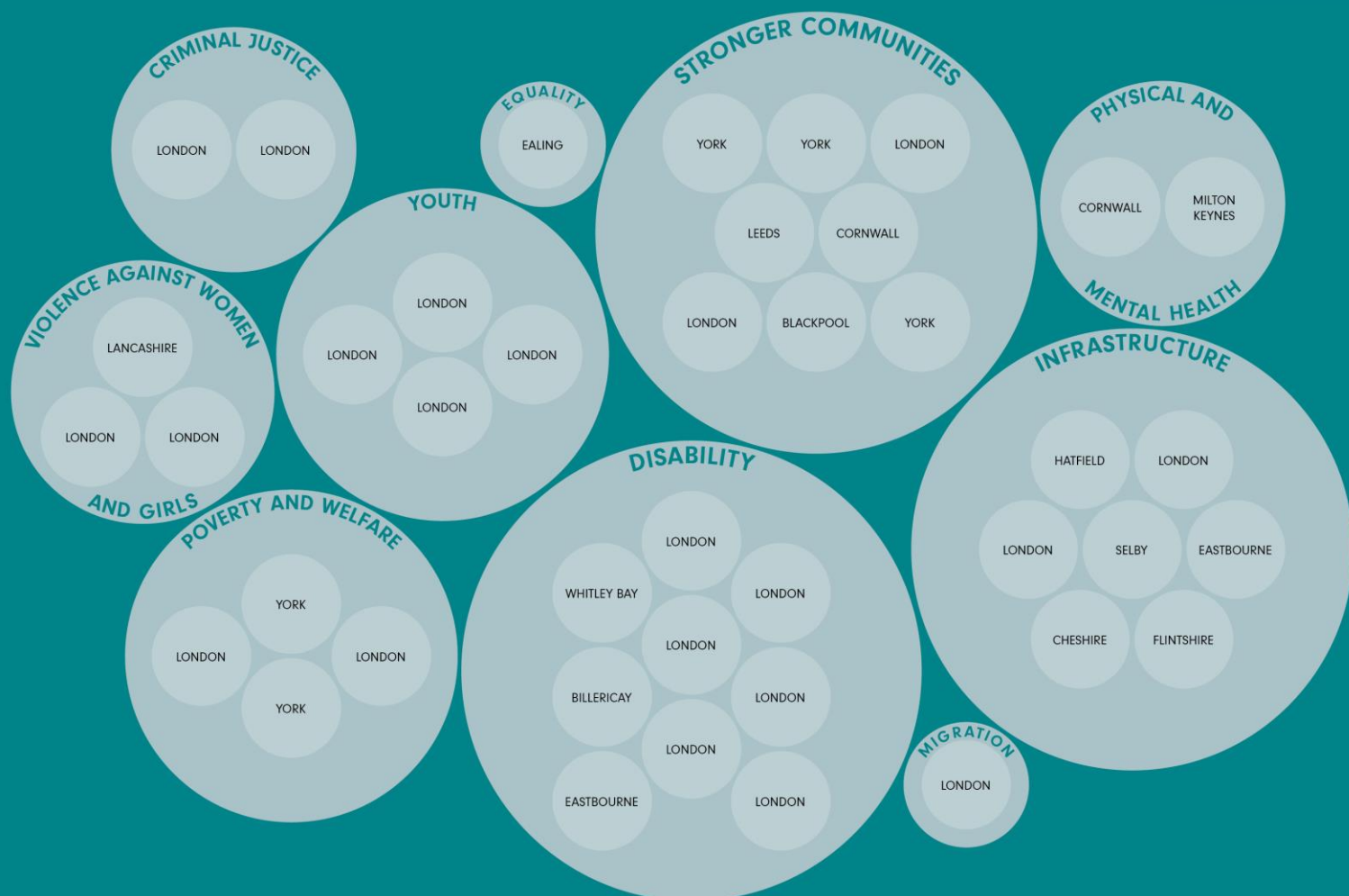


Finding a way forward

Briefing 8 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis

21 July 2020

WE HEARD FROM 41 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 17 JUNE AND 5 JULY 2020

