Focusing on what we <u>can</u> do
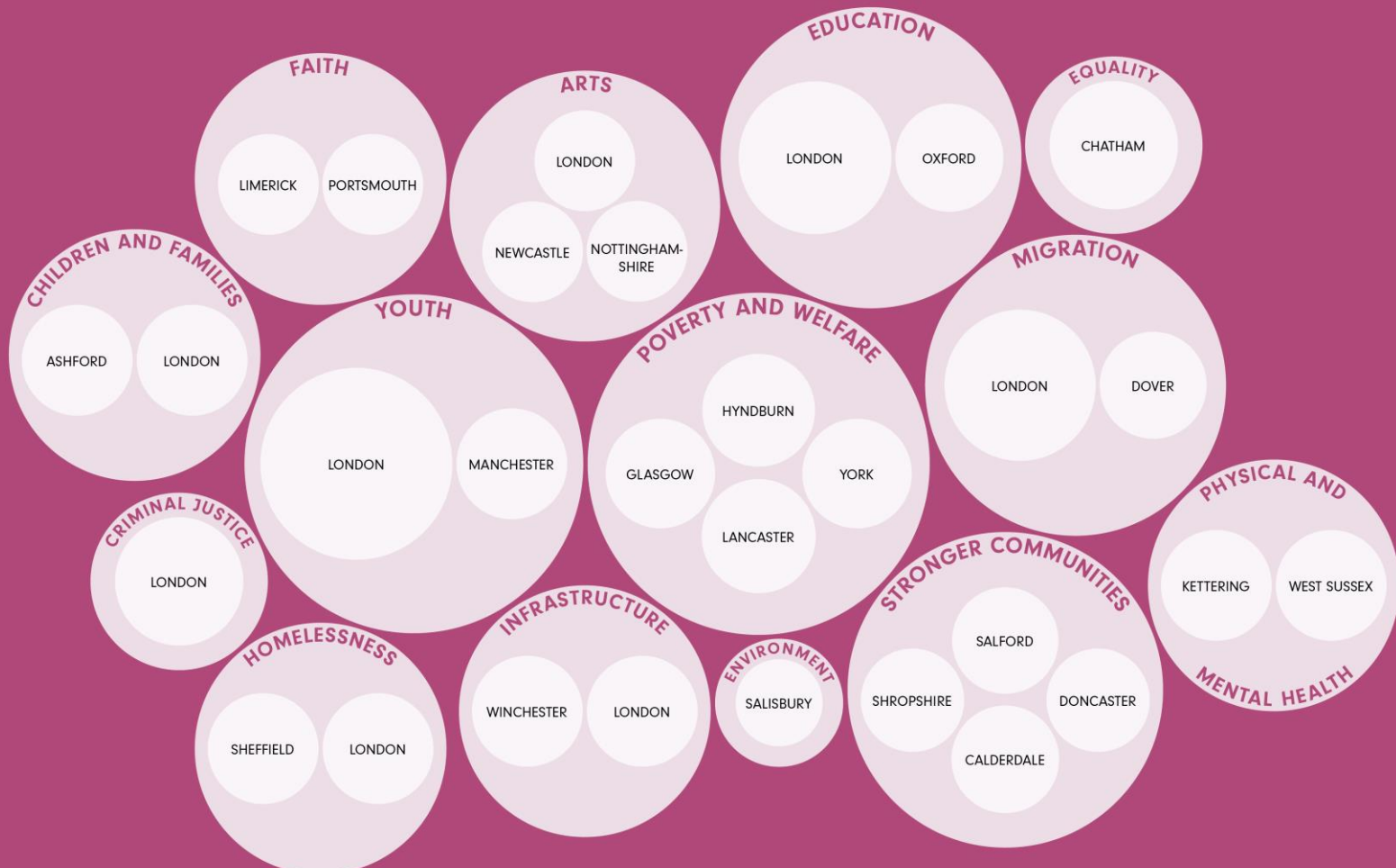
Briefing 5 