The Relationships Framework

A framework for Local government to support thriving relationships

Contents

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.

NAVIGATING TOWARDS THE LIGHT
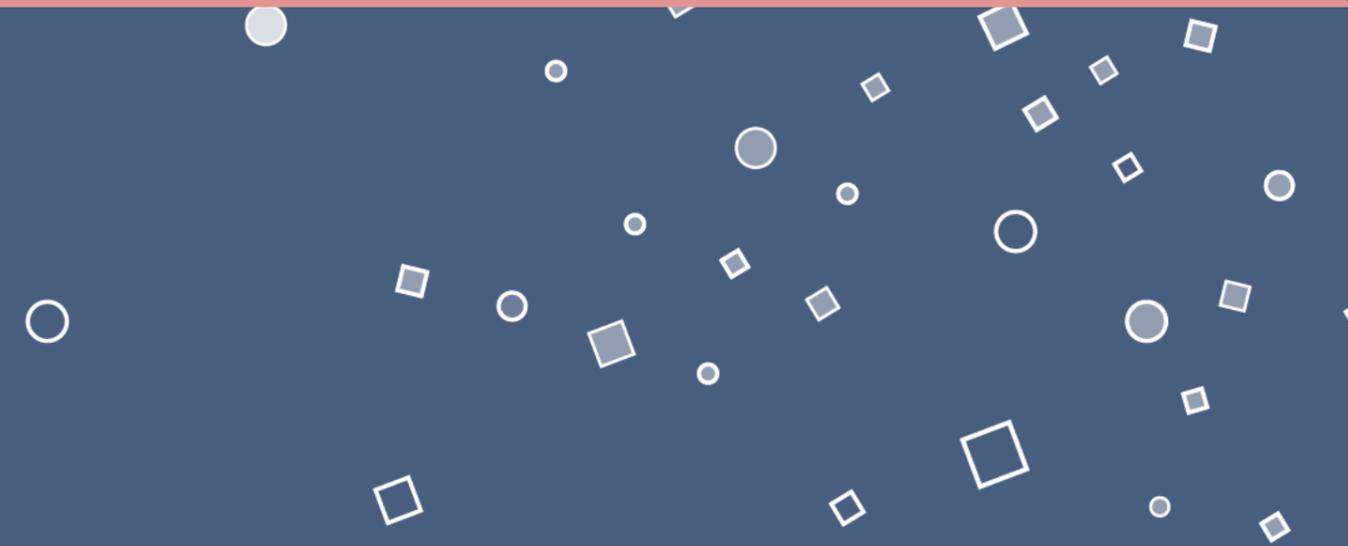
Summary

During Covid we have seen the huge power of community and neighbourly relationships and inspiring examples of councils across the country nimbly adapting to support this new activity. As we look beyond the pandemic, we must nurture these new relationships, enabling them to flourish into the networks of support that will enrich and strengthen our community life. Councils must be at the heart of this.

This kit of resources is designed to help councils sustain and enhance the community relationships that emerged during Covid in a way that empowers rather than controls citizens. It is also intended to help councils look ahead to reimagine their organisations and services with relationships at their heart.

In the pages that follow we invite you to:

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

Integrate relationships more firmly in your council using The Relationships Navigator.

Get inspired by the dozens of real-life examples of councils working in relationship-centred ways in The Framework in Action.

Rays of light

The Relationships Project is rooted in the belief that we can build a better society by building better relationships everywhere, place by place.

Since the first lockdown began in March 2020, The Relationships Project has convened the Relationships Observatory to capture experiences, losses and lessons about our relationships and social behaviour in real time. Among the loss and pain of ill health, isolation and economic insecurity, we have also seen a new flourishing of community activity, mutual help and neighbourliness.

Since March 2020:

- **8.95m people** have spent three hours or more supporting a friend or neighbour.

- **6.27m** plan to do the same amount or more once the pandemic is over.

- The voluntary and community sectors have become even more integral in the landscape of social support.

- Thousands of mutual-aid groups sprung up in neighbourhoods across the country.

This activity wasn't driven by the government or large organisations as the result of policy or systems thinking. It was an aggregation of millions of citizens' moral choices. Most weren't mobilised by anyone. They are willing citizens doing what they can and what they feel is right. Their activity has helped model a future in which citizens and community organisations assume more power, playing a more active role in shaping caring, equitable societies.

