



Anna Smith first came to Cambridge to train as a teacher after studying at the university in Oxford. She stayed in Cambridge working as a History/Classics/Archaeology teacher and middle leader at Hills Road Sixth Form College for 13 years, specialising in pastoral support and guidance. Then she went on to be Deputy Head at Parkside Federation, teaching in Coleridge and Parkside and setting up Parkside Sixth. Now she works as an education adviser. She is a labour councillor for the Romsey Ward and is Deputy Leader (Statutory) and Executive Councillor for Communities at Cambridge City Council.

Reflections on lockdown – by Anna Smith

No-one wanted this pandemic. And with so many lives lost or changed, we have to be really careful talking about ‘silver linings’ or ‘good things’ that have come out of it. It would be offensive to do that. But as we’ve sought to ‘make our garden grow’ as a city during this period, there are certainly things that have grown, that we would want to keep as we plan for recovery.

We had to decide as a city how to respond to an unprecedented crisis. And individuals, mutual aid groups, volunteers, businesses, charities, local groups and faith groups all came together with the city council in an equally unprecedented display of concern to ensure that everyone should get the help they need. The city has worked with partners to establish a support network of local clusters, offering funding, offcame to Cambridge icer support and a whole range of other help. But it is very much a partnership, and often at the most local level, with neighbours supporting neighbours. And with what felt to me like an incredibly genuine multi-way conversation. Not with anyone telling any else what they had to do, but with a sense of mutual support and a common goal.

Much has been said about the amazing people who have shopped, collected prescriptions, cooked and delivered tonnes of food, and run food hubs. And about all those businesses who have donated food, and the furloughed chefs who have volunteered. And all those individuals who have donated money or food to the efforts. And I want to say a huge thank you to all of them – they are all heroes.

Less has been said about the council team who have quietly got on with the immense task of mothballing facilities whilst at the same time designing and supporting a community support network and helpdesk. They have shown creativity and resilience and have worked incredibly hard. They don’t by nature push themselves forward – they are always pointing towards the work of others. So I want to say a huge thank you to all of them too.

Poverty and need didn’t start with Covid-19. And they won’t go away after a vaccine has been found. And there are things about the community and council response that we will need to keep as we move towards recovery.

Firstly, we need to celebrate and retain the flexibility and creativity we’ve seen from our officer team. The model of refining a system as you go along isn’t one we are used to in councils. But it’s worked brilliantly here. And as councillors, and as residents, we need to be willing to give ‘permission’ for this. We have seen what it can achieve, but of course this way of doing things can also be risky – things might not be ‘perfect’ from the start, and we have to be ready to accept that.

Secondly, we have to find a way to keep our partnership and community work going. Not to offload what we do as a council, not to assume that volunteers can take up the slack. But to keep working together in a

creative and mutually respectful way, where we learn from each other, and work together properly. And particularly, we can learn from the concept of mutual aid groups here. A mutual aid isn't one person doing all the giving, whilst another person is the passive and grateful recipient. It's about people helping each other – the helper will at some point become the helped. And that really matters. When we work in communities, we shouldn't be going in and telling people what they need, we should be asking them. We shouldn't be doing things 'to' people, but with them. We shouldn't be assuming that people in poverty don't have skills, or abilities. We already try to do this. We run consultations, we fund community groups to enable them to be part of their own solution. But we can do so much more. We should be taking our lead from the communities we serve, implementing their ideas wherever possible. And for me, there's a vision of a new way of working in true partnership with the community the council serves, that I'm excited about putting into practice.

Anna Smith – July 2020