

REFORM

Resilient State

Liberata

Resilience in local government

Lessons from COVID-19

About *Resilient State*

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a huge strain on the State, and while the response has demonstrated some of the great strengths of our public services and machinery of government, it has also exposed some of the biggest flaws. As we move towards a 'new normal', we have a unique opportunity to explore fundamental questions about the shape of the State and how it operates. *Reform's* 'Resilient State' programme seeks to learn the lessons from this crisis and identify the key building blocks that, if put in place, would enable us to better deal with future shocks and crises.

This collection presents case studies of resilience in local government. It was kindly supported by Liberata UK. It may not represent the views of our donors and partners. For a full list of our corporate donors and further information about *Reform's* funding model see our webpage.

About *Reform*

Reform is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We are dedicated to achieving better and smarter public services. Our mission is to set out ideas that will improve public services for all and deliver value for money.

We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach. *Reform* is a registered charity, the Reform Research Trust, charity no.1103739.

This publication is the property of the Reform Research Trust.

Get in touch



@reformthinktank



info@reform.uk



www.reform.uk

Contents

Introduction 03

Aidan Shilson-Thomas, Senior Researcher, *Reform*

Building relationships before you need them 04

Richard Holmes, Executive Director, Gloucester Community Building Collective

Ensuring digital inclusion in a pandemic 05

Jason Tutin, Digital & Learning Development Manager, Leeds City Council

A safe return to the high street 07

Jenny Nelson, Programme Manager, Digital Newcastle, Newcastle City Council

Innovation required: distributing support funds whilst safeguarding against fraud 08

Charlie Bruin, Chief Executive Officer, Liberata UK

Thriving communities: partnerships and behaviour change to combat COVID-19 10

Peter Pawson, Principal Consultant, Unity Partnership & Oldham Council

Introduction

Local government showcasing how to build back better

The current pandemic has been the greatest challenge local government has faced in a generation. After a decade of funding reductions, councils had little or no capacity for new services or increasing demand. This has made for an even greater test of their resilience, measured by their ability to respond to a new challenge as well as continuing to provide existing services.

The situation is grave; many councils are in financial crisis and facing bankruptcy, and there have been significant challenges with the delivery of public services created by lockdown measures. But in spite of this, examples have emerged of local government's remarkable adaptability and preparedness in the most difficult circumstances. The case studies of local government resilience showcased in this report highlight important lessons for both councils and for central government.

Councils that invested time and resources into building strong relationships with and within communities before COVID-19 had laid the foundations for a strong response. As Richard Holmes explains, relationships in Gloucester were built up so they were there when they were needed most, allowing for a community-led response – every house in the city was leafleted with guidance before a national lockdown had even been announced. This is not only a model of effective planning, but of social trust between government and citizens.

From the start, huge new pandemic demands had to be met within severe resource constraints. To respond effectively councils did not just have to be agile, they had to know how and where to prioritise. Those that did this best had a deep and real-time understanding of communities' needs, underpinned in many cases by good use of data. Oldham

Council's bespoke index of community need, created pre-pandemic, meant that a truly targeted approach could be taken to community engagement.

The pandemic has exacerbated old problems, like digital exclusion, and created entirely new ones, such as how to facilitate social distancing. Creativity has been key to tackling both. In Leeds, longstanding efforts to tackle digital exclusion, such as tablet-lending schemes, were well-positioned to help citizens and organisations transition to virtual communication. In Newcastle, technology was used in an entirely different way, to track how busy the city centre was in real-time, to inform social distancing guidance. Innovative uses of technology have been central to solving some of the pandemic's trickiest dilemmas for councils across the country.

The discussion about the national response to COVID-19 has been dominated by debates about policy failures and a perceived breakdown of trust between citizens and the state. The examples in this collection are a counterbalance to these narratives, and show what is possible. There should be honesty about the scale of the challenges ahead, while celebrating these examples of resilience. The State must learn from them to build back better and stronger than before.



