Between a rock and a hard place
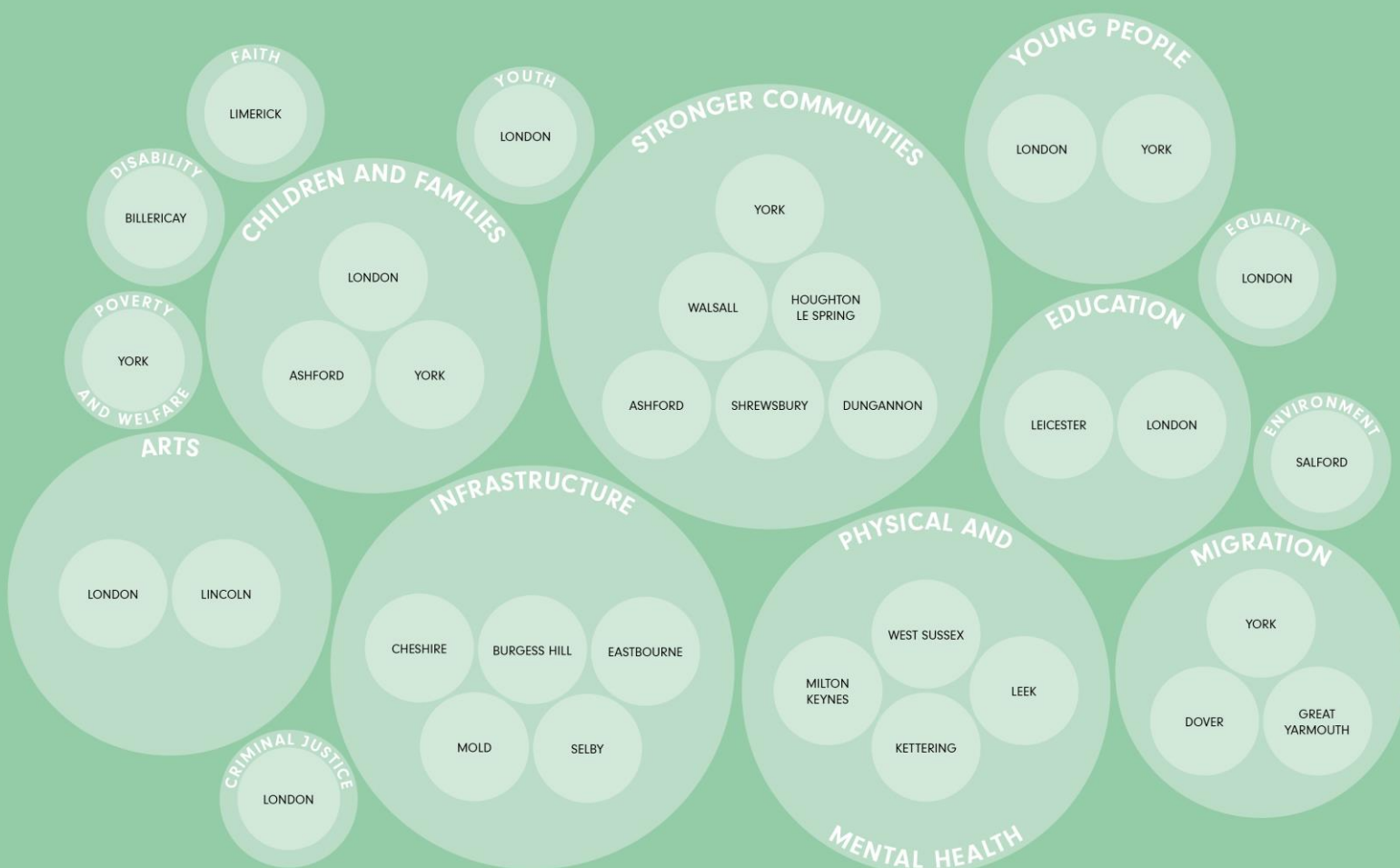
Briefing 9 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis

