

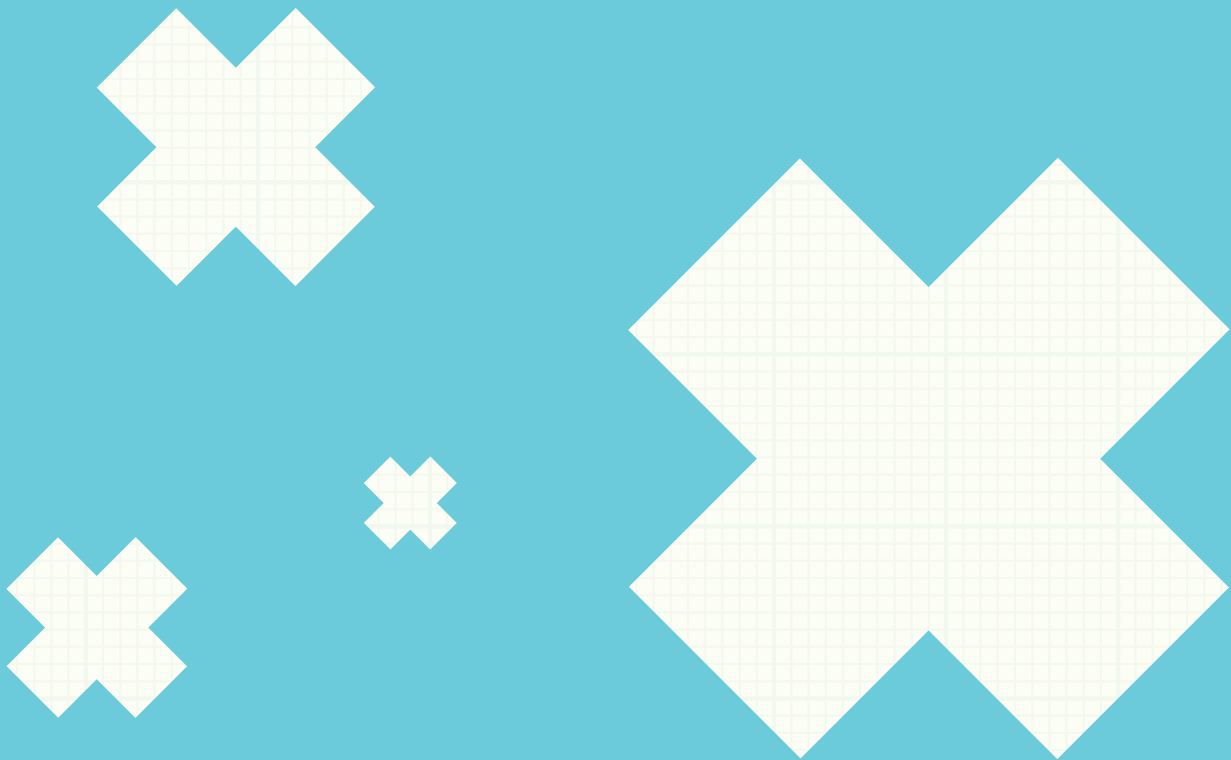


power to
change

business in
community
hands



Network Support



Community business peer networking before and during coronavirus

A report prepared for Power to Change

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About this paper

Power to Change supports and promotes community businesses both through specific programmes and through wider field-shaping market development. This strand of work aims to build a supportive policy environment and infrastructure for community business to flourish. As part of an ongoing evaluation of the market development work, this paper examines the role of peer networking between community business practitioners. The research reported in the paper was undertaken during the early months of the Covid-19 lockdown, and so it reflects on the value of peer networking before and during the crisis.

