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THREE

England

Eddy Hogg, Joanna Stuart, Amy McGarvey and Catherine Goodall

Image 3.1: A Royal Voluntary Service volunteer at a vaccination centre in England



3.1 Introduction

Voluntary action has been a key part of local, regional and national responses to the pandemic in England. From spontaneous highly informal neighbourly help to formal activities coordinated by voluntary and public sector organisations, volunteers have played a vital role during the crisis. The quick, responsive and resilient nature of communities in responding to the pandemic in England has been widely recognised, as too has the role of the voluntary sector in leading the response in many communities (Coutts et al, 2020; McCabe et al, 2020). However, the pandemic has also exposed the legacy of a decade of deprioritisation and disinvestment of the voluntary sector and its infrastructure in England. National government and the sector were on ‘shakier ground’ at the onset of the pandemic (Dayson and Damm, 2020) and in contrast to the other home nations, voluntary action was not as clearly or distinctly considered within national policy. With this backdrop, our research sought to explore voluntary action responses to the pandemic and understand how policy-making both before and during the pandemic played a role in shaping this response. We ask what the pandemic can teach us about nurturing voluntary action beyond the pandemic and how prepared England is for the future.

The approach we took to develop this understanding was consistent with that taken in the other nations of the UK. First, existing research on voluntary action in England during COVID-19 and over 60 policy documents were identified, collated and reviewed to inform the research. A survey was then developed and shared via a wide range of networks, England-wide, during spring 2021. A total of 127 organisations responded with the majority operating in England, and 17 operating across the UK or internationally. Respondents included:

- local infrastructure organisations such as volunteer centres and Councils for Voluntary Services from every region of England (53 respondents);
- voluntary organisations (47 respondents);
- public sector organisations or bodies, including NHS Trusts (ten respondents);
- volunteering leads in local authorities (eight respondents).

Alongside the survey, we also conducted a series of workshops with stakeholders from infrastructure organisations and volunteer involving organisations to review and provide feedback on the survey findings. A second stage of research was conducted in autumn 2021, engaging with policy-makers to further explore the policy response to the pandemic. This included wider stakeholders, such as volunteer involving organisations, local authorities and infrastructure organisations, to understand the impact of the policy response.

This chapter begins with an analysis of the state of the English voluntary sector, and in particular the infrastructure which supports it, in the period leading up to the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. Next, it looks at the ways in which voluntary organisations and volunteers supported individuals and communities in a diverse range of ways during the pandemic. This section focuses on three key themes: the early stages of the pandemic where much formal voluntary action was paused while informal mutual aid groups developed rapidly; the importance of collaboration and partnership throughout the pandemic; and the focus of English national policy-making on large-scale volunteering schemes. The penultimate section looks forward, asking what we can learn from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude by reflecting on how the pandemic has highlighted the strengths of voluntary action and the voluntary sector in England, in particular the importance of collaboration, but also exposed the impact of a decade of limited policy attention and an associated lack of investment.

3.2 The sector in 2020

The past two decades preceding the pandemic saw significant changes in the way in which policy-makers in England approached the voluntary sector and voluntary action. We have seen a shift from the New Labour rhetoric, if not reality, of partnership to the Coalition's more hands-off 'Big Society' approach and more recently to an 'antagonistic collaboration' (Brewis et al, 2021) under the majority Conservative government. Looming large over the latter two periods, since 2010, were substantial funding cuts in the name of 'austerity', which disproportionately impacted local government. In this context, the relationship between the state and voluntary organisations at the national level over the last decade has been described as 'strained', with partnership arrangements between government and voluntary organisations 'scaled back' (Brewis et al, 2021).

Funding from government to the voluntary sector in England reduced significantly over the decade preceding the pandemic. As a proportion of the sector's total income, income from government has fallen continuously since 2008/9 (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2021). Significantly for voluntary action in particular, over this period government and other funding for voluntary sector infrastructure was reduced or withdrawn, leading to closures or mergers of organisations and a more fragmented landscape (Macmillan, 2021).