17 August 2020

FAITH
LIMERICK

YOUTH
LONDON

YOUNG PEOPLE
LONDON   YORK

DISABILITY
BILLERICAY

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
LONDON
ASHFORD   YORK

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
YORK
WALSALL   HOUGHTON LE SPRING
ASHFORD   SHREWSBURY   DUNGANNON

EQUALITY
LONDON

EDUCATION
LEICESTER   LONDON

POVERTY
YORK

ENVIRONMENT
SALFORD

AND WELFARE

ARTS
LONDON   LINCOLN

INFRASTRUCTURE
CHESHIRE   BURGESS HILL   EASTBOURNE
MOLD   SELBY

PHYSICAL AND
WEST SUSSEX
MILTON KEYNES   LEEK
KETTERING

MIGRATION
YORK
DOVER   GREAT YARMOUTH

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
LONDON

MENTAL HEALTH

Introduction

Recognising the tremendous pressure that charity leaders are under as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, IVAR is facilitating online peer support groups for leaders of voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations. The aim is to create a space for them to share challenges, dilemmas and worries, and to learn from each other's experiences. Participation in sessions has primarily been by organisations with a turnover of £1 million or less.

We offer funders feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This ninth briefing shares the experiences of 36 leaders participating in the sessions between 14th and 31st July 2020, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise. Further briefings will follow as new groups meet.

Who did we hear from?

Income ranges:

- UNDER £250K
- £250K – £500K
- £500K – £1M
- OVER £1M

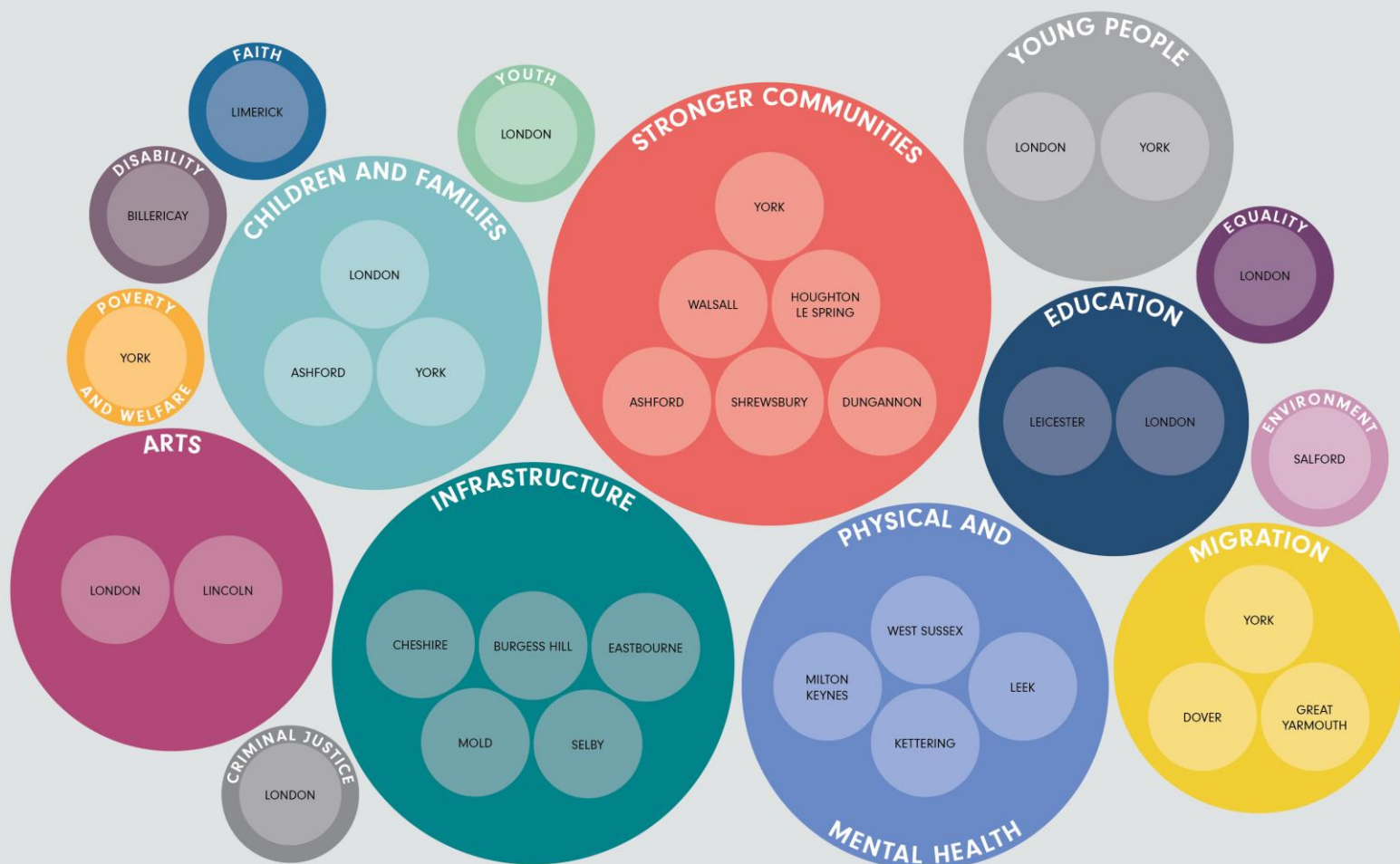**We heard from 36 charities between 14 and 31 July through online support sessions.**

