

Turning to the Light

The Relationships Observatory after one year of Covid. Looking back and looking forward



**RELATIONSHIPS
PROJECT**

2021

David Robinson

relationshipsproject.org

The Relationships Project

At [The Relationships Project](#) we believe that everything works better when relationships are valued; people are happier and healthier, and businesses and services are more effective and efficient. That's why it's our mission is to make it easier for every organisation, service and individual to put relationships at the heart of what they do.

The Relationships Observatory

We set up the [Relationships Observatory](#) at the start of the first lockdown in March 2020. It was a simple mechanism for gathering and sharing insights from a host of volunteer Observers and for learning and reporting in real time. We thought that if we waited and looked back, retrospective coherence would reinterpret the journey and experience would be lost. We posted frequently and tried to unpick the changes in our relationships and our social behaviour in open Zoom conversations. In July we published [The Moment We Noticed](#), reporting on our 100 day findings and setting out 5 Invitations for working with others on exploring the emerging legacy from the Covid experience.

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David Robinson authored the report and [Katie Slee](#) designed it. Immy Robinson, Camilla de la Parra and Sam Firman work alongside David on [The Relationships Project](#).

TURNING TO THE LIGHT

In this Review we update the learning, introduce new resources for the forthcoming season of collective recuperation and renewal, and extend five more invitations.

PART 1: MAKING SENSE



We look back at how relationships have changed since March 2020.

We see the emergence of new relationships between neighbours and between organisations and enhanced levels of trust and empathy, strengthening these local bonds. And we see also the corrosive power of anger and distrust undermining relationships with leaders, experts and authorities and breaking down the bridges between groups with different backgrounds, attitudes or behaviours.

We try to make sense of these shifting attitudes and the sometimes-dissonant behaviours.

PART 2: MAKING CHOICES



We consider present circumstances and the choices that lie ahead.

Conversations in the Relationships Observatory are now a mixed bag. Our community admires the unyielding commitment of our health and care workers, the brilliance of our scientists, and the extraordinary kindness of strangers. We are infuriated by the bubble bursters and the queue jumpers, angered by insensitive or inconsistent policing, confused by conspiracy theories and worried about health, money, lost schooling, and domestic tension. Lately we are lifted by the vaccine, but we still mourn, not only for loved ones but for the loss of mourning itself.

We hear about the differential impact of lockdown, and of the virus itself. Inequality and injustice in the UK aren't new or sectional problems, they are deep seated and ubiquitous, but the daily Covid numbers, the Black Lives Matter movement, the personal experiences of individual neighbours and much more have all contributed to wider awareness. Awareness doesn't inevitably lead to resolution but it can, as Marcus Rashford has shown us, unpick locks, even open doors.

We choose to turn to the light, and to focus on the application of the positives in the Out Turn not because the past year hasn't revealed enormous challenges but because it has.

PART 3: MAKING PROGRESS



We ask five more questions, just as we did in [The Moment We Noticed](#). Each question becomes an invitation for working together in new ways as we build on the upside from the last twelve months.

We introduce ...

- The [Relationships Heatmap](#) for all of us to reflect on where our relationships are flourishing and where they need attention.
- The [Active Neighbours Field Guide](#) for those who work with volunteers, formally or informally, to understand the people behind the numbers and sustain the caring without crushing the spirit.
- The [Bridge Builder's Handbook](#) to help local connectors build on achievement and extend the local experience of mutual support into connecting well with other communities.
- [Kit for Councils](#) to help to develop the conditions which enable communities to flourish.
- A programme of experiments, with and for everyone who is interested in putting relationships first.



On March 23rd the first national lockdown began. It would affect us all, changing social behaviour and reshaping our relationships.

One year on we see how attitudes and behaviours have changed through, so far, five phases.

FIVE PHASES OF LOCKDOWN

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1. THE HONEYMOON
A positive, optimistic attitude prevailed during the early weeks of lockdown
- 

2. THE FALSE DAWN
Fatigue began to creep in in the early Summer, and divides began to widen
- 

3. THE DOWNTURN
Come Autumn, hopes were dashed as infection rates rose and another national lockdown was announced
- 

4. THE LONG WINTER
Many were near breaking point as lockdowns - local and national - dragged on
- 

5. THE OUT TURN
With the roll out of the vaccination programme, the country began to uncurl and rays of hope started to break through



1. THE HONEYMOON

People were sick, struggling and grieving from day one but there was also a positive, optimistic, can do spirit in the early weeks.

The nation re-neighbourhooded and re-tooled, mutual aid bloomed, work and leisure Zoomed, businesses pivoted into deliveries, children's rainbows appeared in front room windows and we crashed our saucepans heartily in praise of key workers.

New activities and behaviours were principle-led rather than rules-based, cemented by solidarity rather than compliance, less hierarchical, more horizontal, less defensive, more can do, kinder, more emotionally responsive and, crucially, driven from the ground up.

At the same time, it became obvious that many people shielding alone had been isolated before the pandemic and would be afterwards. Others had no access to the suddenly crucial technology. Comfortable neighbours shopped for people getting by on £10 a week. And while some with a strong network of relationships had several lines of defence in times of difficulty, others had none.

We all saw things, bad and good, that we had never seen before. In general, in those early weeks, we responded with open minds and a big heart.

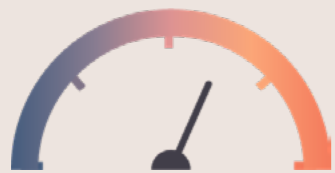
“ One of the issues with the Covid group as it went on [...] is the rubbing up against the hard reality of people's lives. At the start it was 'oh this is almost jolly and ooh we can help our neighbours', then within weeks it became an awkward realisation that there are people in our midst who have practically no money at all - in the same street as others buying bags of organic pasta.”

– Observatory Contributor

“ It was like everyone was one of us.”