What is the appropriate statecraft, in style and substance, for enabling something so intrinsically personal? How does the state open possibilities without undue risk, and raise the game without controlling and constraining? By putting relationships at the heart.

The Relationships Project is rooted in the voluntary and community sector. We primarily come to this project not as policy thinkers or as a part of the local government sector, but as advocates of what we have seen and heard in recent times.

These observations point to a clear and important role for relationship-centred councils: councils that govern by sharing power, listening and enabling citizens and community groups through strong, mutual relationships.

The importance of relationships

At the heart of the community activity we have seen during Covid are strong relationships between people. In our work we talk about community activity, neighbourliness, the importance of the voluntary sector and giving communities more control. These are the positive results of good relationships. Whether between the council and citizens or between citizens themselves, good relationships encourage and facilitate support, which builds resilience.

Relationships are the basis of community. It follows that zooming in on the micro-activity of relationships, and tending to relationships at the personal level, provides the building blocks for stronger communities.

That said, we think the distinction between community and relationships is important. The value of relationships - for example between service 'users' and the council - doesn't rely on an understanding of community. Indeed, individual relationships can help reduce inequalities when somebody doesn't have a supportive community. By forging a good relationship - whether with someone who needs care, is homeless or is making a complaint - we get a better outcome.

We advocate that councils use their services, spaces and ways of working to maximise the opportunities to build relationships between people.

This may result in stronger self-defined, place-based communities. But it doesn't have to. More people with more friends and more contacts is just a good thing: it makes life richer and life's problems easier to tackle, for citizens and councils alike.

Who is this kit for?

- **Local authority staff at all levels**

  We hope this work can show that concrete steps can be taken to implement a more relationship-centred approach within the existing context of delivering council services, and that managers and staff can take some of these steps today.

- **Council Chief Executives, senior management and councillors**

  We hope that The Framework and its practical examples will help in answering some of the fundamental questions about the best role that councils can play in helping communities rebuild in the wake of the pandemic and ten years of austerity.

- **Advocates**

  Many people are already persuaded that we need a more relationship-centred model of public service, and need to move away from process, bureaucracy and hierarchy. But the status quo is hard to shift. This work aims to provide affirmation and evidence for internal and external advocacy and influence.