The infrastructure that has survived ten years of austerity varies hugely between different parts of England. This reflects local and regional differences in resourcing of infrastructure for voluntary action, which in many ways mirror other inequalities between areas. Wider research, for example, shows that deprived areas have fewer charities and lower levels of voluntary action (Corry, 2020). The particularly harsh impact of funding cuts on local government – which typically funded local infrastructure organisations – affected the levels of support for infrastructure and the quality of relationships

between local government and parts of the voluntary sector (Macmillan, 2021).

At the same time, however, the shift towards public service commissioning led to an increasingly ‘complementary relationship’ between local government and some local voluntary sector organisations. Many local organisations were already embedded in local government systems and service delivery before COVID-19 hit (Dayson and Damm, 2020). However, the competitive environment commissioning and procurement practices can create has been seen to discourage collaboration and partnership working within the sector (Brewis et al, 2021).

In addition to the uneven patchwork of voluntary sector infrastructure and levels of public and policy engagement with the voluntary sector, responses to previous events and emergencies had prepared some local areas to mobilise voluntary action better than others. In some areas, responding to an emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic was not a first. There are clear and established mechanisms, legislative duties, processes and procedures which govern how local areas should respond to emergencies. This includes the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, the Community Resilience Development Framework and guidance for local authorities in preparing for civil emergencies. Much of this guidance considers the vital role that voluntary action plays in responding to emergencies and sets out how volunteers and voluntary organisations should be engaged. As a result, areas which had experienced recent emergencies, such as localised flooding, often had better integration and more established relationships between Local Emergency Forums or Resilience Partnerships and wider stakeholders.

Where wider voluntary action policy is concerned, recent national policy-making in England has seen voluntary action conceptualised primarily outside of the scope of central government. The government has seen its role as creating the conditions for voluntary action to flourish, albeit with little

clarity about what these conditions might be, and at least prior to the pandemic, has not recently taken a directive approach to delivering or supporting voluntary action. This can be observed in the mechanisms for funding and commissioning, which tend to be coordinated through the public, social and private sectors.

The most recent English policy document concerning volunteering is the 2018 Civil Society Strategy. The government's hands-off approach is laid bare, with volunteering positioned within a wider concept of 'civil society' (Bennett et al, 2019). Framing volunteering in this broader and less explicit way differs from the other jurisdictions of the UK considered in this volume, where volunteering is clearly and distinctly considered within national policy, which is then linked to clear action plans. A detailed action plan for the 2018 strategy had not been developed prior to the onset of the pandemic.

In England, at the onset of the pandemic, there was therefore an absence of a cohesive and robust agenda or plan for voluntary action at the national level. Given the levels of disinvestment in local government that occurred alongside this, the local response to the pandemic is remarkable. This response is explored in the next part of this chapter.

3.3 Voluntary action and the sector in the pandemic

Having established the pre-pandemic context for voluntary action in England, we now move on to explore how COVID-19 impacted voluntary action and changed the landscape for volunteers. This section first looks at the initial pandemic response, including the pausing of much existing voluntary action alongside the rapid formation of mutual aid groups in almost every community across England. Next, it explores the ways in which new and existing partnerships and collaborations shaped the voluntary action response. Finally, this section looks at the large-scale, mass volunteering programmes introduced

at a national scale by policy-makers in England in response to the pandemic.

3.3.1 Initial changes in voluntary action

The scale and nature of voluntary action has changed significantly and repeatedly over the course of COVID-19. As a result, the pandemic cannot be understood as one homogenous event, but one that changed over time with varying implications for voluntary action.

There were major shifts as individuals, organisations and communities responded to local needs, changing restrictions and evolving personal and organisational circumstances. In particular, the initial lockdown in the early stages of the pandemic was markedly different in character to the long series of easing and tightening of restrictions that followed and continues to the time of writing.

In these early stages, much existing voluntary action was paused. Many volunteers had to step back from their roles, often because of shielding, social distancing requirements or services which had ceased or changed. Wider research reports that in one third of voluntary organisations in England and Wales, the number of volunteers declined between the start of the pandemic and the summer of 2021, while only one in ten reported an increase ([Charity Commission, 2021](#)). As a result, the existing formal voluntary sector was working with far less volunteer capacity than usual, at a time when, for many, demand was the highest it has ever been.