– Observatory Contributor

Reporting on this period in [The Moment We Noticed](#) we identified five Undercurrents – the big shifts in attitudes and behaviours that not only characterised the immediate response but that could prefigure profound and positive change in the longer term.



FROM		TO
Doubting	>	Trusting
Controlling	>	Enabling
Competing	>	Cooperating
Standardised	>	Personalised
If it ain't broke	>	What if?



2. THE FALSE DAWN

By early summer, adrenaline was running out. Across the UK, we had lost the big and small rituals and traditions which give succour, structure, and purpose to our lives and which would normally help us cope together.

Rule breakers and poor decision-making undermined confidence in national leaders and although generally the five Undercurrents were still dominant, there were early signs that the patterns were changing. The most excitable media coverage of mutual aid fell away but the solid work continued with the promise of an enduring legacy.

“ Even though its hard to trust people right away, it is possible to make new friends. My existing friends were all elderly and sheilding, so it was good to make a new, younger one. That wouldn't have happened without the virus.”

– Observatory Contributor

BLM triggered reaction, and counter reaction, in many quarters. Entrenched attitudes and behaviors were exposed. These issues are, of course, far deeper and wider than one troubled season but the movement erupted in the Covid summer and further added to the disruption.

Thankfully the virus appeared to be losing steam. Lockdown rules were lifted. Attention turned to the economy and to “building back” fast. We were even incentivised to eat out. The Covid crisis, apparently, was almost done. Except, of course, it wasn't.

We were closer to those we saw as similar to ourselves but more critical of people, often near neighbours, who we saw as different. Hate crime was rising. The expanding fault lines were invariably the familiar ones, particularly around ethnicity and income.

Hyper local bonds were getting stronger but, even as Black Lives Matter reverberated across the world, cross community bridges were creaking.

“ I've never known the world to be so down-the-middle with everything, even before this, with Brexit, it's 50:50. I've come across some people who've been really lovely and been wanting to help and all the rest of it, I've come across people that just don't care about anybody but themselves. And to me it literally feels like an even split - that's how I feel like the world is with everything at the moment [...] 50% of us are going down the hippie route, looking after one another - and then the other 50% are going backwards.”

– Observatory Contributor



3. THE DOWNTURN

By autumn, infection rates were rising again, local restrictions were back with a vengeance, another national lockdown became inevitable. Hopes dashed may be worse than no hope at all.

As the apparent promise of the summer months was shown to be a false dawn, the national mood dropped like a stone. Murmurs of discontent about local school or shop closures, mask wearing, social distancing, the people “not like us” swelled into open criticism, scapegoating and conspiracy theories. Much of what was special about the spring continued to be important - trust in one another, collaboration, cooperation, empathy - but it was no longer the story that we told ourselves. The autumn downturn was fast and steep and sustained.

“ There are so many stories going around - people believe it’s just the government trying to control us and take over the world so they know where everybody is [...] I’ve heard people saying the vaccine is not going to be able to help you - it’s just so they can trace where you are every minute of the day. I’m like mate, what’ve you been smoking?”

– Observatory Contributor

“ I think we had all been allowing ourselves to hope that life was returning, and now we have to close in again – and this time in the dark of the winter where restorative walks in the sunshine are harder to come by, and with no pandemic end point in sight.”

– Observatory Contributor



4. THE LONG WINTER

“We don’t bang saucepans anymore although people in the hospital are working even harder now and completely shattered,” noted one of our Observers.

Vital services and important relationships were running on empty. There was even a dip in contributions to the Observatory. “Shit got real” explained one lapsed contributor.

Small homes had become pressure cookers for crowded families. Shielding alone was differently but equally stressful for others.

All of us were missing our regular bumping places - schools, shops and street corners, our routine tethers - weekend get togethers, work meetings and communal leisure, and all the social milestones by which we measure out our lives – birthdays and weddings, funerals and festivals.

Most of all we were missing each other - parents and grandparents, friends, colleagues and the many consequential strangers with whom our bonds are lighter but still nourishing.

This is what Hall and Merolla call our “social biomes”- the individual ecosystems of relationships and interactions that shape our emotional, psychological and physical health.

Repeatedly Observers say, they hadn’t noticed they had one until they didn’t. Zoom was an inadequate substitute.