  Advocates within and outside of local government will hear that a relationship-centred approach would be too risky, would waste resources, would not be permitted within legal duties and would fall flat because people wouldn't get involved. We hope these examples provide ample evidence that shows change is possible, effective and exciting. It will never work? It already does.
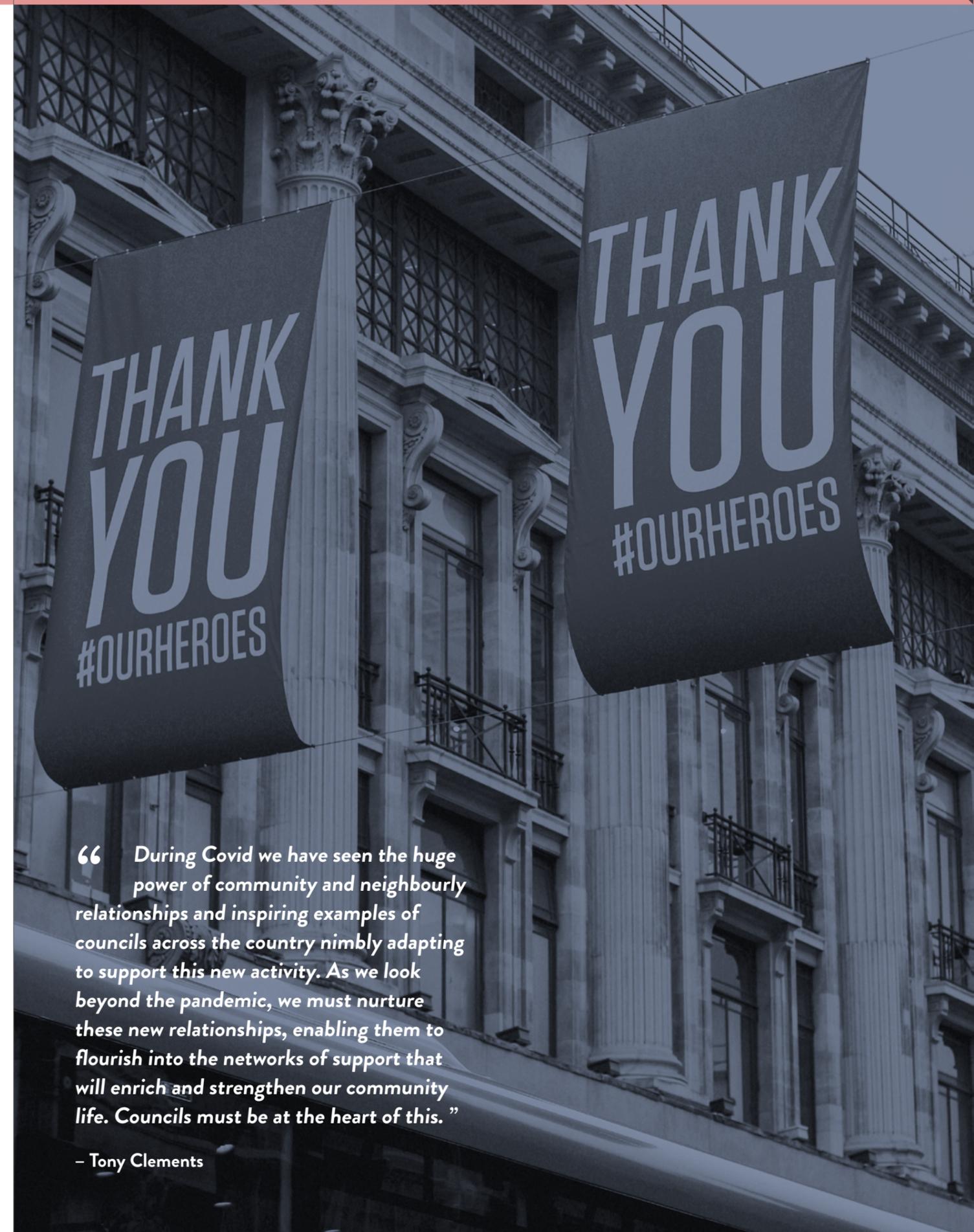
> *During Covid we have seen the huge power of community and neighbourly relationships and inspiring examples of councils across the country nimbly adapting to support this new activity. As we look beyond the pandemic, we must nurture these new relationships, enabling them to flourish into the networks of support that will enrich and strengthen our community life. Councils must be at the heart of this.* "
>
> – Tony Clements

THE RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK

Introducing the Framework

Developed in partnership with citizens, community organisations and council leading lights across the country, The Relationships Framework presents nine principles for a relationship-centred approach to local government.

The first three principles stem from the work we have done during Covid, and the question of how councils can sustain the spirit and social infrastructure of the last year. The next five principles ask how councils can embed what we have learned and experienced into a new business as usual. The final principle covers how councils can keep commitments to doing things differently.

Following the Covid signs		
		1. **Shift the obstacles:** Remove bureaucratic barriers to community activity and citizens engaging with the council.
		2. **Sustain motivation and build new purpose:** Show people how their relationships and actions help address big issues.
		3. **Develop the Covid social infrastructure:** Build on the new ways of working and connecting the pandemic has catalysed.
Setting Course		4. **Create open and transparent cultures:** Foster trust by setting clear standards, being honest about mistakes and making information open.
		5. **Enhance the everyday touchpoints:** Make relationship-building an integral aim of council services.
		6. **Build relationships into physical spaces:** From small facilities to large developments, use the build environment to encourage connection.
		7. **Renew relationships with the voluntary sector:** Share power with community organisations through equal collaboration and favourable procurement.
		8. **Train and empower staff:** Equip council staff and dedicated community teams to build relationships in their day-today work.
Holding Course		9. **Embrace new accountabilities:** Ensure the council is publicly held to account for fostering community relationships.

FOLLOWING THE COVID SIGNS

Sustaining the spirit and social infrastructure that emerged through Covid

 1: Shift the obstacles

Almost any community or voluntary sector organisation trying to work with councils will describe barriers and blockages that get in the way of community activity. We saw that during Covid these commonly cited barriers often melted away – either with more creative solutions being found or with a more proportionate attitude to the risks involved. Some of the most frequent examples are:

- Sharing data and relaxing GDPR requirements where community projects could markedly improve relationships.
- More proportionate requirements around DBS checks.
- Less onerous provisions and conditions when devolving resources or issuing funding.
- Permissive use of public space, e.g. community road closures, use of green space, public buildings.

