

Leicester Community Media Post-Lockdown Review

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1 Introduction

This summary has been compiled from responses to a survey of community media, mutual aid and civic society groups in Leicester following the second lockdown for Leicester. It is comprised of summarised statements, taken from responses to the survey and subsequent follow-up interviews recorded August and September 2020. The aim of the summary is to identify challenges associated with community communications, with respondents reporting their experiences from a range of established civic organisations, emerging civic groups and different forms of community focussed media. Responses, wherever possible have been anonymised and generalised, and are relevant to general communications practice. Responses have been grouped into four general themes:

- Organisation Capacity,
- Community Communications and Engagement,
- Audience, Client and User Interactions, and
- Strategic Communications.

Each is further categorised as either a challenge or a solution that can be indicated for further development work.

2 Organisation Capacity

2.1 Positive Engagement

Respondents reported that there were some positive outcomes to the lockdown. They noted that the delivery and continuation of their services had been both negatively and positively affected. This included how they identified and adapted their services to forms of online delivery, such as consultation and counselling services delivered via telephone and online. It was noted that a wide range of emergency funding became available during the lockdown period, which was targeted at emergency adaptations to the lockdown. They noted that there was more encouragement to engage with businesses, either to make additional donations, or to take part in online development sessions. The spontaneous growth of mutual aid groups at the ward level was viewed positively, along with the spontaneous and independent creation and shared video content, especially with a theme focussed on solidarity messaging. The lockdown put a strain on the editorial processes and production cycles of existing publications, but this was compensated by the shared interaction with mutual aid groups, assisting with, for example, organisational insurance cover and risk assessments. Another advantage

to working closely with the mutual aid groups was the enhanced ability to cross-publicise activities through reciprocal networks.

While it was a challenge to maintain volunteer activities, the respondents recognised that their ability to utilise online social media platforms was improved, such as being able to take advantage of established professional networks, which was viewed as a positive compensation. This enabled some groups to continue to share video, audio and multimedia content within their network, which they indicated was valued by their partners, clients and volunteers. Using social media was seen as an essential way to keep funders informed and updated of the work that had been undertaken, with the maintenance of supportive relationships with licencing bodies, for example, being viewed as a positive approach.

All organisations found revenue funding to be a challenge, though some were confident that they could maintain a flow of small donations from their established network of project supporters. This was reported to be especially valuable when commercial advertising and sponsorship dried up. The ability of small organisation to act quickly was also noted, and the shift to using digital platforms was essential for some organisations to maintain their delivery. If tasks could be actioned expediently, it was reported, then smaller organisations were confident that they could continue to operate in a way that brought people together, without having to go through extended consultation and approval chains. Overall, thinking outside-of-the-box was valued by contributors, and attempts to try new models of service delivery, new engagement strategies and new methods of actions and success tracking were welcomed.

2.2 Challenges

Respondents reported that there were some ongoing challenges encountered during the lockdown that affected the delivery and continuation of their services. This included ongoing financial issues that were exacerbated as avenues for financial support narrowed. For many respondents, their operational effectiveness was reduced, as the number of active participants and volunteers became inactive or harder to reach. An inhibiting factor was a general lack of understanding of the structure and role of civic and community politics in Leicester. Some respondents reported that as unincorporated community groups they lacked the legal status which would enable them to engage with the local public authorities. This had a significant knock-on effect in how they were dealt with by public sector bodies and larger civic sector organisations. In addition a lack of understanding of legal issues,

fundraising, voluntary organisation management and communications regulation were also recognised as key issues for attention by some organisations. It was noted by respondents that trustees often lacked experience, and that there was often only a limited focus in their management and governance bodies on social action processes that might ensure that they were able to make appreciable impact on service delivery.