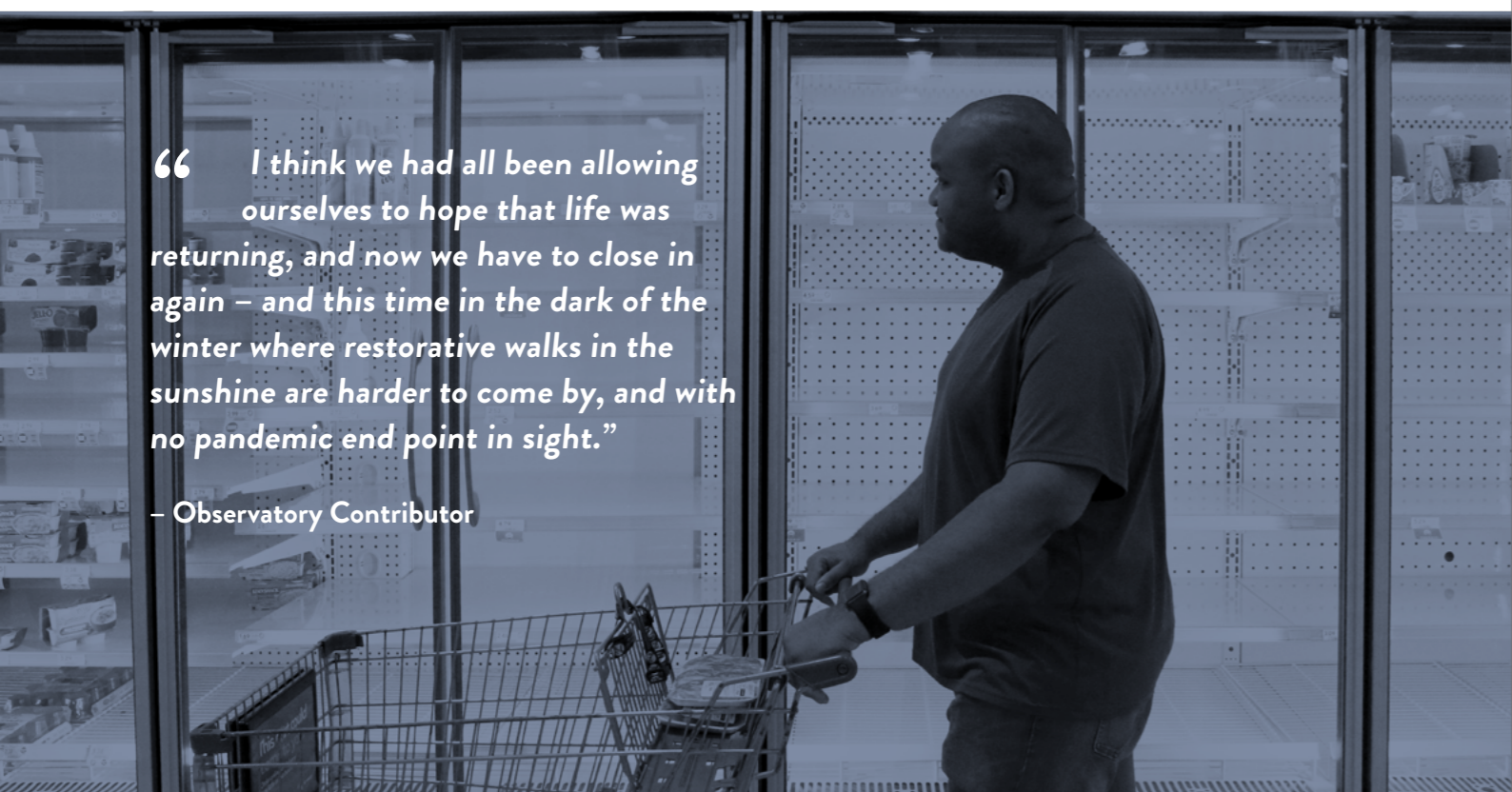
“ I don’t miss the words. I miss the little silences. You need to be there for that.”

– Observatory Contributor

In time, books will be written about the suppressed anger of this period as the apparent peace of lockdown blanketed a broader and deeper disquiet. Restricted access to services hid many of the consequences, but domestic violence, family breakdown and mental ill health were all increasing. This was the Long Winter.

“ I think because we’ve seen in recent years Brexit and all these political things that have divided so many people. [...] Things feel very fraught at the moment. I think there’s surprising pockets of community resilience and shared ownership... I don’t think the media conveys an accurate representation - I think it likes to pit people against each other. I think there is more of a sense of citizenship and community than we realise.”

– Observatory Contributor





5. THE OUT TURN

The vaccination programme is now well underway, schools are open again and the country is at last uncurling and creeping to the Out Turn.

It is tempting to think of this as the final phase, the time to accelerate and, some say, return to normal or others, build back better. We say, read the room: In most contexts, fast would be reckless.

There is an impatience everywhere but also a bone deep weariness and a longing to “stay close to the wall” and process the turbulence for a little while longer.

We must turn slowly to the light and imagine the Out Turn not as one phase, but as two.

“ Can anyone come out of all this and not be changed by it?”

– Observatory Contributor

First Recuperation, healing, grieving and catching up. We know that human beings need time to process bereavement, to recover from trauma, to repair relationships. So too do communities, organisations, societies. If we do not allow for this need, we will pay the price for years to come. There must be time for emotional reset, for restoring relationships strained or suspended in lock down, and for travelling slowly to go far.

Reflection and recuperation might look dangerously like doing nothing at all. If, however, we use the time well, nothing would be further from the truth.

We need to remember the things pre Covid that didn't work, the unfairness, the waste, the version of ourselves and of our communities that fell so far short of what we have achieved on our better days in the last twelve months.

And we need to gather our stories and understand what we have learnt about ourselves and about our relationships with one another.

If we do not take the time to do this well we will remember and carry forward, as we always do with stories, the ending not the beginning or the real substance in the middle.

Reflection and recuperation is quite different from doing nothing. In time, and done well, process will become product.

Then Renewal, reimagining, and refounding. This will be the time for choices and the moment to grow bold. Everything has changed.