Aidan Shilson-Thomas

Senior Researcher,
Reform

"Councils that invested time and resources into building strong relationships with and within communities before COVID-19 had laid the foundations for a strong response."

Building relationships before you need them

Since 2012, Gloucester has been applying 'Asset Based Community Development' (ABCD) as a means of growing community resilience. This approach centres on connecting neighbours around actions on things that are important to them. In doing so, people form new relationships with those they live closest too. Often these relationships grow into friendships, so when we encounter rough periods in our lives it's our neighbours who are on hand to help out.

ABCD is a way of building relationships before we need them. At the start of this year, little did any of us expect that we would need our neighbours as much as we have in 2020.

In the early months of 2020, news spread of how other countries were responding to a new virus, with residents being forced to stay at home. For many of us at the time the severity of the situation was unclear, but if it was to affect the UK, we would need people to help each other.

Gloucester City Council had been developing its practice in ABCD for many years, and had recently established Gloucester Community Building Collective, an independent community interest company with a core purpose of connecting residents and growing community capacity. This made it well-placed to play a leading role in the COVID-19 community response. In anticipation of lockdown measures, the organisation produced guidance for residents to help each other, with a contact card that could be posted with offers of support. With the help of the city's elected councillors, community activists and local organisations, we pulled together to print and deliver 57,000 leaflets to every house in the city before the Government announced a national lockdown.

This network of elected members and community leaders then helped to mobilise over 500 Street Champions across the city, who became points of contact for their streets. Often requests for help came directly to these Street Champions. However, for those who didn't

have that relationship, Gloucestershire County Council established a Help Hub, a central point where people could both ask for help and offer it, often facilitating reciprocal relationships.

Street Champions found that not only could they assist with food and medicine deliveries, but they were also able to provide feedback on local issues, which meant organisations could respond more effectively. This included providing 'bags of play' for vulnerable families, supplied by Play Gloucestershire, and 'arts and creative' packs, supplied by Gloucester Culture Trust to keep people engaged. What made this network of Street Champions and community leaders effective was that time and resources were placed into building relationships before they were needed. People had built trust, which had laid the foundations for collaboration rather than competition. Whilst the situation was uncertain, there was safety in the relationships, which allowed new ideas to come forward.

In order to build back better from this pandemic, we need to invest in communities: not just by funding short term projects with predefined outcomes, but by investing in community resilience, connecting residents and enabling them to co-create solutions. For councils and other organisations this will require building trust and learning how to 'step back', whilst not walking away. We have to continue to learn how to discern when our help is needed, and when we need to stand on the side lines in order for the community to build its own capacity. This is much harder than many of us are prepared to acknowledge.



Richard Holmes

Executive Director,
Gloucester Community
Building Collective

"What made this network of Street Champions and community leaders effective was that time and resources were placed into building relationships before they were needed."

Ensuring digital inclusion in a pandemic

100% Digital Leeds is the citywide digital inclusion programme, led by a Council team, working to ensure that everyone in the city has everything they need to live happier, healthier lives through the use of digital technology. We build the confidence and capacity of partners across the third sector and public sector, to improve digital skills and increase access to technology for service providers and citizens. This means taking a 'furthest first' approach to ensure that no-one is left behind or 'hard to reach'.

When the pandemic began, it was clear that digital exclusion would be exacerbated as citizens and services became more dependent on technology. We acted on several fronts to mitigate against this impact: to prevent vulnerable groups from being cut off from support, and to help them to continue to access services online.

Our first priority was to support organisations and vulnerable groups in the transition to new digital ways of working. This was especially urgent for health and wellbeing services as video appointments and online consultations increased – and shielding patients needed to self-manage health conditions. We worked closely with NHS partners, Leeds Community Healthcare and the third sector to embed digital inclusion within health and care settings.

We purchased more tablets to bolster our existing tablet lending scheme, which gives organisations the tools to work with digitally excluded service users. This has supported organisations ranging from care homes and housing units to peer support groups and recovery hubs. *100% Digital Leeds* has also purchased Amazon Echos with 'Alexa' voice command software, which have been given to carers and their loved ones to improve self-management in isolation and allow them to keep in touch.

