



# Community groups in a crisis:

insights from the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic



# Executive summary

## CHANGING PLACES CHANGING LIVES

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on every section of society. This research looks at the experiences of grassroots community groups during spring and summer 2020: how they have been affected by the impact of the virus, how they have responded to support their communities, and how they can be empowered to continue playing a key role in their neighbourhoods through the next phase of the crisis and recovery.

This research draws on three sources of information: a survey of 2,658 community groups conducted in June 2020, in-depth telephone interviews with representatives of 103 community groups, and analysis of data about activities supported through the Tesco Bags of Help Covid-19 Community Fund between April and September 2020.

### Key findings:

- Community groups have been severely impacted by Covid-19:
  - o Most have decreased or closed services
  - o Four in five community groups have lost income
  - o Most community groups had fewer active volunteers during lockdown
  - o Most say there is more need for their services in their communities than there was before lockdown
- The pandemic has created a wide range of practical and emotional challenges for community groups including greater reliance on technology, maintaining contact with vulnerable people, and dealing with uncertainty
- Community groups have responded in creative and resourceful ways, collaborating with other organisations, helping people to access essentials, keeping people connected and supporting people's health and wellbeing
- Community groups appear to have been particularly active in more disadvantaged areas
- Confidence about continuing in the future is lower among community groups than it was before the pandemic but most feel that they have the potential to play a role in the recovery
- What community groups say they need most is access to funding, for both the short and long term
- Access to suitable buildings and outdoor space is also identified as important as groups try to adapt to social distancing

# Introduction

This report seeks to shine a light on the diverse experiences of community groups during spring and summer 2020, understand the role that they have played in the emergency response and how they can be empowered to support their communities through a protracted period of change and recovery. This is an important topic for Groundwork because over the last forty years we have worked alongside a wide range of grassroots community groups operating on a hyper-local level to improve the quality of life in their local areas.

Community groups are varied in nature, purpose and structure, ranging from small charities and community interest companies to sports clubs, heritage groups and support groups. Many are mostly or completely volunteer-led and work within a very small local area. They form a vital part of an area's social infrastructure - "the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection"<sup>1</sup>.

Prior to the pandemic, the landscape for community groups was already challenging. Groundwork research conducted in 2019 found that 89% of community groups felt that there was more need for their work compared to

five years prior but 46% felt that it had become more difficult for them to operate during this time, often due to the impact of austerity on resources in the local area. The key challenges identified were accessing grants and other income streams, recruiting and retaining volunteers, and lack of support or services from the local authority<sup>2</sup>.

The pandemic will have had a direct impact on these challenges, for better or worse. We have seen the emergence of new community groups (including many mutual aid groups) specifically set up to respond to the crisis<sup>3</sup> and widespread reports of an upsurge in volunteering, symbolised by over half a million people signing up to become NHS Volunteers in England<sup>4</sup>.

New grant funding has been made available to support communities through the emergency and local authorities have had to rapidly re-orientate to provide protection for the most vulnerable. These developments prompted the Prime Minister to commission a report on how to sustain the community spirit seen during the lockdown, which has now been published by backbench MP Danny Kruger<sup>5</sup>.

Emerging literature has provided early insights into how

communities have responded to Covid-19. Research commissioned by Local Trust found that community responses to the immediate crisis have varied widely and that the role and significance of a rich and established community-led infrastructure (of which community groups form one part) seems to underpin an effective community response<sup>6</sup>.

Another report from Locality draws similar conclusions about the importance of existing social infrastructure and found that the crisis has acted as a catalyst for the creation of well-functioning local systems in which community organisations have acted as "cogs of connection"<sup>7</sup>.

Further research has found that neighbourhoods identified as 'left-behind' have been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic but have received less emergency funding and support than other areas<sup>8</sup>.

Through looking closely at the experiences of community groups, this report hopes to contribute to the growing evidence base on how civil society has been impacted by and responded to the Covid-19 pandemic to date and provide some insight into how community groups can best be supported.



## Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the efforts of volunteers: the representatives of community groups who gave their time to answer the survey and take part in interviews, and the staff of Avison Young, Jones Lang LaSalle, HS2 and NHS Property Services who carried out interviews on our behalf. Groundwork would like to thank each of these organisations and individuals for their invaluable contribution.

# Sources

**This report draws on three sources of information:**

## 1. Insight from the Tesco Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund

Groundwork manages the Tesco Bags of Help programme which, over the last four years, has seen 40,247 projects run by community groups and small charities across the UK receive more £90 million in small grants voted on by Tesco colleagues and customers. Following the initial coronavirus lockdown, the programme was replaced by a new short-term fund to help local communities meet immediate needs: the Tesco Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund. The fund provided a single payment award of £500 to organisations supporting vulnerable groups.

This report draws on the learning published in a prior Groundwork research report – Funding Communities in a Crisis: Tesco Bags of Help Covid-19 Communities Fund – in September 2020 <sup>9</sup>.

## 2. A large-scale survey of community groups

Community groups were invited to participate in a survey via Groundwork's national newsletter. 2,685 responses were received between 2 June and 8 July 2020. The responses represented a broad cross-section of community groups, carrying out different types of activities: 15% were focused on improving health and wellbeing, 15% on sports, 13% on young people, 10%

were community hubs or village halls, 8% were providing a specialised community service, 8% were gardening, environmental or parks groups, and 5% were 'Friends of' groups for a local public service. Among the other types of groups represented were food banks, heritage groups, arts groups, and social or befriending projects. Only 20 respondents were from new groups set up in response to Covid-19.

