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## **Community Resilience: A Policy Tool for Local Government?**

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# **Community Resilience: A Policy Tool for Local Government?**

## **Abstract**

In many countries local government has been a prime target of austerity measures. In response, local authorities are exploring a new repertoire of policy approaches in a bid to provide more with less. In England, local authorities have been drawn to community resilience as a pragmatic response to the challenge of deploying shrinking resources to support communities exposed to social and economic disruption. This application of resilience thinking is not without its challenges. It demands a working definition of community resilience that recognises the potential for communities to prove resilient to shocks and disruptions, but avoids blaming them for their predicament. There is also the practical challenge of developing and targeting interventions to promote and protect resilience. This paper sets out to explore these issues and establish the potential utility of community resilience as a policy tool through case study analysis in the city of Sheffield.

**Key words:** community resilience; austerity; local government; neighbourhood planning; public service reform.

## **Introduction**

Local authorities have been one of the main targets of central government austerity policies designed to address the debt crisis (Miller and Hokenstad, 2014; Nunes Silva and Bucek, 2014). In England, for example, the cuts to local government funding under the politics of austerity resulted in a 30 per cent reduction in expenditure between 2010 and 2015 (HM Treasury, 2010), a cutback estimated to be three times greater than during the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s (Talbot and Talbot, 2011). Reflecting on these developments, some have forecast a bleak future for local government, involving a major reduction or the

complete disappearance of services, with councils becoming residual players within communities that are expected to assume responsibility for their own welfare (Levitas, 2012; Taylor-Gooby, 2013). Others have been more up-beat, pointing to the adaptive capacity of local government and its potential to ‘weather the storm’ through innovation and creativity, taking advantage of the possibilities of localism (John, 2014; Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Shaw, 2012a).

Analysis of the response of local authorities to the major gap in funding to emerge after the financial crisis has found evidence of adaptive capacity, with councils devising and implementing efficiency measures that reduce the cost of services without a major change in service levels experienced by the public (Hasting et al., 2015; Overmans and Noordegraaf, 2014). However, capacity for efficiency savings appears to have been rapidly exhausted, resulting in cities being forced to make cuts and restructure public service delivery (Meegan et al., 2014; Nunes Silva and Bucek, 2014). Responses have included dilution of involvement in the provision of certain services; an increasing focus on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable citizens; and a redefining of the relationship between the citizen and the local council, with citizens being expected to take greater responsibility for their own well-being, as well as for quality of life within neighbourhoods (Bordogna and Neri, 2014; Hastings et al., 2013; Overmans and Noordegraaf, 2014).

Within this context, local authorities in England have shown increasing interest in the potential for community resilience to support efforts to act creatively and reinvent institutional repertoires in a bid, not merely to implement austerity, but to buffer local people and places against the shocks and disruptions associated with austerity (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Shaw, 2012a; Steiner and Markantoni, 2013). The concept of resilience emerged from the physical and natural sciences. At its most basic, it describes the capacity to

bend, bounce back and return to equilibrium, rather than break, in the face of pressure and stress (Norris et al., 2008). This understanding informed early applications of resilience thinking to the social world, which focused on emergency and disaster planning, resilience becoming a byword among agencies charged with coordinating responses to climate change, natural disasters, pandemics and terrorism (Walker and Cooper, 2011). In this context, resilient communities are understood to be those that survive external shocks and quickly bounce back to their pre-crisis state. More recently, community resilience has begun to be applied across a range of public policy, planning and management discourses as a means of addressing the uneven ability of places to respond to changes wrought by social, economic and political processes. Local authority corporate plans and strategy documents increasingly reference the need to create resilient communities and cities, not merely in response to environmental challenges but as means of supporting vulnerable people and tackling inequality. In this context, community resilience is not so much about surviving a shock and bouncing back quickly to equilibrium. A return to more comprehensive public services and social security provision is unlikely in the foreseeable future. It is about the ability to adapt and survive in the face of long-term stress; to respond positively to change and on-going adversity and risk.

This notion of community resilience holds obvious appeal for local authorities grappling with the challenge of supporting places to cope in a harsh social and economic climate at a time of major budget cuts and service retrenchment. It responds to the pressure to provide more for less and maximise the impact of shrinking resources. It also resonates with the emphasis of neoliberal politics on the local state as enabler, rather than provider, and on the responsibilities of people and places to manage their own future (Kennet et al., 2015). There is also a certain attraction in its ability to scope the challenge of coping in the context of disruption and change in positive, aspirational terms (White and O'Hare, 2014). However,

the application of resilience thinking is not without its risks and challenges. These need to be acknowledged and addressed if community resilience is to serve as a useful mobilising concept with the potential to inform the effective deployment of shrinking resources by local authorities to support communities struggling within an increasingly brittle environment.

Three particular challenges are apparent when seeking to apply resilience thinking to the social world. First, there is the challenge of developing an effective working definition of community resilience that is sensitive to a key criticism of resilience discourse. This relates to the tendency for resilience thinking to accept external shocks as natural or inevitable, rather than the consequence of social and economic processes and political decision-making. The result is a focus on how to cope, rather than how to reform and prevent future shocks. This risks placing the onus on communities to become more resilient to disruptions, resulting in communities that struggle to bounce back being blamed for their own predicament.