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Key Points

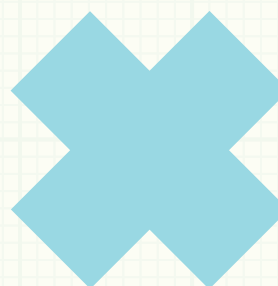
1. Supported and facilitated networking is highly valued, as much for its emotional and personal support for individuals, as for its practical benefits in terms of sharing information, problem solving advice and guidance, reflections on practice in other places, and understanding of wider agendas.
2. Without investment and support, such networking appears to become more fragmented, ad hoc and interpersonal, as the capacity of individuals to engage is squeezed instead by day-to-day priorities.
3. In market development terms, support for community business through networking seems to arise more immediately at individual and organisational levels, including clusters of similar organisations, and less evidently through influencing systems, structures and wider agendas.
4. As a result of Covid-19, community businesses have experienced dramatic changes in their operating environments, with significant declines in trading income from services and buildings, new and increasing demand, and rapid adjustments in services, staffing and ways of working. In this context, peer networking has proved to be an invaluable resource in terms of sharing and signposting information, and for mutual social support during the crisis.

01. Introduction

The response to Covid-19 has involved drastic lockdown measures in support of virus suppression. This has had the effect of turning a public health crisis into a wider social and economic crisis. Over a three to four-month period from late March 2020, citizens were urged to stay at home and reduce interactions with others outside their household, other than for essential purposes. In effect, we went into isolation. Our relationships, connections and networks needed to become socially distanced, but many were recreated through digital means, through Zoom, WhatsApp and other platforms.

Community business practitioners had to adjust rapidly to emergency needs in their communities, enforced new ways of working, and urgent reassessment of their business models. In this context, it is worth pausing to assess the role of networks in supporting community businesses, both in general and in times of crisis. What has been the role and value of connections with others through peer networking, and what kinds of support flow through these networks? And what does this imply for market development efforts to build a facilitative environment for community businesses to grow and flourish?

This paper discusses insights and learning about peer networking from telephone interviews with sixteen community business practitioners in England. The interviews were conducted in late April and through May 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown. Interviewees were either members of the Power to Change Health and Social Care Community of Practice (CoP) or were network coordinators in Power to Change's earlier Peer Networks Programme (PNP). Each interview lasted between c.30-50 minutes, was fully transcribed, and analysed by the research team against four core themes reported in the 'Findings' section: (1) the value of networking, (2) the impact of networking, (3) the impact of Covid-19, and (4) the role and value of networking during and beyond Covid-19.



02. Peer networking, community business and Power to Change

Community businesses can often operate in relative isolation from each other and without an obvious peer group. Given this, there is a logic to strengthening networks of shared interest, both from a trading perspective (sharing information in response to external opportunities, trading with each other or sharing back-office services) and to building solidarity and a sense of shared mission among community businesses as a whole.

Peer networking is often taken to include ‘communities of practice’ (CoP), but in theory the latter is distinguished from general peer networking by having a clearer definition, membership and *raison d’être*, and a main purpose around learning¹. The role of networks and CoPs in relation to community business would appear to be to support shared learning and problem-solving to increase resilience, adaptive capacity and generate innovation. Yet rather than having specific instrumental purposes, the theory is that they help to create the conditions under which other purposes might be achieved.

Power to Change takes a broad-brush approach to the benefits of peer networking. In the PNP, it invested a total of £750,000 over 18 months to April 2018 in 13 peer networks across a range of business sectors and interests. This included support for a CoP for 13 ‘network builders’ (OSCA, 2019). The programme aimed to grow the number of community businesses involved in peer networking, to create new connections and interactions, to increase collaboration and ‘motivation to collaborate’ and to encourage self-generation among community business networks. Beyond this, the programme sought, among other things, to test whether peer networks act as ‘an impactful, sustainable and valued mechanism for community businesses’ (OSCA, 2019: 6). The evaluation notes that the three highest ranked purposes of the networks among respondents were ‘Sharing best practice/ learning/creating new knowledge’; ‘Providing mutual support/advice’ and ‘Improve community business sustainability’ (OSCA, 2019: 5).