As the lockdown came into effect any prior deficiencies in resources and platforms were exacerbated, such as websites that are now out of date and not in keeping with the aims of the individual groups. Most respondents reported having to develop their lockdown strategy on the fly in an *ad hoc* manner, while also making use of media production and communications equipment that was out of date, difficult to maintain and expensive to licence. The lockdown, it was reported, exposed inadequate data connection and telecoms provision for some organisations, especially as all respondents noted that their volunteers were working from home for long periods. Home working meant that while there was an expected increase in isolation for all participants, there was a knock-on effect which required additional professional management attention and enhanced communications between staff and volunteers. The two-way process of awareness of staff and volunteer mental health assistance was made more difficult, especially as some respondents reported significant increases the extent to which their services were being accessed by members of the public.

Support for technical maintenance was reported as a significant issue for some respondents, as equipment which was critical to service delivery could be prone to breakdown if not maintained correctly. Most volunteers in most organisations only had limited technical understanding of broadcast systems, for example. In some situations there was a complete loss of access to studio space, and alternative facilities had to be found elsewhere at additional cost. Some respondents reported that corporate suppliers were not helpful, with time being wasted chasing changes to contracts and seeking payment holidays, for example. It was reported that the local business relief funding was not available to many of the smaller organisations, who are operating on a sub-letting basis, and who do not have separate or independent tenancy and property agreements. Homeworking costs for some volunteers were also prohibitive, particularly as broadcast studio equipment can be expensive, and having the technical capacity to use it correctly can be limited. In addition, the need to re-develop and change programming schedules to suit the reduced availability of volunteers was a considerable pressure, which was dealt with in some cases by extending programme slots.

In this context the lack of coordinated information from public bodies and organisations, that recognise the operational difficulties of community focussed media, was a problem for many respondents. The assumptions made by larger organisations were often at odds with the reality of the way that many smaller organisations have been operating in recent years. Respondents indicated that in many cases they have been operating without financial reserves or spare volunteer capacity for some time, and were therefore stretching already testing 'shoestring' operations. A lack of understanding by funding organisations of the operational needs and set-up of community focussed media, who operate as a voluntary service, financed largely from donations and services-in-kind, compounded many of the problems what were experienced by respondents, and led to expectations of what could be offered that were at crossed purposes. A lack of appreciation of requirements of community focussed media organisations to maintain their independence and trust with their audience and communities was also an inhibiting factor in their ability to maintain effective services.

While some respondents report being flooded with opportunities to apply for funding, it was felt that these opportunities would mostly be available only to established and incorporated organisations with professionalised staffing. A good deal of time and resources could have been spent. for example, on developing translation services without knowing what the impact would be. Respondents reported that the looming sense of the scale of the pandemic was of primary importance, however, there was a difficulty in knowing what to do about this because of a lack of coherent leadership in framing the response as a challenge of local social involvement and solidarity. It was noted that the realisation that plans and practices may have to be continually changed, without going through a proper planning and evaluation process, was both stimulating and concerning. The uncertainty therefore made it more difficult to keep volunteers, partners and funders onboard with practice-based changes. Therefore, because many respondents could not identify where the risks would be concentrated, they adopted a safety-first approach out of the fear of over-reacting, which could potentially lead to the closing a service completely. In addition, respondents also accepted that the greater risk was spreading the virus itself, and therefore their priority was to adapt all services accordingly to prevent transmission of the virus within their organisations.

3 Community Communications and Engagement

3.1 Positive Engagement

Respondents reported that there were some positive outcomes to the lockdown, which they noted affected engagement as they developed and produced their community-focussed communications. This included the way that supporters and participants in civic groups and organisation were supportive and welcoming of adaptations and changes. It was reported by some respondents that it was appreciated that there was an attempt to deliver services as close to the communities affected by the lockdown as possible, especially those which were centred on languages spoken in those areas. It was also appreciated that there was an attempt to deliver services that related to the lives and lived experiences of the people who live in communities that are often ignored or passed over in more mainstream forms of media. For some respondents, the lockdown presented an opportunity to repurpose work around equality and cultural diversity. While for other respondents, the shift from in-person meetings and consultation to online consultation, changed the dynamic and expectations of accessibility.

