

“As humans we aren’t meant to be alone all the time”*

Reflecting on the work of Resource Centre member groups during 2021-22

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a lasting and profound impact on the work of grassroots groups in all areas and communities of Brighton & Hove. Resource Centre member groups are all rooted in communities which face systemic barriers and whose access to resources is limited. Their experiences during the pandemic have been very diverse—this report draws out some common strands and reflects on ways in which the uneven impact on groups indicates the need for careful, differentiated support from funders and infrastructure organisations.

Three pandemic pathways

While every group responded in a unique way, we have observed three broad pathways followed by community groups during the last two years:

1. Rapid change

Some groups rapidly expanded or altered their activities to include emergency and additional support for their members and beneficiaries. Not all of these groups previously had a focus on food, but food support became a central concern for many of them during this period. These groups are now facing challenging decisions about whether and how to scale back or continue their ‘emergency’ activities in a situation of continuing community hardship.

Examples of groups who followed this pathway include: Craven Vale Community Association, Salaam Football Club, Oromo Community, Syrian Community, East Brighton Food Co-op, Vision for a Better Future, the Bevy, BG (Bulgarian) Society.

Craven Vale: getting our community focus back



Craven Vale Community Association was running a weekly food bank as a drop-in at the community centre on the estate before the pandemic. This was in addition to a wide range of other projects, including a community beehive, orchard and wildlife garden, and frequent events.

They responded quickly to the crisis, switching their committee meetings to Zoom and focusing most of their energy on providing an expanded food bank service, which offered food parcels for collection by around 60 local families. The community centre was also made available as a base for the cooking and delivery of hot meals.

Since restrictions were lifted, the association has returned the food bank to a weekly drop-in and resumed a wider range of activities at the community centre, relaunching with a week of events in September 2021. Secretary, Alan Cooke, said:

“We are a community association and our activities are all about bringing people together. So it was important for us that we brought back the tea and cake at the foodbank. It’s about neighbours helping each other out, not an impersonal service. We didn’t want to become a substitute for the welfare state.”

*Feedback from Vision for a Better Future (Somali community group), Jan. 2022:

“It was a much-needed help, and we do really appreciate as a community, without your help we wouldn’t be the community we are today, the greatest challenge we used to face was that our member feeling lonely and as humans we aren’t meant to be alone all the time and today they have the feelings that they belong to a community and it’s so obvious to tell how their mental well-being has improved and thank you again for your invaluable help!”

Sussex Syrian Community: a shining light in dark times



Sussex Syrian Community found innovative ways to adapt and sustain their services to the 1000 strong Syrian population—they ran their classes and advice sessions online or outdoors; raised funds and hand-delivered much-needed supermarket vouchers to 200 families; organised an online children's choir and deepened links with a wide range of partner organisations.

Ahmad Yabroudi, the group's Chair, said:

"We are very proud of what we achieved, keeping our community connected through this terrible time. We were the first place people turned to when they needed help—if they had lost their job, needed advice, or didn't have the technology to access basic services. Even we didn't forget our children and gave gift vouchers for 164 child to celebrate Easter and have an Eid Party at home with their family. The lessons we learned during the pandemic will stay with us and strengthen our group for the future."

2. New directions

Some groups were set up during the pandemic—again, often focusing on emergency needs. These groups are now facing the challenges of reassessing their aims, adapting to a slower and more exacting funding environment, and supporting their volunteers on a long-term basis.

Examples of groups who followed this pathway include: Moulsecoomb Community Market, Phoenix Food Shop, Coldean Food Bank.

3. Pause and regroup

Other groups were unable to continue their activities during the pandemic, so were forced to pause, often for much longer than they originally anticipated. For people in these communities, the challenge is now to re-establish connections and find ways of working that fit with the altered needs and expectations of residents, funders and service providers.

Some groups who followed this pathway include: On Your Way Job Club, Sudanese Women and Children's Group, Sudan Club, Bates Estate Residents' Association, Clarendon & Ellen Residents' Association.

The 'new normal'—community activity in a post-Covid world

Despite the diversity of groups' experiences during the periods of lockdown and restrictions, overall the pandemic has highlighted the importance of community groups in marginalised communities.

