Taking some control
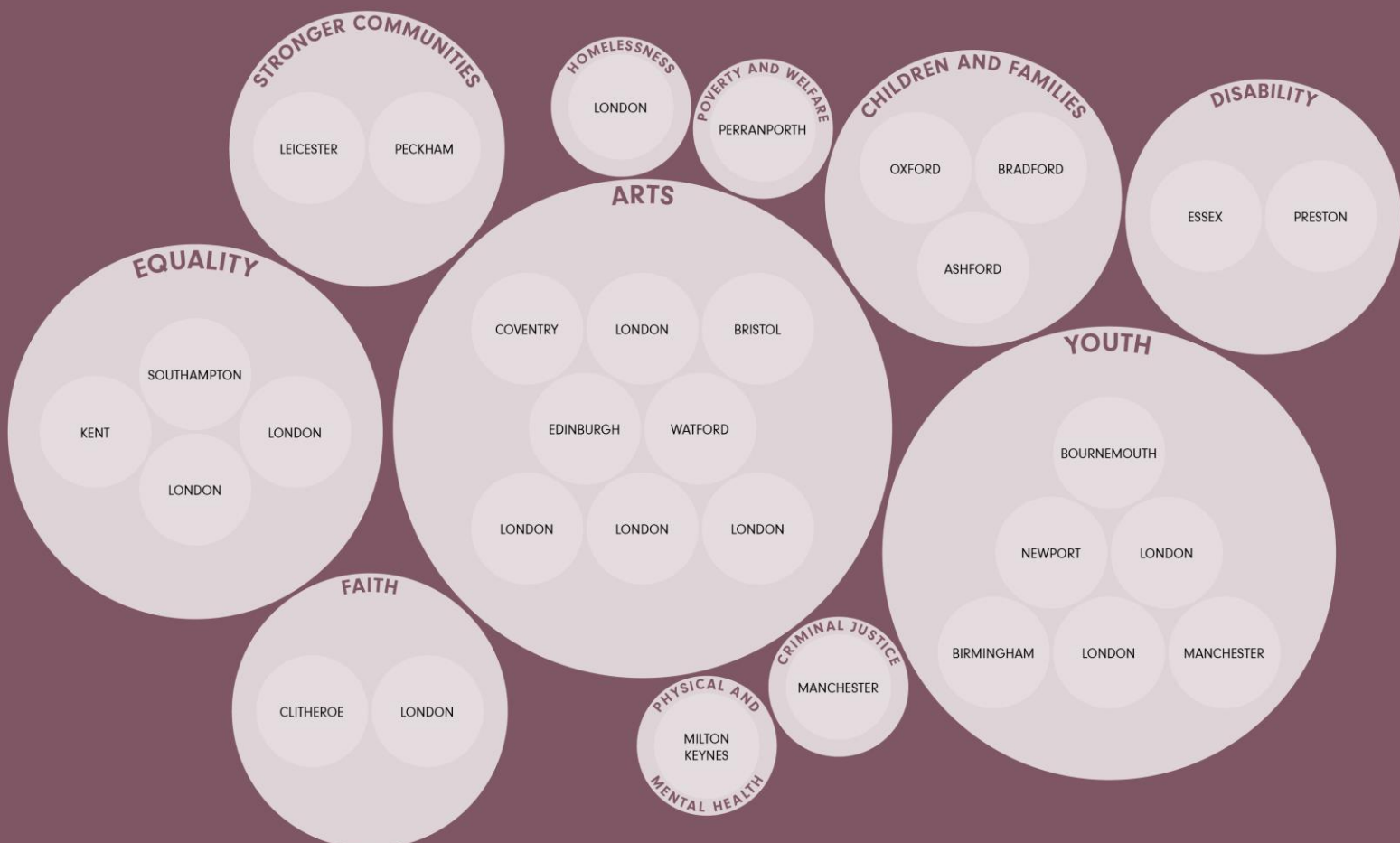
Briefing 6 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis

11 June 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 sixth briefing shares the experiences of 31 leaders participating in the sessions between 12th May and 2nd June, 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:

