

## Achieving social cohesion whilst social distancing

*This is a summary report of the discussion and conclusions of two webinars organised by ECFI, held on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2020, which considered the challenges and opportunities associated with on-line engagement.*

Community Foundations have, due to restrictions in order to respond to and live with Covid-19, needed to adapt strategies, activities and working practices quickly over the past six months. This has impacted on individuals, organisations, and all stakeholders. One of the biggest changes has been the shift from connecting through the use of office and meeting space to on-line working and engagement. However, there is much evidence of flexibility, innovation, multi-tasking and resilience.

We now however need to look to the future and draw lessons from this experience, primarily to be able to ensure that practice is appropriate for the longer term to enable community foundations to do what is expected of them but also to explore and exploit new opportunities that have presented themselves through the enforced and sudden change.

**This webinar considered the shift of mind-set required for the community foundation field to be able to re-position itself and to re-consider its roles and potential in a changed ecosystem.**

### CORE ASSUMPTIONS CHALLENGED DURING THE WEBINAR:

To work efficiently we need to be in the same place/ together

To collaborate we need to work at the same time

By playfully engaging in a friendly debate, webinar participants were asked to choose the side of “sceptics” or “believers” and form arguments to the following statement: *“Community foundations and CF support organisations cannot build and strengthen relationships with key stakeholders (communities, donors, volunteers) by working online”* Based on their arguments we compiled a list of what is missing from online communications and a list of benefits brought by online engagement.

### **What is missing from online interactions?**

- A real understanding of needs of communities and the work of organisations supported;
- The informal part of communications (around meetings, so called ‘watercooler chats’);
- Deep conversations based on trusted relationships;
- Unstructured engagement;
- Emotional engagement (‘we lose ‘touch’ by just being ‘in touch’);
- Body language;
- Spontaneity;
- Inspiration and regenerative energy we get from engagement with other people;
- Engagement with people that do not have internet access or are not comfortable with on-line meetings;
- Events such as galas and other celebrations that have been cancelled;
- We have missed opportunities to show donors what we do and for them to see and feel the commitment, knowledge and added value of the community foundation;
- Structure with a clear distinction between work and personal life (for staff, volunteers and stakeholders);
- Time to think (often while travelling to a meeting).

## Benefits brought by on-line engagement

- We now have limitless space (and time) for meetings in the ethernet;
- Considerable saving of time and money, and reduction of our carbon footprint;
- More efficient work with less redundant down time;
- We have been forced to adapt and have discovered the potential of on-line engagement (from remote working through to on-line fundraising);
- We have been able to participate in meetings that time and cost of travel might have prevented otherwise;
- We have engaged outside our normal ‘bubble’;
- The community foundation have reached people that they previously did not (not only a younger generation but also older people who are tech savvy but where mobility was the issue);
- We have felt a levelling of status of participants;
- We have reduced inequalities by making the community foundation more accessible;
- We have managed to bring new experiences, methods, tools, and reached more and new people;
- We have proven the added value of the community foundation as a resilient institution that has been able to keep working and maintain contact with the community where others have not.

### How can we **achieve our goals and build resilience whilst respecting the restrictions in place?**



In order to transform the organizational culture to one that supports and sponsors an **asynchronous-dislocated** way of working, we need to have a **mindset** that allows us to:

- The change begins from the strategic level downwards.
- Streamline the communication process so you can effectively respond to any request.
- Leaders decentralize power & coach people to make decisions autonomously.
- Address people's judgements and concerns about they being creative or being tech savvy.
- Make wellbeing as important as productivity and communication.
- Social and somatic experiences should be part of the team routines.



Considerations	Concerns	Conclusions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are still in transition from ‘response’ to a stable albeit new environment - but there is some expectation of a return to the way we were.</li> <li>• Who are the ‘game-changers’? And what role can ECFI play to support change in the community foundation field?</li> <li>• Debate whether inequality is reduced or increased through on-line communications - something which is context specific and needs to be carefully monitored and constantly acted on.</li> <li>• We need to make a step-change in the way we understand and perceive the ecosystem - communities, community foundations, and support organisations - and use methods that are appropriate.</li> <li>• We need to make positive adaptive change permanent but without losing what was effective with former practices.</li> <li>• We need to distinguish between the capabilities and willingness to engage on-line of CFSOs and their professional networks, and the situation for community foundations (with a huge range of capacities) with their staff / volunteers and of differing needs of charities/groups they work with, donors at local level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Identify what support is needed to help the field consider this change and address concerns about embracing change.</li> <li>○ Ensure we are thinking about engagement and communications as a two-way process and not neglect listening.</li> <li>○ The improvements brought by on-line are only marginal and the core business remains at risk if we cannot hold face to face meetings.</li> <li>○ There is a risk that on-line direct communication could challenge the value of a community foundation as an intermediary.</li> <li>○ Think about how this shift of online work and the internal challenge that comes with it, will itself motivate staff, volunteers and stakeholders.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* We need to think differently and appreciate the mindset change required to shift from synchronous located to asynchronous dislocated engagement (do we need to meet in the same place or at the same time?).</li> <li>* Must find an appropriate work-life balance which allows for the flexibility offered by on-line engagement but does not come at the price of resentment or even burn-out.</li> <li>* Be prepared to challenge and change core (old) assumptions and habits (as part of a continual learning process) which means re-shaping our work practices.</li> <li>* We should all share stories and experiences of good practice and positive outcomes from on-line engagement.</li> <li>* We need to make on-line engagement enjoyable and productive.</li> <li>* Endeavour to make on-line the norm and as with physical meeting prepare each one appropriately.</li> <li>* We need to reconsider our strategies with on-line communications becoming a key aspect of working practice, if not the primary method.</li> </ul>

The webinar was facilitated by **Pablo Escorcia and Mike Romig** from [Purpose+Motion](#) whom we thank for their preparation and dedication. The richness of information that came out during the webinar is the product of participants' presence and willingness to share their knowledge, insights, concerns and challenges.

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