## 3. Semi-structured interviews with community group representatives

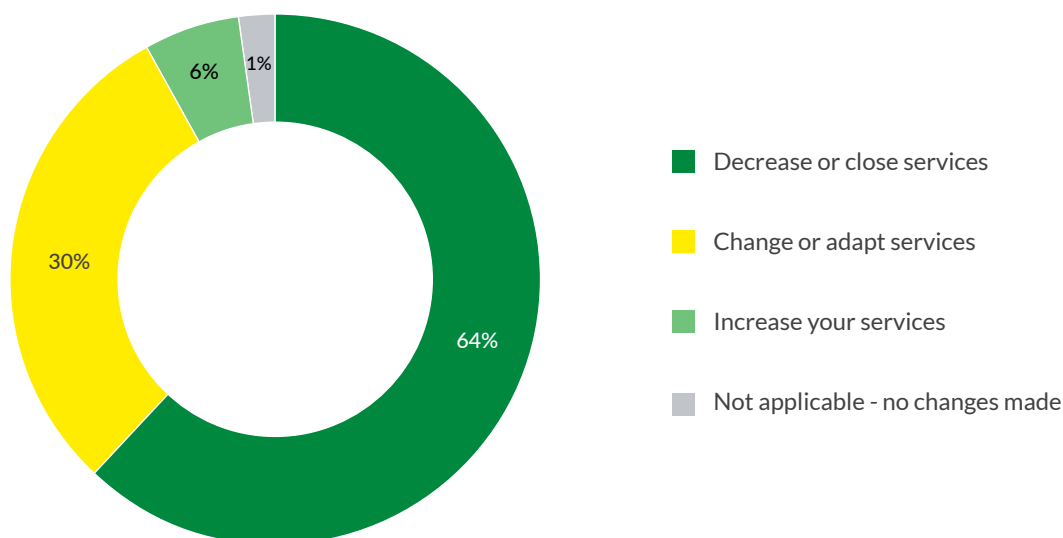
These interviews were carried out by volunteers on behalf of Groundwork and responses were fed back via an online form. 103 conversations were carried out by 33 volunteers: 18 conversations took place in May 2020 and a further 85 in August-September 2020. Volunteers were drawn from Groundwork's corporate partners: Avison Young, Jones Lang LaSalle, HS2 and NHS Property Services. For the initial conversations, community groups which had previously participated in Groundwork's research and awards programmes were approached and invited to take part. For the conversations in August-September 2020, community groups expressed an interest in participating through the survey and a sample was selected to provide a cross section of different groups.

# What impact has Covid-19 had on community groups?

All this evidence points to a common conclusion: the pandemic has been highly disruptive for community groups. Almost all survey respondents had been forced to make changes to their activities because of Covid-19. Almost two-thirds had decreased or closed services (62%), just under a third had changed or adapted their services (30%), around one in twenty had increased their services (6%), and just 1% had made no changes.



## How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected the activities of your community group? Have you had to:



At first glance, this contradicts the prevailing narrative that there has been more community action during the pandemic, with neighbours stepping up to help one another. However, there were noticeable differences in the reactions of different types of community groups: 91% of sports groups and 85% of heritage or arts groups had decreased or closed their services but only 42% of specialised community services had done the same. 60% of food banks had increased their services in response to the pandemic.

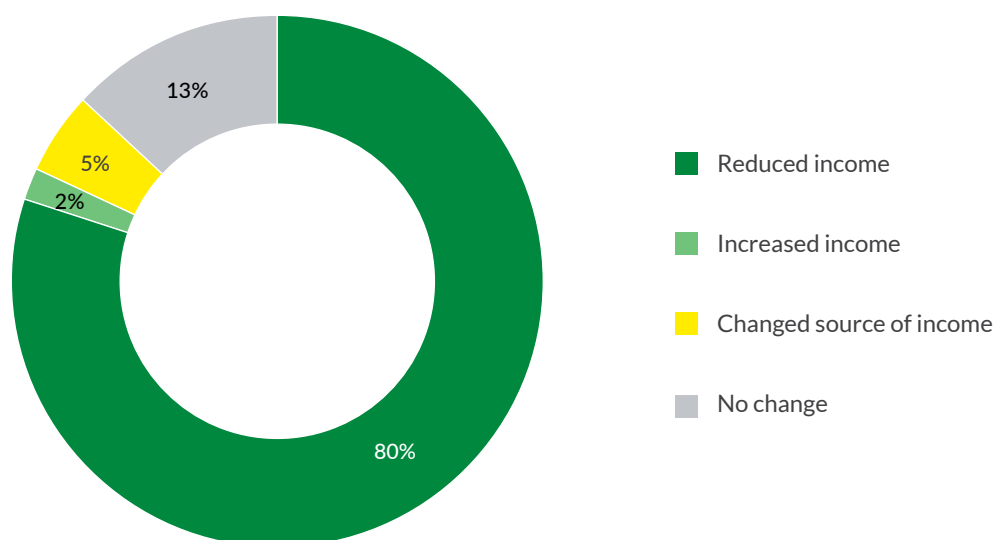
Social distancing will have made

many of the business-as-usual activities of community groups unviable. To qualify for the Tesco Covid-19 emergency fund, community groups had to be making changes to their services of one type or another. The most popular reason for applying was disruption due to coronavirus, which was the case for 43% of applicants. 36% were applying to fund new services in response to the pandemic and 21% of applications were made in response to increased demand on existing services. Projects that were funded due to disruption to their usual services often spent the money

on adaptations such as turning from a face-to-face service to one that delivered food or activities to people at home or delivered support remotely, by phone or online.