Many of the issues groups are now dealing with are familiar ones—how to secure funding, keep volunteers involved, make good decisions and reach everyone in the community.

We have identified three ongoing challenges that funders and infrastructure organisations may need to keep sight of whilst supporting groups in this continuing period of transition.

Phoenix Food Shop: we've needed this for a long time



Phoenix Food Shop was set up by volunteers from Phoenix Community Association, in order to keep providing affordable healthy food to the residents of the Phoenix Estate. The Community Association set up a

weekly food bank at the start of the pandemic, and the Food Shop has developed from this emergency provision, as a long-term, sustainable project.

Sarah McCarthy, Chair of the Food Shop and Community Association, said:

"The pandemic made visible a lot of issues that already existed for communities like ours—lack of funds to access fresh food, isolation and poor mental health, fuel poverty, digital exclusion. We are a little pocket of deprivation, living alongside much wealthier communities. Our local area is undergoing developments which—intentionally or not—squeeze out people who can't afford to go out for coffee or join a gym.

"The food shop is our way of pushing back and creating something for ourselves, to meet our own needs. It's hard work, and it's not always been smooth going, but we are determined to keep it running. This is something we've needed round here for a long time."



Economic shockwaves persist

Since the withdrawal of the government furlough scheme and the £20 per week Universal Credit uplift, communities hit hardest by the economic impact of the pandemic have continued to struggle. Rapid increases in the cost of essentials like fuel and food—on top of a large and increasing household debt burden—are putting extreme pressure on many households, already reliant on charitable support.

Community groups made an essential contribution to meeting this need during the pandemic, making swift and efficient use of 'crisis' funding to deliver fresh food, hot meals and vouchers to their members.

As funders return to 'normal', it is worth being aware that these needs have not necessarily diminished.

Ensuring that community groups continue to exist in marginalised communities is a proven and powerful way to enable people to access vital support.

Using technology well

Many groups made good use of digital technologies to continue meeting during lockdowns, and this has become incorporated into new ways of working. Groups can access equipment at the Resource Centre for hybrid meetings and we have a Zoom account which is available for groups to use for their meetings.

However, the experience of holding meetings and events online has also clarified the limitations of these technologies. Many of the groups whose activities paused during the pandemic were those whose key

organisers were unable to cross the digital divide, or whose activities were simply not transferrable online.

One lasting legacy of the pandemic has been an acceleration of the move towards 'digital by default' public services. Groups based in marginalised communities will continue to play a key role in supporting individuals for whom this development adds to their experience of exclusion. This is an additional task for volunteers, and a barrier to volunteering for some groups of people.

Technology is also not a simple answer to the age-old problem of how to run a group in an inclusive and democratic way. Groups and support organisations alike need to be aware of the danger that technological innovation could mask or even worsen underlying issues and inequalities. Regardless of the technology in use, the key question is how to ensure everyone feels equally welcome to participate in the group's decision-making.

Accountability vs bureaucracy

As we emerge from an unprecedented situation, in which small community groups were trusted to allocate resources and make decisions swiftly, groups need support to develop policies and processes which enable them to work democratically without stifling their flexibility and creativity.

These processes will not necessarily be the same for every group, and it will take time for groups to find new ways of working which meet the specific needs of their members.

On Your Way Job Club: learning together



Do you need help with:

- Finding opportunities?
- Knowing what to say in interviews?
- Writing a CV?
- Using your computer or phone?

Come along to your local community-run Job Club

On Your Way
Job Club and Digital Inclusion

Held at and supported by:

- Moulsecoomb Library, Mondays 10am-2pm
The Highways, Brighton, BN2 4DZ
- Food Bank & Coffee Morning, Wednesdays 9:30am-12pm
Holy Trinity Hall, Norwich Drive, Bevendean, BN2 6JA
- The Bevy Pub, Thursdays 1:30-3:30pm
50 Hillside, Brighton, BN2 4TF

Phone: 07495 883752 | Email: jobclub.digital.inclusion@gmail.com

Thank you to the Resource Centre www.sussexcommunityfoundation.org.uk
Providing support to local community groups

On Your Way is a job club and digital inclusion project run by local volunteers in Moulsecoomb & Bevendean. Before the pandemic, they were running 3 weekly drop-in sessions, offering support with writing CVs, accessing the internet and interview preparation. This successful face-to-face support model was brought to a sudden

halt when local community venues closed their doors in March 2020.