Moving on to the practical challenge of developing a strategy for promoting community resilience, a second issue is how to measure community resilience in order to identify the places where people are not backed up by strong communities and inform where and how diminishing public sector resources might be targeted. Despite the burgeoning literature on community resilience, few practical examples exist of how it might be measured. Third, there is the fact that little is known about the factors that underpin community resilience, rendering it difficult to guide efforts to actively promote community resilience and to spotlight the potential of cuts to particular services to undermine resilience.

This paper focuses on resolving these three issues. It seeks to develop an effective working definition of community resilience, establish a viable means of measuring resilience and understand the factors that promote community resilience. In doing so, the overarching objective is to inform debate about the potential utility of community resilience as a policy

tool local that authorities might employ to help buffer people and places against social and economic disruptions in an age of austerity.

This objective is pursued through case study analysis in the city of Sheffield, England, where the City Council suffered a 31 per cent (£200 million) reduction in the net revenue budget (the budget over which the Council has direct control) between 2010/11 and 2015/16 (Sheffield City Council, 2015, p. 3). During the same period, the city experienced a fall in the number of people in work and a rise in unemployment (Sheffield First, 2014, p. 28). Income levels were also undercut by welfare reforms, with the city losing equivalent to £460 per year for every adult of working age in benefit income (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014, p. 6). Within this context, Sheffield City Council placed the concept of “resilient people and families, resilient communities and a resilient system” at the heart of its corporate plan, the stated aim being to address poverty and social exclusion by ensuring that “people are able to cope well if their circumstances change for the worse, backed up by strong communities and effective public services.” (Sheffield City Council, 2011, p15). To deliver on this ambition the City Council required a clear understanding and working definition of resilience, a practical means of identifying more and less resilient neighbourhoods across the city and an understanding of factors underpinning resilience, both to raise awareness of the impact of cuts to services on resilience and to inform discussion about how resilience might be promoted. This study sought to deliver against these objectives.

Discussion begins by outlining the mixed methods approach adopted to define, measure and understand the factors informing community resilience. Attention then focuses on developing a working definition of community resilience that acknowledges and addresses key concerns associated with applying resilience thinking to the social world, before turning to the question of how to measure community resilience. The aspects of place that emerged

as important in helping to explain the resilience of four case study communities in Sheffield are then explored. A final section considers the significance of the findings.

## **Research Approach**

A mixed methods approach was developed to address the three key issues framing this study: defining community resilience; measuring community resilience; and understanding the factors promoting resilience. First, a working definition of community resilience was developed that built on lessons drawn from a review of resilience literature. The review was wide-ranging in scope, tracing the emergence of resilience thinking in the physical and natural sciences. The specific focus was on community resilience, but lessons were drawn from the broader literature on the application of resilience thinking to the social world, including the nascent literature on organisational resilience and the response of local government to austerity and public sector retrenchment.

Second, developing a measure of community resilience focused on designing an approach that was relatively straightforward to apply, placed minimal demands on officer time and resources, relied on readily available neighbourhood level data and that was amenable to being regularly updated. A key problem with various previous attempts to measure and index resilience is a focus on measuring how well local authority areas might be expected to cope in the face of public spending cuts; for example, according to the strength of the local business base and the characteristics of the local population (see Experian 2010; Mgnuni and Bacon, 2010). The result is a tendency to spotlight places that are less likely to experience stress by virtue of the local resource base, and the neglect of places that are coping better than might be expected given the level of stress they are experiencing. This is not to suggest that possessing characteristics that help places to avoid stress in the first place is not an important dimension of resilience, but to recognise the possibility that a community experiencing stress



might manage or cope better than predicted precisely because it is resilient. Accepting this point, we sought to develop an approach to measuring community resilience that differentiated between stress and outcome measures. This differentiation was critical for gauging how well a community was mediating the impact of stress; the greater the resilience, the better the outcomes when under stress. The result was a measure capable of recognising resilience in different neighbourhood types, including less affluent communities that are likely to be exposed to greater levels of stress and the well-being of which is a major concern for service providers.

The third element of the research approach focused on analysing the factors promoting community resilience through qualitative fieldwork in four neighbourhoods that were identified as resilient by the measurement exercise and evidenced different population profiles (in terms of age and ethnicity). Three of the neighbourhoods were recognised as experiencing relatively high levels of stress (unemployment, low incomes and deprivation) and the fourth was more affluent and experiencing lower levels of stress (Table 1).

Fieldwork involved interviews with a range of local stakeholders identified as being well placed to reflect upon the reasons for the better than expected outcomes in relation to particular outcome measures. Across the four neighbourhoods, 78 people were interviewed (25 in individual interviews and 51 in group interviews), including ward councillors, community and faith leaders, community activists, tenant and resident representatives, police and safer neighbourhood officers and front line service providers including health care workers, housing officers, advice centre workers and early years providers. The interviews explored aspects of the case study community that helped explain their apparent resilience. All interviews were recorded and detailed notes taken for subsequent analysis.

