Local voices II

Living with uncertainty

(August–October 2020)

Introduction

When the coronavirus (Covid-19) hit in March 2020, we took time to talk to local people and places to understand their lived experiences and the emerging behaviours of individuals and organisations. This left us with many questions about the local impact of the pandemic, the potential challenges ahead and the opportunities that had surfaced.

Through our work with people and places we've continued to be immersed in local conversations throughout the pandemic and have now produced a second edition of 'Local voices'. This new edition captures experiences, feelings and behaviours through the second wave of the virus and raises further questions about the future. The first three themes identified are an evolution of themes shared in the first edition. We've also identified three new themes that have emerged during this specific capture period.

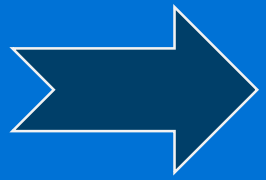
It's worth noting that the observations captured in this resource were prior to the announcement of a vaccination and the National Leisure Recovery Fund.

Themes

SPORT ENGLAND

1. Growth of inequalities and lockdown limitations
2. The power of people at all levels
3. Living with uncertainty and change
4. Survival
5. Tensions rising
6. Emerging leadership

Widening inequalities and impact on wellbeing



Growth of inequalities and lockdown limitations

April 2020 — November 2020

- Not only has there been a widening of inequalities but there's also been a **growth in the number of people experiencing them**. Individuals that previously weren't a specific focus for organisations such as ourselves are now experiencing reduced opportunities. Ultimately, the job has got bigger and even more important.

- The **definition of 'inequalities' is potentially broadening.** Increasing engagement is with individuals and communities that weren't a specific focus prior to the pandemic. For example, individuals who've taken a new caring responsibility by forming a bubble with family or friends.

- Communities, in particular vulnerable individuals, are increasingly becoming physically hard to reach. An intermittent shut down of community spaces has **limited physical interaction and connection** with usual services, charities and support groups. The ability to re-engage isolated members of the community is becoming an increasing concern. The digital divide experienced by many only continues to exacerbate this issue.

- We're continuing to hear that people are being **adversely affected by poor mental health, access to education and financial hardship**. There's a need for sensitivity in how the sector introduces physical activity when there are pressing issues of food and fuel poverty.

Growth of inequalities & lockdown limitations

Local and national emerging questions

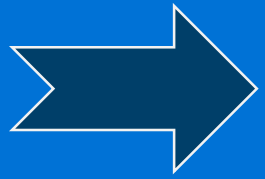
1. Individuals are experiencing layers of inequalities; how do we better understand the connections between these and influence the system to work collaboratively to address these?
2. How can we use lived experience to evolve our view and thinking of inequalities?
3. When's the right time to bring sport and physical activity in as part of the recovery?

Learning from the Tackling Inequalities Fund has found that:

- *There is a role for us to 'reframe' public spaces to make them more appealing/welcoming and reduce stereotypes about who uses them.*
- *Current need far outweighs the resources available and this keeps rising.*

Find out more

Making connectivity and trust count



The power of people at all levels

April 2020 — November 2020

- Helping people continues to be the driver for local systems coming together and doing things differently. The ability to provide this help has shown that local and national systems have been heavily reliant on **community and voluntary organisations to provide the gateway to local people and places** that are most in need of help.

- There's also been a significant reliance on key individuals whose passion and ability to reach communities in a meaningful way has made things happen on the ground. These **individuals increasingly need support and the flexibility of processes and procedures** to be able to offer the right support, at the right time, in the right way.

- Increasingly the workforce is providing help and guidance above and beyond. The emerging need for new skills and knowledge across the workforce must be prioritised to **nurture and support the power of people.**

- **Capacity burnout** is being felt everywhere. The workforce has responded selflessly and risen to the challenge, but this can't be sustained without extra resources often in the form of people, not always money.