In addition to the PNP, a CoP was specifically set up for community businesses working in health and social care. This ran from July 2018 with an initial cohort of six individuals. A second phase beginning in April 2019, when a call went out for an additional 10 to 14 members, after some of the original cohort shifted their focus away from community business models. The CoP aimed to support people developing community businesses to deliver better and more sustainable health and social care services.

¹ See <https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/> for background information on ‘communities of practice’, accessed 28-1-20.

Interviews with external stakeholders as part of the scoping work for the Market Development evaluation highlighted the wide range of existing spaces, networks and relationships both among social enterprises and the co-operative movement, and within which Power to Change has intervened. There is an implied understanding that support for network building and CoPs can be temporary, and that they might reach a stage where they can continue and Power to Change can withdraw. Yet its experience of the peer networking programme suggests that when it does withdraw the momentum dissipates. One theme of the OSCA evaluation is that participants in the PNP are time-pressed – and, by implication, this activity would not be their priority without Power to Change support. These themes also emerge in the evaluation fieldwork undertaken for this paper.

03. Findings

01. The value of networking

Overwhelmingly research participants saw peer networking as worthwhile. They were grateful to have been given the chance to take part and would certainly be involved again if the opportunity arose, even if they could not identify specific benefits of participation. The value of peer networking arises in three main ways, according to participants: (1) personal and emotional support, (2) practical learning and tips, and (3) wider learning about the policy context and experience in other places.

The personal and emotional side of peer networking support was uppermost in several participants' reflections among both the PNP and CoP groups, even where participants might be sceptical about the value of networking generally. Members of the Health and Social Care CoP felt supported and strengthened in their role as a result of being involved in the network. For one participant, a new CEO grappling with issues associated with asset management, 'They basically kept me sane'. Being able to speak and share experiences with a trusted group of peers is vital – it gives you a voice, makes you realise that you are not alone in your dilemmas and struggles, and prevents you being too 'inward-looking'. It provides an outlet, particularly for those in leadership roles:

A CEO's job is quite a lonely job, really. The more support network we have around it, it's good for our mental well-being and it's good for our progression into creating organisations which are viable by having shared ideas, which are tried and tested somewhere else. And that helps a lot. And it helps to get it off your chest as well and have a good old moan.

This personal support through networks seems in some cases to have endured beyond the life of the formal peer network or community of practice, through ongoing bilateral relationships, based on personal affinity, compatibility and support between members. Relationships among PNP coordinators were not as close as within the CoP, in part because of the time that has passed since the project was funded, though some are still in touch with other peer network coordinators on a personal basis.

More pragmatically, perhaps, participants have used the collective knowledge and wisdom across network members to share and receive practical tips, suggestions and learning about specific organisational challenges and dilemmas, for example around team working, organisational structure, mergers and property. These pointers help put individual problems into wider perspective. An efficiency argument mattered for one participant, who suggested that community businesses need peer networking because 'I think it allows people not to re-invent the wheel'.

Those who were part of the PNP network coordinators' group found their discussions were very helpful in being able to take ideas and materials back to cascade through their own networks. They would translate them for their network members, for example on vision, values, working practices. Through this process good or helpful ideas were transferred between individuals and organisations: 'It was perfect timing... I just was able to take all of what I was picking up and learning and the tools I was picking up to actually go back and say, "right, you know, we need to review our purpose, you know, is the vision that we are still current...?"'

Finally, participants spoke of enhancing their understanding both of practice elsewhere, and the wider policy and practice context. It was an encouragement to look outwards rather than within existing organisation, field and locality silos. This was helpful, it was thought, in bolstering efforts to change local approaches and practices: 'Opportunities to think about a bit more [at a] systemic level...what needs to shift on the national level in order to allow better local outcomes.' Sharing knowledge and understanding about the bigger picture helped place local efforts in a wider context of latest developments.