Respondents reported using communications technology creatively so that they could ensure staff and volunteers could continue to be included in the production and development process. Using online resources from other organisations in the charity and civic/social/mutual sector, for example, to access and share expertise and management material was reported as a positive benefit. For some respondents it was necessary to keep abreast of wider issues in other social sector networks, via news for civic, charity and mutual aid groups. Respondents noted that the lockdown was a reminder of the power of the role of community influencers operating in informal locations where influence could happen, and that the lockdown was a reminder of the benefit of involvement and co-development in facilitating effective forms of community communication. It was felt by some respondents that using influential figures and speakers, who are relevant to each communities' core values, was an effective way of promoting behaviour change, and that using different methods of engagement from multiple perspectives was more beneficial at a local level. It was reported that being able to use social media in non-formal ways was an advantage when communicating directly with people in their local neighbourhoods, which was beneficial if it also included memes and humorous material that could be shared in social networks. Being able to produce podcasts and YouTube videos, for example, that shared supportive content with project participants and volunteers, such as learning videos, discussions was an advantage.

It was reported that the ability to produce locally created 'viral' material was a good practice which contributed to the spontaneous and independent use of social media by, for example, healthcare professionals and public service organisations. As many of the respondents reported having only limited media resources, it was noted that it was advantageous to use social media in order to minimise distribution and communication costs when interacting with other not-for-profit organisations. For example, home produced leaflets for direct distribution, the sharing of PA and audio equipment enhanced the ability to identify and formulate key messages in multiple formats. It was reported that volunteers responded well to online training in broadcasting regulations and programme planning, and that volunteers and presenters were able to embed links that they had with other media organisations. Volunteers responded well to using online teleconferencing as a resource for programme production, and that online participation increased the number of women participating in some of the broadcast services. The extended and complementary use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and provided a notable and measurable increase in audience engagement compared to previous years broadcast projects.

It was reported by respondents that having the opportunity to play a role in rethinking and reconfiguring key communicating messages, that improved their relevance to constituent communities, was appreciated. The challenge was to avoid duplicating mainstream commercial and public service broadcast messages. This was viewed as a welcome creative challenge that enhanced a sense of community belonging, particularly as there was a need to adapt the core messages to the patterns and rhythms of people's lives and circumstances locally. This gave, it was noted, an added dimension to the community-focussed communications. Respondents reported their concern that in addition to their standard duties, they were also expected to ensure that fake news and disinformation was not spread or amplified. Similarly, respondents noted that there was an urgent need to acknowledge that the pandemic is a universal problem, but one with differential impacts on BAME communities, which called for social solidarity in different ways that are meaningful to those communities. It was also noted that access to shared resources, equipment and facilities within their constituent networks, usually on an informal basis, was appreciated, as this ensured that reciprocity and mutual aid was primarily recognised as forms of contribution and support to others, thereby encouraging listeners, readers and users to send in messages of support and encouragement to keep those volunteers active in mutually appreciative cycles.

3.2 Challenges

Respondents reported that there were some ongoing challenges encountered during the lock-down that affected engagement through community-focussed communications. This included official communications material which they believed was often designed without an apparent awareness of language and translation needs. Similarly, design and visual presentation of graphic material often did not take into account issues of cultural diversity and cultural sensitivity. It was reported that the initial intelligence work required to ensure that communications was engaging and involving the right people in the process of signposting was onerous when trying to identify appropriate local experts and trusted voices. Respondents noted that there is a clear need to shift the focus on BAME-led practices, in which co-production should be seen as more than consultation, and more about empowerment and facilitated support. It was suggested that there is a need to shift the community communications model from centralised and corporate managers, to distributed and embedded partners.

It was identified that there is a need to review the message modelling process, especially to avoid one-sided communication, and to ensure that differential cultural impact is better understood. It was felt by respondents that there is a need to ensure that a wider range of people are involved in co-producing and developing communications through participative activities. Often, as some reported, there was an absence of coordinated and purposeful co-development and involvement in the processes of communication development. It was also felt that there was an absence of coordinated and purposeful community asset evaluation, with the lack of a working model of community value which meant that some service costing and expected outcomes seemed inappropriate. The lack of a model of community value associated with community communications meant that perceptions of operational effectiveness were hard to distinguish, and that a lack of experience in using some social media platforms for social action and engagement work meant that they went untested and under utilised.