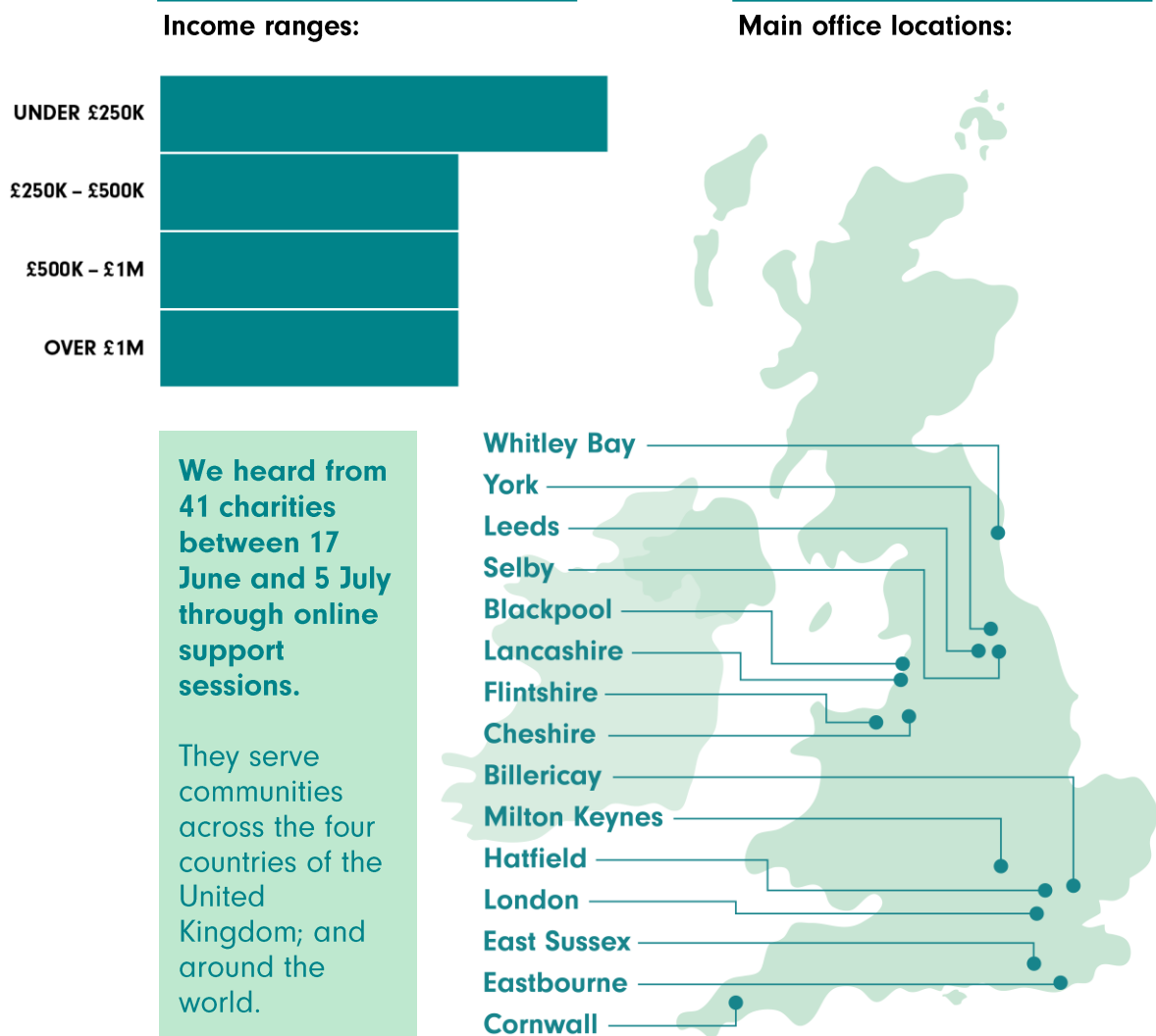


Introduction

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.