Many of the organisations we work with provide healthcare services, but the pandemic has had wide-reaching consequences for all. The Third Sector Leeds Resilience Survey noted that 74 per

cent of all third sector organisations said digital exclusion has been an issue for the audiences they work with during the pandemic.

100% Digital Leeds worked closely with the Leeds City Digital Partnerships team and Forum Central, a network of Leeds' Health and Social Care organisations, to design and launch a grants fund worth £100,000 to support the third sector's pandemic response by working effectively with technology.

For small organisations – many of which had no financial reserves – we understood the importance of quick access to funding. We expedited the payment process and launched an online application portal to assess grant applications on a first-come, first-served basis. The first organisations to apply received funding within two days of the fund being launched.

The impact of this programme for services and users could be game-changing. One service reported to us: "Since lockdown, [the service user] had been staring at four blank walls and was spiralling deeper into depression...The mobile phone purchased for [them] literally transformed [their] world overnight."

A key part of our work during lockdown has been to empower organisations who work with the most vulnerable, isolated and excluded in Leeds to address digital exclusion. For many of them and their staff, Digital Champions training from our team was the start of their digital inclusion journey.



Jason Tutin

Digital & Learning
Development Manager,
Leeds City Council

"When the pandemic began it was clear that digital exclusion would be exacerbated as citizens and services became more dependent on technology. We acted on several fronts to mitigate against this"

6 - Resilience in local government

Our training raises awareness of the barriers that client groups are likely to face, and shows what practical steps organisations can take to help people overcome them.

During this period, we delivered tailored webinars to almost 500 delegates, to train audiences with different needs to become Digital Champions. For instance, we delivered webinars tailored to supporting people with learning disabilities and sensory impairments, foreign language speakers, and older people. Sessions were delivered in partnership with an organisation experienced in digital

inclusion and included a case study from an organisation in that field who are further along on their digital inclusion journey. This co-production fosters local digital inclusion communities and encourages the sharing of skills and best practice.

The *100% Digital Leeds* team are building a digital inclusion network across the City and increasing the opportunities for people to get online in the places and with the support that are most appropriate for them.



A safe return to the high street

The COVID-19 pandemic has created huge challenges for our high streets and changed our relationship with retail. At the height of the lockdown, retail footfall was down 70 per cent and, while this has since recovered significant ground, recent research indicates that people remain concerned about returning to the high street. If people do not return, this will be a fatal blow for many businesses, and the loss of income and employment for so many will be devastating. Yet as they do, the risk of spreading the virus rises.

Businesses and local government need to work together to balance these risks, creating COVID-19-secure environments, to reassure the public that it is safe to come back and shop in person.

We recognised that we needed to help people feel more comfortable returning to the city centre, and thoughts turned to how we might use data as a means to do this. The result was the web-based platform, *HowBusyisToon*, which uses real-time computer vision data from cameras that measure footfall levels in the City centre to advise residents of how busy it is, and how easily they will be able to social distance.

HowBusyisToon was designed to support four very different user needs:

- Residents need to feel safe so that they can confidently return to the City centre;
- City centre retailers need shoppers to return to the high street so that they can maintain their business;
- As a local authority, we need residents to feel safe to return to the City centre so that we sustain economic recovery and growth, protecting jobs and city vitality;
- As a Business Improvement District, we need to drive customer footfall so that businesses are sustainable.

To create the tool, it was essential to work collaboratively with local partners. Newcastle City Council and the Business Improvement District team provided the business intelligence for the tool, the data was sourced from the Urban Observatory at Newcastle University, and the National Innovation Centre for Data and the University's Research Software Engineering team worked together to provide the analytical capacity. Working together, we managed to create and deliver *HowBusyisToon* at no additional cost to the public purse.