Respondents reported that the novelty of the lockdown situation left many people shocked and unsure of what they could be doing. The closure of studios, for example, made it difficult to maintain ongoing broadcast services, and to maintain a sense of community between volunteers. It was noted that there has been little time to reflect and evaluate the services provided, especially in relation to the growing need to counter misinformation and fake news. This was compounded, however, by an over-reliance on web material in English, and a lack of services that actively manage the

expectations of clients and partners. To do this, it was suggested, there is a need to avoid party-political bias and help to build bridges between organisations who are often perceived as rivals. A number of priorities were identified by respondents that would ensure that young people, for example, and vulnerable people, are given a voice in the communications production and decision-making process. There is a need also to look at transport costs, as volunteers are often prevented from participating because of availability or cost of public transport during the lockdown. It was noted, therefore, that there is a need to consult more widely with people who have experience of organising social campaigns, particularly in forms of engagement that demonstrate involvement with people who have experience of operationalising community action activity, thereby moving from 'oh no, someone should do something about this' to 'let's do this' approach. Respondents recommended that maintaining democratic accountability and avoiding cliques within decision making networks, often held behind closed doors, was essential. As was maintaining a focus on mental wellbeing.

4 Audience, Client and User Interaction

4.1 Positive Engagement

Respondents reported that there were some positive outcomes to the lockdown that they noted, that had been reported by participants and users of their services. This included how one-to-one calls had increased in value over the lockdown, and that making regular calls to check on service users and volunteers wellbeing was valued. It was recognised that every story that was told was a testament to the support and collaboration that was offered between different people, especially when using different communication techniques that extended the reach of a group or organisation in different circumstances. It was noted that there is a value in recording and writing stories that indicate how renewal is nurtured, and how radio, for example, remains an established and well-practiced way of keeping people informed, while also allowing for public concerns to be addressed in forms of dialogue which encourage interactivity and participation, which in turn improves listenership and engagement in programming.

Many respondents reported that using social media platforms and network engagement skills to improve responses, such as '#GetLeicsTheData' campaign, was a positive approach. The process of facilitating active learning about wellbeing and employability with core service users and participants through online Zoom calls, was an innovation that was well regarded. Likewise, the ability to use online communication platforms to interact with political representatives, MPs, and councillors in a cross-part alliance was well regarded. Respondents felt that the Leicester solidarity video worked well as an expression of social cohesiveness, because it gave an insight into how sharing community

news and information in Leicester is in urgent need of attention. Respondents indicated that the challenge of the lockdown gave them the opportunity to experiment with alternative forms of engagement, such as 'live newsroom events.

It was noted that traditional forms of media such as radio and newspapers often get overlooked when helping to provide practical support for vulnerable people, especially people who are digitally isolated. It was suggested that maintaining reliable and uninterrupted broadcast services was recognised as an over-riding priority to meet specific community needs. It was noted that community radio can reach into communities on a more personal basis than national or commercial media can, and that successful community communication is founded on a strong sense of trust between the group reporting the information and the community accessing it. Successful community communication avoids political and religious bias from one group or another. Likewise, successful community communication is independent of financial interests. So it was noted in the responses that there needs to be a renewed recognition of the positive role of companionship of community radio as an essential part of the communications process, especially as many people have been isolated. The respondents indicated that their listeners and readers valued the relationship they had with presenters and writers. It was also noted that there is a need to recognise where community infrastructure is robust, and what community resources can be signposted by sharing positive stories, and that this is a useful way to deal with negative and polarising issues.