**Table 1: Case Study Neighbourhoods**

Neighbourhood	Better than Expected Outcomes	Context			
		<i>Deprivation Quintile</i>	<i>Youth Quintile</i>	<i>Working Age Quintile</i>	<i>% BME</i>
<b>Lodge Moor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longevity</li> <li>• Crime</li> <li>• Voting participation</li> </ul>	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	4.0%
<b>Firth Park</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health</li> <li>• Crime &amp; ASB</li> </ul>	Above Average	Highest	Average	4.2%
<b>Abbeyfield</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crime</li> <li>• Voting participation</li> <li>• Youth engagement</li> </ul>	Above Average	Highest	Average	52.0%
<b>Southey Green</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth engagement</li> <li>• Educational attainment</li> </ul>	Most Deprived	Average	Average	4.3%

## Defining Community Resilience

The application of resilience thinking to the social world has not been without its problems, prompting calls to proceed with caution (Christopherson et al., 2010) and even to abandon use of the concept in social analysis all together (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012). Three key criticisms have been levelled at the translation of resilience thinking from analysis of ecological systems into the social world. The first relates to the overtones of self-reliance inherent within the emphasis of resilience thinking on self-organisation. This can lead to people and places being blamed for their predicament and charged with solving their own problems through the reinvigoration of community. This interpretation supports the neoliberal focus on self-reliance, absolving government of responsibility and justifying the rolling back of the state (Davoudi, 2012).

A second criticism relates to the politics of resilience and questions of power, in terms of who determines what represents a desirable outcome and who benefits from resilience building. MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) argue that resilience is all too often externally defined by state agencies and expert knowledge in a way that emphasises the need for communities to

become more resilient and self-reliant in order to maintain the stability of the system against interference. Hence, resilience is criticised for being an inherently conservative agenda.

A third criticism relates to the tendency of resilience thinking to bound analysis and limit discussion to particular themes. The consequence is to deny interlinkages, for example, between social, economic, political and environmental processes and outcomes, which tend to be considered in isolation. A focus on particular scales of analysis (the neighbourhood, the city, the region) also fails to recognise interlinkages within the globalised world between socio-spatial scales and naturalises communities, cities and regions as self-contained units that are home to the causes of and solutions to their own problems. This subsumes politics and economics into a neutral realm of place management, thereby depoliticising the processes key in putting people at risk (Cannon and Mueller-Mahn, 2010).

The application of resilience thinking to the social world clearly demands careful reflection. Residing in a resilient community can serve as a 'buffer', providing conditions and opportunities that support groups and individuals to cope with various problems and challenges (Cottrell, 1976). However, resilience is no panacea for communities facing major social and economic disadvantages. It is a strategy for helping communities cope with adversity, rather than overturning structural inequalities. It can help communities to 'beat the odds', but it cannot 'change the odds' by removing the causes of adversity (Ungar, 2008). The existence of engaged social networks can help foster adaptive capacity and enhance transformative resilience, but it is not possible to isolate a community from the processes driving change or control all the conditions that might affect local residents. Communities are not neutral containers, but are connected into complex socio-spatial systems with extensive and unpredictable feedback processes operating at multiple scales and timeframes (Davoudi, 2012).

In relation to the politics of resilience and the distribution of burdens and benefits, we recognise the inherent conservatism of the discourse of resilience as survival in the face of uncertainty and vulnerability, with the objective being to bounce back to some pre-existing equilibrium. Such thinking fails to acknowledge the possibility that the scale and intensity of pressures bearing down on local places in an era of austerity and public sector retrenchment, far reaching cuts in social welfare and increasing social polarisation might render a return to some previous status quo unrealistic. Survival in this context might be better understood as coping and getting by in the face of ongoing flux and transformation; bouncing forward, rather than back to some pre-existing equilibrium following an isolated shock.

Any working definition of community resilience also needs to recognise the importance of human agency and the potential for people to learn from their experiences and incorporate this learning into future responses, thereby informing the very nature of change (Shaw, 2012b). Members of resilient communities might ‘intentionally’ develop personal and collective capacity and engage in a bid to influence change, to sustain and renew the community, and develop new trajectories for the future (Magis, 2010). In short, resilient communities might act purposefully and strategically. This might extend to more antagonistic, bottom-up politics of struggle and resistance. As such, Raco and Sweet (2012) argue that a progressive resilience agenda has the potential to facilitate radical and interventionist modes of politics in the city, whilst acknowledging that take up has been limited. This suggestion taps into discussion of the opportunities to define resilience in more radical ways that might open up during a systemic crisis. According to Raco and Sweet, a more radical deployment would view resilience as a dynamic process in which change and constant reinvention provide the grounds for fundamental social and economic reform, rather than the return to the original state from which crisis arose (p. 1069). In the context of austerity, this might include the emergence of new local social movements, with new ideas

and new styles of political behaviour. Whether the result is a new programme of municipal radicalism, mirroring that of the 1980s, which seeks to resist austerity and transform the local state (Seyd, 1990), or a more focused programme of social action on a specific local issue, the emphasis is on community members organising themselves to tackle imbalances in power and to redistribute resources.

On the basis of these understandings, the working definition employed in this study draws on the definition developed by Magis (2010, p 401), who describes community resilience as the existence, development and engagement of local resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise. Our definition attaches four important caveats to this position. First, 'thriving' can encompass survival, transformation and resistance. The latter recognises that the locality can be a significant base from which to mobilise as a community of solidarity and to realise social change (Bhattacharyya, 2004), whether or not this measures up to the radical deployment of resilience discussed by Raco and Sweet (2012). Second, communities are not bounded systems, but are interconnected into wider socio-spatial systems. Third, different places possess different combinations of resources and are therefore differentially placed to deal with stresses and pressures. Some places are likely to require support and assistance boosting the resources that underpin resilience. Fourth, resilient communities possess the capacity to influence change, but resilience is not a cure-all for communities struggling to come to terms with external shocks.

A final point of clarification when defining community resilience relates to the contested concept of community. The literature on community resilience fails to clarify what type of community is being referred to. Our analysis focuses on communities of place and, in particular, the neighbourhood. Community is conceptualised as "an entity that has

geographic boundaries and shared fate [...] composed of built, natural, social and economic environments that influence one another in complex ways” (Norris et al., 2008, p.128).