This type of emergency grant funding, made available soon after the imposition of lockdown, has been crucial for many community groups. Our survey found that most groups have experienced a loss of income which will have affected their ability to sustain services. 80% of those surveyed said that their income has reduced due to the pandemic.

## How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected the finances of your community group?



Many community groups rely on fundraising events and cash donations and these will have dried up during lockdown. One group reported that they usually raise a significant proportion of their income through supermarket bag packing, which they were not able

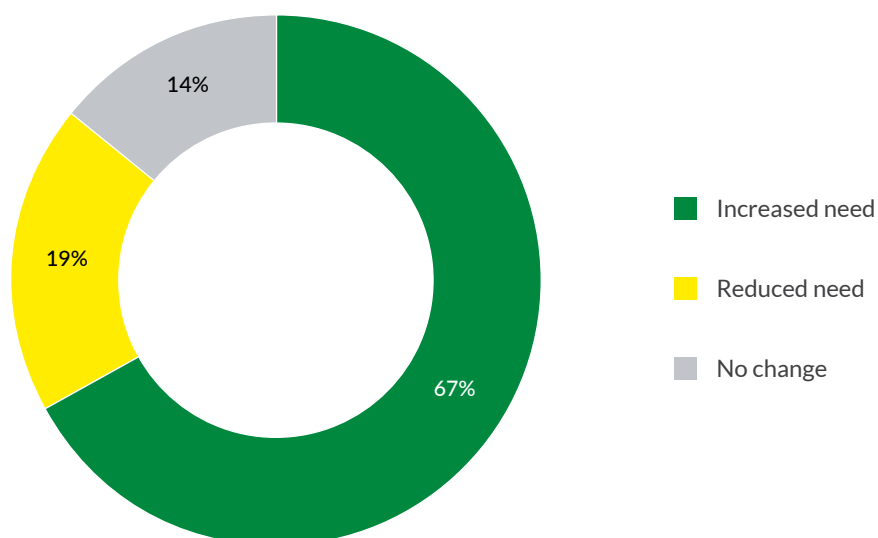
to do during lockdown due to social distancing and the need to limit the number of people in shops. Some community groups usually charge fees for activities, such as sports clubs, but are now offering online sessions free of charge to keep people engaged and active and to

prevent social isolation.

Despite the funding challenges and the closure of services, two-thirds of community groups said that they believed the level of need in the community they work with has increased.



## How has the coronavirus outbreak affected the level of need in the community you work with?

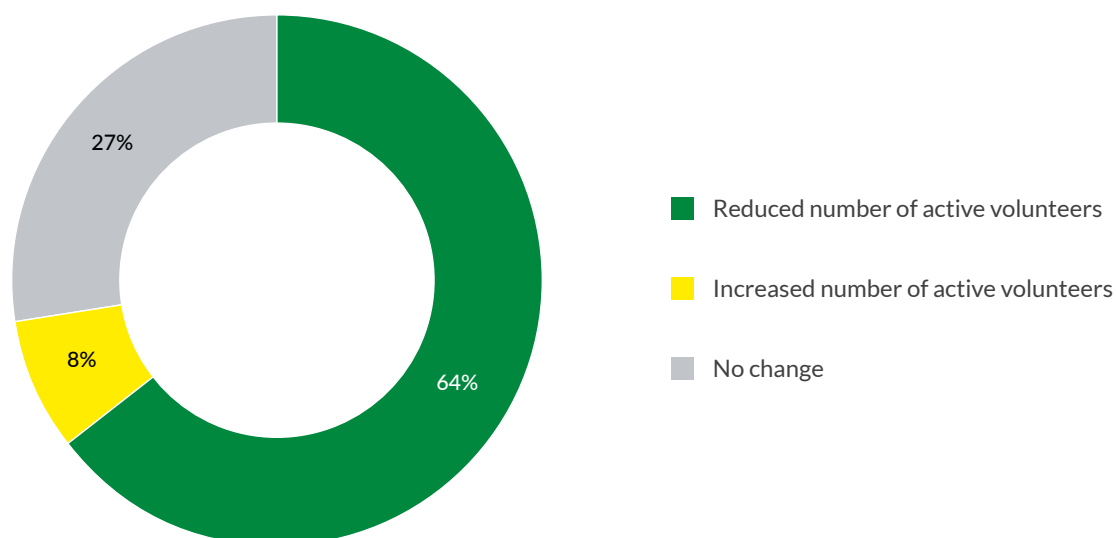


### Reasons given for this rising need were varied, but included:

- older people having become isolated and anxious during lockdown
- people who are clinically vulnerable to coronavirus needing practical support to access essentials such as food and medicine
- many households struggling financially because of furlough or redundancy
- mental health affected by lack of social interaction, particularly for young people and people with disabilities
- unpaid carers experiencing increased stress and being unable to access respite services due to lockdown
- reduction in physical activity levels during lockdown, affecting health and wellbeing
- increase in domestic abuse and drug and alcohol problems, including affecting households with children
- more people wanting to access community green spaces

Throughout lockdown, commentators identified an increase in the number of people wanting to volunteer to help their neighbours as a positive outcome of the crisis. The results of this survey indicate that the picture on the ground may be much more complex: many existing community groups have not seen a surge in volunteer numbers and many have actually seen a reduction in the number of people donating their time.