They serve communities across the four countries of the United Kingdom; and around the world.

Main office locations:

- DUNGANNON
- HOUGHTON LE SPRING
- YORK
- SELBY
- SALFORD
- MOLD
- CHESHIRE
- LINCOLN
- LEEK
- LIMERICK
- GREAT YARMOUTH
- SHREWSBURY
- WALSALL
- LEICESTER
- KETTERING
- MILTON KEYNES
- BILLERICAY
- LONDON
- ASHFORD
- WEST SUSSEX
- BURGESSS HILL
- DOVER
- EASTBOURNE

WE HEARD FROM 36 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 14 AND 31 JULY 2020

FAITH — LIMERICK

YOUTH — LONDON

STRONGER COMMUNITIES — YORK, WALSALL, HOUGHTON LE SPRING, ASHFORD, SHREWSBURY, DUNGANNON

YOUNG PEOPLE — LONDON, YORK

DISABILITY — BILLERICAY

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES — LONDON, ASHFORD, YORK

EQUALITY — LONDON

EDUCATION — LEICESTER, LONDON

POVERTY AND WELFARE — YORK

ENVIRONMENT — SALFORD

ARTS — LONDON, LINCOLN

INFRASTRUCTURE — CHESHIRE, BURGESS HILL, EASTBOURNE, MOLD, SELBY

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH — WEST SUSSEX, MILTON KEYNES, LEEK, KETTERING

MIGRATION — YORK, DOVER, GREAT YARMOUTH

CRIMINAL JUSTICE — LONDON

ARTS
Community Focus
Inclusive Arts
Soundlincs
Mousetrap Theatre Projects

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Dads Unlimited
Chance UK
Children and Families
Across Borders
Kyra Women's Project

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Clean Break

DISABILITY
Hamelin Trust

EDUCATION
Books Beyond Words
CovidCerulean

ENVIRONMENT
Mersey Forest
(Community Forest Trust)

EQUALITY
women@thewell

FAITH
Irish Institute for Catholic Studies

INFRASTRUCTURE
Mid Sussex Voluntary Action
3VA
Flintshire Local Voluntary
Council
Selby District AVS
CVS Cheshire East

MIGRATION
Time To Be Out
Migrant Help
GYROS

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
Centre for Chaplaincy
in Education
Cransley Hospice Trust
Borderland Voices
Willen Hospice