UNDER £250K

£250K – £500K

£500K – £1M

OVER £1M

Main office locations:
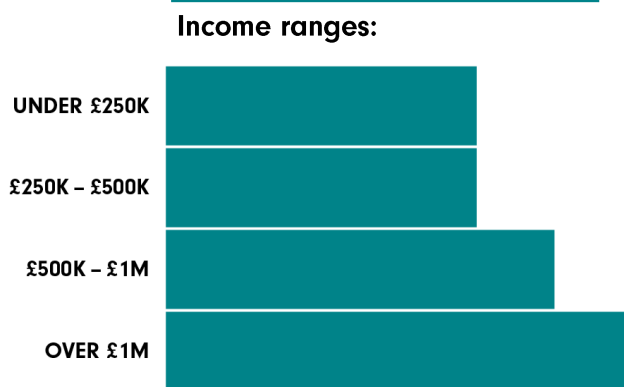
We heard from 31 charities between 12 May and 2 June through online support sessions.

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

EDINBURGH

CLITHEROE
PRESTON
BRADFORD
MANCHESTER

LIMERICK

LEICESTER
BIRMINGHAM
COVENTRY
MILTON KEYNES
NEWPORT
OXFORD
ESSEX
WATFORD
BRISTOL
LONDON
ASHFORD
KENT
BOURNEMOUTH
SOUTHAMPTON
PERRANPORTH

WE HEARD FROM 31 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 12 MAY AND 2 JUNE 2020

STRONGER COMMUNITIES — LEICESTER, PECKHAM

HOMELESSNESS — LONDON

POVERTY AND WELFARE — PERRANPORTH

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES — OXFORD, BRADFORD, ASHFORD

DISABILITY — ESSEX, PRESTON

EQUALITY — SOUTHAMPTON, KENT, LONDON, LONDON

ARTS — COVENTRY, LONDON, BRISTOL, EDINBURGH, WATFORD, LONDON, LONDON, LONDON

YOUTH — BOURNEMOUTH, NEWPORT, LONDON, BIRMINGHAM, LONDON, MANCHESTER

FAITH — CLITHEROE, LONDON

CRIMINAL JUSTICE — MANCHESTER

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH — MILTON KEYNES

ARTS
Underground Lights
Mousetrap Theatre Projects
Open Up Music
Voluntary Arts
Spread the Word
Para Dance UK
RTYDS
PhotoVoice

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Family links
St Christopher's Family Centre
Dads Unlimited

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Out There

DISABILITY
Hamelin Trust
Galloway's Society for the Blind

EQUALITY
Chrysalis
Kent Refugee Action Network
Micro Rainbow
Women @ The Well

FAITH
The Christian Heritage Centre
at Stonyhurst
Irish Institute for Catholic
Studies, Mary Immaculate College,
University of LImerick

HOMELESSNESS
Hope for Southall Street
Homeless

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
Willen Hospice

POVERTY AND WELFARE
Counselling and Benefit
Support Ltd

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
St Philips Centre
Peckham Vision

YOUTH
The Wave Project
Isle of Wight Youth Trust
The Nucleo Project
Creative Academies
Step Up To Serve
Hideaway Youth Project Ltd

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

Since publishing our first briefing on 6th April 2020, the emotional and physical impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on VCSE leaders has become increasingly apparent:

> *'I've been in crisis management mode for several weeks now. It's exhausting.'*

> *'We're not doing less. We're not doing more. We're just doing it under a great deal more pressure and with less capacity.'*

We continue to hear from leaders who face stark decisions and concerns regarding the future of their organisations: *'We will either have completely reshaped our programmes and organisational mission, or we will have had to let people go and closed down'.* At the same time, leaders are also having to:

- Respond to the changing and increasing needs of beneficiaries.
- Manage the risks attached to reopening and reshaping of services in line with unfolding social distancing guidelines (which can be particularly challenging when having to navigate the different devolved contexts).
- Provide options and reassurance to staff and trustees regarding the future of their organisation.

Across the sector, leaders are talking about the severity and volume of demand in their field, such as: a rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers due to growing fears in Calais about Covid-19; court orders being violated without any access to justice due to courts' preoccupation with increasing levels of child protection cases; or the relapse of some beneficiaries who suffer from mental health or addiction problems.