## How has the coronavirus outbreak and the measures taken in response affected the number of people available to volunteer for your community group?



Of course, where groups have had to reduce or close services, the need for volunteers will also have reduced. Other reasons cited as explanation for a reduction in the number of active volunteers included older volunteers being more vulnerable to the virus

and less familiar with digital communication tools. Some groups said that volunteers were unavailable due to having to juggle work commitments with home schooling and childcare. Others mentioned not being able to provide training or Disclosure

and Barring Service checks during lockdown as barriers to bringing on new volunteers. It is possible that some volunteers who were not active with community groups during this time were redirecting their efforts to other organisations involved in responding to the crisis.



# Challenges

Asked about the greatest challenge that Covid-19 and lockdown had presented them, community groups often referenced the problems with fundraising and maintaining a strong volunteer base discussed above. Other practical challenges included the closure of spaces where they would usually carry out their activities and the inability to meet with people face-to-face due to social distancing.

Some challenges were less practical, however, and related to the emotions involved in supporting a community of people through an unfamiliar crisis. Respondents spoke about the difficulty of maintaining engagement with people and ensuring that they did not become isolated.

*“Not having face to face interactions means that engagement is significantly lower. The need for Wifi and technology to access our virtual clubs has meant that our usual youth club cohort have not engaged with our virtual clubs at all.”*

Concern about the mental health impact on members of the community was frequently cited:

*“Many children are locked down within abusive home situations. Older children are suffering mental stress as their hopes and plans for their future educational paths are riddled with uncertainty.”*

Coping with bereavement at a time when the normal rituals for dealing with grief were disrupted came up in some responses. This could relate to supporting individuals who had lost a loved one but also to losses affecting a community group as a whole:

*“Not being able to say goodbye to our residents that have passed away, we would like to be able to do a memorial service at some point and have community members joining us again for afternoon tea.”*

Uncertainty was a common theme, with many groups feeling cut adrift and unable to plan for the future:

*“Currently we are experiencing huge uncertainty of when and how we can reopen. Even if schools reopen we are unlikely to be able to access the school hall to use for our club. Also we are a joint club with 2 schools, the children from the other school are unlikely to be permitted to travel across if any form of restrictions continue to be in place.”*

Many groups spoke about the uncertainty that the people they work with were feeling, as well as being unsure how or when income and fundraising might recover. Several of the community groups that employ staff said that having to put people on the government's Job Retention Scheme (furlough) compounded this sense of uncertainty about what might happen, with redundancies a very real prospect for some.



# How have community groups responded?

Despite these challenges, many community groups have adapted to the changed reality brought about by Covid-19 in resourceful and creative ways, stepping up to respond to unmet needs and support people's wellbeing. Amid the enormous loss and distress caused by the virus, some community groups were even able to identify positive developments in the way they were supporting their neighbourhoods: 44% of community groups surveyed said that there were changes they had made in response to the crisis that they would carry on with in the future, with a further 38% unsure if changes would continue.

## Collaboration

Around half (51%) of the community groups surveyed said that they had been working with other organisations during the pandemic. The most common partner was the local authority, with just over a quarter having worked with their local council. A similar proportion had collaborated with other community groups and a sixth had partnered with a local food bank. Roughly 5% of those that were working with other organisations were working with a local mutual aid group, suggesting that the co-ordination between new volunteer groups and existing community groups was patchy.

Some groups reported that partnership working had improved in their local areas because of the pandemic. The crisis had forced people to collaborate out of necessity and strengthened relationships:

*"We will continue to collaborate with local authority and homelessness services to offer better all-rounded support to our guests. We are now well-established within the community and have stronger relationships than ever before. We are confident and hopeful that Swansea will continue to work 'together' to support the most vulnerable in our city."*

## Providing the essentials

Ensuring that vulnerable people had access to food and other essentials during lockdown was a common area of community group activity. Food banks reported rising numbers needing their help due to financial difficulties, problems with benefits, health issues and homelessness. Many food banks began offering deliveries for the first time, responding to the need for social distancing and for people to shield.

Food banks were not the only type of community group that was involved in distributing food during lockdown. Many groups that had previously been focused on other types of activity recognised that food security was a growing problem for the people they work with and responded accordingly. For example, a parent-led support group for families with children with autism or mental health issues was among those that applied for funding to deliver food parcels to families in difficulty. Another group that had previously operated a 'Ring & Ride' service instead deployed their volunteers to deliver groceries and prescriptions to their service users at home and to help with tasks such as dog-walking and DIY.