Since launching the tool in July to test the concept and the public's reaction, the site has received more than 25,000 visits and a significant level of social media engagement. Feedback from users and politicians has been positive, and now other cities and organisations, such as local public transport providers, are interested in the concept. We have now been awarded national funding, from the MHCLG COVID-19 Digital Fund, to further develop the concept, to create an open source digital product that could be replicated elsewhere.

We're now exploring new concepts, undertaking user research to look more widely at what data would encourage citizens back into 'normal' city life. Alongside measures of footfall and 'busyness', there has been interest in the possibility of a metric that indicates the level of compliance with social distancing, and 'safety' ratings for high street shops. These findings present food for thought. In some cases, we don't currently have this kind of data to share, and we must consider the privacy implications of citizen generated or crowd sourced data. We've also looked at how COVID-19-related data is being used by other sources, including Google, Trip Advisor, and CityMapper, as it's important that we can maintain the public's trust.

Overall, *HowBusyisToon* has demonstrated the importance of data driven decision making and collaborative working in our pandemic response. As we move into the design phase for further COVID-19 initiatives, we are mindful of defining a very clear scope, so that our work will meet the most important user needs, and have the biggest impact.



Jenny Nelson

Programme Manager,
Digital Newcastle,
Newcastle City Council

"HowBusyisToon has demonstrated the importance of data driven decision making and collaborative working in our pandemic response."

Innovation required: distributing support funds whilst safeguarding against fraud

To give financial support to small businesses impacted by the lockdown, the Government introduced new Discretionary and Business Rate Grants for eligible businesses. It was down to local authorities to administer these, and the speed with which money could reach bank accounts was essential – businesses needed access to this emergency funding fast.

From the start there were two imperatives: set up schemes that were simple to use and which enabled prompt payment, while protecting against fraud or payments simply made in error with appropriate and rigorous governance procedures. These objectives could be in conflict – an easy to access scheme without the proper checks and balances and supporting processes becomes vulnerable to deception. HMRC has recently estimated that furlough fraud and error may exceed £3 billion.

Liberata worked at pace with its local authority clients, including North Somerset District Council, the London Borough of Hounslow and the London Borough of Bromley, to administer these grants and disburse monies on their behalf. This collaborative approach enabled councils to support businesses at a time of great need whilst safeguarding public monies.

Bringing together our expertise in service delivery, risk management, system development and project execution, we were able to develop an effective and expeditious solution that met the needs of local government and businesses, as well as working within complex Treasury parameters.

The interface for our solution was a set of electronic forms designed not only to be intuitive for users to fill in, but which could also enable diagnostics to detect potential fraud and highlight errors, inconsistencies or duplications. In this, we balanced the need for funds to be distributed quickly

with diligence to protect public funds. Design, build, testing and implementation were achieved within four weeks.

Innovative use of technology and automation meant that large volumes of applications could be triaged and screened before being evaluated by skilled technicians. 'Smart' online forms helped to ensure applications were complete and accurate. Our time could therefore be focused on assisting eligible businesses to access support. With the majority of applications being right first time, we could deliver swift resolution and payment of grants. A consistently robust approach to governance that incorporated an appropriate balance of technological and human control played a large part in us achieving these results.

The scale of our operations was substantial. Across the two schemes, Liberata processed over 23,000 individual claims and disbursed in excess of £145 million, whilst keeping fraud to an insignificant level. The expedient process meant that eligible businesses could receive their grant within five days of their submission being approved.

Innovation in a time of crisis does not always require extensive new invention. A deep understanding of an organisation's specialist resources, technical skills and expertise, and a vision to bring these together in the right way, can allow an organisation to adapt, overcome, and deliver.



Charlie Bruin

Chief Executive Officer,
Liberata UK

"A deep understanding of an organisation's specialist resources, technical skills and expertise, and a vision to bring these together in the right way, can allow an organisation to adapt, overcome, and deliver."