4.2 Challenges

Respondents reported that there were some ongoing challenges encountered during the lock-down that had been reported by participants and users of their services. This included some frustration at the lack of face-to-face contact, thus making the delivery of services more difficult. For some service users and volunteers, oral communication is of primary importance, so having the capacity to share stories about their personal experiences has to be rated as of equal importance as other forms of communication. Stories may of a sensitive nature, however, and may contain confidential information that could be linked to individuals, so proper safeguards and expectations about privacy needed to be in place. Adapting to online delivery, it was noted, put additional pressure on groups to operate in line with expectations about privacy and safeguarding. Respondents noted that shared community news was often shared informally and in an *ad hoc* manner, though it was understood by a number of respondents that addressing digital exclusion could only be achieved if there was information provided about services that crossed multiple media platforms and boundaries, with the

expectation that they are used collaboratively to reinforce one another. For example addressing a sense of isolation and vulnerability, as it affects all age groups and people from different social backgrounds, was countered by producing shared, recognisable content which pointed to, and fed from, other forms of engagement. Radio, print and leaflets, for example, were reinforced with websites and social media messaging use.

It was noted that if there is to be a coordinated effort to prepare people for life after the lockdown, with the social changes that will be brought about by the pandemic, then respondents felt that there must be more opportunities to develop interactive and participative online sessions that help people to feel less isolated. These services need to acknowledge that different people will want to get different things from the media that they use and share, and that not everyone shares the same personal or social goals. It was noted that the process of recognising public health instructions and civic information on how to access public services, is different for people from different cultural backgrounds, and that access to public services is problematic for many people who do not speak English as their first language or recognise the symbolic framework that is used. Respondents identified that was highly problematic to expect people to cope with a health emergency to relate to advice and information which was presented almost exclusively in English. Behaviour change did not take place, respondents noted, until there was a perceived local authority-figure supporting the information. Similarly, behaviour change did not take place until the second lockdown and the intense additional media and public scrutiny it brought.

The communications model, it was felt, did not recognise that many people had a pressing need to continue working, and that many did not understand the requirements for social distancing until the lockdown was imposed more strictly. Information from national sources and government advice, for example, seemed contradictory to local experiences. In order to maintain their independence many community communication groups operate with limited and tight budgets, this means that it is more difficult to use inter-cultural communication techniques to disseminate health messages that are more attuned to the wellbeing expectations of majority communities who are defined by different social structures. It was felt that the role of community communications did not expand to include those in care, and that the use of online media to facilitate engagement in these circumstances missed the benefits of past media production and distribution experience, such as hospital radio.

Respondents noted that if promises are made, but change doesn't happen, then people will get frustrated. There is a clear need, it was noted, to reach out beyond the core communities that are established, or which are largely focused on the centre of the city, and that community communications should encompass other communities and language groups across the whole of the urban area of Leicester. It was felt that it would be useful if income generation could be defined and enabled in a more collaborative and mutually beneficial way, so that community groups and social sector organisations could work more closely to improve effective signposting. Furthermore, as BAME groups are likely to be affected disproportionately because of compounding issues of poverty, low-skilled working and poor housing, then the effect of the pandemic on BAME communities urgently needs to be systematically examined and accounted for locally. In addition, avoiding a blame culture was felt to be a priority, and that supporting positive social cohesion is a main concern for respondents, as is tackling pandemic-denial.

5 Strategic Communications

5.1 Positive Engagement

Respondents reported that there were some positive outcomes to the lockdown, and that they noted the strategic benefit of coordinated community communications. This included a noticeable increase and more responsive use of social media, which was reported to be appreciated by participants, clients, partners and funders. It was noted that members of informal and mutual networks often provided information that was more beneficial than official government sources, and that respondents often preferred to use their own networks to link with people in Leicester who have a strong influence on their communities. A priority for future development, it was noted, should be to develop access for poor and isolated people who are not able to access established services or use online processes. It was felt that the exploration of different social media platforms for the purpose of sharing stories and issues, would be more effective if it related to the core communities and participants. It was proposed that mutual aid and civic society groups should try to articulate a model of what Building Back Better would mean locally to Leicester, and that this discussion should be based around community communications that would promote active civic deliberation and democratic discussion as part of the local system of self-governance across all services.