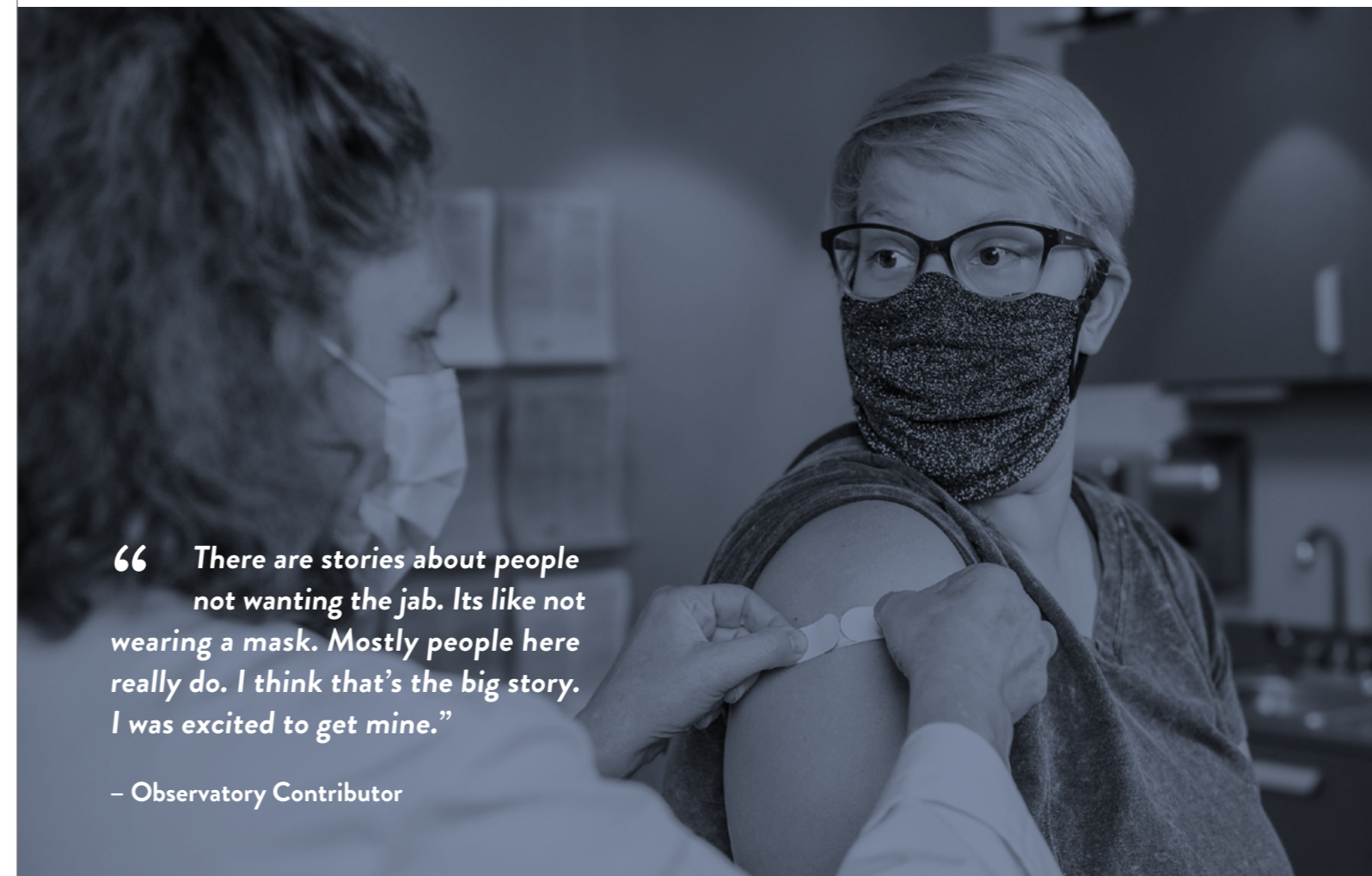
Institutions that were slow to adapt may not resurface but others, closer to the ground have already grown up. In every sector and across the sectors, collaborations have flourished, conventional interests have been invested in a bigger whole. Workers have been re-deployed, buildings repurposed.

Renewal will begin with understanding. What have we missed? What has worked better? Where have our relationships served us well, where are they weak or absent? How can we shape the renewal to redress, rather than perpetuate, systems and behaviours that reinforce deep seated inequalities?

Get in touch

Does our sense-making reflect your experience?

Let us know by emailing david@relationshipsproject.org or tweeting us @Rships_Project.



“ There are stories about people not wanting the jab. Its like not wearing a mask. Mostly people here really do. I think that's the big story. I was excited to get mine.”

– Observatory Contributor



MAKING CHOICES

There are many different ways of interpreting what has happened as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and our individual and collective responses.

Through statistics, a reading and a reflection, we explore the choices we can make about how to remember this time. We can choose to hold on to the darkness of recent months, or we can choose to move towards the light.

We lean towards the positives as the building blocks of a relationship centred renewal.