However, while much voluntary action through organisations was paused in the early days of the pandemic, huge numbers of people were keen to give their time and talents to support others. The pandemic introduced many new people to voluntary action, with research from [Together \(2021\)](#) finding that around a third of those who volunteered during the first six months of the pandemic were first time volunteers, an estimated 4.6 million people. The furlough scheme in

particular was instrumental in enabling many working-age adults to volunteer for the first time.

These new volunteers were involved in a wide range of activities, supporting neighbours, existing voluntary organisations and forming new mutual aid groups, often at extremely local scales and with a neighbourhood or community-level focus. During the first lockdown in March 2020, 4,000 mutual aid groups were registered on the COVID Mutual Aid UK website (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). These groups included a huge diversity of activities and approaches, including everything from WhatsApp groups to sophisticated new community organisations. The sizes of these groups varied too, with some having only a handful of members and others having many hundreds (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020).

Many of the local infrastructure organisations who we surveyed reported this influx of new volunteers during the early stages of the pandemic. Many noted the different profile of volunteers they engaged with during this time, particularly an increase in younger volunteers, including those who were furloughed, who stepped up when older and more vulnerable volunteers had to stand down. Organisations also highlighted that the adoption of more flexible ways of working during COVID-19 has, for some, reduced the bureaucracy of getting involved. However, for some organisations, the pandemic has prompted concerns that it has amplified inequalities in society, in particular for some groups such as disabled volunteers, with organisations unable to support more vulnerable volunteers.

Another aspect of this early stage noted by surveyed respondents was the speed at which individuals and communities stepped up and organised to provide emergency support to members of their community. Organisations shared some of the challenges and tensions this created on the ground. This included an insufficient number of opportunities, due in part to the COVID-19 restrictions, and a lack of capacity to place, manage and support the influx of new volunteers. In some areas, supply of volunteers significantly outstripped demand

and this was cited as a key issue by a number of infrastructure bodies: “We had more than 2,000 people respond to our call for general volunteering support but found the opportunities available were much more limited” (Local infrastructure organisation, East Midlands, survey). Communities and organisations met some of these challenges by creating new roles and opportunities for volunteers. However, this was within the wider context of the considerable challenges being faced by organisations, not least the increase in demand for services and growing financial pressures.

Initially there were some concerns from existing voluntary sector infrastructure organisations that new organisations, such as mutual aid groups, while nobly motivated, were not suitably connected to existing systems and processes, particularly around safeguarding:

‘Local Mutual Aid set up really fast, iterated really quickly, scaled quickly. It faced challenges from the other agencies, questions about its legitimacy and safety, attempts to marginalise it, but seems to have been very effective in this phase, and we worked to advise and support it, integrate it into the rest of the community response, and connect it with other volunteers in pre-pandemic networks and agencies.’ (Local infrastructure organisation, London, survey)

By summer 2020, as restrictions began to ease, many mutual aid groups were increasingly plugged into local voluntary sector networks, while others had faded away: “By [the] end of summer easing levels of activity by mutual aid groups dropped. A couple had disappeared completely. Some were still very active, especially ones that had linked up or even integrated with borough-wide volunteer response” (Local infrastructure organisation, London, survey). As the pandemic moved past these early stages, concerns were raised about the wellbeing of volunteers and burnout (Ellis Paine et al, 2021). The challenges

of managing the influx of new volunteers were replaced by other different challenges of sustaining their involvement as furlough came to an end, as well as re-engaging volunteers who had paused their involvement (more on this in [section 3.4](#)).

3.3.2 Relationships, collaboration and partnership

Individuals and organisations coming together during COVID-19 has been at the foundation of much of the national and local level response to the pandemic. Collaboration has not, however, been universal and has not been without challenges.