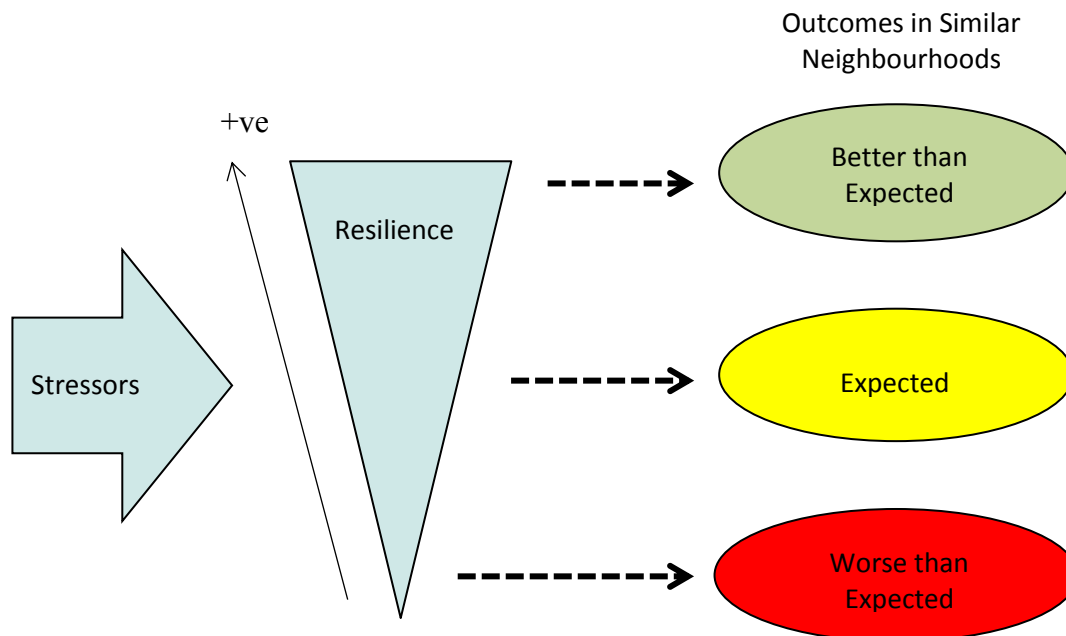
Relating community resilience to neighbourhood resilience is not to deny that people are likely to be members of multiple communities of identity and interest that transcend neighbourhood boundaries, but to recognise that neighbourhoods are the setting for much of daily life, their form has real consequences for the people who live in them and they represent a tangible material setting and target for interventions designed to promote resilience.

### **Measuring Community Resilience**

As discussed above, the measurement of community resilience focused on identifying neighbourhoods deemed to be evidencing better or worse outcomes than expected given the level of stress they are exposed to. A number of important conditions were attached to this basic proposition. First, resilience can vary depending upon the specifics of the stress being experienced. A community might prove resilient to one set of stressors, but struggle to manage the consequences of another set. It is therefore important to be clear about the stressors under examination. Second, it is important to recognise that the intensity of a stressor can vary from place to place. For example, the stress of unemployment and falling incomes is not uniformly distributed. Third, the impact of a stressor on resilience can vary. In the face of stress, some communities can actually become more resilient. This possibility has not been recognised by previous approaches that have combined data relating to stress, capacity and outcomes into a single composite score. As a result, socially deprived areas have tended to score worse than more affluent areas; failing to acknowledge that some more deprived areas might actually be evidencing greater levels of resilience in the face of more extreme levels of stress and hardship. Recognising this fact, the research challenge became the identification of neighbourhoods that are evidencing better (or worse) than expected

outcomes, given the intensity of the stress they are exposed to (Figure 1). The resultant approach is detailed in the discussion below.

**Figure 1: Conceptualising the Mediating Effect of Resilience**



Analysis focused on socio-economic stress, which was deemed indicative of the challenges raised by economic restructuring and public sector retrenchment. Neighbourhood level data on changing levels of unemployment, incomes and deprivation were employed as the stress measures. Known associates of socio-economic stress were identified as potential key outcome measures. Correlation analysis revealed a significant or moderate to strong relationship between socio-economic stress and eight key outcome measures within neighbourhoods across Sheffield related to issues of community safety and cohesion; health and well-being; and inclusion (Table 2).