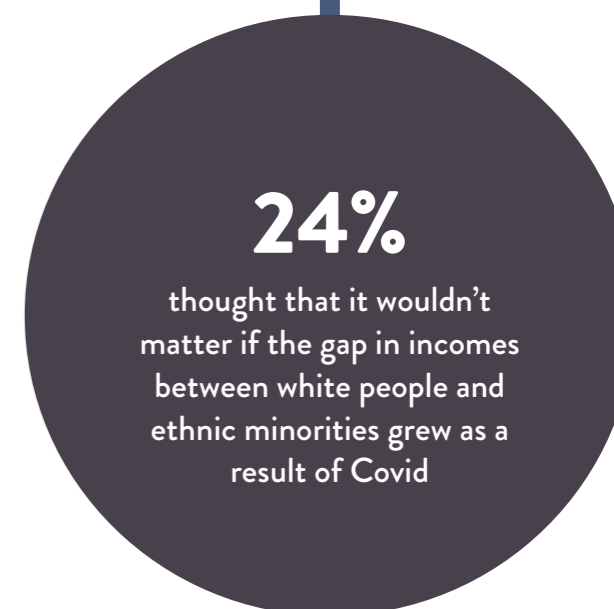
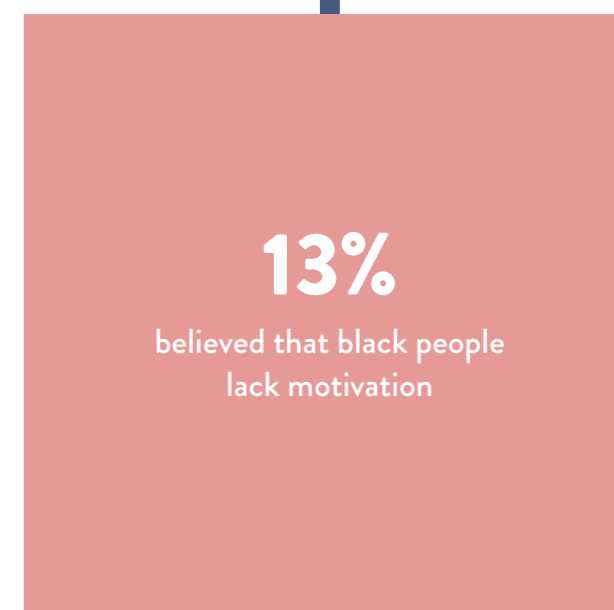
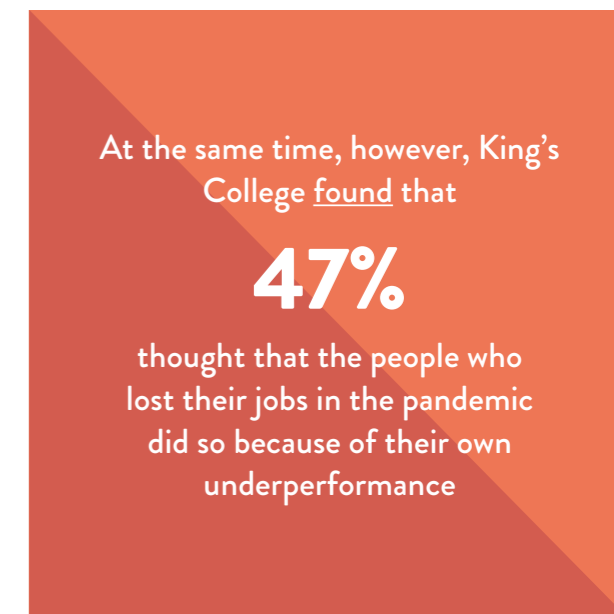
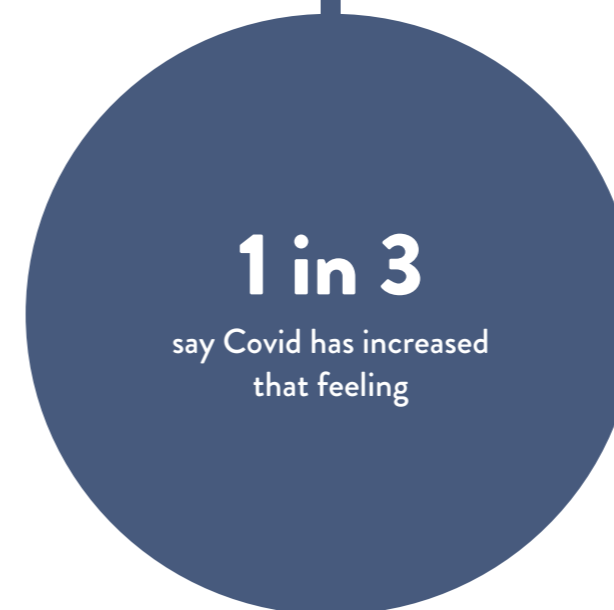
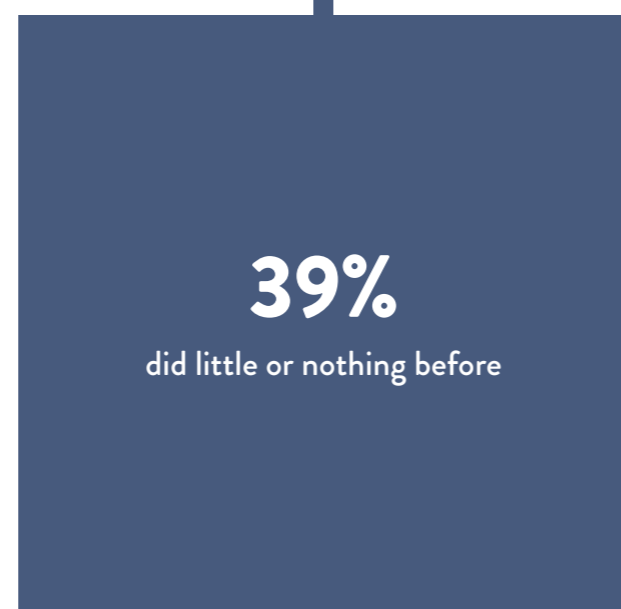
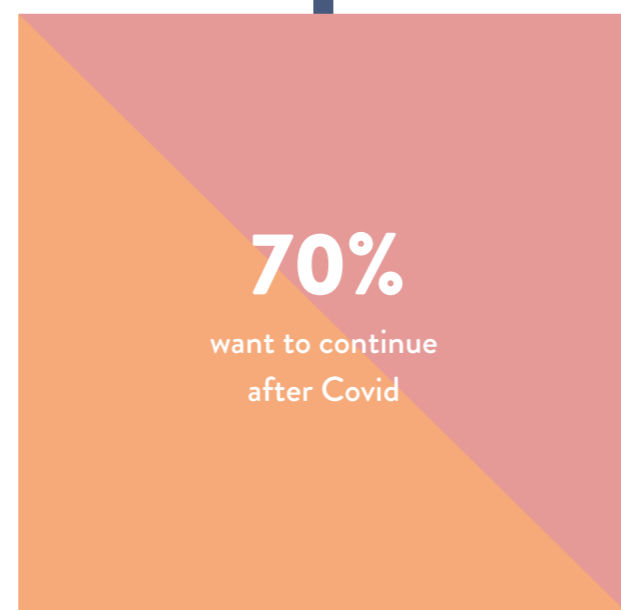
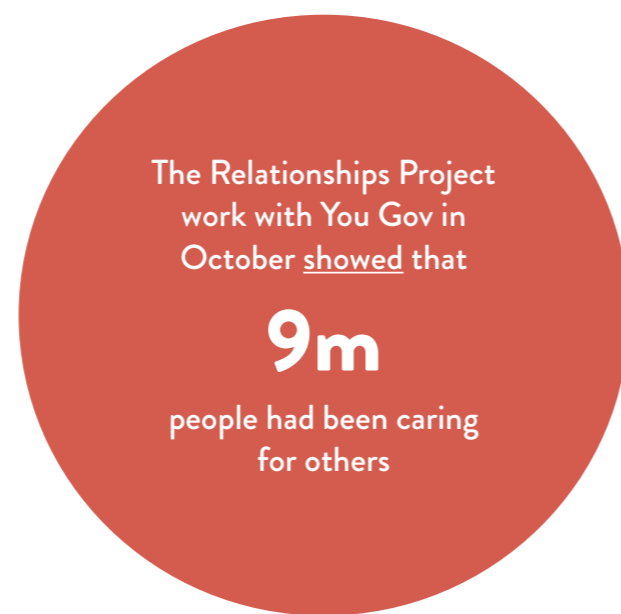
A MIXED PICTURE

Huge disruption in social behaviour has been a universal experience but also one that has affected each of us differently.