Respondents felt it was important to recognise the work of, and engage with, local reporters in traditional media outlets, and their extended work on social media platforms. Respondents also felt that

there must be a recognition and engagement with the work of responsible social media users who have supported the dissemination of information according to principles of openness, transparency and accountability. It was noted that a high-level of leadership and management expertise already exists in the civic and community sector in Leicester, and that this expertise is connected in established networks. However, linking up thinking about communications proves to be problematic. It was suggested that there should be a collective effort to combine resources and to seek ways to share information, knowledge and experiences, with the aim of mobilising citizens, reducing fear and isolation, and bringing people together. This means recognising the 'trusted companion' role of community media, and that community media is not a platform for breaking news or interrogation of public officials. It was felt that work needs to be done to promote forms of community communication that are grounded in local knowledge, and which are created and shared by people with local experience, using community communications to target specific neighbourhoods, language groups, faith groups and other communities of identity.

5.2 Challenges

Respondents reported that there were some positive outcomes to the lockdown that they noted strategic challenges of community communications. This included, looking at ways to develop a more robust and differentiated approach to communication that goes beyond marketing and commercial social media communication practices. It also included the need to develop an asset-based and community development approach to community communications, which fosters involvement and participation through creative practices. Developing and producing updated information guidance for public bodies on how to manage community communications was regarded as a priority. In addition it was felt that by offering support for specific language groups to assist signposting for organisations and individuals, it would be possible to coordinate and managing the dissemination of information and updates from a wider range of organisations and social sector groups about their activities.

Respondents also recognised that there is a need to raise awareness, and to train councillors and local public services officials about community communications. They felt that there is a need to encourage public authority leaders to participate in community conversations about service development and provision. Respondents identified a need to diversify media engagement models, especially those that expand beyond press releases and formal radio appearances. This should include the recognitions and celebration of the role of the mutual aid groups, and the informal social sector

groups that have less established relationships with public bodies. As the lockdown progresses there will be a need to counter the often pernicious, one-dimensional and negative narrative of national media around ethnic and cultural identity, which respondents believe seeks to divide people. Instead there is a clear need to build alternative capacity for the sharing of local stories of social integration through community communication platforms. These platforms must be capable, it was felt, of ensuring that claims that groups or individuals make to represent specific communities need to be verified and tested, thus avoiding self-appointment.

It was noted by respondents that transformation will be achieved locally by ensuring that reflection, evaluation and recommendations for change are produced publicly and openly. A strategy for enhanced community communications therefore needs to be developed that can ensure that community radio is more widely recognised as a designated key services which regulated by Ofcom as an essential information source. This strategy must promote, and support calls for additional funding and resources to support increased diversity in the supply of community communications and information. In the Build Back Better strategy, therefore, respondents felt that any strategy must ensure that community media is embedded as a core process, thereby ensuring that information that is distributed to community communications groups is timely and relevant.

To make these changes, respondents felt that there has to be improved public coordination and access to information that can be refunctioned for audiences that mainstream media does not reach. This strategy must avoid a reliance on central government advertising that is generic and follows the limited model of engagement employed by commercial radio organisations. This strategy must also recognise that BAME people must have direct access to communication platforms and to the governance and control of those platforms. Respondents felt that this strategy must go beyond the established media contacts databases, and recognise and use the community assets that exist in the form of youth workers, community workers, voluntary organisation and mutual aid groups. It was felt by respondents that there must be a change in the role profile of public authority communications teams to include engagement with civic and community sector organisations. These teams should focus on prioritising key messages that are relevant to changes in community capacity in order to respond to the pandemic and other forms of social change, and must disseminate as much accurate information as possible in culturally sensitive forms, while countering fake news and misinformation.

6 Leicester Covid-19 Responses

<https://danslee.wordpress.com/2020/07/10/covid-comms-23-early-lessons-for-comms-people-from-the-leicester-lockdown/>

<https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3028>

<https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/its-lazy-simplistic-blame-covid-4390123>

7 Community Media UK Responses

<https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Projects/UK-community-radio-responses-to-COVID-19>

<https://chat.commedia.org.uk/t/community-media-association-key-commitments-survey/1843>