They also continue to show deep concern for beneficiaries who may be increasingly vulnerable and struggling to access essential support as a result of digital exclusion and poverty, significant health problems, and simply not being known or visible to services. And they are worried about the long-term, economic implications of Covid-19 and their impact, alongside other national and global events, on particular individuals and communities: *'Young people will be disproportionately affected by the economic situation as society emerges from lockdown as well as the fallout from Brexit and climate change'.*

Leaders are demonstrating huge resilience, finding ways to adapt and cope with multiple demands and tasks as well as taking control and embracing opportunities where they exist: *'If we're going to survive, we need to change our mindsets … How can we be creative and grasp this as an opportunity?'.* But, despite these heroic efforts, four preoccupations continue to be front of mind:

1. The uncertainty of future funding
2. Staff welfare and morale
3. Balancing the opportunities and limitations of virtual service provision
4. Strategic direction

The uncertainty of future funding

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, funding has been at the forefront of VCSE leaders' minds. In particular, we have heard leaders voice their anxiety about:

- The impact of the economy on the availability of future funds.
- Changes in funders' long-term priorities (post emergency funding).
- Writing funding applications when the future is so unclear.
- The outcome of outstanding funding decisions that are under threat of being revoked or postponed.

Our most recent conversations reflect pressing concerns about the weakness of the longer-term funding pipeline on which so many depend:

> 'It's hard to deal with funders who just close the doors and won't take a look in. We've got grant applications out but they're all being held up. It makes the future so uncertain.'

> 'How do we make sure we aren't creating a situation where charities who do incredible work have no future because of the way funding is organised?'

But leaders are experiencing challenges right across their fundraising portfolios, citing, for example: inconsistent approaches to covering organisational overheads; the pressure of identifying and applying for short-term funding alongside managing services; and gaining traction in the digital fundraising market for small organisations.

Staff welfare and morale

When describing the welfare and morale of their staff, some leaders have recently begun to use words such as 'burnout', 'fear', and 'fatigue'. They describe the cumulative drain of a range of challenges including: adjusting to new working practices; dealing with highly emotional situations; juggling work and home life; and living with prolonged uncertainty and constant change:

> 'We have to do more for our staff. I'm sensing a drop in morale and energy levels.'

> 'Staff are quite scared about change. When we say we have a new strategy in place for three years for which we are taking a U-turn, it is quite frightening.'

Leaders are finding different ways to respond, such as:

- Supporting staff to build self-care into their daily routine.
- Enlisting trustees to 'do care calls every other day with staff to check in'.
- Keeping communication open with furloughed staff, and actively valuing the essential contribution they are making to the organisation's financial sustainability.

But this is all taking its toll, particularly when leaders are left carrying the uncertainty on their own, or when they feel people are looking to them for answers which they are unable to provide:

> 'As a leader, I am constantly planning and talking about potential scenarios that are quite bleak. How do I share this? There is no point

worrying staff that there is a 10% chance that we might shut down when we are constantly trying to ensure that the 90% works out.'

'The unknown of how long this journey will be is hitting everyone because I don't have the answers ... They are looking at me for answers, but I don't have a hotline with God or Boris to provide that.'

The opportunities and limitations of virtual service provision

VCSE leaders have talked about the opportunities of providing virtual services, including enhanced geographical reach; increased flexibility; and enhancing their organisation's digital infrastructure.

However, there is a widespread sense that something is being lost online: *'The therapeutic benefits of our model are not currently possible'.* Some are struggling to build rapport with their (particularly new) clients or know they are missing the non-verbal clues that help them pick up quickly on problems and support needs; others are noticing that organic, peer support is being lost as service users are no longer connecting in a physical space; and most are contending with the resource implications of virtual provision.

Overall, *'it's about getting the balance right for those that we know need personalised intervention, and those who we can engage with in a different way'.* While *'digital methods have enabled organisations to continue in this space, how sustainable this is for the future'* is the pressing question.

Strategic direction

Planning in times of uncertainty has been a recurring theme in our past two briefings, with VCSE leaders having to judge how much energy to put into planning in the midst of a very insecure future, while at the same time trying to provide the clarity and vision so often expected from a leader: *'Thinking through how we can plan for the next financial year is hard when there's a lot of fog out there'.*

Although the fog remains, what is becoming clearer by the day is that VCSE leaders expect to have to consider the implications and impact of Covid-19 on their organisations, services and beneficiaries for the foreseeable future. For now, attention is beginning to turn to some of the hard questions about what will be required to deliver on their missions in this new context. Most believe that the size and shape of their organisations and services will need to change, possibly dramatically:

'How can services be reconfigured to lower the cost base?'