At the national level, [Brewis et al \(2021, p 153\)](#) describe the ‘rapidly improvised new relationships’ developed early on in the crisis between government and the voluntary sector. Our research showed how new partnerships were formed and voluntary sector organisations shared their knowledge to inform the crisis response at the national level. However, wider research suggests that partnerships faltered as the pandemic progressed and the impact of the pandemic was increasingly being felt by the sector ([Macmillan, 2021](#)).

At the local level, research shows how relationships were strengthened and barriers broken down between individuals and organisations during COVID-19, supporting voluntary action and the quick response of communities ([McCabe et al, 2020](#)). Multi-agency and cross-organisational working during COVID-19 was a key feature of the response in some areas, representing ‘a significant transition away from more traditional silo working towards a place-based response’ ([Burchell et al, 2020, p 2](#)).

Consistent with these studies, many of the local infrastructure organisations and local authorities who responded to our survey highlighted how they worked collaboratively during the pandemic and the effectiveness of the collective COVID-19 response. This included different types of organisations and agencies working together on the voluntary action response:

‘Working at a local level and in partnership across the system has been the key to our success. This needs to be acknowledged nationally – I don’t feel it has been.’ (Local infrastructure organisation, South West, survey)

‘The collaborative, coordinated approach between public and VCS [voluntary and community sector] sectors has to be maintained. The pandemic allowed process, policy and usually stifling “red tape” to be “parked” meaning actions could be taken swiftly and openly between partners to mobilise voluntary support within services and communities. It has to be recognised by central and local government the power and support volunteers and the VCS provided during the pandemic and therefore built upon.’ (Local authority, Yorkshire and the Humber, survey)

Other examples in our research included new and strengthened relationships between mutual aid groups – as explored in the previous section – local authorities and local infrastructure. Where it worked well, collaboration led to the effective mobilisation of volunteers and innovative ways of working, with examples of local solutions which will be useful beyond the pandemic.

While some were new, it was – perhaps unsurprisingly – clear that pre-existing relationships, networks and partnerships helped with quick responses to the pandemic. “Two years before COVID[-19] we had already agreed to get involved in the command-and-control structure for an emergency response ... so when we got to COVID[-19] we were very embedded in it all because of those arrangements we had around emergency response” (Local infrastructure organisation, North West, interview). Several other factors were identified as enablers or barriers to collaboration. Having effective lines of communication, mutual understanding and trust in place prior to an emergency situation was seen as key for collaborative

working. Technology has also played an important role in keeping volunteers, organisations and agencies connected.

Resources, in particular funding, were also identified as an enabler to collaboration, allowing for innovative collaboration, including between local authorities and the voluntary sector. The VCS Emergencies Partnership was an example of this. This partnership brings together local and national organisations to help deliver a more coordinated response to emergencies and with grant funding from the government the network grew to 30 national organisations and 200 local partners during 2020/1. [McMullen and Macmillan \(2021, p 13\)](#) note how funding through the VCS Emergencies Partnership supported dialogue and collaboration between organisations and ‘brought together a diverse range of organisations working in different areas of the country to be able to learn from each other’. Organisations in our study were particularly concerned, however, about a lack of future funding to maintain relationships and the impact this could have.

However, experiences of relationships varied considerably and some organisations reported a lack of joined-up working and missed opportunities in the response, or that the pandemic has brought more competition and less collaboration. Those expressing this felt it to have hampered the voluntary action response to the pandemic. Some experienced disconnection between public agencies responsible for different elements of the pandemic response, poor coordination between local authorities and the voluntary sector in some areas, and less positive relationships between mutual aid groups and local authorities and/or local infrastructure. The impact of this included a slower or more fragmented response and duplication of effort:

‘There was a distinct lack of communication between statutory and local organisations leading to (in many cases) duplication. Also, this was mainly a top-down response without considering the grassroots organisations who

are in contact with many individuals and groups who were not reached by the other initiatives. Again, a lack of joined up working.’ (Local infrastructure organisation, South East, survey)

Many of the examples of disjointed or un-coordinated working that were reported in our research centred on national–local relationships, as many respondents perceived a disconnect between the ‘top down’ response being driven nationally and what was happening at a local level with the recruitment, mobilisation and management of volunteers. Local infrastructure organisations highlighted that even within a local area, a ‘one size fits all’ approach was not suitable. National volunteering programmes were cited as examples of this (more on this in [section 3.3.3](#)). Some of these issues are likely to be rooted in the disconnection and disenfranchisement that has characterised the relationship between government and the voluntary sector over the last decade.