Underpinning these dimensions of value from networks were two important features. First, is the curation of a space and time for reflection, away from both pressing demands of organisation and management, and the people participants work with every day – a space to step back and think strategically:

It felt like an opportunity to step away and review and learn, rather than kind of just keep on the treadmill of keeping going, keeping going. It allowed reflection time which I think helps us all individuals and which in turn helps the organisations.

Second, the importance of trust-based learning (especially during Covid-19) is apparent, which enables honest and frank discussions of difficult issues.

When you form a network, you know, it takes five to six months to get to know everybody. And what they do, what their issues are, and at that point everybody starts to be comfortable with each other and trust, and we openly discuss stuff. And the group was at that stage where we could openly, you know, discuss the good stuff and the bad stuff and really ugly stuff.

Trust has to be built out of the curated space, and this takes some time as members are introduced to each other, get used to each other's styles and approaches, and see the network as a priority. The network can become stronger over time with good facilitation and the identification of a clear purpose.

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The importance of personal and emotional support through networks raises a question of whether their primary value lies in the individual support for members, as opposed to the capacity it builds among members to better serve their organisations. Do the benefits remain predominantly with the individual member of the network, or with the organisation that was part of the network, and how much does this matter in supporting community businesses? Insofar as it is the former, the risk is that benefits stay with individuals when they move on, rather than being embedded within organisational practices and approaches. Would such individuals be more likely to stay with their organisations rather than move on? And even if they moved on, it is possible that the enhanced skills, knowledge and confidence generated through networking could be shared elsewhere in community business or in their specific field of interest, such as health and social care.

02. The impact of networking

The value of networking then feeds through in terms of its longer-term impact, that is, what participants see as the difference it has made to them and their work. Lasting differences are harder to discern, but participants refer to how their horizons have broadened through access to other perspectives and insight, for example on how others have addressed issues. In some cases this helps provide reassurance and thus confidence that individuals are approaching issues appropriately. It has also helped prevent the repetition of common but frustrating mistakes:

With any organisation...what happens is that you're very inward looking, very [focused on] your organisation and so, for me, the best part of it was being able to talk to organisations who I wouldn't necessarily have linked up with or understood or known and, so, getting that external viewpoint, and a different viewpoint on how they approach things, and understanding their particular challenges.

More broadly, participants point to sharing new frameworks for working. In the case of community libraries, the suggestion that its network simply would not exist were it not for participation in the PNP. In this case, it was thought that community libraries were stronger as a result because they had been encouraged to think of themselves as community businesses.

For the peer network coordinators, lasting benefits can be seen in information, knowledge, and tools cascading through specific networks and through ongoing collaborations, but this is limited by capacity and resource constraints. Without support for networking, practitioners constantly get pulled back into day to day work, and network connections become less of a priority: 'it was just sort of not anywhere quite near the top of anyone's to do list [...] we needed to be weaned off our support providers for the programme but no one quite had enough time.'

The momentum behind a peer network quickly dissipates once it has formally reached a conclusion. Sometimes this can be because it is felt that a network has 'run its course'. Although some of the networks in the PNP continue, interpersonal networking carries on informally. This tends to be ad hoc rather than group wide, however, and this meant that opportunities were lost, in the view of one participant:

There was some lost learning there and I know that there was a couple of people who did decide to take that forward on a smaller scale but it was not the whole group, it was just a few people and mainly the London-based people who could get together quite easily that decided to do that.

“The best part of it was being able to talk to organisations who I wouldn’t necessarily have linked up with or understood or known and, so, getting that external viewpoint, and a different viewpoint on how they approach things, and understanding their particular challenges.”

Another reflected a similar sense of fading engagement, as everyday priorities take over:

The individuals in the organisations on peer networking were wonderful, extremely knowledgeable, loads of expertise and immediately after the project we did kind of call on each other a bit but I have to say that has, well it's just been hard to resource because like it sends you off in a different direction and priorities will be aligned about business plans and although it is always nice to stay in touch it's sometimes hard in reality.

