Turning despair into hope: A power to change approach

"When a flower does not bloom you fix its environment, not the flower."

Since March 23rd, 2020, Leicestershire Cares has been actively involved in supporting young people, community groups and schools to deal with the impact of the Covid19 lockdown and pandemic. We have also actively participated in local policy forums, hosted a wide range of learning and sharing webinars and carried out ongoing rapid participatory appraisals.

Throughout the lockdown, we have shared thoughts and papers both locally and with a wide range of national policy and government institutions. Reflecting on our learning from the "place" and "context" we are operating in, we have developed our "power to change" based approach to working with young people, communities, councils and business.

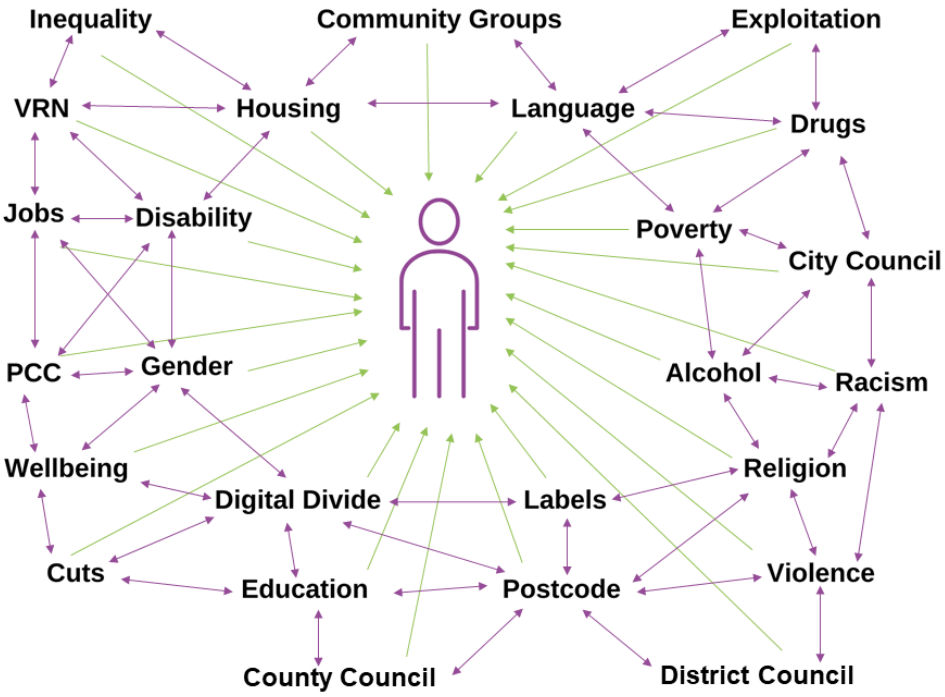
Place

Place is important. Lockdown has really highlighted that people often care most about the neighbourhood where they live and issues where they feel they can have an impact. A lot of political and policy discourse can feel unreal and most local people do not participate or vote in local elections. However, many people volunteer both formally and informally and the growth of local support groups and foodbanks has shown that "place-based" community development is a strong motivator.

This place-based local knowledge can be key when, for example, trying to understand why people might not be complying with lockdown rules or are reluctant to take the vaccine. A walk through Belgrave, a stroll around Foxton or a walk through the council estates of New Parks will bring home just how diverse our city and county is. All these neighbourhoods and communities have their own unique cultures and heritage. Understanding and working in a coproduction way with local people is the key to effective local development.

Context

We are very aware there are a lot of context issues below and this is our key observation. There is **no one single linear cause and effect that disadvantages young people and communities, rather there are a complex range of interlocking issues** that need to be understood and dealt with in a joined up and holistic manner.



Poverty and inequality

The pandemic has amplified and exaggerated what we already know. Our communities, cities and towns have big divides and sadly your postcode is all too often an indicator of your life expectations. Even in a relatively small city like Leicester, life expectancy can drop by three or four years between different districts.

The pandemic's impact was felt very differently by poor people living in crowded houses without Wi-Fi and having to go to work, to more affluent people living in spacious houses, where they and their children could comfortably study and work from home. The growth of foodbanks and concerns about food poverty are another indicator of the deep rooted levels of poverty across our city and county.