3.3.3 Mass volunteering programmes

A significant feature of national volunteering policy in England during the pandemic was the focus on large-scale, mass volunteering programmes. The first of these was the NHS Volunteer Responders Programme mentioned previously in this chapter. The programme, a partnership between NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE/I), GoodSAM and Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) was originally established to support people who were asked to shield due to underlying health conditions. The programme was designed as an additional service for communities focused on health service activities and was not intended to replace existing local groups or infrastructure ([NHS England, 2020a](#)). The programme aimed to match local volunteers with individuals or organisations such as pharmacies through the GoodSAM app. The other large-scale national volunteering scheme

focused on the delivery of vaccinations and vaccine boosters, with over 100,000 volunteers recruited to support at vaccine centres (*The Guardian*, 2022), some of whom were matched to roles through the NHS Volunteer Responders Programme.

These programmes were hugely successful in attracting large numbers of willing volunteers. Both too were able to match volunteers with tasks that supported England's response to the pandemic, although with differing levels of success. NHS Volunteer Responders was perceived as effective in our research where the existing local voluntary sector and its infrastructure were less strong. For example, a workshop participant noted that in their local area the programme had been essential, as they had very little local volunteering infrastructure to support the coordination of volunteers at the scale needed during the crisis; a consequence largely of the legacy of regional and local inequality in investment and support for the sector.

The broader impacts of the NHS Volunteer Responders programme are an important part of the picture of how community needs were met during the pandemic. An evaluation of the programme by partner organisation RVS found that the majority of patients supported by the programme felt that their basic needs had been met and it had enabled them to stay at home and stay safe during the early stages of the pandemic (*Royal Voluntary Service*, 2020).

Not all voluntary sector infrastructure and volunteer involving organisations on the ground shared such positive views. To some, the programme was disruptive of, or distracting from, local arrangements already in place. A number suggested that the programme could have linked better with local arrangements and focused more on the communities with higher levels of demand. The programme and the political rhetoric around it also set high expectations about the numbers of volunteers that could be accommodated by the NHS and reportedly left some volunteers disappointed when they were not matched to tasks or there were delays in being matched: "There was a lot of disruption to local arrangements

due to the RVS project, which not only encouraged so many people to volunteer, but set huge expectations of what the NHS could accommodate which could not in any way be fulfilled” (Local infrastructure organisation, London, survey). Despite these challenges, many reflected that the initial outpouring of volunteer support for the Volunteer Responders Programme has helped to raise the profile of voluntary action and the important role of volunteers within communities and among decision makers. Infrastructure organisations similarly reflected on the ‘wonderful response’ from volunteers to the call for help with the vaccination programme.

The vaccination volunteering scheme was delivered by the NHS in partnership with St John Ambulance, RVS and local infrastructure organisations. This was primarily driven by the health service rather than the government in England and this was seen as a key factor in enabling it to connect and collaborate more effectively with organisations and efforts at the local level compared to other national, more centralised responses. The House of Commons *Lessons Learned* report, for example, points to the openness of the vaccination programme in welcoming volunteer involvement which was seen as starkly different from, for example, the Track and Trace programme (House of Commons Health and Social Care, and Science and Technology Committees, 2021). “In early December we were approached by our clinical commissioning group to recruit non-clinical volunteers to support the surgery vaccination centres – volunteer recruitment was rapid and helped by already having so many links to existing volunteers who had put themselves forward to be COVID-response volunteers” (Local infrastructure organisation, South East, survey).