The importance of the architecture supporting peer networking thus comes through strongly from participants. This involves good facilitation and organisation, the cultivation of a supportive culture, but one which is open enough to explore challenges, financial support for meeting up, the use of residential sessions, peer exchange visits, external expert speakers, and action learning approaches. For one participant what has endured is the appreciation of the tools and approaches discussed in the network, for another it was the use of action learning sets and the discussion of organisations' mission, vision and values, and 'questioning why you are a network'.

This all has a resource requirement, but additionally suggests that the hope that peer networks can continue in a self-directed and self-sustained way may be misplaced or somewhat optimistic. Perhaps some networks should be seen from the outset as time limited. Some participants thought that peer networks cannot be sustained in the absence of good facilitation. More thought needs to be given, perhaps, to what mechanisms and support – for example, guidance on self-direction – are required to enable networks to continue as desired by members. One participant reflected on the challenge of network leadership and 'ownership':

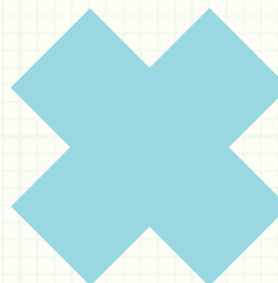
How do you get the members to take ownership of the network, so it's not all down to one person or organisation having to run everything? I think what it demonstrated was that without support and funding it's very difficult to make these peer networks work. And so we did actually try afterwards to do it ourselves and it didn't happen and, you know, we as a membership organisation, we've tried different ways to let our members take more ownership...but in the end it's always come back to us... to take the lead and provide that infrastructure and that support... yes, someone has to take the lead.

Over time the Health and Social Care CoP has begun to focus its attention on seeking change in the health and social care system; it has developed a purpose around wider influence in the field. This has taken some time to emerge as a focal point, as the network itself has formed, built trust and new members have enrolled. Members have varied experience, confidence and knowledge of both policy advocacy and of the health and social care system as a whole.

The influence work had, by the time of the research for this paper, only really begun to develop. The work centres around promoting the idea of a ‘community facilitator’ role in health and social care, a more general form of link worker found in social prescribing schemes, and likened to a coordinating ‘community DJ’ interface, operating in GP practices, for example. To date the work has been limited to floating the idea through blogs, presentations at key conferences and specific meetings. However, the Covid-19 crisis escalated just at the point that this work was building up momentum and has more or less stopped it in its tracks.

The evidence is a little thin on the impact of the influence work. Participants feel that they are having an influence of sorts, connecting up with others who might be able to advance an idea, but it is unpredictable and hard to identify tangible traction and results. This led to an assessment of the need to be realistic in the target for influence (for example, national thinking and policy, or local practices and approaches), the scale of change sought, the time it takes for change to materialise, and perhaps to develop a clear route-map for how it might be achieved: ‘I’d be hard pushed to say we have managed to influence anything...us pulling together a few blogs and tweeting about them every now and again is not going to deliver that’.

In market development terms, then, support for community business through networking seems to arise more immediately at individual and organisational levels, including clusters of similar organisations, and less evidently through influencing systems, structures and wider agendas. Or rather, the former can provide benefits more immediately, whereas the latter is a much longer-term project, requiring sustained attention and investment.



03. The impact of Covid-19 on community businesses

The research for this paper was undertaken in the midst of the Covid-19 lockdown. Participants spoke of their experiences to date, and how the community businesses they were involved in had been faring. The main impacts have been the loss of face-to-face work, the loss of trading income, the need to close buildings/venues. The broad picture is similar to the circumstances reported elsewhere, a now familiar tale of rapid disruption involving severe impacts and necessary adjustments, but with some variability. Organisations could be very busy indeed or could have stopped work entirely.