In some cases, the adaptations had been so successful that groups were intending to continue some elements of them in the longer term. For example, one group said they would continue to offer foodbank delivery and

a prescription collection service for residents that struggled to get out and about due to mobility problems.

## Staying connected

Increased use of online technology was the most prominent adaptation, with many groups identifying being able to hold meetings online and offer some services and activities remotely as a positive that they would continue to some degree beyond the pandemic. These things were possible prior to the pandemic but necessity had provided the impetus for people to familiarise themselves with the technology, with one group commenting "Online meetings – who knew it was so easy". Some groups have been able to involve more people because of the move online:

*"We will continue to offer an additional online class for people who could not attend due to location and distance e.g. we have participants joining from different regions of the country and the wider world - with 2 people from Canada joining us!"*

*"We will continue to deliver one Zoom Zumba session as it suits some of our community. It allows them to access a fitness session but also a social gathering where they can speak to friends."*



Simple changes, like starting an electronic rota for volunteers, were making a difference for some groups. Some groups made more use of their website and social media pages to post activities and resources for people who would usually engage with their face-to-face services.

Of course, there are risks as well as benefits with the shift to online delivery and many community groups expressed concern about digital exclusion. Some groups had used grant funds to purchase devices which were then loaned to families or individuals who did not have them, to ensure that they were able to stay in touch and participate in activities. One community group summed up the importance of maintaining these connections:

*“By having these conversations and taking part in these activities it not only passes many solitary minutes but communicates they have not been forgotten in these lonely times.”*

In many cases, community groups were staying in touch with people via phone, making regular calls to check on the welfare of isolated people and to ensure that they had some social contact while in lockdown. One of the interviewees told of how this service was “seen as a gift for people who are now more visible to the group and local community”. One community group worked with a local primary

school to set up a pen pal initiative, with children exchanging letters with community members who were isolated by the pandemic.

## Supporting health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing were a key focus of much community group activity over the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Staying connected with people in the ways described above was a key part of this, as social isolation is a major risk factor for mental ill-health.

Other initiatives were more sharply focused on mental health provision. A significant proportion of applicants to the Tesco Bags of Help Covid-19 Community Fund applied to fund activities explicitly designed to support mental health. For example, one group applied for funds to run mental health and wellbeing sessions for families attending a primary school in a disadvantaged area. Many of the children had experienced trauma prior to the pandemic and the group identified a risk to wellbeing while the school was closed. The funding allowed them to run online workshops for parents, helping them to support their child through a challenging period.

Many other groups provided activities aimed at supporting people’s physical wellbeing, through online exercise classes, the provision of healthy food and ensuring people had the medicines and other resources they needed.





# Where were community groups active?

The community groups who responded to the survey and took part in the interviews were from across the UK, with grassroots organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland represented. The Tesco Bags of Help Covid-19 Community Fund also funded projects in each of the four nations and analysis of the locations indicates that the grantees – community groups actively supporting people during the pandemic – were concentrated in more deprived areas.

There is no UK-wide deprivation metric and therefore separate analysis was carried out for each of the four nations. The charts below are based on data from the English Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 <sup>10</sup>, the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020 <sup>11</sup>, the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 <sup>12</sup>, and the Northern Ireland Index of Multiple Deprivation 2017 <sup>13</sup>. In each case this is the most up-to-date data available.

The data on project location is based on the postcode provided with the application and it is important to note that projects may be being delivered over a much wider area or in a different location to the one in which the organisation is based. The relative level of deprivation in the communities in which projects were based was not part of the assessment criteria for the grant programme.

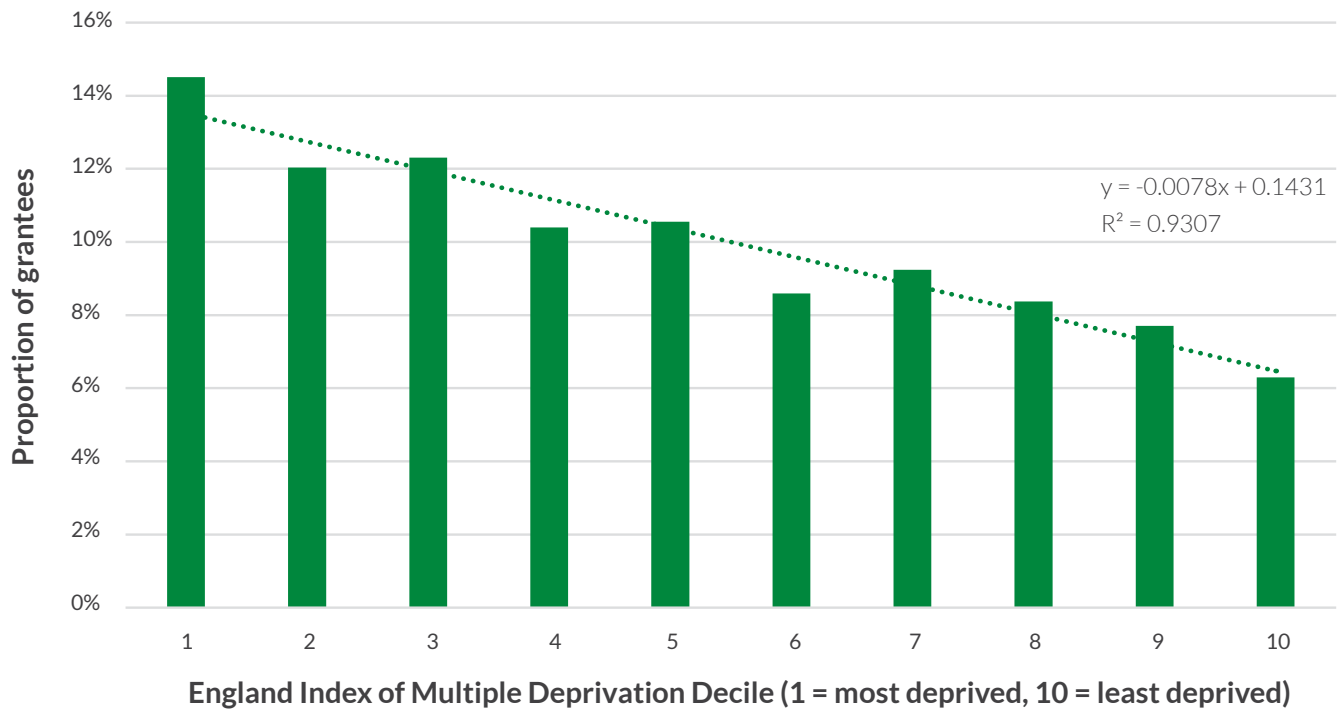
Although the Indices of Multiple Deprivation provide an indication of the general level of deprivation in an area, there will be households experiencing different challenges in each area; projects based in an area which ranks among the least deprived by this measure may be working with extremely vulnerable people.