The outpouring of volunteer support during the pandemic, then, has been facilitated and constrained by a wide range of factors, including English policy approaches to voluntary action and the voluntary sector before and during the pandemic. Consistent with wider research, this has been shaped by the pre-existing environment (Ellis Paine et al, 2021). Where

local infrastructure was stronger, it was better able to support newly formed mutual aid organisations, to support an influx of new volunteers and to work in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations. Where such infrastructure was weaker – either due to cuts over the preceding decade or due to other reasons – there was less support for emergent mutual aid groups, less ability to form and nurture partnerships and more reliance on national volunteer matching schemes.

3.4 Looking forward

In this final section we look to the future, exploring the current and upcoming challenges and opportunities for voluntary action policy and practice. We look at how we might create an environment for voluntary action to thrive beyond the pandemic, and prepare for future challenges.

As we have seen, the pandemic led to fundamental shifts in voluntary action with a significant influx of new and returning volunteers across England as well as the pausing of much existing voluntary action. As restrictions have eased, changed and eased again, volunteer involving organisations have had to carefully consider how to re-engage these existing volunteers in the context of continued uncertainty.

Organisations who participated in our research reported a range of factors they were dealing with, including the wellbeing of volunteers, especially in relation to anxiety about returning to roles; lack of digital skills among volunteers whose roles have shifted online; and the need for existing volunteers to adapt to new ways of working. They noted that some existing but paused volunteers may simply not wish, or not be able, to return.

Organisations have been meeting these challenges with practical measures and a focus on supporting their volunteers. This includes new and refresher training, additional emotional support, peer support through schemes such as volunteer buddies, and the development of micro-volunteering opportunities for people who want to dip their toe back in.

Alongside re-engaging existing volunteers, organisations and communities have also faced challenges with sustaining the involvement of new volunteers. As furlough came to an end and the needs of communities fluctuated, volunteer involving organisations in our research reported losing a number of their new volunteers and many of those active in their communities reportedly stepped back. Sustaining voluntary action has been challenging for organisations and communities, with organisations pointing to a lack of resources and capacity to provide meaningful roles and ongoing support for new volunteers, particularly given the stress that the pandemic has placed on the finances of voluntary organisations. Understanding the different motivations and needs of volunteers during ‘crisis’ and ‘calm’ and how best to respond to these to promote a positive volunteering experience needs to be a key part of the approach to sustaining voluntary action. In our research, organisations shared how they are developing new flexible roles, co-developing voluntary activities with volunteers and using technology to engage volunteers.

However, wider research reminds us that sustaining voluntary action may not always be a good thing and we should not ‘always assume that more is better’ (Ellis Paine et al, 2021). Indeed, our research has shown that during the pandemic, particularly in the early stages, the key issue was less about the ‘supply’ of volunteers but more about the availability of, and access to, voluntary roles and capacity to support volunteers.

Indeed, the pandemic has brought into sharper focus issues relating to inequalities in access to voluntary action. While the pandemic has broken down some barriers to participation, it has exacerbated others with concerns in our research that some groups will be less likely to return to volunteering including disabled people and those with health conditions. Long before the pandemic, research into voluntary action has consistently highlighted the inequalities in access; those who are more affluent and better educated, for example, are more likely to volunteer, especially where voluntary action takes

place in more formal settings (Southby et al, 2019; National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2021). Events from the past year such as global anti-racism movements and campaigns like #CharitySoWhite in the UK have additionally brought these issues to the fore (Donahue et al, 2020). Looking ahead, organisations saw issues around diversity and inclusion only becoming more important. The need to address digital exclusion was particularly highlighted by organisations in our research, especially given the emergence of more hybrid opportunities. As organisations re-engage existing volunteers and seek to sustain the involvement of newcomers during the pandemic, they must also ensure that they do so in a way which is inclusive and accommodating of the widest possible range of volunteer needs. Organisations in our research gave examples of how they were working towards more inclusive voluntary action, from making onboarding easier to engaging new volunteers through connecting with local groups and communities.

