

How Government can unlock the power of connection and community

Our network stresses the importance of these three things that Government should do.

1. A new national vision of a collaborative society, dedicated to National Renewal

Covid-19 has revealed the power of communities to look after each other but it has also demonstrated that many people, for example, BAME and disabled people, people in care homes and front-line workers have felt ignored, powerless and unprotected and have been at disproportionate risk. More people have looked out for each other, but others have felt overlooked, and as the economic as well as health consequences unravel existing inequalities in society will only deepen.

There is an opportunity to build on the power of communities, and heal divisions, around the collective goal of **National Renewal**, provided it is matched by a **vision of a collaborative society**. The parallel is the national effort after World War Two to tackle the 'Five Giants', recognising that helping each other helps ourselves. As then, we face multiple challenges, including:

- Covid-19 itself and poor underlying health in some communities;
- The collapse of the economic heart of communities and loss of livelihoods;
- Racial and other inequalities, including geographical inequalities;
- People who are struggling to feed themselves or who have lost out on education;
- Services and systems such as social care that are not fit for purpose;
- And, the biggest of all, the climate change crisis.

Different communities will choose different priorities and solutions, but civil society can play an important role in helping to address these questions, if government sets the right framework.

This requires a new vision of a **collaborative society** embodying these [Better Way principles](#): *prevention is better than cure; building on strengths is better than focusing on weaknesses; relationships are better than transactions; collaboration is better than competition; mass participation is better than centralised power; local is better than national; and principles are better than targets.* [Our Call to Action](#) identifies that valuing everyone and giving them power is key.

This is and should be a non-party political vision creating national unity. But the Government has a critical leadership role in setting the vision and framework for itself and others.

This will require a very different national conversation about people in which 'we can all depend on and learn from each other'. Rather than characterising people as subjects or consumers, the state should recognise people as citizens. Rather than seeing the role of the state as stepping in to support 'vulnerable' people, it should be seeking to create an environment in which every citizen has agency, is valued, heard and believed in, and can influence the things that matter to them.

It also requires a new **collaborative** relationship between government and civil society. The role of government at every level should be to promote collaborative leadership. Rather than public servants being 'gatekeepers' and contract managers, they should be working across sectors as equal partners with other '**systems leaders**' to create policies and systems which help people to thrive.

All established institutions need to engage and listen to those they serve so that services can improved and transformed. The social sector has a critical role in enabling those voices, campaigning for change and in challenging government where things are not working. Recent attempts to pigeonhole it as a delivery partner only, or to constrain its campaigning voice, will undermine any collaborative vision. The social sector must be a trusted partner nationally and locally.

National renewal must be driven from the bottom up but local authorities and other public bodies still have a vital statutory, convening and funding role and they must be properly funded by central government. Government must stop centralising. Government has applauded the power of community but also cut deeply across it, with heavily centralised initiatives.

A collaborative society needs **collaborative commissioning**. Government should retain those **procurement changes** introduced in the crisis that encourage multi-agency collaboration and fast and creative responses; and we'd like to move to a situation where contracts are only awarded to private and civil society organisations that have a social purpose.

2. Government investment in social infrastructure with priorities and funding controlled locally

Government should set up a national renewal fund to spend on vital social infrastructure:

- Safe and affordable housing, without which no-one can lead healthy and productive lives, and other local public services such as libraries which make a healthy, thriving community.
- Digital inclusion: Covid-19 has shown many cannot connect with others due to lack of affordable broadband, mobiles, laptops, or support. NB not just a network issue.
- Local community spaces, activities and facilities: these are needed to bring people together, to support each other, and to do things together that build community life, including youth services, lunch clubs, arts and cultural activity, setting up of micro enterprises, and so on.
- Organisations, faith groups and individuals who carry out a connecting role, connecting institutions to local people, creating community by connecting people up, and enabling people to have more power over policies and institutions.

A national renewal fund must be used to empower communities, who should decide on their own priorities in the light of their circumstances, using participatory democracy. Local authorities and other public bodies will have an important role and should be required to act on those priorities once agreed. Funds should be channelled according to the principle of subsidiarity – going where they can be best used – with the presumption that they should be channelled through civil society, or cross-sectoral bodies whose governance includes local people, working with local authorities and others as partners. Where possible, funding should be available to informal groups with proper safeguards, perhaps distributed and accounted for by established civil society organisations.

A local 'right to own' should be introduced and community ownership should be encouraged, by gifting local assets, or giving capital grants, rather than forcing communities into debt.

The funds should be used to build on and enhance what is already there, wherever possible, as high quality existing social infrastructure is in imminent danger of being lost due to the pressures caused by the pandemic. Ways should be found to support social enterprises struggling in the pandemic, e.g. through trade back schemes. Funding needs to consist of both capital and revenue grants, with flexibility, giving people power and agency to build on local strengths and add most value.

3. Recognition and funding for the 'connecting role' (as opposed to service delivery)

Many social sector organisations are a vital safety net in the crisis, are struggling financially and need support but do not forget about the less visible 'connecting role' of civil society which needs to be properly recognised and supported. This role has been especially vital (if largely hidden) in the pandemic. Umbrella (sometimes known as infrastructure) organisations and community anchors have connected up local authorities and public services to grass roots activity as well as connecting up people to each other. Community organisers, Local Area Co-ordinators and faith groups have carried out a similar role. These connectors create communities and ensure that sometimes marginalised people are heard and given agency and power. These functions are often unfunded now, with connectors being pushed into service delivery in order to get funding.