The overall trends shown on each of the four graphs below, however, shows that more grants were awarded to organisations based in more deprived areas than to organisations based in less deprived areas. The trends are clearer in the data for England and Northern Ireland than for Scotland and Wales.

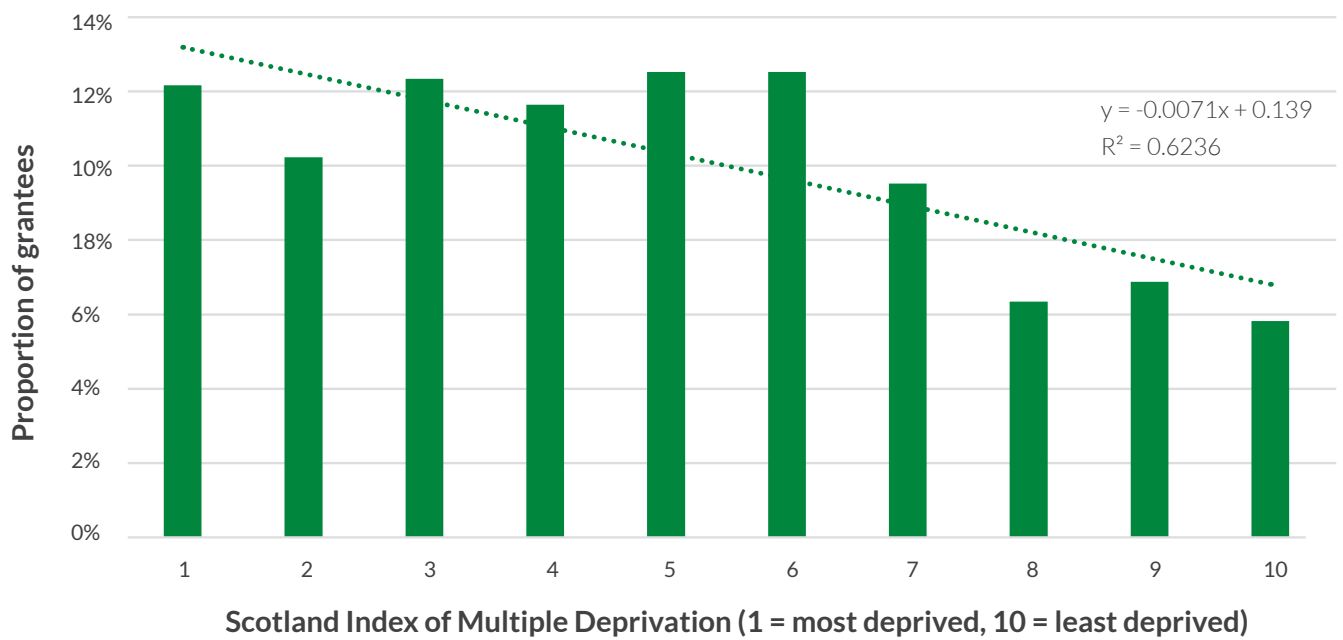
Given these trends we can say with some confidence that there is a greater need and demand for funding community groups in areas that are more disadvantaged and that the responses from groups about the support they need in future should be seen as relevant to the drive to 'level up' opportunity and tackle existing economic and health inequalities.