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis
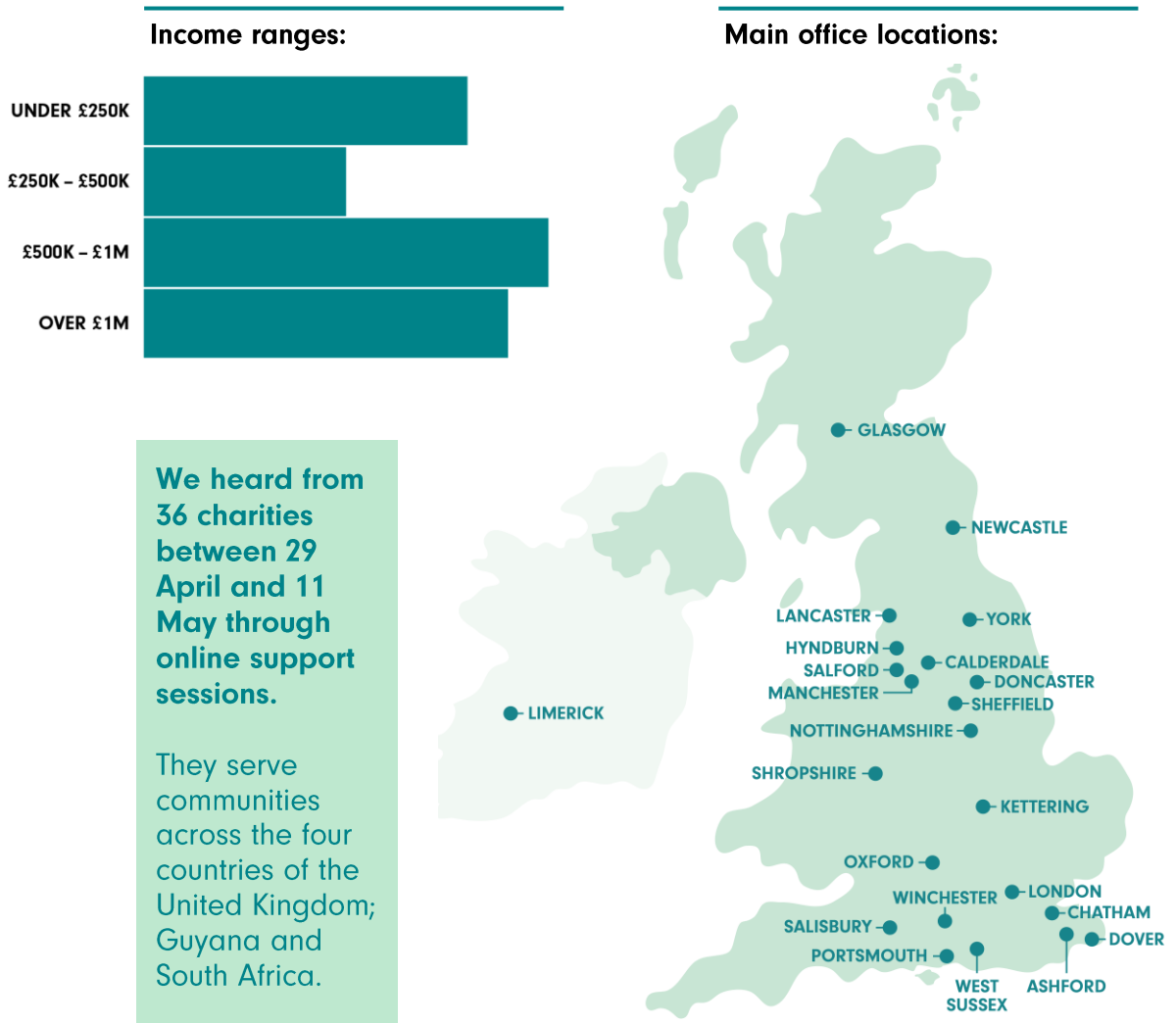
21 May 2020