Organisations were facing a three-dimensional crisis, of resources, operations and demand (Macmillan, 2020). Income had gone down, dramatically in some cases, particularly in trading areas affected by lockdown restrictions. Staff had been furloughed through the government's Job Retention Scheme, but some had also been made redundant. Organisations were seeking to access emergency funding and relief to support cashflow, where they could, from Power to Change and others.

The operations of community businesses were rapidly adjusted and redesigned to enable as much remote working as possible, reaching existing service users and customers in new ways, and reaching out to the newly vulnerable: 'Every service across the board has had to be re-designed. We've done that trying to keep in touch with all the vulnerable people we are very aware of, but also of course reaching out to the newly vulnerable because of Covid.' There was a concern that providing services online was necessary for the moment but could not replicate the quality and experience of face-to-face work.

Some organisations had been repurposed, for example, community buildings operating as community hubs to meet immediate needs: 'One centre alone in the first week of lockdown was giving food parcels out to 20 households. That has gone up to 140 in eight weeks.' Some have been able to continue their work through different referral routes. Existing plans for services and facilities had to be suspended, for example integration of two newly merged organisations was put to one side while the organisation responded to the immediate crisis; and work on the refurbishment of a building for new services was put on hold.

Demand for some services had increased, and staff were working longer hours to deal with it, but with no increase in income to support it. There was also growing concern about longer term problems which were likely to be exacerbated by the crisis: unemployment, debt, mental health issues and domestic abuse.

Participants reflected on the future, both in terms of challenges but also opportunities. But this was difficult in that the crisis has been such a rapidly moving picture and lots of things were 'on hold'. A key challenge at the time of interviews was about planning for recovery – participants were not sure when that will be or how. One reflection has been that closing down services and buildings has been easy but opening them back up will be difficult, both in terms of what is permissible and advisable to ensure Covid-security, and the associated cost implications, but also in terms of user and customer confidence: 'It was dead easy to close. You know we were given hours and we packed up and just went home, basically, but coming back is going to be something quite... you know, it's going to be a mountain to climb.'

For those interviewees who are more wedded to the idea of community business as advocated by Power to Change, Covid-19 has posed some interesting challenges. In some ways it has highlighted the importance of more traditional, grant-based neighbourhood models of community activity. The future models of finance and service delivery, and even the community business model as a whole, have to some extent been called into question, at least temporarily. For one participant, the businesses best-placed to cope with Covid-19 'are actually the ones that might have had a more traditional model and less trading'. This is not only because they are able to access emergency funding, but also because their business models are less vulnerable to sudden drops in demand. The crisis thus highlighted vulnerability for organisations prevented from trading, and where the costs of buildings continued but they were unable to generate an income: 'we went heavy on setting the trading, and building the business out of the building, so Covid-19 has completely destroyed that really'.

For some the crisis has provided an opportunity to rethink services, in that traditional barriers in the way of change have come down, for example, in respect of the role of digital services in organisations: 'In a way it's quite exciting times because a lot of the traditional barriers to, you know, what you can do and can't do seem to be...you can flex and challenge those at the minute and come up with new solutions but very, very fast paced'. Nevertheless, there were some doubts about whether and how payment for online services could be realised. There was a longer-term worry about the loss of skills for organisations and the community business sector as staff might move onto other jobs or into sectors.

There were some positive aspects of the crisis, in terms of relationships with local authorities and others, and in highlighting the value of self-organised community-led mutual aid networks and community businesses in mobilising responses locally. One participant suggested that statutory organisations and established charities 'have had their eyes opened to the capacity and capability of local people'.

Participants suggest that the crisis has involved more meaningful collaboration, leading to a belief that broader system changes may be possible, for example in health and social care:

We have seen previous blocks to cooperation with authorities and trusts and between different organisations. We've seen that taken down, we've seen that credible kind of rapid response and action. That conversation about our experience and what we think should stay and what works and what doesn't. As well as the prioritisation of health and social care during such a difficult time and why it's such an important thing to have for a country that is often neglected.