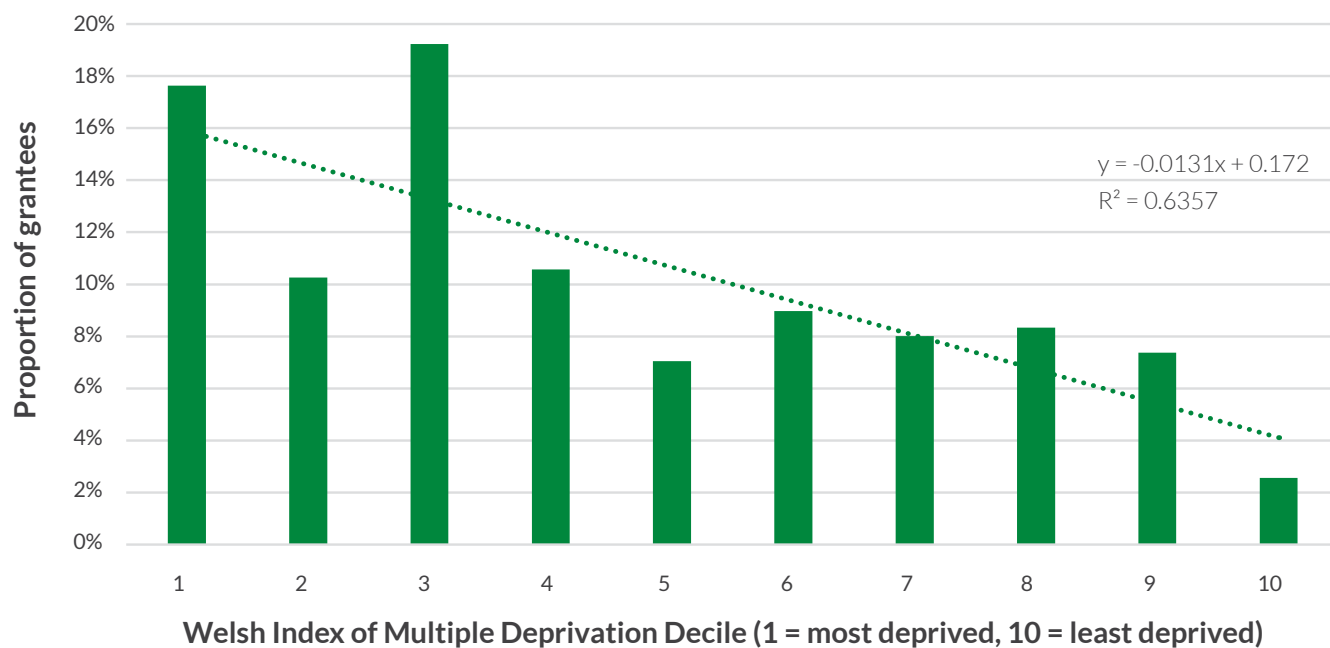
## England



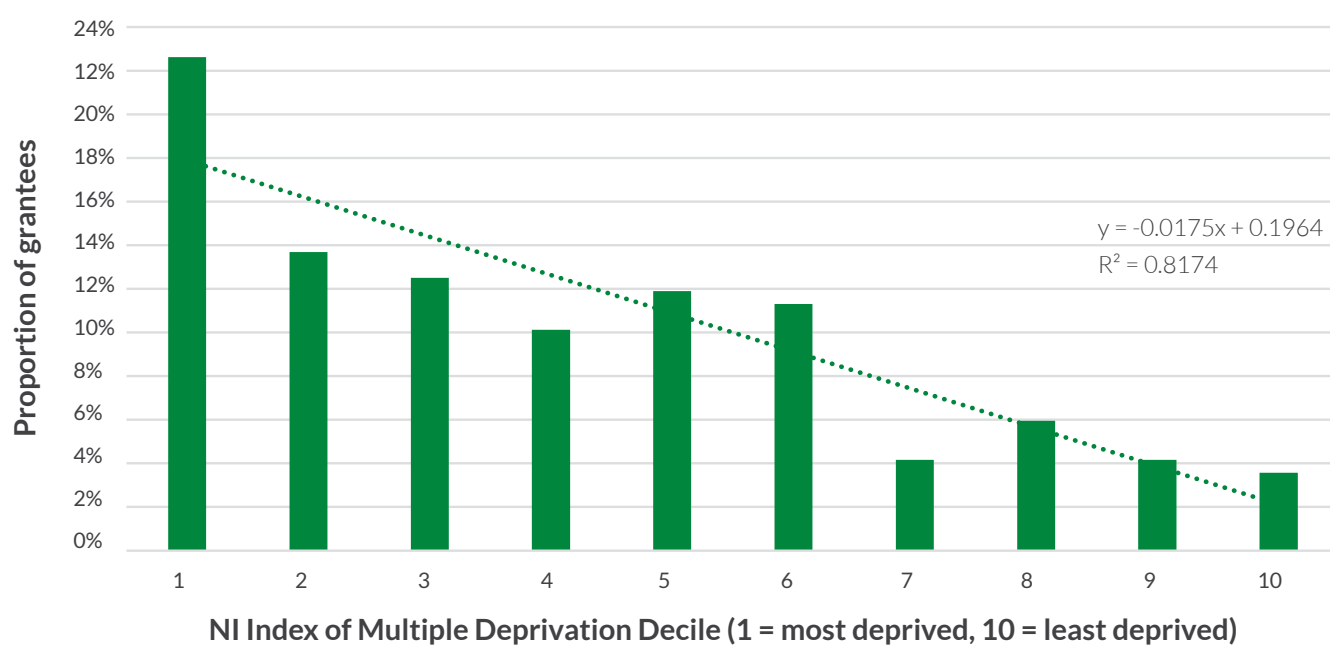
## Scotland



## Wales



## Northern Ireland



# Looking to the future

It is unsurprising that the disruption caused by the pandemic has eroded the confidence of community groups about the future: 45% of survey respondents told us that they were extremely or very confident about their ability to continue their project in the future, compared to 60% in 2019 (2). Despite this, most community groups believe that they have the potential to make a profound difference to their neighbourhoods if they are able to overcome the many challenges the pandemic has presented. 84% of the surveyed groups felt that they could play a role in rebuilding and recovery after the pandemic.