The rise of new technology

For many of the people we work with, the internet has been a lifeline during lockdown. The growth of online working, services and community support opens a wide array of opportunities to do things differently and connect people. It also increases concerns about the influence the internet is having on people and the increasingly faceless nature of our "algorithm driven" society. Supporting communities and young people to understand and benefit from our increasingly "digital society" is likely to be a key area of work over the coming years.

Digital divide

If you are unfortunate enough to live in a house with no or poor Wi-Fi access, you are excluded. If your family has one smart phone and limited data to share amongst six, getting online to participate in schooling is impossible. We have spent a lot of

time during lockdown sorting out Wi-Fi access and loaning laptops to vulnerable and isolated young people so they can tap into support. In many ways having access to the internet is becoming as much of a necessity as running water and electricity. As well as access, people need support to become “digitally competent”. A webinar we hosted on the subject concluded that in the 21st century, internet access should be a right and not a privilege.

Education

There is growing evidence that school closures have had a hugely disproportionate impact on the learning of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with additional needs, and that it is going to be difficult for these students to catch up. Locally, this has led to a lot of community action to support these young people and our own efforts have included providing safe distanced homework spaces, digital support and getting business volunteers to run online sessions on topics such as employability and numeracy skills.

Jobs

ONS data shows that unemployment has tripled across our city and county over the last year, and many young people are very concerned about being able to get a steady, decent job. The city economy has a high dependency on SMEs and the double whammy of Brexit and Covid19 may well lead to many folding.

It was predicted prior to lockdown that around 1 million people would lose jobs in retail as consumers increasingly shop online, and the lockdown has accelerated this change. The collapse of the retail sector is likely to have a bigger impact on women, who are more likely to be employed in this sector. There is also the growing issue of the “gig” economy and many new jobs being part time, temporary and not offering paid leave and sick pay. The much publicised “modern slaves” and textile industry stories seems to suggest that many people are driven or forced out of desperation into unsafe and illegal employment.

We can do a lot of work supporting young people to develop employability skills, but there also need to be jobs available for them. In addition, it is likely that as unemployment rates grow, the more disadvantaged young people will find themselves pushed to the back of longer queues as employers have more “job ready” people to choose from. The Kickstart scheme offers some hope and opportunities to support these young people.

This is clearly an area where the goodwill developed between councils, business and community during lockdown could be built on to develop innovative solutions for generating economic growth and job creation.

Business cares

Throughout the pandemic, the local business community has stepped up in lots of ways to support those in danger of being left behind. Our own practice has seen hundreds of businesses volunteers sharing skills and knowledge with young people

and community groups alongside businesses supplying food, essential items and PPE to community groups and foodbanks.

Cuts to services

Across our city and county, councils have had to cut back on services and this means young people and community groups can struggle to get support.

Community sector is struggling

Against a background of cuts, many community groups are struggling. Whilst it is great that so many have stepped up during the lockdown, once emergency funding disappears, numerous community groups will struggle again and people might lose vital support.

The pandemic has highlighted the enormous benefits the voluntary, community and faith-based sector brings to communities. The “levelling up” agenda and #BuildBackBetter movements have all started creating discussions that strongly suggest more needs to be done to support local community, voluntary and faith-based groups.

Competing visions

Many would agree that the way to develop a country, region, county, city and community is by having government, business and community working together in partnerships. In many ways this is the backbone of the United Nations sustainable development goals.

The pandemic has highlighted that this is often easier said than done. The “third sector” (community, voluntary and faith sector) has some contact with councils but often it is an ad hoc and erratic partnership that is not systematised. There is no real forum for community, business and council to meet regularly and develop shared visions and this can lead to confusion and even clashing visions. This “confusion” can be exacerbated by the political differences that can come between city, county and district councils and the lack of a single forum for either business or community.

However, the response to the pandemic has led to more proactive attempts at partnership with some positive results. Whilst developing this “collective” working will be a challenge, the personal as well the organisational relationships developed do provide fertile soil in which to grow these partnerships.

Creativity and agility

Much of what has worked well during the lockdown has been delivered by staff and agencies who have managed to be creative and agile. Many of these organisations have been informal community, neighbourhood and faith-based initiatives. Often the internet has played a big role in helping these groups to mobilise resources and support.