Some blockages to cooperation have been removed during the crisis, but can these be sustained beyond covid-19? This leads to a bigger unknown question with likely impact on community business – what will happen to local authorities, social care and the NHS beyond the immediate crisis of lockdown? Will there be an offloading of assets and services, and/or a major retrenchment akin to the austerity imposed from 2010 onwards?

04. The role and value of networking during and beyond Covid-19

If the varied impacts of Covid-19 on community businesses and other VCSE organisations is by now a relatively familiar story, the role and value of peer networks is perhaps less so. The value of peer networks seems to come into its own during a common crisis (Litchfield, 2020).

National organisations supporting community business, themselves forced to rethink their immediate engagement with their members, have appeared to intensify online engagement mechanisms, through well attended forums, panels and webinars. Examples include Social Enterprise UK's Covid-19 Forum, Locality's member networks, webinars and Facebook group, Ubele's Emergency BAME Conversations and Fundraising Support Webinars, and webinars and network events organised by Plunkett Foundation and Co-ops UK.

In addition, other Covid-specific initiatives have involved peer networking or online peer support. The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), for example, has held regular online peer support sessions for charities since the beginning of lockdown², and a new online peer network for community business in and beyond Covid-19 has been established by Practical Governance³.

As an established and continuing network, the Health and Social Care CoP has provided an immediate value to its members during Covid-19. Members meet every three weeks on Zoom and have shared advice on funding opportunities, furloughing staff and market knowledge: 'We trust each other, and we understand each other's organisations so if something comes up that may be useful for another organisation you can signpost them.' In addition, a WhatsApp group has been helpful in enabling people to support each other, through sharing information and opportunities, but perhaps most importantly in providing mutual support, offering a 'rant-space', as one participant put it. The network 'keeps you afloat' and offers the chance to offload: 'It's just knowing that there's somebody you can pick up the phone to and just go bleurgh, you know, and just... or even help one another out.'

² See <https://www.ivar.org.uk/covid-19-briefings/>

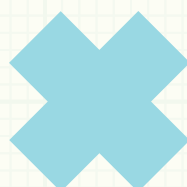
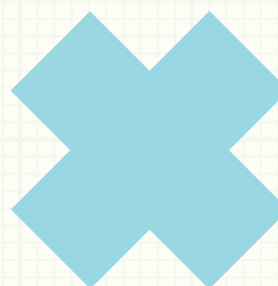
³ See <https://cbmutualaid.co.uk/>

The trust built up in the CoP enabled members to share experiences, dilemmas and different approaches in responding to the immediate crisis. It may not in itself lead people to approach things any differently. However, the importance of personal and emotional support becomes more apparent – ‘a sense of mutual support, and an understanding of the stress that people are under.’

Participants from the PNP coordinators’ group report more of a mixed picture. This is not unexpected, given that the programme ended some time ago, but it highlights the different ways in which networks fare over time after ‘formal’ programme support ends. Local support and connections within the peer networks the coordinators represented may be more important. Some of the networks appear to be live and meeting regularly, for example the Community Libraries Resource Hub where community-managed libraries share their experiences and knowledge of safe working environments, and the community centres in Octopus are having weekly meetings. Others have taken a step back, for example in Community Energy and among Community Organisers, while in Brixton the work has refocused on supporting very local mutual aid activity.

One Health and Social Care CoP participant linked the value and resourcing of facilitated networks to the Covid-19 crisis, and suggested this provided learning for the future:

“It needs to be facilitated, which is the strength of it. And that needs to be funded...I think what Covid proves is that we need that to be kept going, really. Because of the value it has – of the support, of the information and knowledge sharing, and the influencing upwards of our issues and challenges.... Because now we’re going to need it most for the next two years, because of the impact of Covid is not going to go away. But organisations are going to take two or three years to recover. And to do that you need groups like this.”