Helping people to regain confidence and get out and about safely in their community was a key area that community groups felt they could contribute to.

*“People are going to need a lot of support to come out of shielding and to engage with the community, so we can help with that... the community needs to support the community.”*

Community groups are planning to support people suffering because of the pandemic in very practical ways. The continuation of food delivery and helping people to access other essentials, mental health and befriending support, activities for children and young people, and specialised support services were just some of the examples given.

Some community groups felt that there had been a rise in community spirit during lockdown, with people getting to know their neighbours and becoming more involved in public life in their neighbourhoods. As a result, they felt that community groups like their group would play an increasing role in the future and become more integrated into the social fabric of their areas.

Several Friends of Parks groups felt that people valued their local green spaces more after lockdown and hoped that this would translate into more engagement with the need to protect and maintain them.

*“Community empowerment is central to the future of green spaces and to our society generally.”*



# What support do community groups need?

Of course, the capacity of community groups to support the recovery of their communities does not only depend on their internal efforts. Community groups are part of an ecosystem of social infrastructure and the resources they can draw on play a key role in determining how much impact they can make on their neighbourhoods.

We asked survey respondents about the types of support they would need to achieve their goals in the future. This question was also asked in Groundwork's 2019 survey of community groups (2) and the comparison provides some insight into the ways that the groups' priorities have been changed by the pandemic.

**What type(s) of support would help your community group to achieve its goals for the future? Please select all that apply**



In 2019 community groups had a much broader range of priorities, with seven categories of support selected by over 50% of respondents. In 2020, only grant funding was selected by over 50% of respondents, suggesting that the financial impact of the pandemic has led to a narrower focus on financial security.

The only other area which was more frequently selected in 2020 than 2019 was access to buildings or outside space. This is likely to reflect that the coronavirus pandemic has made some spaces inaccessible and changed the type of spaces groups need, with many looking for larger spaces or outdoor venues to facilitate social distancing.

In their conversations with community group leaders, corporate volunteers were able to explore the support needs in more detail. Many community groups spoke about the need to find new spaces as the spaces they had previously been using had become unavailable or no longer met their needs. For example, one community dance group told of how they were desperate for affordable space they could use as a studio. They had been offered use of a council-owned space that was being used for storage but could not afford the £27,000 per year rent. Lack of affordable space in the local area was an issue for many groups, as was how to make spaces 'Covid secure'.

### Other areas that were commonly raised as support needs included:

- advice and guidance on writing bids for funding, training on using websites, social media and video conferencing
- support to develop fundraising and diversify income
- access to long term funding which can support core running costs as well as project costs
- marketing and social media to help community groups reach out to more people
- help to become involved in advocacy work to tackle the root causes of the problems that groups are addressing in their communities (for example, food poverty)

As we found in our 2019 survey, the support available to community groups from local authorities and voluntary sector infrastructure bodies has been scaled back significantly over recent years due to spending cuts. It remains a challenge for the sector to find ways to fund and sustain this support so that community groups are able to maximise the impact of their work.





# Conclusion

This research has highlighted the many challenges that community groups have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic; the majority of groups had reduced their services, had fewer active volunteers and their income had taken a hit. It is no wonder, then, that their confidence about continuing to operate in the future was lower than it was a year ago.

However, despite these challenges many community groups have found resourceful and creative ways to support people in their neighbourhoods. Community groups played a key role in ensuring that people had access to basic necessities during lockdown, combatting social isolation, and providing crucial health and wellbeing support. Many community groups have found new ways of working which they intend to continue with in some way beyond the pandemic. The stories they tell point to the importance of local knowledge, trusted points of contact and commitment to the wellbeing of others and reinforce the value of strong social infrastructure to successful community responses.

The location of grantees suggests that community groups are particularly active in areas with high levels of deprivation, as measured by Indices of Multiple Deprivation. This suggests that community groups and emergency funding are reaching areas of high

need - though it is not possible to say that all areas of high need are being reached.

Looking to the future, groups feel that they have the potential to play an important role in supporting their communities to recover from the crisis. This research identifies that grant funding is overwhelmingly identified as the single thing that would make most difference, with safe space another important factor. Other forms of support were deemed less important than they had been previously, indicating that groups are focused on the immediate financial challenges the pandemic has presented.

It is safe to conclude that, whilst there has been a welcome flurry of programmes offering grant funding to the voluntary sector - a number of them prioritising smaller charities - access to funding will be crucial to ensuring groups are able to support their communities through what is anticipated to be a challenging winter. What this research also shows is that, if these resources remain available, there are community organisations operating across the country, particularly in the areas hardest hit by the pandemic, who have shown great commitment and creativity in adapting their services and whose activities should be embraced as part of local recovery plans.

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