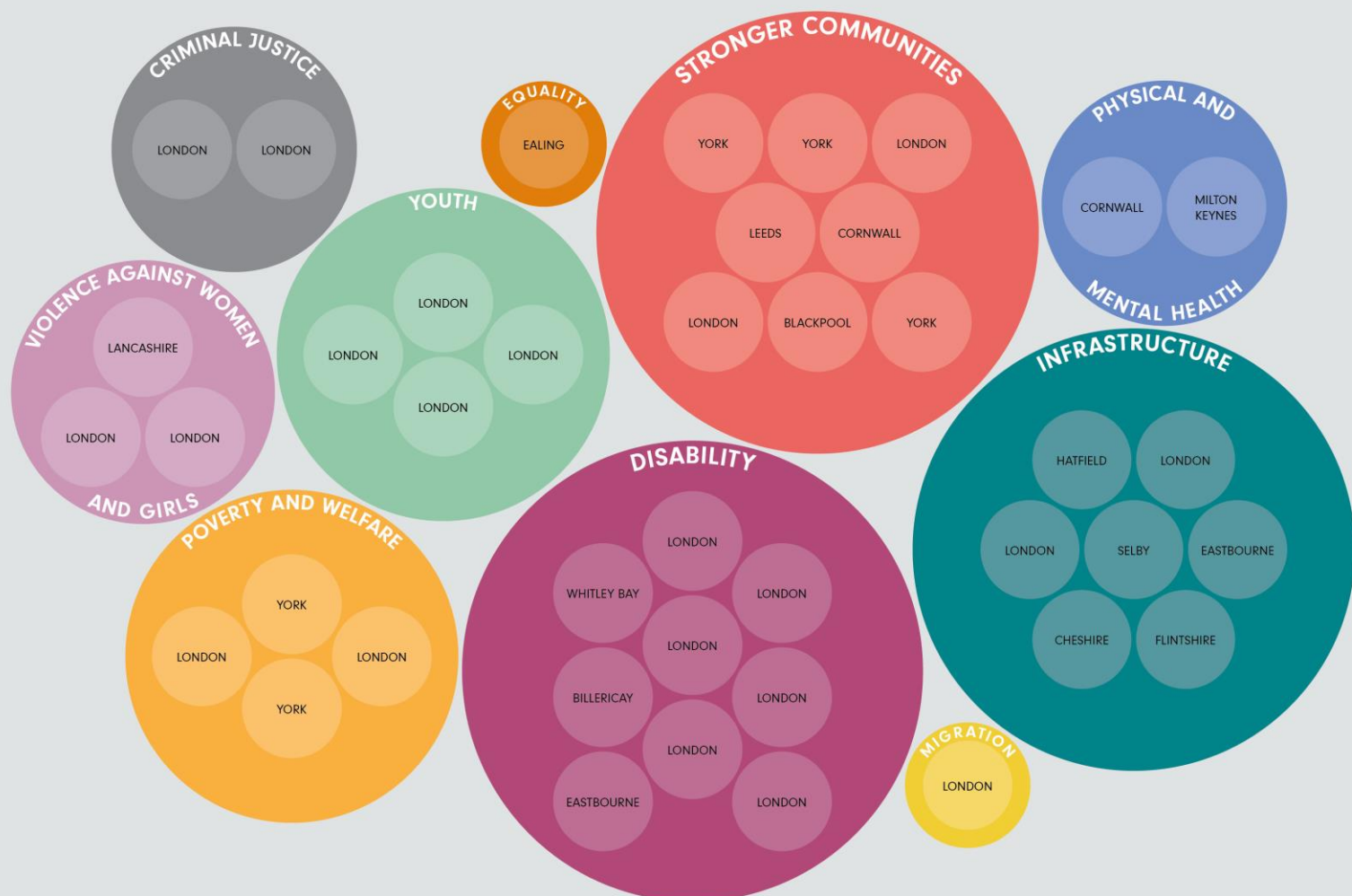
We offer funders feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This eighth briefing shares the experiences of 41 leaders participating in the sessions between 17th June and 5th July, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise. Further briefings will follow as new groups meet.

Who did we hear from?



Fields:

WE HEARD FROM 41 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 17 JUNE AND 5 JULY 2020



CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Clean Break Theatre Company
Safe ground

DISABILITY

Wheels for Wellbeing
Entelechy Arts Limited
One-to-One (Enfield)
Stay Safe East
Hamelin Trust
Centre 404
National Autistic Society

Smell the Roses
Breathe Easy Eastbourne

EQUALITY

Ealing Law Centre

INFRASTRUCTURE

Enterprise Hertfordshire
Lambeth Accord
Young Hammersmith & Fulham
Foundation
Selby District AVS
3VA

CVS Cheshire East
Flintshire Local
Voluntary Council

MIGRATION

Evelyn Oldfield Unit

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

CAHSC Learning Partnership
Willen Hospice

POVERTY AND WELFARE

Welfare Benefits Unit
Z2K (Zacchaeus 2000 Trust)

Older Citizens Advocacy York
Children and Families
Across Border

STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Converge
Experience Counts (York) CIC
Skills Enterprise
Better Leeds Communities
Age UK Cornwall
High Trees Community
Development Trust
Layton Community House

York City FC Foundation

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Safenet
Women @ the Well
Africa Advocacy Foundation

YOUTH

Young Brent Foundation
Young Camden Foundation
Young Barnet Foundation
New Horizon Youth Centre

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

The context for VCSE leaders remains largely unaltered. In particular:

- The needs of current and prospective service users continue to unravel and often increase, with serious concerns about the welfare of the 'most vulnerable' (either as a result of digital exclusion or the disproportionate risk that some individuals face in light of the multiple implications of Covid-19).
- Adaptations to day-to-day service delivery and working practices continue, although some staff remain furloughed.
- Loss of income (e.g. loss of rental income and fundraising events/opportunities) is widespread; and mid to long-term funding prospects are bleak and unclear.
- Many organisations describe themselves as 'stretched' and have limited space and time for strategic thinking or applying for future funding: *'Lots of small organisations are really struggling with capacity. Some can't even make funding applications. There is a lot of demand for services'.*

As noted in [briefing 7](#), VCSE leaders are mindful of the length of time over which Covid-19 is likely to affect services and working practices and, as such, are facing stark decisions about the future shape and sustainability of their organisations (even if some immediate needs have been addressed by emergency funding and/or repurposing existing funds):

'I am very clear with our trustees that we are in a good place in the short term, but we don't have any long-term certainty for our future.'

'By the end of the year, the biggest problem is going to happen. With no more furloughing scheme and no funds, people will be laid off.'

In this context, there are three issues that remain at the forefront of leaders' minds:

- The wellbeing of their staff and themselves
- The range of issues that need to be taken into consideration when planning how to safely reinstate face-to-face services and working practices
- Ensuring that the sector's role and contribution is visible

Staff and personal wellbeing

Being attentive to staff welfare and morale has been a recurring theme throughout our recent briefings and blogs. For example, in [briefing 6](#) we highlighted some of the practical measures and messages that VCSE leaders have been putting in place in order to protect staff from burnout and fatigue (e.g. encouraging self-care and enlisting trustees to undertake 'care calls' to check-in with staff).

Leaders continue to voice concerns about the *'the long-term resilience and mental and physical health'* of their paid and voluntary workforce, and their ability to continue to endure current working practices and strains. A particular worry is for staff members who are shielding.

Leaders are actively managing this, for example: instigating a weekly staff quiz; sending home 'care packages' to staff; and encouraging people to share their favourite music over the staff WhatsApp group *'to lift our spirits'*. They have also commented on how grateful and proud they are of their staff's achievements, commitment and loyalty; in one case, this included staff voluntarily reducing their working hours to contribute towards the organisation's £100,000 deficit:

'I've seen amazing behaviours from our team which has been quite humbling.'

'I have no words to praise the staff who have carried on supporting very vulnerable people within the confines of social distancing.'

'You can't buy this kind of loyalty and commitment ... this culture and behaviour.'

Leaders are also conscious of the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on their own personal wellbeing. It can be hard to achieve a work/life balance, and avoid feeling *'overwhelmed and isolated'*:

'I am supposed to work four days a week. At the moment I'm working about six ... I am feeling the weight of being the only non-furloughed staff, which is quite heavy at times.'

'Our service users have anxieties. Our trusts and boards have different anxieties. And so do our staff. I am finding it very hard to be my "usual leadership self" when I am stretched to my limit and there is no one to support my anxieties.'

'Trustees seem interested in how the organisation has been responding, how the staff are managing, about recovery plans ... but nobody's asked how I am doing or feeling through this. I am a resilient person, but this is a lot even for me to handle.'

Some leaders have shared their survival strategies, for example by: focusing on the positives and what is being achieved; saying no to requests that they feel are unnecessary (e.g. in one case, this meant saying no to a proposal for a weekly update to the board); and using *'well-placed humour'*. One organisation is investing unrestricted funds in counselling for all staff in order to relieve some of the burden on the leadership team.

Safely reinstating face-to-face services and working practices

Since the easing of lockdown, organisations are thinking hard about *when* and *how* to reinstate in-person services, as well as their usual working practices. For some, the decision is quite straightforward – either because the space they have available is simply not big enough for them to adhere to social distancing guidelines, or they are determined to restore the benefits of face-to-face provision: *'A lot of people rely on our services to access community'; 'we're in the business of people. We need to get people together'*.

For others, these decisions are complex and require a huge amount of thought, planning and weighing up of the pros and cons:

'For many of us, the complexity of our working environments has increased so much more now. As we try to plan for the future, what layouts will be safest? What should the service focus on? What is most pressing for our vulnerable users?'

'It is going to be difficult for us to plan for recovery as we are really going to struggle to make our building Covid-safe. In any case, most of the charities that would use the rooms are now struggling and may not be able to afford the room hire.'

Leaders are also trying to reconcile the different needs and preferences of staff:

'There is a disparity among the team, with some really keen to have some time back in the office, while others are worried.'

'We're opening the office for people's wellbeing. There is no pressure to come in, but if being at home is too much, people can come into the office.'

'All our volunteers said they want to come in, but it's the staff that don't. If I have staff at home for another two months, how will I manage this?'