The group offered online support, but the core element of their work was impossible to transfer online—a friendly and non-judgemental space in which people could exchange skills and experiences, and learn at their own pace. They reallocated funds to purchase laptops and software, and produce publicity materials in preparation for re-opening.

Since January 2022, they have been once again running regular drop-ins.

The flexibility of Sussex Community Foundation has been invaluable in enabling this group to survive and re-emerge. Reflecting on the experience, the group has decided to bring more volunteers onto the organising committee. Before the pandemic, much of the organising had taken place through informal discussions between volunteers at the drop-ins. Without that frequent contact, it proved difficult to create new methods of working together, and individual volunteers had to make decisions without reference to the wider group. They are now taking steps to make their processes more robust.

Group co-ordinator Jonathan White said:

"Friendly, local support with using computers and finding work is needed now, more than ever. It's a great feeling when someone you've helped lets you know they've found a job—makes everything worthwhile."

Resource Centre—responding and reflecting

Throughout the last two years, the Resource Centre has been adapting to the changing circumstances and the diverse needs of our member and user groups.

As a small charity, we have experienced many of the same issues described here—having to rapidly alter ways of working, get to grips with new technologies, make decisions on the hoof and manage the impact of Covid on our personnel.

The needs of our member groups have guided our decision-making, leading us to:

- ◆ Invest in new equipment for outdoor events, and safety indoors
- ◆ Keep our print service running throughout, with improved capacity and services
- ◆ Provide intensive support to our member groups, helping them to negotiate with funders, raise money for crisis support, get their finances in order, update policies and procedures, and re-establish their activities
- ◆ Establish clear protocols and good ventilation in the Centre, enabling us to reopen safely
- ◆ Survive financially—despite a dramatic drop in income—while continuing to be a supportive and flexible employer

We are now—as many groups are—evaluating and reflecting on how to move forward. Our development week in November will give us a chance to consider the best way to balance our services and use our resources, time, experience and knowledge.

At the heart of this evaluation will be the needs of the myriad grassroots groups we support. It's important that we are there for the groups who have adapted and moved forward as well as those who are still working out what they want to do and how they want to do it.

We also know there are many small groups out there, doing amazing things, who don't know about our printing service, equipment hire or one-to-one support.

When we work with groups we listen to their experiences and learn about their communities. We use this knowledge to assess how we can best support member groups to develop the skills they need and make progress towards the aims they have identified.

Sudanese Women and Children: being together is what matters

The Sudanese Women's and Children's group brings together women in the Sudanese community at fortnightly gatherings and other events, activities and celebrations.



Each year, the group elects an entirely new committee, which is responsible for fundraising and organising the events for the year. The aim is to ensure that these responsibilities and skills are shared widely among the members of the group.

The committee continued to meet on Zoom, but apart from a few celebration events during the summer and autumn of 2021, the group was unable to meet from March 2020 to early 2022. This has been a hard time for the members of the group, as the regular gatherings were very important to them.

Finally, in spring 2022, the group was able to relaunch with a series of meals during Ramadan. The committee used these events to gather ideas for activities, with the fortnightly gatherings once again forming the backbone of the group's work.

The Resource Centre carried out an examination of accounts and supported the committee to draw up a budget for the coming year and submit funding applications to Sussex Community Foundation and Brighton & Hove City Council.

The group's vice-chair, Intisar Ahmed, said:

"Being together is what matters to our group. When we are together, we can speak to each other in our own language, our children can hear their mothers talking and laughing around them, and we can share food and stories. It is impossible to do any of these things through a computer screen."

By working in this responsive and flexible way, we are able to support groups who are following a wide range of pathways. Our relationships with our member groups are long-term and based on trust and mutual respect. Whilst we assess what changes we need to make post-pandemic, we are committed to making sure this doesn't change.