POVERTY AND WELFARE
Older Citizens Advocacy York

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
York LGBT Forum
Shropshire Rural
Communities Charity (RCC)

Dads Unlimited
Speedwell Trust
Easington Lane Community
Access Point
Transforming Communities
Together

YOUNG PEOPLE
Door 84 Youth and Community
Solutions Not Sides

YOUTH
Young Citizens

What is now front of mind for leaders of VCSE

The context within which VCSE leaders are operating continues to be exceptionally challenging, and they face huge responsibilities both for the safe provision of services and the survival of their organisation:

> *'Everyone is paddling madly underwater to adapt.'*

> *'There is no handbook. We are creating history at the moment.'*

> *'People are relying on me to pay their mortgage ... put petrol in their car. There is a huge amount of responsibility.'*

And we continue to hear inspiring stories about how organisations are coping and striving to meet the needs of the individuals and communities they serve in a detailed and practical way. Some have found creative ways to connect people within remote communities. Others are working collaboratively with similar organisations to create safer services. Many are increasing the reach of their services. Across the board, responses are characterised by ingenuity, dedication, determination and a deep commitment to being human and inclusive.

The practical impact on organisations does, though, vary from sector to sector: *'We're all in the same storm, but we're not all in the same boat'.* Some VCSE leaders reflect that they are *'the busiest we've ever been'* as a result of increasing and changing beneficiary needs and the degree of planning and adaptation that is required to the content and structure of their services. Although emergency funding programmes are hugely welcome, fundraising for grants on six-month rather than three-year cycles adds a significant burden. Other organisations, however, remain closed (e.g. some of those working within educational settings or many operating within the arts sector). Either way, the emotional toll remains significant for VCSE leaders.

In particular, three factors remain at the forefront of their minds:

1. Staff and personal welfare
2. Navigating the easing of lockdown
3. Long-term strategy

1. Staff and personal welfare

Since we began publishing these briefings in April 2020, VCSE leaders' concerns about, and attention to, the welfare of their workforce have been ever-present: *'You can't sustain organisations on money alone ... we need to look after ourselves'.*

VCSE leaders are encouraging their staff and volunteers to stay connected while working remotely, for example holding daily check-ins, making time for informal chats or hosting fun activities online. They remain conscious of the need to communicate clearly and often with staff and volunteers who may be shielding or furloughed so that they feel involved and part of the team. And they are encouraging everyone to take breaks: *'People can't pour from an empty cup'.*

However, it can be hard to keep up these habits, either because *'people have got quieter over time'*, or because *'taking a break can feel very difficult to do when the organisation is operating at reduced human capacity'.* And leaders know all too well that staff are missing out on the informal support they gain from

working in an office environment, which is not easy to replicate online: *'They're not willing to open a can of worms on a video chat. If they were in a room, they would have a great conversation'*.

Unsurprisingly, we have started to hear real concerns about the ongoing resilience and capacity of staff due to the protracted nature of the emergency that we are all living through, as well as the multiple demands they face as a result of: reductions in human capacity (either due to furloughing staff or recruitment freezes); increasing beneficiary need; and their own personal challenges.

> *'Our clients are really suffering at the moment which means staff are hearing difficult stories and clients are becoming harder to help – they are starting to take their frustrations out on our staff more, which is very hard.'*

> *'Morale is very low as staff struggle with the work alongside trying to give their children the support they need emotionally.'*

2. Navigating the easing of lockdown

In our last briefing, we noted that VCSE leaders had been thinking hard about *when* and *how* to reinstate in-person services, as well as their usual working practices, since the easing of lockdown began. From our most recent conversations, it is apparent that this is a very difficult period for many VCSE leaders – in some ways more so than when they responded to the initial national lockdown: *'Moving to planning for recovery and face-to-face services has been very difficult as I think we are pulling in different directions, when previously the focus was straightforward. It feels like we are stuck between a rock and a hard place'*.