Disillusionment

Many of the young people and groups we work with have little interest, respect or faith in local or national politicians. There is a strong feeling that politicians do not care about them. Media coverage of local and national politicians appearing to break lockdown rules was often cited as examples of “one rule for them, another rule for us”. Most of the young people we work with cannot see the point in voting. It will be interesting to see if there is any effect on the usually low voting rates in the upcoming local elections.

On the upside, many people have become involved in local community action or volunteered their services during the lockdown. So, there is a bedrock of goodwill that could be built on, the key learning seeming to be that people are often more motivated by very tangible local issues where they feel they can make a difference.

Disconnect

Many of the poorest people in our city and county are disconnected from decision making and support. The rise in Covid19 infection rates across parts of the city, whilst reflecting crowded housing and people having to go to work, also suggested a disconnect between information, support and advice and some of our more vulnerable people. In truth, many officials across all sectors struggled to understand and explain behaviour that led to the rise in the infection rates. Cuts to local community support networks meant that local knowledge and understanding was often not present in the discussions.

Language

If you do not speak or read English, much of the information produced during the pandemic may well pass you by. In addition, with the growth of the internet and people choosing to watch TV programmes from their ‘home’ country, it is entirely possible for people in the middle of Leicester city to be out of the “official comms” loop. This might also partly explain why certain groups are so anti taking the vaccine.

Identities and labels

Many of the young people and community groups we work with have multiple identities. The labels and lens through which people are viewed can have a big impact on the support and provision available for them. This raises the question of “who decides” on the “labels” and how does this impact on resource allocation.

Black Lives Matter

Before the lockdown, from MacPherson to Lammy, report after report had highlighted systemic racism in our society and institutions. As infection rates spread it was a clear reminder that BAME staff and communities were often at higher risk of Covid19. Discussions about why infection rates spread also led in some quarters to racist finger pointing. It sadly suggested that our city and county are not quite as united as we might wish, and a lot of work must be done to tackle racism and to increase tolerance and understanding across communities. On the plus side, there

are many committed people and organisations who are very willing to take this work forward.

Care experience

Sadly, young care experienced people are often amongst the most disadvantaged. Locally, despite the committed efforts of the city and county council it can still be the case that care leavers can end up being isolated and vulnerable, and this can lead to all sorts of issues, challenges and exploitation.

Housing

The lack of safe, secure affordable housing is a significant challenge across the city and county. It prevents young people from finding work or participating in education or training, as well as putting them at risk of exploitation. However, the lockdown also showed what can be done when the government resources councils to provide emergency housing.

Exploitation and violence

It is a subject that has a lot of media attention and for good reasons because it is a real threat to our communities and young people. County lines, domestic abuse, bullying, hate crimes, knife crime and modern slavery are all sadly present in our communities. A webinar we hosted on county lines had 423 participants and clearly demonstrated that there is a lot of concern and a need for joined up action to defeat this vile practice. It should be noted that the internet is often used as a way of “recruiting and distributing” by county lines gangs. There are strong links between county lines, the rise in knife crime and modern slavery.

Mental health

A lot of the young people we work with struggle with mental health issues: anxiety, depression and addictive behaviours being most common. Accessing professional support can be challenging, however, thanks to a lot of local and national campaigning there is increased awareness and understanding of mental health and wellbeing.

Impact on young people: Complexity

The place and context in which young people live has a significant impact on their life chances. They are affected by a range of overlapping and interlinked issues. The key point to highlight here is that there is not one neat, linear solution to a simple cause and effect, rather for most of the young people we work with, there is a complex web of issues that need to be addressed in an agile and creative way.