The power of people at all levels

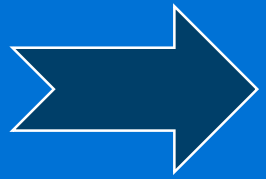
Read Leah's story

Read Roberta's story

Local and national emerging questions

1. The importance of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) has been brought to the fore, what does this mean for our work going forward?
2. How do we focus our efforts to support those that can really deliver?

Daily life



Living with uncertainty and change

April 2020 | November 2020

- In the first lockdown people were able to rally and work together to overcome what they believed to be a short-term solution but now there's a real **lockdown fatigue which is hitting people hard** and what little optimism there was, is now depleted.
- Mental health is suffering as people's resilience is wearing thin and the **dark winter months are only adding to this feeling.**
- People are feeling a real **sense of loss** for what life was like 'pre-coronavirus' and want to return to normality but underlying this is the notion that 'normal' is going to have changed immensely.
- With local restrictions constantly subject to change, physical spaces have often remained closed to groups, activities have yet to return, events are postponed, and people remain fearful. This is resulting in **long-term isolation for individuals of all ages** and contributing to worsening physical and mental wellbeing.
- **Social interaction, conversations and messaging around physical activity** are more important than ever, especially with the target groups were trying to reach.

Living with uncertainty and change

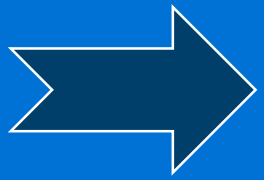
Emerging question

1. People are getting used to the uncertainty. How will they cope once life changes again and we all try to get back to some form of normality?

We heard from people working within local communities that:

- *We are riding the Covid roller-coaster*
- *Telephone befrienders are struggling to give people hope. Older people have little confidence in things ever changing for the better. They are worried they may never be able to get back to the life they once knew.*

Financial sustainability and recovery



Survival

April 2020 — November 2020

- For many of us – individuals, families and organisations – this year's presented significant financial challenges. The supply and demand assumptions that drive local economies have taken a considerable battering. For many working within the leisure sector the financial situation is **no longer about simply bouncing back from the first lockdown, it's about survival.** Organisations can't easily pick up the pieces when further local and national lockdowns challenge economic coherence and the ability to plan.

- We know many planned investments are now paused as the assumptions underpinning them can no longer be relied upon. Even more fundamental is the exposure of business models which were already creaking, where the tensions and challenges were just below the surface pre-coronavirus. The whole offer and business model around leisure is going to have to be re-thought. **Fewer resources, more anxieties and a bigger need are the challenges having to be faced for the 2020s.**

- For now, decisions around these challenges are being deferred thanks to various forms of temporary financial support. But 2021 will be critical for our sector to discuss and reflect on **what's most valued, what's most needed and what can be made viable.** Without some answers to guide decisions there's a tangible fear that disproportionate impacts will start to mount up in places and communities that are least able to bear it.

- Many within the sector are clear that public resources for leisure will be squeezed over the next few years. Already there's a view that this may result in a highly targeted leisure offer with the 'universal' leisure service provision either discontinued or made much more aggressively commercial. The **social vs. commercial dilemma** for leisure trusts and other non-profit leisure providers will be acute.

Survival

We heard from local authorities that:

Building back better was a summer 2020 phrase. It feels overly optimistic and doesn't reflect the sheer devastation which is still going on.

Local and national emerging questions

1. What's most valued from sport and leisure services and why?
2. How will we take tough decisions on what should/can be saved and what's beyond repair?
3. How do we reimagine sport and leisure and repurpose the built assets?

Tensions rising

- We're seeing a wave of **tensions emerging**. National vs. local, north vs. south, old vs. young, here and now vs. strategic thinking. The list goes on.

- The last few months have seen a greater appreciation across the system as to **why local matters.** Locally driven decisions and actions have shown their strength when blended with and supported by appropriate national action.