Councils can maintain this spirit and enabling approach. Many, like North Ayrshire, already are. Others, like Buckfastleigh, were working to make the council more accessible before Covid.

 What actions have you taken to reduce the barriers citizens face when engaging with the council?

2: Sustain and build new purpose

Making problems visible

The crisis has given people both the time and motivation to support their neighbours. The crisis is universal and visible.

There are other crises - such as isolation, environmental degradation, difficult-to-manage spaces, overcrowding in children's homes - that are not visible to the general public but are to councils. These are untapped potential for community activity.

Making these hidden issues more visible and inviting community action will not only sustain the energy of community activity but help address these seemingly intractable issues. This is not new, as the Frome's Model of Enhanced Primary Care and asset-based working in York and Leeds demonstrate. But Covid has given councils a renewed impetus to do this on the hyper-local level that has been the big feature of pandemic community activity.

Contributing to something bigger

During Covid people have seen their neighbourly actions as part of a national or indeed global effort to tackle the effects of the pandemic. People routinely underestimate the power and impact of their neighbourly efforts in normal times. We could do more to mobilise people who are motivated by a sense of being part of a bigger mission.

For example, councils could show more clearly the link between reducing isolation and fewer hospital admissions, reduced social-care requirements and lower costs for the NHS costs and employers, freeing up money to spend on parks, libraries or leisure centres. As a result of this conversation, neighbours and statutory services might, for example, work together on more collaborative care models rooted in community relationships.

This is not about trying to make people quasi social workers, but showing that the everyday contact people have with their friends and neighbours makes a societal as well as an individual difference.

Successful examples include Wigan's Deal and Kirklees' Democracy Commission.

> *How do you communicate the positive impact of community relationships?*

3: Develop the Covid social infrastructure

Where do we go next with the relationships that have developed during lockdown?

Sustaining community hubs

Most councils established community hubs during the first lockdown, where various parts of the public sector, community sector and volunteers came together under one (sometimes virtual) roof. This seemed to engender a culture of collectively addressing a problem with whoever was the best placed to help. The question became 'What does this person need?' instead of 'Who does this problem belong to?' This is why the majority of community hubs - for example in Hertfordshire - have been seen as such a success by the public and community sectors alike.

Councils could sustain their community hubs, continue to do the activity they currently do where relevant, and evolve to meet other needs over time. Councils could consider if other professional areas - such as social care, public health or employment support - could achieve better results, if delivered from the hubs.

Many council staff have been redeployed to work on the community response to Covid, often in closer collaboration with others. Has their community role had more impact than what they would have done in their substantive roles? Councils could commit to this redeployment for a further year and see what value results compared with business as usual.

What next for Covid volunteers?

Many of the people that volunteered in their communities and with community hubs want to continue. This insight is the basis for our ongoing Active Neighbours work, which aims to understand the motivations, needs and energy of those who stepped up and to collaboratively develop pathways to inspire and guide local organisations to help maintain this commitment into the future.

There are plenty of formal volunteering routes, but many wish to do good without this level of committment or feeling their efforts have been co-opted. Councils can build on their intrinsic good will and help them to support their community informally. One model is through Community Connector training like the Frome model, where over 1,000 people have undertaken light-touch training (a two-hour session) to help signpost friends and neighbours to services and organisations that they might need.

Similar examples include Newham's Health Champions - people in the community, equipped with some training to support the health and wellbeing of those around them during the pandemic - and Barking and Dagenham's Citizen's Alliance Network, which is likewise being set up specifically to "continue the coming together of our borough" that they have experienced during lockdown.

> *How equipped are you to sustain the new ways of working that have emerged during Covid?*

SETTING COURSE

*Embedding what we've learned and
experienced into a new business as usual*

4: Create open and transparent cultures

What's it got to do with the council? This is the attitude of many people who have done more to support their friends and neighbours over the last year. While some have been involved in community hubs, many have made their own choices independent of any formal organisations.