Four specific difficulties have arisen from the easing of lockdown:

1. **The sense of responsibility and anxiety attached to the decisions/choices is very high:** *'We're constantly having to weigh up having more choice and freedom with the personal risks you're taking on. Getting it right is a massive responsibility'*.

2. **Any face-to-face provision that is possible will still be very different in nature and, in some cases, very limited:** *'Like many others, we've come out of the crisis phase and we've survived it. But planning for increasing capacity with physical distancing, infection prevention and having control measures in place is going to make our services very, very limited'*.

3. **The provisions that need to be put in place need resourcing and are adding to workloads:** *'We've just put in a process for all staff doing health declarations with volunteers and mentors. Then they'll have to do weekly checks to ensure people are still okay for us to go back and do sessions. It's added another layer of admin. It's appropriate, but it's extra'*.

4. **Staff, as well as service users, have diverging views/appetite for reinstating/returning to usual working spaces and practices:** *'Some staff really want to get back to frontline work, and at the other end we have really nervous staff. Covid has left people in a state of anxiety and it plays out differently for different people'*.

Strategies for navigating these challenges include:

- Giving staff a choice about whether or not they want to return to an office environment.
- Operating in 'bubbles' so that there is an element of consistency over who interacts with particular service users.
- Providing personal protective equipment (PPE), and ensuring that the working environment is as safe as possible (for example, one organisation has provided desk screens and hand sanitiser; they are only using every second or third desk; and have implemented a one-way system).
- Working in partnership with other organisations who provide a similar service (e.g. lunch clubs) to ensure service users are able to access at least one service a week.

3. Long-term strategy

A recurring theme across online sessions has been the difficulty of planning in uncertainty. In briefings five and six, we observed VCSE leaders carefully judging how much time and energy to put into hypothesising and planning for the future. Specifically, balancing the need to provide the clarity and vision that is expected from them as leaders, while recognising the many unknowns surrounding their future operating environments.

Recently, we have heard from leaders who are starting to give more time and attention to their long-term strategy, in light of the sustained impact of Covid-19 – both on beneficiary need and the financial health and sustainability of their organisations:

> *'We definitely don't have the income we had going forward to just carry on with usual activities. We're having to review earlier development plans which could mean difficult strategic decisions.'*

> *'If this virus is endemic, which it looks like it will be, we need to be thinking further ahead.'*

> *'The support that clients will need in six months will not be what they normally need. We are having to rethink our strategy for the long term.'*

And, for most organisations, the permutations are many and varied. One is reconsidering their need for an office space. Another is debating the discontinuation of their therapy and wellbeing services. A third is facing the very real threat that a vital stream of earned income is likely to diminish or even disappear: *'Will we be able to charge as much if we're not offering face-to-face provision?'*.

What are we learning about the support VCSE leaders may need?

Access to peer support

VCSE leaders continue to value peer support, welcoming the opportunity to: confidentially share worries and concerns without creating unnecessary anxiety amongst their colleagues; sound out ideas; and *'gain reassurance that there is no right way of doing things'*:

> *'I am able to share things that I can't share with my Chair or staff.'*

> *'There is a need to be able to have space for some strategic thinking and thought, not just reactive behaviour. Peer support helps me to do that – to sound things out to a group of peers for their input and thought.'*

Peer support gives leaders the confidence to adjust their provision and response, or simply realise that they need a break: *'It was like a ray of light. The conversation with other peers led me to ask for help and understand I am not on my own and I need time to rest as well'.* It is also a chance for leaders to share coping mechanisms such as reminding each other to be kind to themselves and trying to keep a sense of humour.

Looking ahead, there is some appetite for hosting and organising peer support locally, to help foster collaboration, as well as to bring people together across sectors in order to develop trust and strengthen joint planning.