Wherever we look, in communities across the UK, there are the long shadows of grief, inequality, and tension but also shafts of light: a greater awareness of others, empathy, mutuality, new and more meaningful relationships.

The research reinforces our Observations. Taken together these findings, and many more like them, are not contradictory but they are discordant.

A mixture of scarcity and empathy, fear and kindness, isolation and bubbles, shrunken horizons and new experiences has all turned us inwards, bonding stronger with some whilst disconnecting from others.



A LOVING READING

Many of our conversations on the Observatory have referred directly or obliquely to questions of power and inequity as pre existing inequalities were laid bare by the uneven impact of the virus.

The five Undercurrents, and other positives from the Covid year, are not an adequate response to the negatives - discrimination and exclusion are fundamental structural problems requiring fundamental structural solutions.

But social change isn't about waiting for all the stars to align. It is about navigating the uncertainty by the light that we have. From a loving reading of the last year, we can essay a version of the future that is more fair, humane, and realistic.

We were suggesting before the pandemic that the relationship between the citizen and the state defined the economic and political orthodoxy in the immediate postwar era. It was overtaken by the relationship between the citizen and the market in the 1970s but latterly this era too has run its course.

As we have shown in case studies and blogs, the relationship between citizens is increasingly the common sense approach, if not quite yet common practice.

The pace of change has quickened over the last year as Community Connectors reached out with messages about shielding and vaccines, teachers, council staff and small businesses reinvented what they do to meet individual needs, [Active Neighbours](#) formed new relationships and care workers adapted activity to sustain personal connection.

All reminded us over and over again that our health and happiness, as individuals and as communities, is built from the aggregation of our personal relationships. And each of us have felt for ourselves the pain, and the cost, of absence.

“ The element of community cohesion and belongingness has changed.... The way society had become, there is a lot of hatred and division. This virus has been a wake up call for a lot of people that we need to reach out and help each other. People's opinions, morale, sense of belonging has changed... Covid has been a shock to people - what do we consider humanity to be?”

- Observatory Contributor

Relationships are not the frilly extra, an alternative to good health or education outcomes, emotional well being, safe communities, or a thriving economy. They are the making of it all.

We are now at first base in a three hump crisis – first the pandemic, merging into the recession and then a further wave of social consequences. The national economy has shrunk more over the last year than at any time since the Great Frost in 1708. Most councils are planning cuts for at least the next 4 years. And all this after a decade that was rocked first by the banking crisis and deep reaching austerity, then by Brexit.

Continuing change in the public realm in the 2020s isn't an option, it's a given. The only choice today is between random erosion and a strategic, principle based, refounding.

Some will say that we have been here before, the banking crisis for instance, and it didn't happen then. We say, remember that fundamental social change often happens along a slow and faltering arc and then suddenly, a trigger point and all in a rush. If not now, when?

[Elsewhere](#), we have recommended a programme of Citizens Commissions to plan the future around specific themes.

These would draw on the skills of experts but crucially be modelled on the citizen assembly experience. Difficult choices must be made, and ambitious plans shaped and owned, by forming relationships across divides. Only an inclusive, relationship-centred, deliberative process such as this could meet the challenge and do justice to the opportunity.

But the joy of a relationship-centred view of the future is that we don't have to wait for such a grand plan to start to change our corner of the world.

Redesign and reconfigure well and practical experience can also then be distilled and used to support change in other places.

How would our place change if collaboration, kindness, and good relationships were our guiding stars, not only in emergencies but always?

In the next phase, we must turn to the light; to work with the upside from the Covid experience, place by place, and help to develop the wider ecology for a societal shift towards a relationship centred future.

We have less trust in politicians and media

Old systems and existing markets have been inadequate

We want the future to be different from the past

We noticed our interdependence and feel more connected

We have been separated

We have more trust in one another

We are experiencing grief and loss

The year has revealed deep inequalities

Established relationships have been invaluable

Some have resisted restrictions

We've learnt about using technology to communicate

THE DARK

THE LIGHT

We are experiencing economic hardship

Bridges between communities are crumbling

Mostly we have observed rules for the common good

The virus has had a lasting effect on our physical and mental health

We have looked for scapegoats

We've noticed our dependence on ritual and custom

We have collaborated more

We are impatient for a return to normal

Dependence on technology has exposed a digital divide

We've valued people we hadn't thought much about before

We know more about our neighbours

Bonds within communities are flourishing



MAKING PROGRESS

Here we set out five questions, just as we did in *The Moment We Noticed*. Each becomes an invitation for building on the positives and working together in new ways. In aggregate they would help to encourage the development of relationship-centred practice everywhere.

THE QUESTIONS

1. **Taking stock:** Because we need to take stock and recuperate, how can we best, individually and collectively, understand what we have learnt and prepare for change and renewal?
2. **Evolving the care:** Because we need to step into the particular before we can grip the overarching, how are we to understand the individual acts of kindness and active neighbouring, and how can we sustain and evolve this activity without crushing the spirit?
3. **Building the bridges:** Because relationships between communities have been strained by the crisis, and will continue to be tested by its social and economic consequences, how can we build from the safe ground of the hyper local to reach out to others?
4. **Growing the ecology:** Because communities, cities and societies are built from the aggregate of personal relationships, how can local councils grow an ecology which supports solidarity and practical kindness without controlling and constraining?
5. **Igniting connection:** Because, as we have seen so clearly over the last year, relationships make the world go round, how can we learn more from one another and work together on putting relationships first, everywhere and in every context?