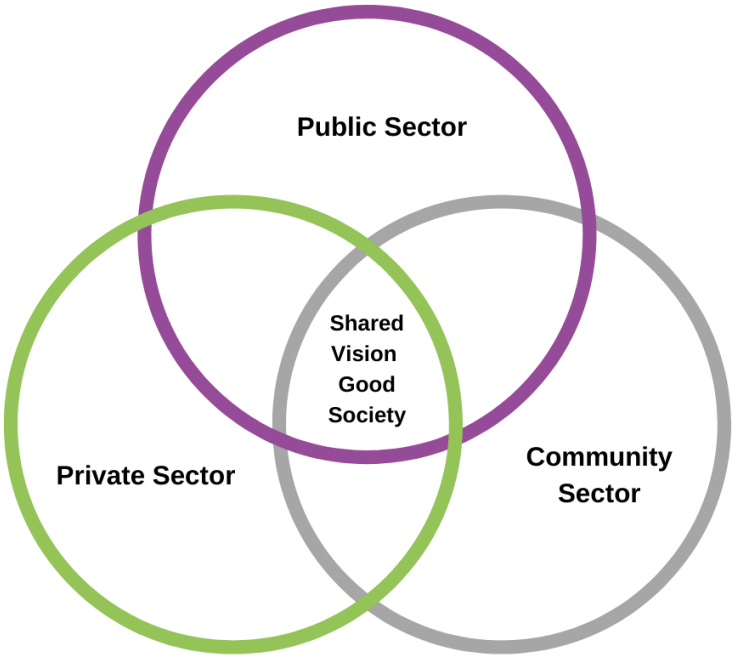
These **complex issues** often include: having experience of and been emotionally scarred by the care system; physical and mental health issues; insecure or inappropriate housing; addictions; involvement in crime; lack of family support; having children taken into care; domestic abuse; debt and financial management issues; racism; immigration status; living in a deprived area; poor levels of basic education; and being unwilling or unable to get a job. For many of these young

people, Covid19 seemed to be just another hurdle and stress in their often chaotic and complex lives.

It is our strong belief based on reflecting on our practice, that to work effectively with these young people, we need to understand the complexity of their life situation and work with them to address these overlapping issues.

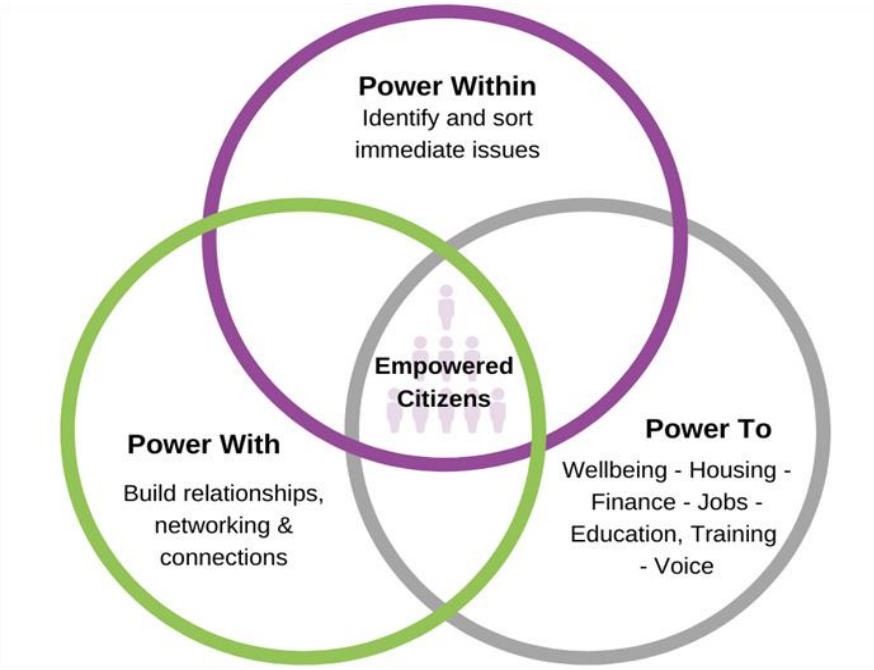
What needs to be done: Our power to change approach

We believe that partnership and creativity is key. If local government, business and community can work together in creative and agile partnerships, without “egos, silos or logos”, in the knowledge that nobody has all the answers but all of us have the answers, then we are more likely to identify the solutions to the many challenges we face. It is these values and beliefs that are behind our power to change approach. This approach has been developed and refined by our reflection with young people, staff and partners based on learning arising from our work. In many ways it resonates strongly with the old saying “it takes a village to raise a child”.



At the heart of this approach is the belief that we need to work with young people in a joined up, agile and holistic way that is rooted in partnership working and a solid understanding of the local place and context. It is also based on the belief that young people are often best placed to know what is best for them and, given support and encouragement, they can become “creators” rather than just “consumers” of services and solutions.