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 and infrastructure bodies feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This fifth briefing shares the experiences of 36 leaders participating in the sessions between 29th April and 11th May[1], and our reflections on the questions and opportunities that they raise. Further briefings will follow as new groups meet.
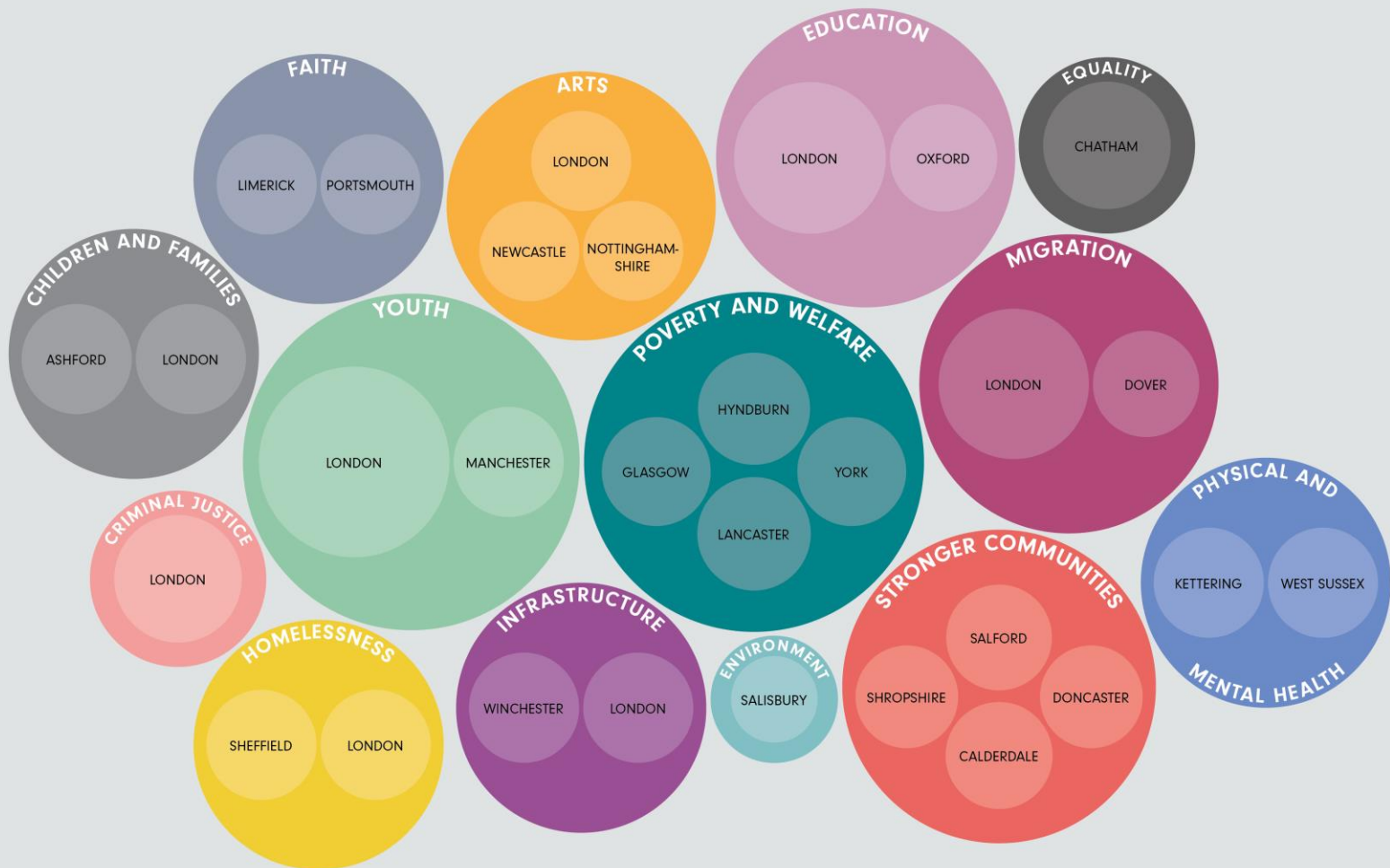
Who did we hear from?