1. TAKING STOCK

To move forward with confidence and capability we need to understand our own strengths and weaknesses as recently revealed.

We have developed two resources for this process. The first, the [Spirit of Lockdown Storybook](#) was launched last year. The stories we tell now about how we responded to Covid-19 will shape how we look back on this time, and how we move forward as a society. How will you remember lockdown? What's the spirit you want to bottle and take forward?

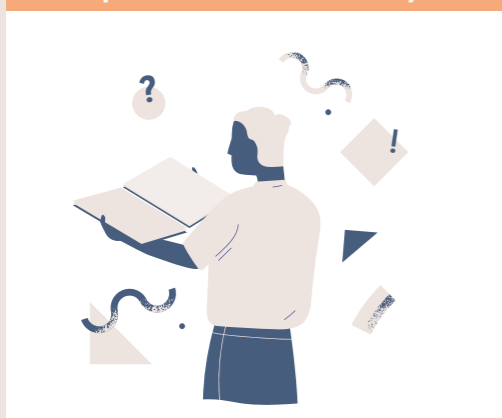
This simple tool is helping organisations, communities and individuals to [tell their own story](#) of the past year, to weave it together with others, find the truths that will inspire better days and carry them forward.

Second, as Britain enters the Out Turn, we are launching the [Relationships Heatmap](#).

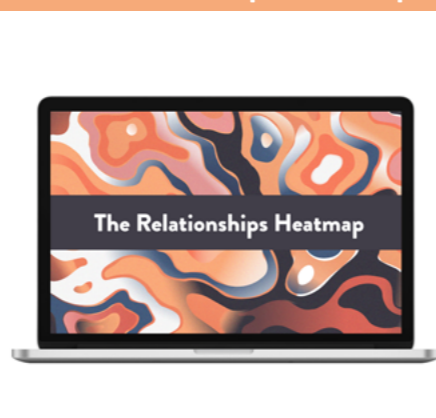
The Heatmap is an interactive diagnostic tool that helps you find the areas of strength in your relational practice and areas for improvement. You can build a collective Heatmap with others in your place, comparing your results and sparking a conversation about change.

The Heatmap has been developed and tested with a wide range of small groups and big organisations over the last year. Read about their experiences of using the Heatmap [here](#).

The Spirit of Lockdown Storybook



The Relationships Heatmap



Our first invitation:

Join us in taking stock, understanding, and recuperating.

Together we'll:

- Share our [stories of lockdown](#) and celebrate the power of relationships in helping us through the past 12 months
- Explore what we can all do, on our own patch, to create the conditions for relationships to flourish via The [Relationships Heatmap](#)

2. EVOLVING THE CARE

In the midst of the autumn Downturn, YouGov research, undertaken on behalf of the Relationships Project, showed that almost 9m people were caring for others for more than three hours a week, that 6.29m intended to do the same or more afterwards, and that 3.94m had done little or no volunteering before hand.

These numbers indicated some drop off from the Honeymoon but still, particularly in the 6.29m, huge potential. In The Moment We Noticed we stressed that this is not a “volunteer army waiting to be redeployed” and “that trying to capture and preserve the spirit of this movement with systems and structures would be like trying to catch a butterfly in a jar – we would kill or damage that which makes it beautiful”. We set out instead to explore the stories behind the numbers and to so inform the development of a sustaining and regenerative ecology.

Our Active Neighbours Field Guide, launched alongside this Review, is a collaboratively created resource, based on in depth interviews and setting out five personas (right).

The Field Guide is intended to help those who work with the time givers, formally or informally, to dig into the different experiences, feelings, motivations and needs of the Active Neighbours and to consider how best to support them in the future.

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Practical Taskers: the busy doers new to volunteering who thrive on getting tasks done
- 

Everyday Carers: the old hands who provide unwavering care to someone close to them
- 

Neighbourly Empathisers: the sociable companions who've found meaning in new neighbourhood connections
- 

Community Weavers: the connectors and organisers building platforms for others to get involved
- 

Visionary Disruptors: the big picture thinkers striving and agitating for a new way of doing things

Pathways

We are working now on the development of potential pathways forward for each group. Some paths will be individual, for example joining up with a borough wide Connectors programme. Others might involve working with neighbours on new projects for example:

Emotional wellbeing: Most mutual aid wasn't really mutual – it was one group helping the other. Lockdown has impacted wider well being. How might these groups become genuinely mutual and address emotional wellbeing?

Micro care: Many people who have been helped were isolated before the crisis and will be afterwards – they have just been noticed more.

How might the mutual aid model – networked neighbours working with professional partners and linked on a simple platform - be sustained for the most isolated and perhaps take on additional caring responsibilities?

Social justice: “Until I shopped for her, I had no idea that people in my street lived on £10 a week”. How might local groups develop this awareness into conversation and activity, around social justice?

As we navigate the Out Turn, we will be developing the pathways and co-creating opportunities for knowledge sharing, connection making and resilience building with a new Peer Group Support Programme.

Our second invitation

Join us in expanding the pathways forward for each of our Active Neighbours groups. Together we'll:

- Make and test practical resources designed to help the 9m carry on caring
- Develop a peer support programme for Active Neighbours to learn and grow together

To get involved, [RSVP here.](#)

3. BUILDING BRIDGES

Applying the positives to the negatives is especially relevant and important in the building or rebuilding of bridges. Over the last year thousands of little connections have been made close to home but our wider, cross community relationships have suffered from social distancing.