**Table 2: Stress and Outcome measures**

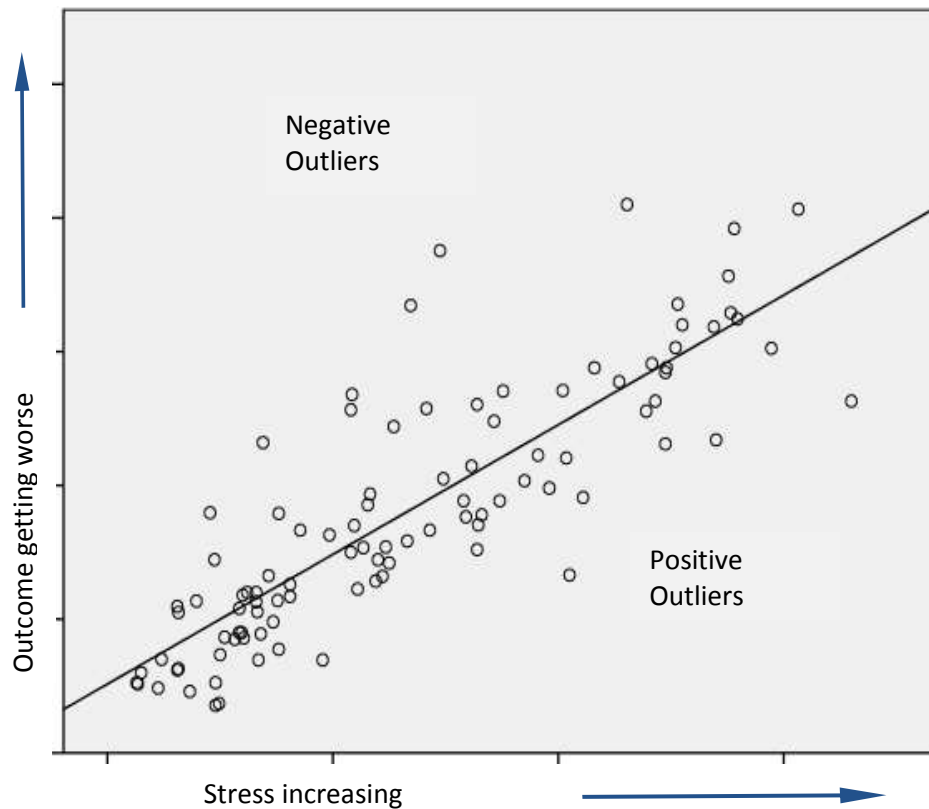
Stressors	Outcomes	Explanation
Deprivation Unemployment Low incomes	Community safety and Cohesion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• crime rate</li> <li>• ASB rate</li> </ul>	Recorded crime and anti-social behaviour is a useful measure of community safety and well-being. There is a well known correlation between crime and deprivation. A strong and consistent relationship also exists between racial (in)tolerance and neighbourhood level crime, suggesting crime rates might serve as a proxy for cohesion.
	Health and Well-being <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• life expectancy</li> <li>• premature mortality</li> <li>• mental health admissions</li> </ul>	Life expectancy, premature mortality and mental health admissions are three key health measures commonly employed in well-being indicators for which neighbourhood level data is readily available.
	Inclusion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• voting</li> <li>• truancy</li> <li>• educational attainment</li> </ul>	Political disengagement, measured through voter turnout, and social exclusion are known to be mutually-reinforcing. Truancy can be indicative of various problems and challenges in a child's life, including bullying. There is also a direct link between attendance and achievement (measured through educational attainment), and subsequent opportunities for inclusion in society through work and training.

The identification of neighbourhoods doing better or worse than might be expected given the level of stress experienced involved analysis of stress levels and outcomes in each of Sheffield's 100 neighbourhoods, as defined by the City Council. Drawing on neighbourhood level data held by the City Council, National Health Service and Police, each outcome measure was analysed separately against each of the three stress measures (unemployment, incomes and deprivation). The data point for each neighbourhood was then plotted to establish the nature of the correlation for each stress and outcome pairing and a trend line for the city as a whole. Figure 2 illustrates this exercise. Each dot represents a neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods above the trend line were seen to be experiencing better than expected outcomes, while neighbourhoods located below the line were experiencing worse than expected outcomes, given the level of stress endured. This exercise was repeated for each outcome measure. Neighbourhoods were then ranked on the basis of the number of times



they were found to be a positive or negative outlier against different outcome measures. This approach helped limit the impact of any data anomalies associated with individual measures.

**Figure 2: Identifying Outlying Neighbourhoods**



This approach responded to the appetite for an index that ranked neighbourhoods on the basis of their resilience. In practice, it proved relatively easy to identify neighbourhoods evidencing relatively high or low levels of resilience. It was more challenging to distinguish between and rank neighbourhoods closer to the average. However, the result was a ranking of the ten neighbourhoods evidencing the lowest levels of resilience, providing an obvious starting point for discussion about where the local authority might target efforts to promote resilience. Analysis also revealed the top ten neighbourhoods exhibiting relatively high levels of resilience. These neighbourhoods provided a focus for our interest in understanding the factors underpinning better than expected outcomes in order to inform discussion about

what Sheffield City Council and its partners might do to protect and promote resilience in neighbourhoods across the city.

## Understanding Community Resilience

Various authors have argued that community resilience is best understood in terms of how well different capitals are developed within a community, community resilience being built on local resources that are collectively held or accessible to the community and can be developed and engaged to achieve community objectives (Magis, 2010; Steiner and Markantoni, 2013). Analysis across the four case study neighbourhoods generated a long list of 15 factors, or capitals, identified by respondents as helping to explain why these communities were more resilient. These factors were grouped into three bundles on the basis of the type of explanation they support, relating to who lives there; the social and physical context; and the nature of the local community (see Table 3). These bundles are not proposed as competing accounts, but as overlapping and interrelated explanations. This section considers each of these explanations in turn.