Income ranges:

Main office locations:

We heard from 36 charities between 29 April and 11 May through online support sessions.

They serve communities across the four countries of the United Kingdom; Guyana and South Africa.

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[1] This briefing is based on the experiences of VCSE leaders in weeks five and six of the UK's Covid-19 'lockdown', which commenced on Monday 23rd March. Five out of the six sessions took place before the Prime Minister's announcement on Sunday 10th May about the easing of some lockdown measures.

WE HEARD FROM 36 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS BETWEEN 29 APRIL AND 11 MAY 2020

FAITH
LIMERICK PORTSMOUTH

ARTS
LONDON
NEWCASTLE NOTTINGHAM-SHIRE

EDUCATION
LONDON OXFORD

EQUALITY
CHATHAM

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
ASHFORD LONDON

YOUTH
LONDON MANCHESTER

POVERTY AND WELFARE
HYNDBURN
GLASGOW YORK
LANCASTER

MIGRATION
LONDON DOVER

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
LONDON

INFRASTRUCTURE
WINCHESTER LONDON

ENVIRONMENT
SALISBURY

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
SALFORD
SHROPSHIRE DONCASTER
CALDERDALE

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
KETTERING WEST SUSSEX

HOMELESSNESS
SHEFFIELD LONDON

ARTS
Little Fish Theatre Curious Monkey Ltd
National Holocaust Centre and Museum (Beth Shalom Ltd)

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Dads Unlimited
Generation Exchange

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Unlock
Criminal Justice Alliance

EDUCATION
St Benet's Hall Oxford
The Wiener Holocaust Library
National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education

ENVIRONMENT
Clean Up UK

EQUALITY
The Challenging Behaviour Foundation

FAITH
Irish Institute for Catholic Studies, Mary Immaculate College, University of LImerick
Caritas Diocese of Portsmouth

HOMELESSNESS
Emmaus Sheffield
The Upper Room

INFRASTRUCTURE
Action Hampshire
Reach Volunteering

MIGRATION
Migrant Help
Jesuit Refugee Service UK
Kosovar Albanian Youth Against Violence

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
Cransley Hospice Trust
Centre for Chaplaincy for Education

POVERTY AND WELFARE
The Louise Project
Older Citizens Advocacy York
Lancaster RC Diocese Youth Service (Castlerigg Manor)
Citizens Advice Rossendale and Hyndburn

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
Caritas Diocese of Salford
Shropshire Rural Communities Charity
Light Up Black and African Heritage Calderdale
B:Friend

YOUTH
First Give
The hideaway youth project
Generation Exchange
The Centre for Youth Impact

What is now front of mind for leaders of VCSE organisations?

As VCSE leaders entered weeks five and six of the Covid-19 lockdown, our sessions were punctuated by quite practical self-care tips: take morning walks, connect with others, and appreciate small achievements. Some are managing quite different services – and organisations – to usual; others are hibernating, wondering when buildings can reopen and some semblance of normality can resume. Fatigue over never-ending uncertainty is beginning to set in. But all are carrying on.

Three main challenges remained at the front of their minds:

1. How should they continue to adapt services and working practices in order to respond to changing/increasing beneficiary need?

2. How can they plan at a time of huge uncertainty?

3. How might they respond to reductions and pressures on organisational income?

1. Safely adapting services and working practices to meet beneficiary need

Covid-19 is continuing to have a stark impact on the individuals and communities that VCSE organisations support. The VCSE leaders we spoke to between 29th April and 11th May are responding to increases in: social isolation amongst some of the most vulnerable and hard to reach groups; food shortages at food banks due to increasing demand; unemployment and associated financial hardships; hate crime; and mental illness.

As leaders continue to adapt and improvise, they are *'focusing on what we can do, rather than what we can't'*. Responses have included:

- Delivering food parcels and basic toiletries
- Extending befriending services
- Organising mobile top ups
- Distributing pre-paid cards so people can get food
- Acquiring smartphones and laptops to respond to the high levels of digital exclusion that some communities are facing

Within this context, what continues to be of greatest concern is how to support those 'hardest to reach', as well as those for whom digital safety, or access to digital services, is problematic:

> *'We're not seeing the individuals who never have credit on their phone ... and that's worrying.'*

> *'People are assuming that young people have access to a computer and the internet ... but they often have limited data.'*

VCSE leaders are also voicing concerns about how long they will be able to sustain their adapted provision, particularly as demand increases:

> *'How are we going to deal with the turfing out of 100s of homeless people once they are back on the streets?'*

> *'It's okay to operate like this for a while, but not for a long period of time.'*

For some, the level of adjustment and adaptation means that their day-to-day operation is already very different from their experience of 'business as usual': *'Our strategy is the same … what's different is the delivery.'* For some leaders, it feels like *'running a completely different organisation'*, with significant operational implications, such as the redeployment of project staff to more front-line roles, and ensuring that they communicate and raise awareness of their organisation's new service offer to both service users and referral partners.