The three dimensions of power



Power within

As noted above, many of the young people we work with are having to deal with a wide range of complex issues. There is no point trying to work with them on issues such as getting a job or sharing their lived experience until this ‘chaos’ is dealt with. Key to our approach is being young person centred and working with the young person to identify the issues they face and to support them to understand why this is and how they might bring about change. Quite often, this is linked to obtaining secure, safe accommodation, getting out of abusive relationships, seeking practical and emotional support, getting on top of finances and developing IT and living skills. It requires our staff to have strong links with the various community and local authority service providers who can provide specialist support.

Power with

Many of the young people we work with see themselves as worthless and powerless individuals. They are often living isolated lives and feel cut off from society. We believe that if we can bring people with similar experiences together, it can be an empowering experience. When young people are encouraged to think more collectively about the context and environment in which they have been growing up and how that may have shaped them, it can be a transformational experience.

Key to this “social action” approach is that anything that has been “socially constructed” can be changed. In many ways, this unfolding process of knowledge and realisation is the bedrock of effective citizenship. It is also based on the belief that to get on in life you need to be able to develop and build relationships, networks and connections. Your group becomes your back up and a source of inspiration and strength. The more you get used to working in groups the easier it becomes to make

new connections and, as any manager or would-be employer will tell you, “teamwork” is an essential life skill.

Throughout this stage, we are proactively working with young people to create opportunities for them to build understanding and connections with community, business and local authority staff as well as their peer group. This might vary from attending a community project to completing a work placement with a local business or being mentored by a local business volunteer. Not only do these connections offer practical support, but they also provide young people with experience of meeting people who may well be very different to them. From being isolated and cut off, young people become more confident and sociable.

That is why as well as our youth workers, we have community workers, working to strengthen the community sector and to build links between business, community and local authorities.

Power to

Once young people start to understand more fully the situation they are in and why so many of their peers are in a similar situation, it can be a powerful catalyst for change. So, for example, we have supported young people to educate decision makers and other young people about their experiences and contribute to structural changes in the way services are developed and delivered. This process also enables young people to develop a wide range of soft and hard skills which many then use to secure a job or enter education or training.

Supporting young people’s journeys

This power to change approach assumes that young people might often “yoyo” in and out of the various power stages and our staff are flexible and agile in being able to adapt to the ever-changing needs of their young people. With support and encouragement, many will find the process of individual and collective realisation enables them to make sense of their lives, the context in which they live and the changes they want to make happen for themselves and others. In doing this, most will realise they are not an “island unto themselves” and the ability to build connections and relationships are key. The “power with” stage is therefore a crucial part of the process and we would suggest most people who get on in life do so because of the connections and networks they inherit, develop and maintain.

A skilled team of staff

The emphasis on building connections within our power to change approach requires our staff to be effective networkers who can work creatively in partnership with a wide range of business, community and local authority staff. Crucial to this approach is an understanding of the environment and context in which young people are growing up, alongside an ability to form networks that seek to share, explore, learn and respond to the issues arising from the work. It also recognises that there are often no “silver bullets” or off the shelf solutions. If organisations work together with a

willingness to learn from each other and to listen to young people, then we are much more likely to achieve positive outcomes for young people.

Conclusion #TogetherWeCan

Covid19 has shone a cruel light on the many issues facing our city and county, but it has also shown that there is spirit and a willingness for people to work together. It might be a cliché, but our strongest asset is our people and we firmly believe that all young people, given support and opportunities, have much to offer to the recovery and development of our city and county. Rather than seeing them as victims or problems, we must see them as assets and solutions who can create rather than just consume ideas and policies.

We believe our power to change approach can inspire young people's energy, vitality and creativity and, in doing so, turn despair into hope and create a better city and county for all.

Kieran Breen

CEO Leicestershire Cares

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@LeicsCares

In addition to internal discussion with our staff, young people and community partners. Drafts of this paper greatly benefited from the feedback of colleagues working for Leicester City Council, Leicestershire County Council, Violence Reduction Network, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner ,CASE, THINK FC, Reaching People, Moneywise Plus, De Montfort University ,DMU Local, Deconstructing Media, Vulnerability 360, Centre for Social Justice, Compass, Diana Award, Joules group PLC, AllTruck PLC, Nylacast, Sytner group limited, Rock, Kitchen and Harris Ltd, Access group, Samworth Brothers Ltd and, Knights PLC. Their willingness to set aside time in their busy schedules to read and feedback was greatly appreciated.