Connecting with others has underpinned much of the voluntary action response to the pandemic and strengthening these connections and relationships will be crucially important for the future of voluntary action. In our research the role of connections between volunteers and organisations and between different organisations/agencies has been particularly highlighted and those involved in our research were taking practical steps to try and sustain collaboration and partnership working to facilitate and support voluntary action to help meet the needs of local communities. This included agencies and organisations working together to create a shared vision for voluntary action, new systems for sharing resources between organisations, including volunteer training, and new ways of working to enable volunteers to move easily between volunteer opportunities and organisations. Collaboration has not however been universal and inequality in access to, and capacity for, collaborative working ‘highlights the importance of reaching out beyond existing networks’ (McCabe et al, 2021, p 9) as we move beyond the pandemic.

At the national level, there is also a great deal to be learnt from the pandemic with lessons for voluntary action policy-making. During COVID-19 the government in England has been described as acting in isolated ways and an ‘absent presence’ (Macmillan, 2021), in part a reflection of the absence of a strategic direction or specific agenda for voluntary action pre-COVID-19. Questions about the relationship between the sector, local and national infrastructure, volunteers and the government have been raised in our research, including what role government should, or should not, play in supporting voluntary action: “We’ve got to be better organised. And, I’ll follow whoever is leading ... we’ve got to be organised and we’ve got to understand who is leading and where does the sector sit in parallel to the state?” (Volunteer involving organisation, national, interview). Recognising this lack of strategic focus and long-term planning for voluntary action in England, a group of voluntary sector organisations are collaborating to develop a ten-year ‘Vision for Volunteering’. Driven by a steering group of more than 20 organisations with support from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the work aims to build a clear, ambitious and achievable ten-year plan, with measurable actions.

Indeed, the pandemic has provided a unique opportunity for organisations and communities to think, and perhaps rethink, the voluntary action ‘ecosystem’ and how it can best thrive. The organisations in our research anticipate challenges ahead. In particular, local authorities, infrastructure and volunteer involving organisations expressed concerns about future funding. Participants emphasised the importance of robust social infrastructure, defined in the wider literature as ‘the places and structures and buildings or clubs that enable people to get together, meet, socialise, volunteer and co-operate’ (Gregory, 2018, p 11) and the need to invest in this. This is seen as an important part of the government’s levelling up agenda and ‘how we can collectively strengthen the community and neighbourhood infrastructure needed to build social capital and

enable all neighbourhoods to thrive' (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2022). The success of this will be key to creating an empowering and inclusive environment for voluntary action. Achieving this will likely be best done through investment in effective local infrastructure and by understanding what worked before and during the pandemic – relationship building and effective collaboration – rather than through sweeping new initiatives and projects.

3.5 Conclusion

The pandemic has shone a light on the strength of voluntary action and the voluntary sector in England. The impact that volunteers and the sector have had over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic is nothing short of remarkable, particularly given the decade of disinvestment, lack of coordination and absence of strategic direction that preceded it. The community response occurred in spite of, rather than thanks to, the policies around voluntary action that had been pursued in England over the past decade.

Underpinning these responses has been people coming together, connections being made and organisations working collaboratively. The importance of these connections has been a key theme in our research and this chapter. In many places, new partnerships formed and collaboration was facilitated, hastened by urgent need. Yet elsewhere collaboration stalled, hampered by a lack of existing infrastructure. The lack of a pre-existing overarching policy for volunteer involvement – in times of crisis or otherwise – meant that in areas or fields where infrastructure and collaboration was lacking, there was little overall strategy to fall back on. Building, strengthening and sustaining relationships and working collaboratively will be key to creating an environment for voluntary action to flourish beyond the pandemic.

The role of volunteers and the voluntary sector has been widely recognised and celebrated during the pandemic, with

the ‘significant power of the voluntary sector in supporting people in their local communities’ highlighted by the government ([Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2022](#)). Voluntary action is seen as a key element in the government’s levelling up agenda, seen ‘as critical to a vibrant and resilient civil society’. If the voluntary sector and volunteers are to play a significant role in national rebuilding – and they surely must – we need far more linked up and long-term thinking. The post-COVID-19 period offers an important opportunity for government and the sector in partnership to develop and deliver a strategic plan for volunteering, setting out the role that the sector, volunteers, government, wider civil society and others can play in creating a vibrant and sustainable environment for voluntary action.