Supportive funding structures

VCSE leaders continue to call for:

- A shift back to longer-term, multi-year funding, without losing all of the speed and flexibility that has characterised many emergency grants.
- Provision of truly unrestricted funding to ensure that organisations are able to adapt and allocate resources based on organisational and beneficiary need over time.
- Trust-based funding relationships: *'Trust us. We will do right by our communities/service users and your money'.*

In addition, leaders have begun to talk about the importance of funders holding *'realistic expectations about what can be delivered in the current context'.* For example, one organisation envisages only being able to support 12 people at any given time, rather than 50, thus significantly reducing their possible outputs. Another hope is that funders will support organisations to manage well, not just to deliver: *'We need funding to do planning and strategising ... supporting organisational change ... and visibility and outreach work'.* Finally, leaders continue to seek reassurance regarding funders' plans post emergency funding.

Collaboration and cross-sector engagement

In previous briefings, 'joined-up thinking', 'opportunities to strengthen the sector's collective voice' and 'cross-sector dialogue' have been identified as support needs. These continue to be relevant and pressing: *'This is a unique and key opportunity to bring organisations across sectors together to develop a multi-agency plan'.* The importance of joint planning and ensuring VCSE organisations

'have a seat at the table' is pressing, particularly given the fears of a resurgence of Covid-19, especially in the winter months.

Questions and opportunities for funders

Since April 2020, we have identified a range of key messages, and posed a number of questions, for funders to reflect on as they consider how best to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many have focused on four themes:

1. **Funding structures and processes** – flexible; light-touch; proportionate; agile; trust-based.

2. **Voice and influence** – provide a platform from which the VCSE sector's contribution and voice can be advocated and championed; build collective intelligence to shape the future.

3. **Organisational support** – provide funding, support and information to VCSE organisations to help them to adapt and respond, as well as consider their strategic options.

4. **Transparency and openness** – communicate short, medium and long-term strategies.

This briefing highlight three aspects of the current reality for applicants and grantees that funders need to keep front of mind in their efforts to support the causes and organisations that they care about:

1. **The easing of lockdown** is a huge challenge, not least because the process is far from linear. As they open, face-to-face services will inevitably see fewer people and at higher costs than funders are used to; and may be subject to closure orders at any time, should the virus surge in a local area. This does not make them any less essential, particularly for people who are excluded through digital means.

2. **One size cannot fit all** – although *'we are all in the same storm'*, we clearly are *'not all in the same boat'*. A differentiated analysis and response are needed to, for example, applicants who have been running at full speed for months to provide front-line services and those struggling with the challenge of relaunching valuable work that has been unable to continue under lockdown.

3. **Planning for the future** is becoming increasingly pressing but is likely to remain a perilous mixture of best guesses, cautious optimism, and crystal ball gazing for the foreseeable future.

Given this – and the uncertainty that funders themselves are facing – it seems to us that it will be important to sustain, develop and prioritise the following funding approaches and models:

- **Trust** – select organisations whose values and ambitions align with your own and then back their knowledge, experience and skills. Even the most engaged funder cannot hope to know as much as its grantees do about the needs, opportunities, challenges and barriers they deal with day to day. Trust them to do the very best they can with the funds you give them.

- **Flexible funding** – trust is best expressed through genuinely unrestricted funding, which grantees can use as they see fit in response to changing circumstances. This is the only kind of funding that fully acknowledges the

unpredictability and complexity of the context within which VCSE organisations are trying to make plans and decisions.

- **Support** – make support offers *'genuinely bottom up'*. Respect organisations' own analysis of their needs and circumstances. Fund them to create the capacity to engage with and use support; and give them the freedom to decline it, if the timing or focus isn't right for them.

Finally, we suggest that the idea of linear progression in funding from emergency to recovery and then to renewal is becoming unhelpful as restrictions are tightened in virus hot spots, a difficult winter is predicted, and medical solutions to Covid-19 have yet to be found. However, both funders and VCSE organisations desperately need to move on from the demands of applying for and distributing six-month grants. The challenge now is to move back to more conventional cycles of one, three and even five-year funding, without losing the urgency and lightness of touch that has characterised the immediate response by so many. For the foreseeable future, all funders are emergency funders.

Authorship

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