**Table 3: Key Explanations for Resilience**

Explanations for Resilience	Elements identified by Respondents
<b><i>Who Lives There</i></b> The circumstances and situations of the population.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• individual resources</li> <li>• age profile</li> <li>• capacity to engage</li> <li>• population stability</li> <li>• diversity and difference</li> </ul>
<b><i>Social and Physical Context</i></b> The local context or setting, including resources, services, amenities and facilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• physical environment</li> <li>• facilities and amenities</li> <li>• service provision</li> <li>• active citizenship</li> <li>• media and communications</li> <li>• links to power and influence</li> <li>• housing</li> <li>• crime and anti-social behaviour</li> </ul>
<b><i>Nature of Community</i></b> The sense of community, including shared notions of belonging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shared notions of belonging and identity</li> <li>• inclusive communities</li> </ul>

## Who lives there

Who lives in a neighbourhood and their situations and circumstances informs the economic resources available to a community for the welfare of its population, including individually and collectively held financial resources available for investment in civic enterprise and business development. It also informs the human resources available in the form of individuals' innate or acquired attributes, such as labour force activity, training, skills and knowledge. Individuals are also key in realising the social capital embedded in the social relations within a community (Coleman, 1988). It came as no surprise, therefore, that the situations and circumstances of the local population and their capacity to engage were spotlighted by respondents as important factors helping to explain the resilience of case study communities.

The impact of the socio-economic circumstances of the local population on community resilience was largely 'controlled' for by the fact that resilience was defined relative to the level of stress (unemployment, low incomes and deprivation) within a neighbourhood. However, two references were forthcoming regarding the importance of economic resources. First, in Lodge Moor reference was made to the fact that a relatively large proportion of the population were retired (more than one in four of residents are over 65 years). Although these residents might have relatively modest incomes, many were home owners with access to accumulated assets (property and savings). These resources were recognised as helping people to cope and get by and maintain a good quality of life, promoting better than expected outcomes in terms of life expectancy. Second, references were made to the presence in the relatively deprived neighbourhood of Abbeyfield of more affluent groups - "white 'middle class lefties' and upwardly mobile and aspiring Pakistani families" as one respondent put it - who had made a conscious decision to live in the neighbourhood. The economic and human

capital of this population was reported to be an important resource within a relatively deprived neighbourhood, as we will see.

With the exception of these two examples, the key resources reported to be serving collective interests typically took the form of human capital. Echoing classic studies of community development, which emphasise the importance of Putnam's notion of social capital to the form of voluntary associations and civic trust (DeFilippis, 2001), reference was made in all four case studies to the presence of a critical mass of people who were articulate, politically aware, cared about the community and were playing an important role promoting shared priorities and grievances that underpinned community action. Passionate individuals were said to contribute to resilience by facilitating collective responses to local issues, securing resources for the area, running groups and activities and providing support to local people. A respondent in Abbeyfield pointed to the fact that there were many activists in the area:

The people of Abbeyfield are able and know what to do to deal with issues affecting them, and they are not frightened of fighting the council. A few people like this are able to bring along more. In some areas there may only be one, but there are enough of them in Abbeyfield to bring along others. There is a lot of internal resilience.

Active residents explained that community activities took up a lot of their time and suggested that this level of commitment would not be possible alongside full-time family or employment responsibilities. As one respondent observed, "when you've been working until 7pm, you can't come back and start going to a meeting". Community volunteers and activities were therefore often retired or employed in part-time positions. High participation rates in Lodge Moor, for example, were reported to be linked to the high proportion of older residents, who have spare time to get involved in community activities. Concerns were raised about the dangers of a community relying on a few key activists and local council officers

emphasised the importance of generating a local community infrastructure that could survive their loss, for example, by supporting community activists to share their skills and provide training to help a wider range of people get involved.

No obvious pattern or relationship was apparent between resilience and ethnic diversity of the local population. Stability of the local population, rather than its particular composition, was commonly identified as a key factor underpinning resilience. The argument presented was that if a neighbourhood has a relatively stable population, social ties, links and associations are more likely to develop. These ties can underpin shared notions of belonging which promote community action. Population stability was also reported to impact positively on levels of crime and anti-social behaviour and fear of crime. One explanation given by respondents in the Abbeyfield and the Firth Park case studies was that stable communities are more effective at governing conduct. It was also suggested that people are likely to be less fearful of young people hanging around when they have seen them grow up and know their families. One respondent commented that it is "hard to play truant when everyone knows you".

Evidence did emerge in one case study consistent with previous studies, revealing how the arrival of a new population can present a challenge to established identities and notions of community (Hickman et al., 2008). Residents reported local concerns about the recent arrival of a Roma population. This was due to an apparent clash of cultures in relation to the use of space in the local area and disposal of household waste. They went on to explain how these concerns had brought the established community together to voice concerns:

Previously only a handful of people attended these kinds of meetings [councillor forum], and then only when there was a problem, but now they're packed out. There were 20 to 30 people at the meeting last night baying at the Councillors. It got a bit hairy.

Such collective shows of concern or anger can prove challenging for local agencies and there is an obvious need to challenge and mediate divisive and prejudiced opinion. However, a respondent in the Abbeyfield case study suggested that such situations can provide an important opportunity for the full range of community voices to be heard, as discussed below.

### The local social and physical context

Much has been written about the importance of informal public gathering places - or third places - and their relevance to public life and community. Oldenburg (2000) suggests that main streets, pubs, cafés, post offices, libraries and other third places are the heart of a community's social vitality and the foundation of a functioning community of place. They serve to render places discernible, create habits of public association, and provide a setting for grassroots activism and politics. They can also offer psychological support to individuals and communities and can act as a 'self-organising public service', a shared resource in which experiences and value are created (Mean and Tims, 2005). These themes were apparent in the comments and reflections of respondents. A consistent refrain was the important role that a distinct centre with shops, services and related amenities can play in promoting interaction and a sense of community.