Alongside continuing adjustments to services, VCSE leaders are looking to the next period of the crisis; this is adding another layer of anxiety:

> *'I thought closing down was the hardest thing to do … but we have the hardest road to come. How do we keep our staff safe? How do we keep our volunteers safe? How do we keep our service users safe?'*

> *'We will have to manage the complexities of opening a public space … as a leadership challenge, that feels quite monumental.'*

> *'We're beginning to think about what it might look like, but it's unclear how to do that safely … We have over 350 asylum seekers. Once they know we're back open, it will become unmanageable.'*

Providing services that adhere to social distancing, and keep people safe, will be front of mind for many VCSE leaders in the months to come. However, in the absence of unequivocal guidelines, it is felt that a lot of the decision making will fall on them as leaders: *'It seems unlikely that we're going to get a really clear message about what we should be doing'.*

The welfare and motivation of their workforce during this period is also a major preoccupation for leaders, with widespread concerns about: the implications of increasing caseloads and the severity/type of beneficiary needs, as well as the impact of employment instability, particularly for furloughed staff who may be at risk of future redundancy.

2. Planning in times of uncertainty

In our fourth briefing, 'planning in times of uncertainty' was one of the key challenges VCSE leaders were contending with, and this continues to be the case. Leaders are having to judge how much energy to put into planning and *'hypothesising'* in the midst of a very uncertain future, while at the same time recognising that *'psychologically, organisations need the reassurance of a plan'.* Some are feeling the pressure to deliver clarity about the future; others are trying to stay focused on the here and now:

> *'Looking to the future is something as a leader that you have to be able to do. However, the challenge at the moment is that we have no idea what the future is going to look like.'*

> *'I've been resisting trying to make sense of the situation too much at the moment. It feels too early to understand where we're going to be.'*

> *'We're operating in an environment where we're not going to get enough information to make confident, good decisions. We have to allow ourselves the slack to get things wrong and give ourselves permission to say "I don't know".'*

3. Responding to pressures on organisational income

As noted in our <u>previous briefings</u>, many VCSE organisations are facing the loss of vitally important sources of unrestricted income (e.g. membership fees, public fundraising, charity shop trading, venue hire and rental income). The burden of applying for emergency funding and having to *'come up with new ideas'* has been noted, as have leaders' concerns about the availability of funds in the mid to long term, and the strain on organisational reserves.

The implications of significant funding gaps in both the immediate and long term remain at the forefront of VCSE leaders' minds: *'In the sector, there are already limitations in the funding pools available ... we are just stuck in the unknown in the medium and long term'.* In particular, there are concerns about:

1. How to write funding applications when *'the sand is constantly changing'* and *'there are lots of uncertainties'* about future need?
2. What will be the impact of the economy on the availability of future funds?
3. When/will funders reopen funds to new/prospective grantees?

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

A place to turn for support and guidance

Currently, leaders are being required to make very difficult, significant decisions that will have a lasting impact on the lives of their staff, volunteers and service users, as well as the future size and shape of their organisations. They are also managing multiple, complex situations that are being affected in different ways by Covid-19, at the same time as trying to keep on top of usual organisational responsibilities such as AGMs, annual accounts and building maintenance. Some VCSE leaders have very supportive boards who are increasing their level of contact and helping leaders to take, and deal with the implications of, big decisions. Others aren't so lucky: *'We're now an emergency Covid-19 response organisation which the board agreed. But they haven't been in touch since'.*

Leaders are at risk of being vulnerable and isolated during a period of unprecedented demand and stress:

> *'Everyone wants stability at the moment, but no one is holding that for us.'*

> *'As a leader, I don't have anywhere to look to or turn towards in the middle of the sea of crisis.'*

Cross-sector dialogue

It is understood that everyone is under pressure and facing a large degree of uncertainty. However, VCSE leaders continue to express frustration about the lack of – or the nature of – conversation and dialogue with the public sector. Some feel side-lined and ignored; others feel dictated to; many describe a culture of planning and decision-making that means the potential contribution of the VCSE is underused or wasted – for example the relocation of a group of homeless guests to the opposite side of London away from the support of the local VCSE working with them to prevent their return to the streets:

> 'At meetings with our local authority, the VCSE are at the back of the room. The message we get is "We're the council, this is what we're telling you to do." There is no proper dialogue.'

Where there is an appetite in the public sector for open dialogue with VCSEs, this is often hampered by underdeveloped structures for meaningful communication, representing sufficient diversity of voices: *'We need better dialogue with local authorities. They think that because they talk to one CVS that they're hearing from everyone'.*

Elsewhere, we have heard about barriers to cross-sector working coming down – for some leaders the pandemic has *'actually forced us into working together'.* The message coming from our sessions is that cross-sector dialogue is vital. First, to ensure that there is good understanding of each other's responses, so that services can be better planned and coordinated. Second for the true impact of Covid-19, and the inequalities it has exposed, to be addressed by future public policy.

A chance to demonstrate the contribution and impact of the VCSE sector

Some VCSE leaders are recognising the value of actively demonstrating the contribution and impact of the sector at this time – to protect its future sustainability as well as to maximise the potential for it to influence what comes next:

> 'Issues are amplified at the moment and the sector should use its voice to address these concerns.'

> 'As a sector we undervalue ourselves ... we are in a strong position as we support the most vulnerable and there is now a spotlight on this.'

Strategic foresight and flexibility from funders

The ask from VCSE leaders is that funders continue to think carefully about how they balance their short, medium and long-term strategies, and how these are communicated to the sector, in order to:

1) Provide organisations with as much information as possible to inform their planning for the future: *'We need to know what they are thinking about "need" going forwards as our boards will ask us about the future'.*

2) Ensure that the different needs of the sector (in terms of size, location and purpose – for example direct service provision, advocacy/campaigning or systems change) are well thought through: *'We need to be careful that there's a sector left after all of this'.*

This reflects messages noted in our previous briefings about the importance of funders providing as much assurance as possible beyond the immediate emergency, as well as the value of flexibility – including unrestricted funding, grant extensions and light-touch reporting – and working on the basis of trust.

Questions and opportunities for funders

At the end of our fourth briefing, we argued for the importance of **joined up thinking between emergency funding and other funding streams**, before highlighting three undertakings:

1. **Provide as much assurance as you can 'beyond the immediate emergency'.**

2. **Support the voices of VCSE organisations.**

3. **Recognise and enhance the value of small VCSE organisations.**

We concluded with a modest call to action:

> **Now is the moment for funders to adjust the balance between accountability and trust, and to ease the burden on VCSE organisations. First, by introducing lighter, less onerous expectations; second, by designing processes and encouraging behaviours that genuinely enable funded organisations to do good work, to learn and to do better.**

Two weeks on, as the Covid-19 crisis continues to evolve and adjustments begin to be made to this new 'Stay Alert' phase of partial lockdown, the importance of trusts and foundations for the VCSE sector cannot be over-estimated. They continue to be uniquely placed to provide continuity; take risks; operate flexibly; and invest in politically unpopular or marginalised areas. With these freedoms come responsibilities. Not to shoulder all of the burden; but perhaps to ensure that their contributions are the very best that they can be.

As decisions about priorities and processes for recovery and renewal begin to take shape, attention might usefully be paid to these three questions:

1. Which organisations haven't you heard from/are you not supporting through your emergency funding? What is your responsibility to support these absent organisations?

2. How can you make better use of your assets to provide emotional and practical support for VCSE leaders?

3. What contribution can you make as an advocate for, and champion of, VCSE organisations?

Authorship

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