Increasing the visibility of the role and contribution of the sector

Some VCSE leaders are particularly concerned that the role and contribution of the sector is made more visible, to ensure that its future health and sustainability is prioritised and protected:

'If we don't survive, then who else will do this work?'

There is frustration about being judged by funders solely in relation to Covid-19 responses, without an acknowledgement of the important work that is 'normally' carried out:

'I find it frustrating that they've been coming along and asking "what are you doing about Covid? How is your project going to ensure recovery post-Covid?" Our work was and is important whether Covid happened or not.'

'Our service is important and our capacity is being consumed in responding to need. Covid has massively impacted our groups and, while Covid has a role to play, our plans and service delivery need not change significantly.'

For some, it is particularly important that the value and contribution of smaller VCSE organisations is understood, to ensure that they are 'not discounted' and that their voice, passion and 'willingness to find a way' are taken into account in any recovery planning.

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

Our recent conversations with leaders have reaffirmed three pressing support needs in tackling the challenges of service and sustainability creatively and well:

1. A sounding board

Leaders continue to value the **opportunity to step outside of their organisation**, either through accessing peer support or external advice and input. It helps them to *'take stock, reflect and keep each other going'*:

'There is a sense of solidarity. It [the peer support session] has helped me feel more grounded. It is important to talk to people without any agenda sometimes.'

2. Opportunities to strengthen the sector's collective voice

There is also an appetite for **opportunities to come together as a sector** in order for collective concerns to be voiced, and collective action to be planned:

'Unless we say we need to work together better, nothing will change.'

'We have to have some real conversations. We're lots of voices, collective voices, but we're being drowned out with all the noise.'

3. Supportive funder relationships, and agile, trust-based funding

The fervent hope now is that funders continue to endorse and apply flexible working practices, and are mindful of how they can be carried forward into new grant relationships, including:

- **Provision of longer-term, flexible grants:** This will not only provide stability to organisations but recognise that *'services might significantly change between now and December, given the crisis hitting us in waves'*.
- **Funding for core costs:** *'Funders must make it a priority to fund back-office type things that don't yield direct results to individual service users but make organisations more robust.'*
- **Ensuring funding programmes adopt realistic timescales:** *'The timeline was ridiculous ... How could we highlight our biggest challenges and make big decisions about submitting a proposal in just two weeks? How can we predict the new environment without having a space to think?'*

In the words of one leader:

'There needs to be a way to influence funders to think differently about what they are doing to support the voluntary sector. Charities do not know what kinds of demands are going to be arising when lockdown'

is lifted and what the external environment is going to look like. Funders will need to be more flexible and, as long as charities are meeting their charitable objectives, funders must be happy to fund even with changing timelines etc ... This honest and realistic conversation must happen with funders. This might help with sustainability for many small charities ... Funders need to speak to us, involve us in conversations and work with us as they rewrite their strategies’.

Questions and opportunities for funders

We concluded our last briefing with three very clear messages for funders:

- Recognise how much your contribution matters
- Free your funded partners
- Be an active player in the collective effort

While VCSE leaders continue to grapple with the multiple demands of uncertainty and emergency, they are looking to funders for reassurance and clarity. At the same time, funders themselves are under pressure, and facing their own tough decisions about how best to use all their assets to respond to escalating need, and support and sustain the causes they care about. For now, we suggest three questions to help frame and focus efforts to find a way forward:

1. **What are you looking for in organisations, both now and in the future?** In other words, what **characteristics, strengths and qualities** will give you the confidence to fund organisations – and to fund them flexibly – helping to ensure that the VCSE sector remains well placed to respond to the increasing and changing needs of the most vulnerable in society, and to ensure that positive social change is possible? What do you really mean by the words you might choose? How will you explain to applicants what you hope to see and how can they demonstrate these strengths and qualities to you?
2. **What funding models will enhance these characteristics, strengths, and qualities?** What can you do – or continue to do – differently, that will help organisations to build on, and sustain, the strengths and qualities you require and admire? What more can you do to reduce the burden of accountability mechanisms and reporting frameworks designed for more certain and less turbulent times?
3. **How can you enable the voice and contribution of VCSE organisations to genuinely influence the way you work?** What can you do to seek out and hear diverse and dissenting voices, ready to tell you when your practices are behind the curve of front-line experience? How can you do this sensitively and effectively in the face of the extreme and persistent overstretch that is ‘the new normal’ for many VCSE leaders?

Authorship

Rebecca Moran, Ben Cairns, Liz Firth and Emily Dyson, based on work carried out by Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) staff and associates: Katie Turner, Charlotte Pace, Richard Jenkins, Dr Vita Terry, Miranda Lewis, Houda Davis, Sonakshi Anand and Annie Caffyn.