'How much could we shift the model? What would it cost?' Could it be sustainable?'

For some, taking some control by thinking strategically, and focusing on what they're good at, is felt to be the best option for coping right now:

'Let's take some control ourselves of what we can within a timescale of 12 months, as whatever happens in the wider world, our work will still be useful.'

'While no-one is certain about the future, as a leader, being able to take some control will help us feel better about the future.'

'If we come out of this with the centrepiece of the jigsaw intact, it might be shaped differently and we might not like it, but if we're delivering a good service, then that's what's important.'

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

A place to turn for support and guidance

As highlighted in our fifth briefing, VCSE leaders are feeling isolated and need spaces for support: *'As CEO you straddle the operational and strategic. You are there to be the support to senior managers, and guide trustees. You do stand alone in many ways'.* They value the opportunity to hear different perspectives, broaden their thinking, sense check ideas and share experiences, including of how they and their peers are working alongside different funders. And they speak about the changes they have made as a result.

Some leaders are drawing on external coaches, who understand the CEO role and can provide a mixture of challenge and support: *'Someone I can download to, who understands my role and the pressures, and helps me organise my thinking. It was incredibly useful. I was just reacting, reacting, reacting and my head was spinning with what-if scenarios'.*

A small number of leaders have talked about receiving this type of support from their chair or trustee board, although this has not been the experience for many. Resourcing such support, however, is felt to be hard to justify at this time, despite its value.

Alongside one-to-one support, leaders are also looking for practical support and guidance to support their immediate and ongoing organisational response and decision making[1] on issues such as:

- How to rethink the use of inside and outside spaces in order to support the return of face-to-face provision while adhering to social distancing guidelines.
- Rethinking safeguarding protocols and procedures.
- Skilling up staff on digital fundraising and engaging with social investors.
- Employing quick methods for monitoring and evaluation of new services and approaches.

Joined up thinking

VCSE leaders would welcome further efforts to develop joined up thinking across VCSE and public sector organisations about how best to respond to the implications and demands of the Covid-19 pandemic, both now and over the longer term: *'There needs to be more joined up working. Combining of services. This is because there will be a period of liquidation and less resources, but there will also be a huge need to support service users ...'.*[2]

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[1] One organisation described the support received through Furlonteer, which has been set up to connect furloughed staff with charities who need their expertise and time: *'We had our HR totally revamped...it was expertise I could never normally afford'.*
See: https://www.furlonteer.com/about-us

[2] The example of West Midlands Culture Response Unit was shared: *'An action-orientated, sector-led response to the Covid-19 crisis in the short, medium and long term. The purpose is to ensure the visibility, viability and recovery of the Culture Sector in the West Midlands.'*
See: https://www.culturecentral.co.uk/wmcru/

There is a particular call for commissioners to listen to representative voices across the VCSE sector to ensure that fresh ideas are shared and to acknowledge that *'this is not short term for any of us.'* Some VCSE leaders would like to see commissioners playing a more proactive and supportive role in regard to the health and viability of the social care sector.

Provision of long-term as well as emergency funding

VCSE leaders continue to ask funders to think carefully about the type of funding they are making available to the sector, and to whom. While many appreciate the availability of emergency funding, as well as the willingness of funders to adopt a flexible approach when it comes to existing funding arrangements and relationships, there is still a strong call for funders to demonstrate strategic foresight and to recognise the long-term needs of the sector. In particular, this includes acknowledging that organisations need to have access to core and long-term funding, as well as opportunities to approach new funders.

Questions and opportunities for funders

In our fifth briefing, we highlighted the important role that independent trusts and foundations play in the VCSE sector – and the responsibilities that come with this freedom to act. In particular, we noted their unique ability to: provide continuity; take risks; operate flexibility; and invest in politically unpopular or marginalised areas. And we posed three questions for discussions about recovery and renewal, all of which remain pertinent:

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?

While VCSE leaders continue to grapple with the multiple demands of uncertainty and emergency, they are looking to funders for reassurance and clarity. For now, attention might most usefully focus on:

- What more direct support and information can you provide VCSE leaders to help them as they begin to take control and consider their own strategic options?
- What assurances can you give about how you intend to move from a state of emergency to being able to support the longer-term needs of the sector?
- What commitments can you give to make permanent the recent adoption of light-touch, flexible processes?

Authorship

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