Appropriate buildings and spaces for activities to take place were frequently identified as important. It was also suggested that community buildings are signifiers of community activity and can be a source of community pride and belonging. Concern was expressed about the future of community buildings, including local libraries, in the face of public sector cuts. Green space, particularly parks, were also frequently mentioned as important to resilience. It was reported that well maintained public parks were still playing the role intended by their Victorian founders, contributing to social mixing, mental well-being and promoting local pride in the area. Parks were often the focal point for community festivals,

which were seen by community stakeholders as important for social mixing and civic pride. Respondents in Firth Park expressed concern for the future of their community festival due to cuts in services that support the festival, including park rangers. Parks were reported to benefit young people in particular. In the Southey Green neighbourhood, which recorded better than expected levels of youth engagement, an old landfill site had been redeveloped as a park, with the involvement of young people. A group often seen hanging around the local shops had been approached to design the skate park area, in an attempt to ensure it met their needs and to give them a sense of ownership over the new park. Service providers reported that, despite initial reluctance, most young people welcomed opportunities to participate, to feel needed and to be responsible for something. Another reported example involved three girls, who regularly spent time in the local library, being made library monitors. This was viewed as a successful initiative that had been extended out to other young people.

Community links with power and influence, including MPs, ward Councillors and officers in key institutions, were reported to be important to resilience. One case study neighbourhood was reported to have benefitted from the work of a high profile local MP, who helped secure support for funding bids for schools and community initiatives. Community links with Councillors were also reported to have helped with local campaigns in the case studies, by bringing issues to the attention of the local press and Council meetings. Councillors had also assisted with advice about how to make local campaigns more effective. Having three active ward Councillors resident in the neighbourhood was an explanation provided for higher than expected political engagement in Abbeyfield.

Respondents frequently spotlighted the role of public services in promoting and sustaining the infrastructure upon which local organisations rely and resilience might be built. Even a relatively small level of support from the Council or other local service providers was

reported to have far reaching consequences. This included examples of where the local council or a voluntary sector organisation had kick-started local groups and activities that had become self-sufficient. Respondents also pointed to the importance of protecting and promoting facilities and amenities and considering the knock-on consequences for resilience of any decision to close a facility. One respondent gave the example of a local library, which was reported to accommodate much more than books and IT facilities. It also provided a warm and safe space where community groups could meet. Uncertainty was expressed about whether an alternative venue could be found if the library was to close.

A two-way relationship was reported between crime and resilience. Crime was commonly identified as a key factor undermining resilience and community resilience was reported to be an important factor explaining relatively low crime levels. In Lodge Moor, police officers and residents active in Neighbourhood Watch reported that good police-community relations were responsible for relatively low levels of reported crime. Police officers also reported that older residents were more likely to be around and about during the day, to talk to each other, keep an eye out for anything unusual or suspicious and readily report incidents to the police. In at least one other case study it was suggested that low rates of crime can also be a result of ‘not very nice collective action’, tight knit communities sometimes dealing with issues informally. This might result in relatively low recorded crime but undermine the community infrastructure and reduce resilience to other stressors. Another important observation, discussed below, was the potential for crime to provide the incentive for residents to come together to tackle underlying problems in their neighbourhood.

### The local community

The nature of the local community includes cultural resources, such as the ways in which community members ‘know’ the world, their values, and their assumptions about how things



work, including rules relating to power and influence (Magis, 2010). The particular nature of community in the case study neighbourhoods was frequently referenced by respondents when seeking to explain resilience. A shared sense of belonging and identity, promoted by contact and interaction between local residents, was widely reported in the case study neighbourhoods. Such shared understandings of place and connectedness appear to run contrary to the notion that modernity divests place of significance in relation to notions of community as most social activities are no longer confined in the "place" but are oriented to unknown people in unknown places, to abstract institutions, and within rules that are different from the community norms (Bhattacharyya, 2012). However, they are consistent with the emphasis of the social capital movement on networks, trust, and mutual obligations enabling people to take collective measures to address shared problems (Putnam, 1995) and have previously been recognised as impacting on resilience (Alkon, 2004).

In explaining how this sense of community had been nurtured, respondents pointed to many of the factors already discussed, including the importance of spaces of association in facilitating social interaction and promoting social ties; stability within the population allowing links and ties to solidify into networks of familiarity and association; and interaction and engagement facilitated by local agencies nurturing a sense of belonging and shared interest. A clearly demarcated physical setting was also reported to help to define a shared sense of being a community.

The recognition of shared priorities, concerns and grievances demands knowledge and awareness of issues impacting on the local area. For this reason, good communication has been identified as essential for community competence and resilience by helping communities navigate their way through change (Norris et al., 2008). This was evident in the form of communications from service providers, community mechanisms (including

newsletters and community newspapers) and word of mouth. For example, Firth Park had a community magazine, 5Alive, and Abbeyfield had a local newspaper, the Burngreave Messenger. These were reported to increase awareness of services, activities, opportunities, and local groups. They also kept people in touch with local proposals, which overcame the reported tendency for agencies to purposely restrict the availability of information in a bid to 'get away' with things (for example, proposed changes to a local bus service) and limit social action.

