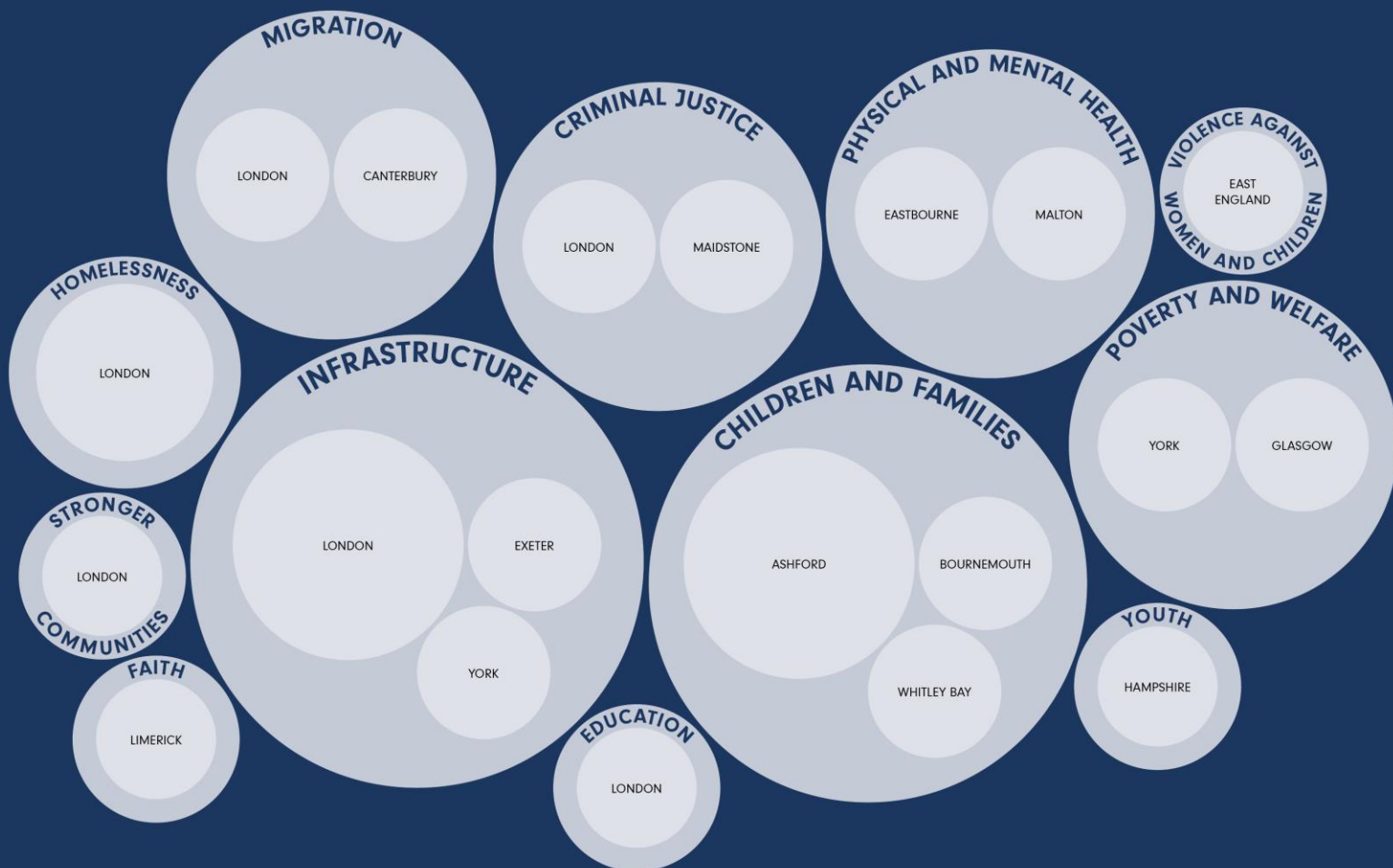


# Looking for more stability

*Briefing 10 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis*

17 September 2020

WE HEARD FROM 24 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS IN AUGUST 2020