- With the variation of local lockdown restrictions, the **feeling of 'we're in this together' has dwindled**. The sense of camaraderie or common purpose has become increasingly fragmented as experiences become even more varied and disproportionate.

- The **tight control** of many national organisations' resources is likely to continue to play out and remain a source of friction. Particularly with local authorities where there's increasing tension about the future funding arrangements.

- There's been the difficulty of dealing with the here and now against finding the time to think more strategically. **Finding a balance** between the 'needs of now' whilst collaborating towards a shared vision.

- As a national organisation we're continuing to explore how to appreciate these tensions which we sometimes find ourselves a part of. It's important we **all learn to work with the tensions** in the future to ensure ongoing value and impact for communities.

Tensions rising

Local and national emerging questions

1. How do we understand and navigate the tensions in the systems to ensure we reach those with the most need?
2. How do we remain true to our purpose and values? Avoiding competition between organisations, especially for resources, and be more collaborative to build a stronger voice together?

Several local delivery pilots and local authorities spoke of a widening north vs. south divide underpinned by anger, frustration, anxiety, scepticism and fear. Increasingly everyone's experiencing the return to play differently, creating frustration and, at times, confusion.

Emerging leadership

- An emerging pattern of who can really access and deliver in places at a time of restrictions is now becoming clearer. We can see evidence of a **growing 'humanitarian' leadership** in communities where people who had no formal role or perceived capability have emerged as leaders simply based on the need to organise and support their immediate neighbours and friends.

- These individuals wouldn't necessarily see themselves as leaders but their convening and catalysing behaviours locally are tangible. Having seen many examples of this sustained over several months, wider system partners are investing further resources in **connecting and supporting these new leaders.**

- We're seeing a move to **leadership behaviours** which revolve around compassion, empathy, honesty, trust, and collaboration.

- The leadership of place and being seen to **speak for 'your community'** has come to the fore since the summer, in particular over local lockdowns. There are highly visible examples of this (e.g. council leaders) but we've found that speaking up for your community doesn't always rely upon formal authority and power structures. A sense of place identity has been strengthened through the challenges of further lockdowns and the resilience required.

Emerging leadership

Local delivery pilots reflected that it's been important not to look over the fence for someone else to do the leading. It's important to listen to the needs of the community – investing in people who understand the locality and can make things happen.

One local authority described how the spirit of the city hadn't been broken and they would continue to do what they do best; collaborate.

Local and national emerging questions

1. How can we best support these emerging community leaders to flourish?

2. How do we reframe leadership and build on the behaviours we're now seeing?

Behaviours that support change

As part of this reflective process, we've identified how people are connecting, working and the emerging behaviours that are helping them build trust and reach out to others.

When thinking about how we need to act and lead, we should consider the following;

1. How comfortable are we with living and working in the grey and with emergence, nothing fixed, or stable or certain?
2. How can we develop high levels of personal resilience and help others to develop theirs?
3. How do we distribute leadership – local leaders from communities have come to the fore, how are they enabled to develop their role?
4. How do we retain the good collaborative behaviours the crisis has encouraged locally and not revert to previous siloed behaviours?

Reflections summary

We've seen how people are continuing to try and find a balance between the 'needs of now' whilst finding the time and headspace to look to the future. Through our local conversations there are questions that have emerged which we feel are important to consider as part of future thinking and planning.

- Where does physical activity fit in the inevitable resetting of local priorities?
- How do we collaboratively work with communities to retain the positive physical activity messages and opportunities to be active in new ways?
- What will the impact of a recession look like locally?
- How can we continue to connect to common purpose, ensuring a balance between economic drivers, wellbeing and equality as we move towards recovery?
- What's most valued from sport and leisure services and how do we use this understanding to reimagine sport and leisure and repurpose the built assets?
- How do we reframe leadership and build on the behaviours we're now seeing?
- **Individuals are experiencing layers of inequalities; how do we better understand the connections between these inequalities and influence the system to work collaboratively in new or different ways to address them?**

Thank you