An ever present danger in strongly bonded communities is that they pull together in ways that serve to exclude and problematise sub-sections of the local population. Examples provided by respondents included communities pulling together to campaign against the development of a new traveller site and attending public meetings to protest about the unfamiliar or anti-social behaviour of new migrants. It can be tempting in such circumstances for agencies and groups to foreclose discussion. Whilst acknowledging the need to challenge and mediate divisive and prejudiced opinion, a more productive ambition championed by a number of respondents was to try and harness the community engagement and participation promoted by controversial issues. Shared negative experiences have the potential to bond people together and stimulate collective activity. Whatever the initial hook for people to get involved, it is possible to grow participation over the longer term and in relation to a broader range of issues. For example, a group of Somali women, who came together following the shooting of two young Somali men, continue to work with the local authority to set up a range of diversionary activities for young people in the area. Forged in adversity, this group has subsequently mobilised to inform, challenge and resist local authority plans for the neighbourhood and to draw in more resources. Learning from such examples of social action is particularly relevant in the context of the difficult decisions local authorities are making in relation to cuts in provision, which are likely to spark community opposition.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Residing in a resilient community can serve as a buffer and provide opportunities for residents to manage better in the face of change. Promoting resilience can therefore represent a pragmatic response by local authorities faced with difficult decisions about how to effectively deploy shrinking resources to support communities struggling in a hostile economic environment. However, it is important to recognise the limits of what might be achieved; resilience might serve as a strategy for helping communities to cope with adversity, but does not represent a means of overturning structural inequalities. Recognising this fact helps avoid the subtle elision of resilience thinking and the neoliberal focus on self-reliance, which can result in communities struggling in the face of adversity being blamed for their predicament because of a lack of collective resources and cooperative participation.

Our subtle revision of the survival discourse might be criticised for emphasising locality development (Rothman, 1968) and replicating the tendency within discussion of social capital to divorce community development from economic capital and power and imbue analysis with the assumption that social networks are inevitably a win-win relationship (DeFilippis (2001). The result is to risk engendering stability, rather than challenging the systems and processes responsible for the pressures bearing down on people and places. Yet, it reflects the immediate challenge faced by large numbers of households and communities across the UK in the context of economic turmoil, low incomes and the retreat of public services. It also poses important questions for local government about what represents a meaningful response to the challenges faced by people and places in an age of austerity and how communities might be empowered; thus affording the possibility of engaging with more radical constructions of resilience as social action to bring about fundamental change, rather than a return to the situation that caused the problem in the first place (Raco and Sweet, 2012).

Rather than merely surviving, a resilient community might respond to shock and adversity in creative ways that serve to transform the very nature of the community and leave it better placed to overcome adversity in the future.

This understanding of community resilience was applied through a measure that identified local communities that were evidencing better or worse outcomes given the intensity of stress they are exposed to. This approach could be usefully employed to guide local government actors grappling with the challenge of looking beyond the implementation of austerity and toward the targeting of efforts to stimulate growth and build socially productive relationships (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013). Any meaningful response also demands appreciation of the mechanisms through which communities might be buffered against the full force of changes wrought by economic restructuring and public sector retrenchment. Exploring these mechanisms in four resilient communities revealed a number of key themes that cut across discussion of social capital, third places, community development and the underpinning role of public services: a local sense of community and strong social relations; local capacity to secure and share information, speak with a strong local voice and exercise power; and a basic infrastructure of public spaces within which the sense of community was rooted and social relations were nurtured. These factors are not presented as an exhaustive list of mechanisms underpinning community resilience, but as partial insights into the interaction of neighbourhood features that might inform resilience to economic stressors. As such, they are worthy of the attention of local authorities seeking to promote and sustain community resilience. However, they would need to be considered alongside three overarching conclusions that can be drawn from the empirical insights presented above.

First, as Davoudi (2012) has observed, even resilient communities will continue to require the support of public services to mediate the impact of stressors and support the on-going

development, engagement and realisation of collective capacity. The local state was playing an important role in strengthening local adaptive capacities and building resilience across the four case studies. This contribution was found to be complex and multi-faceted, a finding that complicates the already difficult decisions local authorities are having to make about which services to protect and which to cut in the context of ongoing reductions in funding. It is reported that councils have thus far, somewhat surprisingly, been able to protect key frontline services (Fitzgerald and Lupton, 2015). However, a focus on resilience raises questions about what represents a priority or frontline service. Park wardens and libraries, for example, are the kinds of service that have been at the forefront of local authority cuts in recent years, but were revealed to be playing an important role promoting community capacity and resilience.

A second insight relates to the apparent fragility of community resilience. Respondents intimated or expressed concern that the interwoven fabric of factors supporting community resilience could easily fray, unravel or tear, for example, if certain local facilities and amenities closed, active individuals withdrew, services departed or the area experienced rapid population change. This is an important finding. Building resilience is commonly presumed to involve a journey from a position of insecurity and weakness to one of stability and strength. The experience in the four case studies was that community resilience is a fragile state and the fabric of factors supporting resilience requires ongoing maintenance if it is not to unravel and the strength and stability of the community dissipate.

Finally, communities can respond to adversity in creative ways that involve struggling against top down, managerialist approaches to resilience. It is questionable whether the examples to emerge in this study represent the radical resilience discussed by Raco and Sweet (2012), which pave the way for more interventionist modes of development and public policy.

However, communities were posing important questions about the quality of the local social and physical environment and seeking to influence future plans for their communities. Local agencies were reported to sometimes try and foreclose discussion and curtail alternative narratives emanating from bottom-up struggles, particularly in relation to more controversial or divisive local issues. This represents a failure to recognise the potential for contention, problems and crisis to provide an opportunity for community development. However, as Davoudi (2012) points out, turning a crisis into an opportunity requires a great deal of preparedness which in turn depends on the capacity to imagine alternative futures.

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