We ought not to take it for granted that the council is a natural or credible actor in community relationship-building outside a crisis. Indeed, in normal times the reason for neighbours coming together is often in response to something the council has done or has neglected. Councils need legitimacy and trust to be effective in this domain, which is built over time. Some ways to build trust may also facilitate community and civic activity.

Transparent service standards and honesty

Without decent core services, clear standards and honesty when they fall short, councils will have a harder job convincing residents that its interventions, in a more sophisticated domain, are worthwhile. Honesty and transparency are the best policies when it comes to building trust with your community.

Open decision-making

Councils often make decisions and then 'sell' them to residents as the best solution. Councils could engender more trust by being more open about the constraints, limited resources and trade-offs when making decisions, as Fife has been in its participatory budgeting experiments. Letting citizens into the thought process allows more meaningful engagement for those that want it. It also leaves more space for co-creation and community action where citizens have different ideas or see other opportunities.

Open access to data

Unless there are compelling reasons to hold it back, make all council data publicly available through an open online platform which doesn't rely on 'requests' or Freedom of Information. This would aid transparency, which can build trust, and provides an opportunity for people in the community to use that data for different purposes (e.g. Citymapper uses real-time TfL data that is publicly available).

*Where could you build trust
by working more openly?*

5: Enhance the everyday touchpoints

The ways in which a Council can use its everyday services to build relationships is almost unlimited. Sometimes this is to help achieve a specific outcome for someone. Sometimes it is to create new personal connections that are at the heart of successful communities. Below are just some examples.

Libraries, parks and community centres

These assets could be transformed by thinking of them as places of relationship-building rather than properties or services. We can train our librarians, caretakers and grounds staff as professional 'community connectors' as they stack the shelves, open the halls and do the planting. Barking and Dagenham library staff, for example, have assumed a proactive outreach role.

As well as assessing their quality by the number of books issued, the state of the planting, the income generated or the number of anti-social behaviour cases, councils could point to the number of groups using these services, the new initiatives started or how full they are round the clock. If, in a day, a library hosts a video-game club, a community film night and a chair-aerobics class for older people, all while providing quiet space for study, how much does it matter if nobody borrows a book?

Community safety

Neighbour disputes (for example around noise or mess) are the most frequent anti-social behaviour complaints. They are also some of the hardest to resolve through enforcement, rarely leading to a satisfactory outcome and always requiring a lot of effort, paperwork and evidence gathering. Councils could respond to complaints more quickly with trained mediators to help resolve issues and build relationships, instead of enforcement officers seeking, often in vain, legal remedies.

Employment and skills

Most people find jobs through people they know. Rather than a narrow focus on skills training for those out of work, councils could proactively build local, professional networks for connecting those without networks to people working in areas they are interested in. Skills and qualifications can come next, to support progression.

Housing

Individuals turn up at housing services, but the reasons that bring them there often involve their family relationships, and the assumption by families that councils can provide more and better housing for people than they do. Rather than just dealing with an individual's eligibility criteria in the system, housing officers can visit families with the applicant to discuss options together, explain the realities of temporary accommodation and support people in their existing accommodation. This can include financial incentives or the establishment of a formal tenancy.

Middlesbrough has demonstrated the potential of building deeper relationships with people who have experienced homelessness. And Gateshead, which decided to use council-tax arrears as a signal to explore the context of the debt, has demonstrated how councils can use housing-related 'problems' as opportunities to build supportive relationships.

*How integral is community relationship-building
to your approach to delivering services?*

6: Build relationships into physical spaces

Councils shape the long-term physical environments of their areas through building houses, the planning system, regeneration schemes, creating public spaces and parks and designing roads and highways.

We all know that some places feel naturally comfortable to linger, chat to neighbours and strike up conversations with those we don't know. We also all know parts of our neighbourhood where we hurry past others because it is noisy, congested or feels unsafe; or where our private space feels intruded upon, so we feel the need to put up barriers physically and socially.

Councils can put positive 'bumping spaces' at the heart of their physical infrastructure by:

- Involving the community in the design of those spaces, so they are 'owned' from the outset. Essex's approach to drug rehabilitation shows the value of this approach.
- Using the best professional advice. The evidence is out there: use the best urban planners, architects, transport planners, engineers, landscapers and challenge them to design relationship-centred places.
- Limiting the private ownership of public space. If the only pleasant places to stop are cafes and restaurants, it excludes those on lower incomes. If property owners' rules prohibit games or cycling it sends messages about who is welcome.
- Putting council assets into community hands, like in Cornwall and Wigan.