04. Conclusions and implications

Peer networking is clearly seen as worthwhile by its participants, whether through general networks or participation in more clearly defined communities of practice. They point to a range of benefits which arise from regularly meeting up with others in similar situations – including personal and emotional support; practical tips, guidance and learning; and wider learning about the policy and practice context in which they are operating. These are generated through the curation and facilitation of space and time for reflection, but also through trust-based learning as relationships develop.

The value people attach to their networks seems to be as much about personal and emotional support as it is about operating effectively as a business. It may be that a strong emotional support network is a necessary if not sufficient condition for community business resilience. But this highlights a dilemma in peer network participation, over the balance between benefits arising at individual, organisational and field or policy context level. If the value initially accrues at individual level, there is no automatic or easy translation into benefits for organisations. It may be lost or dissipated insofar as people move on from their organisational settings or out of the community business field or sector altogether. The research here suggests also that influence at field or policy context level is harder to discern, difficult to achieve and may take much longer to arise than hoped.

The architecture supporting peer networks is an important consideration underpinning the reflections of many of the participants reported here. The networks seem to have worked well in part because of expert facilitation, resources to support participation, and a varied and relevant programme of visits, speakers and action learning sessions. Networks are valued as a result, and appear to become more fragmented, ad hoc and interpersonal, in the absence of clear leadership and investment.

The discussion in this paper raises some pertinent issues for Power to Change and other funders seeking to grow the community business sector and achieve wider systemic change. These can be summarised as follows:

- 1) For community business leaders, there are clear personal benefits from peer networking and communities of practice. At times of organisational development or crisis, such personal support plays an important role in generating confidence and providing a network of critical friends. This raises a question of whether leadership development through peer networks should be a standing feature of the support offered to community businesses.

2.) Our research has highlighted the risk that the benefits of peer networking reside with the individual member of the network rather than the organisation or wider networks they represent. To ensure benefits to the organisation as well as the individual, thought needs to be given to the number and diversity of participants involved in networking activities. Is the 'single representative' model the right one, or should there be several participants from each organisation or group within a peer network in order to make it effective at a field level?

3) The issue of drop-off when funding and support have ended is not unique to peer networking, but raises questions of how the value achieved through such support can be sustained. The challenge of long-term sustainability and self-organisation remains unresolved. No individual organisation seems able or willing to take on the longer-term leadership of a network even though most would value continued networking. The longer-term options would thus appear to be:

- a)** Accept that peer networking is valuable, but not a priority, and allow networks to grow or cease organically according to the enthusiasm of participants;
- b)** Recognise the value of peer networking for participants and provide a continuous level of background support to ensure it takes place;
- c)** Recognise the value of peer networking for the community business field, and direct continued support to networks of organisations, ensuring continuity is not lost when individuals move on.

For Power to Change, there is a question of the level of support required in order to fulfil the potential of peer networks. This may not be best achieved through short-term programmes. However to integrate peer networking into long-term packages of support will require a resource commitment that must be balanced against other demands. A strategic choice is thus needed about the value of peer networking compared with other forms of support offered.

Online peer networking and support has flourished during the Covid-19 crisis, as practitioners look to peers, funders and national infrastructure bodies for advice, guidance and news of latest developments and opportunities, and to share and hear of others' experiences. It has, it seems, offered a lifeline to many practitioners in a context otherwise marked by enforced distancing and isolation. It has been said by participants in this research, and elsewhere, that a new spirit of sharing, co-operation and collaboration has emerged from the crisis, as part of an 'all-hands-on-deck' response to the pandemic. It is not implausible that online peer networking has contributed in a small way to this ethos. As policymakers, funders and practitioners begin to plan for the next phase of the crisis, what role might peer networking play in supporting the recovery and renewed growth of community businesses?

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Power to Change

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Network Support: Community business peer networking before and during coronavirus

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