise important questions for how social policy scholars position these changes amid the potentials and pitfalls of austerity localism agendas. Has embedded, collaborative place-based working over an extended period created a cultural shift within organisations? Has two years of working differently meant that there is now 'no turning back' or will post-pandemic pressures lead to a return to 'business as usual' reinforcing austerity localism?

Numerous challenges exist in a post-pandemic climate that could facilitate a return to austerity localism, reducing the local state and restricting the space for collaboration. Shrinking resources mean that prospects for collaboration will be set against a discourse of austerity and shortfall in capacity. Previous research reveals how austerity discourses were used as the rationale for funding cuts and a shrinking of the local state (Featherstone *et al.*, 2012; McGimpsey, 2017), offloading responsibilities from state institutions to the VCS, individuals and communities (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2019).

This creates significant risks for maintaining collaborative relationships. Researchers have previously raised concerns about how complementary relations often involve the VCS being harnessed to meet the 'goals and ambitions of government, rather than experiencing a more equal relationship as an 'active' partner, particularly in respect of agenda setting and policy shaping' (Lewis 2005: 122). It is possible that national policy may seek to impose a supplementary style of relations, built upon the perceived effectiveness of complementary

collaborative models during covid, but reshaped to fill the gaps in provision created by austerity.

However, this research demonstrates that this is not inevitable. Although austerity localism may indeed represent a cynical attempt to co-opt progressive agendas, how these dynamics are implemented at local level is not always predetermined by national policy. Reflecting Avidson et al's (2018) emphasis upon local context, the Covid responses demonstrate that progressive local configurations are possible and decentralisation agendas can be utilised by actors who cut across different ideological positions and motivations. The pandemic has unsettled the status quo, creating the space for local configurations to flourish and leading many to look towards more localised, place-based approaches. As these have evolved they have challenged some of the core underlying tenets of austerity localism. Key aspects such as marketisation and competition, disinvestment in infrastructure and asymmetrical power, have been challenged by the decentralisation of power, and the key role played by infrastructure organisations, cross-sectoral collaboration, the valuing of community insight and the pooling of resources.

This research highlights several avenues where collaboration could prosper along the complementary approach outlined by Young (2000). The Covid crisis increased the visibility and profile of the VCS, its valuable community insight, and its credibility and capacity to co-develop solutions. In contrast to pre-Covid research (e.g. Brewis *et al* 2019) the sector has actually expanded its ambition to increase its role and contribution, with VCS infrastructure playing a vital connecting role between local government and communities. Future research could usefully investigate whether this bridging role for VCS infrastructure organisations can offer a balance between adversarial and complementary roles. Is there room for both collaboration and critique?

The pace, breadth and scale of the pandemic crisis created space and opportunity for innovation. As pre-existing systems floundered, the crisis paved the way for new opportunities locally to exercise agency and shape collaborative change (Ansell and Trondal, 2018). The shared agenda setting and pooled decision-making identified within this article moved beyond the limitations to collaboration identified by social policy scholars such as those identified under New Labour's Modernising Local Government agenda (Lewis, 2005; Osborne and McLaughlin, 2003). Future research should explore whether and how these relationships can be maintained beyond the crisis.

De-bureaucratisation was key to the collaborative processes. In the face of unprecedented pressures, barriers that once seemed immovable (notably around risk, data sharing and funding), were circumvented at speed. These experiences indicate that this bureaucracy may represent a form of control, power and restraint on change, embedded within organisational culture. The prospects for these changes to underpin future collaboration is contingent upon the extent to which, after collaborating for two years, LAs (and to some degree the VCS) are able to embed flexibility, permission to act and power sharing into their organisational culture. Previous research has identified the centrality of cultural change in enabling successful collaboration (Osborne and McLaughlin 2003; McLaughlin and Osborne 2000). Discussions with research participants suggest this is a major challenge amid concerns that gains may be lost as LAs retrench to old processes. However, collective memory of what was possible during a crisis, may weaken this propensity to revert to type and reimpose bureaucratic barriers to collaboration. Future research, therefore, should examine the implications for organisational culture of an extended period of loosened bureaucracy and whether those who utilised such processes to block collaboration are still able to do so and the impact this has on local state-VCS relationships.

Conceptually these experiences and challenges highlight an important interaction between the perspectives on collaboration highlighted by Young and the emphasis upon local

context and agency reflected by Arvidson et al (2018) and others, outlined earlier. In particular, it highlights the importance of looking more closely at how the interaction between local and national pressures can shape collaborative relationships. The emergence of different local collaborative relationships witnessed during Covid reflected the weakened influence of national policy and an emphasis upon localised solutions. This resulted in some locations embracing the drive to more complementary relationships, some transitioning from antagonistic ones, while others restricted the VCS to supplementary roles. The ability for these new relationships to be sustained, as highlighted above, will also be shaped by the interaction between local context and national policy (Arvidson et al 2018). In particular, whether pressures from national policy and a reframing of austerity localism will constrain the ability to maintain local complementary relations. For those locations less embedded in the drive towards complementary relations, re-bureaucratisation and a re-engagement with austerity localism agendas may provide the impetus to retrench.

LA-VCS relationships have reached an important crossroads. Crucially, the enhanced role of the VCS and communities was supported with resources, bureaucratic flexibility and shared decision-making. How these support structures extend or retrench will be pivotal to future collaborations and their capacity to deliver better community outcomes. If the value and capacity-building within collaboration is not fully recognised and embedded in (particularly LA) organisational systems, the ‘great leap forwards’ could be lost. Amid competing claims for limited resources, evidencing the value of collaborative working and supporting infrastructure is key. This research has illustrated the benefits of LAs working as equal partners with the VCS. The challenge now is to learn from what has worked so well during the pandemic and build on it.

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