Is social connection a guiding priority in how you design and use physical spaces?

7: Renew relationships with the voluntary sector

Most community hubs have been cross-sector, involving anchor organisations, specialist charities and faith groups, as well as volunteers and more informal groups. The crisis has seen voluntary-sector organisations take on greater responsibility, in many cases leading to a more collaborative, equal relationship with councils. The most successful local efforts have been in places where there was already a history of working well together. The heart of this was good interpersonal relationships rather than formal partnership structures.

Shared leadership

One of the characteristics of these collaborations has been that leadership has been shared between councils and the voluntary sector. During the crisis many places, like Hertfordshire, have gone beyond the hierarchical idea of the voluntary sector as applicant or supplicant to the public sector. This is because no one organisation could fix or do everything, and it was often unclear where the responsibility for needs definitively lay. Leadership fell to those most able or willing to adopt it - sometimes the council, sometimes the voluntary sector - with little competition or defensiveness.

Councils and the voluntary sector can continue to find ways to share leadership. Many of the same features of shared leadership apply outside the Covid crisis. Indeed, councils like Plymouth were working in a joined-up way before the pandemic. Rarely do the problems people face fit neatly into the responsibilities of 'sectors' or 'services'. There is always more than enough for everyone to do, and competition or duplication between organisations is a waste of effort and energy.

Procurement and public services

The shared leadership between the public sector and voluntary sector is in part a rebalancing of a power relationship. It is also part of the current towards greater trust. This could be enhanced and cemented in the ways councils (and indeed the NHS and other public services) use their purchasing power and procure services. During the crisis, procurement of local services and the use of public money was more flexible in order to quickly mobilise the local organisations who could deliver.

Procurement rules make it difficult for smaller community and third-sector organisations to bid and win public-sector contracts. Spending budgets on local community providers of services – from care to parks to catering - keeps money in the local economy, means less is extracted as profit and strengthens the capacity and capability of community organisations.

Continuing with this new approach after the crisis would support the development of the local community economy. The Social Value Act was intended to support this objective but tended towards adding social benefits to the usual contractors. Freer procurement strategies, like in Kayleigh, would be transformational.

To what extent do you work with community organisations in a joined-up way and as equal partners?

8: Train and empower staff

Often there is a lack of training and knowledge within councils in how to successfully foster better community and neighbourhood relationships. There is also often a lack of visibility in how the unintended effects of public-sector actions can support or inhibit community activity.

This can be tackled by:

- Strengthening or introducing Community Development or Neighbourhood Management teams or roles, which were frequently an early casualty of austerity. Models include Gloucestershire's Community Builders.
- Implementing community development-type training for other frontline staff to integrate a relationship-building approach into 'core business': housing management, safer communities teams, parks and leisure centres etc. This could be the cultural change that brings 'enhance the everyday touchpoints' to life.
- Instilling working cultures that encourage more relationship-centred working styles. This might include meaningful cross-department collaboration; empowering staff with the autonomy to make decisions based on their expertise, rather than checklists; or a more supportive approach to risk-taking and experimentation, like in Denbighshire.
- Trialling reverse mentoring, whereby senior management are paired with willing members of the community. This could be a valuable tool to reveal some of their 'blind spots' and the unintended effects of some council policy.

How effectively do you equip and encourage staff to take the initiative in building community relationships?

HOLDING COURSE

Maintaining the commitment to doing things differently

9: Embrace new accountabilities

Running through this Framework is the idea that councils can adopt new ways of working that strengthen community and neighbourly relationships and establish a new council-citizen relationship. Councils visibly holding themselves to account for this work is an important way to build trust in itself, as is essential to a genuinely new, more mutual relationship between councils and those they serve. Councils can choose to do this by:

- Designating one chief officer to lead, be accountable for and hold the rest of the organisation to account for relationship building - akin to the statutory powers and obligations that exist in relation to financial and legal duties, adults and children's services and public health.
- Publishing an annual report on the health and vitality of local community activity and neighbourliness, and what the council and others have done and can do to foster this.
- Adopt a Community Power of Competence (something we advocated in The Relationship-Centred City). Councils strongly welcomed the General Power of Competence legislation in 2011 giving councils the ability to do anything, as long as it was not proscribed in law. A Community Power of Competence could provide the right for people to use public space and resources to undertake the activities they want, unless councils can reasonably demonstrate why they shouldn't. For example, if you wanted to close your road to hold a street party, you would inform the council and your neighbours and go ahead. At present you apply and pay for permission from the local authority.
- Establish a standing commission of residents or local institutions to publish or approve the annual report above. This commission could also be the arbiter of a Community Power of Competence where residents feel the council has not acted in accordance.
- Do more to allow citizens to not only hold councils to account, but actually make binding decisions themselves. Citizen governance of resources (like with Barking & Dagenham's BD Giving fund), citizens' assemblies (like in Waltham Forest), participatory budgeting and meaningful input into service design all provide ways to do this.

What mechanisms are in place to ensure the council is publicly accountable for working in a relationship-centred way?

PRESSING AHEAD
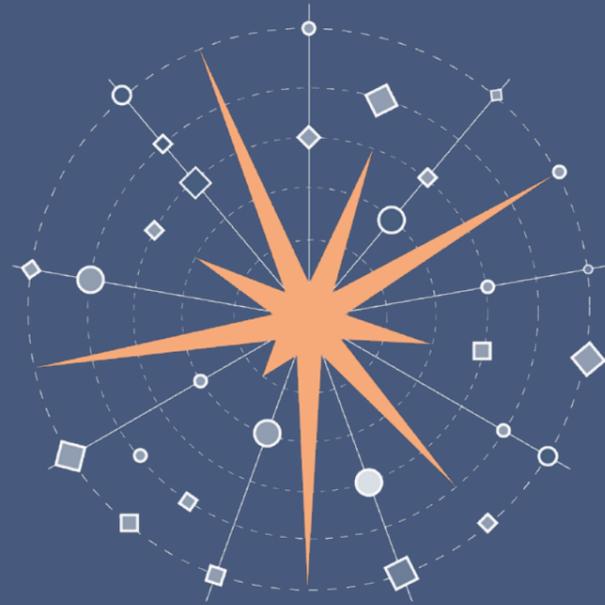
## THE RELATIONSHIPS NAVIGATOR

The Relationships Navigator is a tool that allows you to assess how closely your work aligns with the Framework principles. It shows you how truly you are navigating towards the 'North Star' of relationship-centred governance and where you could correct your course.

It works in four simple steps:

- Take your coordinates by responding to prompts about how much your work aligns with the Framework principles.
- Plot your coordinates to see where you are travelling.
- Read your bearing using the brightness of your North Star.
- Correct your course with help from councils leading the way and other Relationships Project tools.

Use the Relationships Navigator now to start taking practical steps towards more relationship-centred statecraft.

EXPLORE

THE FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

The Framework in Action is a collection of dozens of real-life examples of pioneering councils putting the Relationship Framework principles into action. It is designed to offer inspiration Fand insight into how applying the Framework is not only possible, but already happening. We hope The Framework in Action will help you respond to objections with real-world evidence. Each example the database includes:

- The council(s) responsible.
- An overview of what the council has done, with links for further learning.
- The complexity of the action: Tweak, Tactic, Project or Strategy (in increasing order of complexity).
- Which Framework principles the example demonstrates, with a brief note on how it does so.

The Framework in Action is intended as a living, growing document. There is a huge amount of fantastic work going on and at the moment the collection only scratches the surface. If you know of further examples of councils putting the Framework principles into practice, please share them with us at hello@relationshipsproject.org. Thank you to all who have helped us build the collection so far.

EXPLORE

TRAVELLING TOGETHER

The pandemic has been an incredibly challenging, painful time for so many. As we care for one another in the aftermath, we must also sustain the fantastic work and act on the valuable learning it has forced upon us - much of it to do with relationships.

When the road becomes challenging, we are more inclined to travel together. Covid has pushed us in a more relationship-centred direction. Now is the most critical time for us to fine-tune and hold this course, and councils have a vital role to play.

We warmly welcome all input into this work, whether further examples of councils doing good work, reflections on using the Framework, suggestions for where this kit could lead or critical responses to it.

We would love to hear from you at hello@relationshipsproject.org.

RELATIONSHIPS
PROJECT

relationshipsproject.org