9 - Resilience in local government

The confluence of these, combined with the old-fashioned virtues of good project discipline, stakeholder expectation management and clear communications, can power solutions that go beyond meeting the varied needs of service users and clients alike.

In this case, large volumes of new government money were disbursed quickly to those that needed it whilst establishing strong safeguards and assurances that funds were going only to eligible businesses. Feedback from our clients has been positive, with North Somerset's Head of Support Services, Stuart Anstead, recognising Liberata for "going above and

beyond" to administer Business Rate Grants swiftly, and Peter Turner, Finance Director for the London Borough of Bromley commenting, "With only 7 payments (from a total of over 3,300) requiring further investigation for fraud or error, this is real success."

The coming months will present many more challenges which will require speedy and effective service delivery - and the careful use of public money. Liberata will work with local government through the winter months to develop innovative solutions that councils, businesses, and citizens can depend on.



Thriving communities: partnerships and behaviour change to combat COVID-19

At the onset of the first wave, we knew that communities in Oldham would face challenges, due to our demographic make-up and the levels of poverty in the Borough. One of the first steps in our response was to set up a COVID-19 helpline and build a customer database, to support anyone who needed help to access basic necessities such as food or medicines.

The helpline received over 2,000 calls in its first two weeks, and around 100 a day were from people who were isolating without a support network. At the same time, panic buying was increasing, which made it even more difficult for those people to get what they needed.

As the scale of the task ahead became clear, we understood the need to focus our resources where they were needed most. We realised Oldham's Thriving Communities Index, created before the pandemic, would enable us to target support.

Co-produced with services, Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCSFE) groups, and elected members, the Index is designed to truly reflect the geographic localities as agreed by those communities within the borough. It is made up of 30 socio-economic indicators for each neighbourhood so the council and partners can use it to understand different needs across the borough.

This is underpinned by a combination of quantitative data – ranging from churn in housing occupancy, A&E admissions and safeguarding, to police data – and qualitative data about peoples' perceptions of their neighbourhoods derived through workshops. The Index can be visualised on a map of 115 small neighbourhoods, made up of roughly 2,000 residents each. This allows us to identify pockets of need in our communities with quite a lot of granularity.

By cross referencing the data from the call database and overlaying the data from the Thriving Communities Index, we could pinpoint areas that were not engaging with the helpline, possibly suggesting unmet needs, and take a targeted approach to engagement. We initiated a multi-language communications campaign to reach further into these communities and ensure that they had the right support.

This method has allowed Oldham Council and its partners to respond in an efficient manner to meet the needs of its diverse population. The Index and the customer database have informed the provision of, and access to, food, sanitary products, mental health support, mutual aid, medicine, and housing support.

This approach has evolved in order to tackle the second wave, with door-to-door engagement becoming a keystone of the approach. Several teams are now out every day meeting people in priority areas, informed by data from the helpline, the Index and national testing. These teams are made up of redeployed council, health and leisure staff and VCSFE workers – this is a real 'Team Oldham' approach. This has been combined with targeted work with community leaders to get messages out via local channels, such as through WhatsApp groups, and at Friday prayer in Muslim communities.



Peter Pawson

Principal Consultant,
Unity Partnership & Oldham
Council

"As the scale of the task ahead became clear, we understood the need to focus our resources where they were needed most."

II - Resilience in local government

The door-to-door service has not only spread health messaging, which is critical to driving behaviour change on a borough wide level, we have also created a doorstep testing offer so hard-to-reach communities can get easier access to testing. Our emerging local contact tracing offer, which is scaling up as we speak, is delivering a higher contact rate than national tracing. We feel this is because there is a local offer of support, starting

with a local number coming up on residents' phones, but more importantly linking with a wider support offer that links residents with the relevant benefits, food, and care support where needed. Although we are working through a rapidly increasing number of cases, and know that there is a lot of work ahead of us this winter, we are confident that our community-driven and data-led approach will be key to turning the tide.



REFORM



[@reformthinktank](https://twitter.com/reformthinktank)



info@reform.uk



www.reform.uk