Places with lots of tension or suspicion are not good places to be. We feel unsafe, unseen and uncomfortable. We use our resources to build walls when we could be building bridges. Instead of avoiding each other and pulling away, we could be reaching out. A connected community feels friendlier, is safer and performs better. This can only be achieved by starting with the local, by placing positive relationships at the centre of our thinking and by embracing disagreement as an opportunity, rather than a threat.

We can all play a part but this is more scary than shopping for the couple upstairs.

In work led by Neil Denton, Professor in Practise at Durham University and a leader in community mediation and conflict transformation, we have co produced the [Bridge Builder's Handbook](#) to help local connectors "think like mediators" and feel comfortable with extending the hyper local achievements of mutual support into effective "voice walking" - understanding and connecting well with other communities.

The [Bridge Builders Handbook](#) translates expert knowledge and experience into practical steps, ways of working and guiding principles for making positive and meaningful connections with different groups. It is designed to be used on its own but we are seeking to extend its reach and application, with guided learning and peer group support.

" We should nurture those who have seen their neighbourhoods in a new light having met the person and not just read about problems and poverty. Many we live alongside have been in a form of isolation that both pre-existed and will persist the pandemic. That being "seen" is a universal human need, and to turn our "seeing" into "speaking" is a positive action. Compassion and empathy form the many and small feeder streams required to create any meaningful flow of solidarity further down."

– Observatory Contributor

First and foremost, we want this work to inspire and support local activity. We also want that action to have wider influence. A "place based" policy narrative informs the priorities of many practitioners and funders. Without an equally influential complimentary narrative, and programmes of activity and investment, we risk the prospect of becoming a nation of "Little Placers" – supportive of our own, narrowly defined, suspicious of others. Our bridges also need attention.

Our third invitation:

Join us in becoming a nation of [Bridge Builders](#)

Together we'll:

- Create more practical resources to guide the safe construction of community bridges
- Develop peer support for Bridge Builders across the country

To get involved, [RSVP here.](#)

4. GROWING THE ECOLOGY

Alongside The Moment We Noticed we set out a discussion paper, written by local authority director Tony Clements and based around ten “To Dos” for local authorities to support community activity.

We thought about that work as nurturing an ecology which enables solidarity and practical generosity to flourish and grow, rather than establishing rigid systems and structures which would control and constrain.

Building on the further experience of the last six months, and many more open conversations, we have continued this exploratory work together.

Alongside this review, we are publishing a Relationships Framework of principles for relationship-centred practice in councils, along with some useful tools for putting this theory into practice.

We don’t believe that you can systematise relationships but, as lockdown showed, it is possible to make systems more relational.

Communities working at their best are a wonderful natural resource, not something that needs to be fixed. A statecraft that begins with that sensibility, expressed in style and substance, would apply the best of the learning from the Covid experience to the needs that are also, and as much, a part of the legacy.

We invite you to explore:



The Relationships Framework: a set of principles for sustaining and nurturing community activity now and in the future.



The Relationships Navigator: a tool to integrate relationships more firmly in your council.



The Framework in Action: dozens of inspiring, real-life examples of councils working in relationship-centred ways.

Our fourth invitation:

Join us growing an ecology which enables relationships to thrive

Together we’ll:

- Continue to test, apply and refine the Framework
- Build out the repository of examples of councils acting in relational ways in the Framework in Action
- Explore ideas for more practical support or resources

To get involved, [RSVP here](#).

5. IGNITING CONNECTIONS

As we have seen so vividly over the last year, relationships make the world go round. For some organisations, relationship building might be an end in itself - befriending schemes for example or anti bullying programmes. For others - a council perhaps, or a health centre - it is the means to the end; a foundational principle in pursuit of safer neighbourhoods or better care.

The power and importance of relationships is recognised in pockets reaching far and wide, and relationship-centred practice is being developed and refined in numerous different contexts. But these bright spots of energy and action tend to be unconnected - many parts not yet making a forceful whole.

What learning can be shared across these different actors and how can we work together to put relationships first, everywhere and in every context? We have been working with Iona Lawrence who has [led this discussion](#) with policy advisers, local authority people, community organisers, academics, philanthropic funders and business leaders. We wanted to understand the potential for collaboration across this wide range of actors, what gets in the way and how we might do it better. Iona's report is published [here](#).

She [concludes](#) that it would be "useful to foster closer ties, stronger networks and the conditions for collaboration and collective action across the brilliant, bright, hopeful and emerging 'field of relationships'".

We want to join the dots but a conventional organising model, centrally owned and driven, would be inappropriate. It couldn't fully reflect the diversity and dynamism of the field, it wouldn't realise the potential for cross pollination and it would be at odds with the values and purpose of the exercise.

We need a methodology that exemplifies the culture desired from the field: relational, open, generous and effective; approaching its work with an experimental mindset: testing what works and giving everything time to bed-in or fail.

With all this in mind The Relationships Project, Grapevine, the Connection Coalition, Civic Square and a growing cast of kindred spirits are coming together to [experiment](#) with different ways of strengthening the field of relationships over the next six months. The journey is open to all. Do please join us.

We will surface inspiring ideas, gather around shared challenges, such as measurement, power and high streets, and try out alternative approaches to network weaving and strengthening.

All the time, we will be holding this question: What ways of working or organising structures could provide the catalytic energy needed for greater connectivity and a stronger field of relationships in the longer term?

Our fifth invitation:

Join us now as we gather around the [first programme of experiments and work together on developing the next steps](#)

Together we'll:

- Surface inspiring ideas
- Gather around shared challenges
- Weave and connect a wider, deeper, stronger field

To get involved, [RSVP here](#).

“Only in the darkness, can you see the stars.”

– Dr Martin Luther King, April 1968



Stay in touch

We would love for you to be involved in our deeply collaborative work, and really do welcome you to get in touch.

Whether you have ideas, critiques, resources or something else to offer, we'd love to hear from you.

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