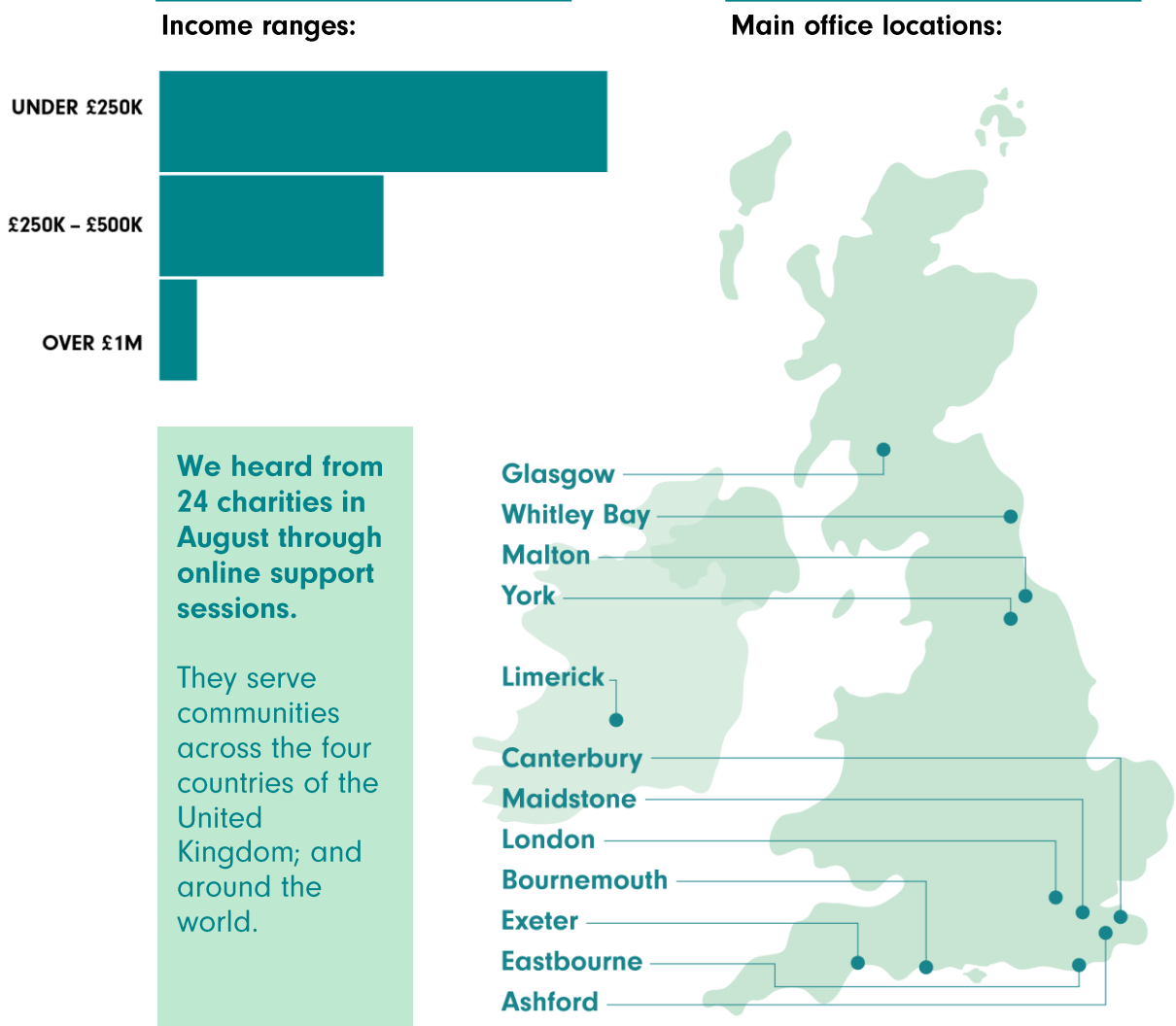


## Introduction

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.

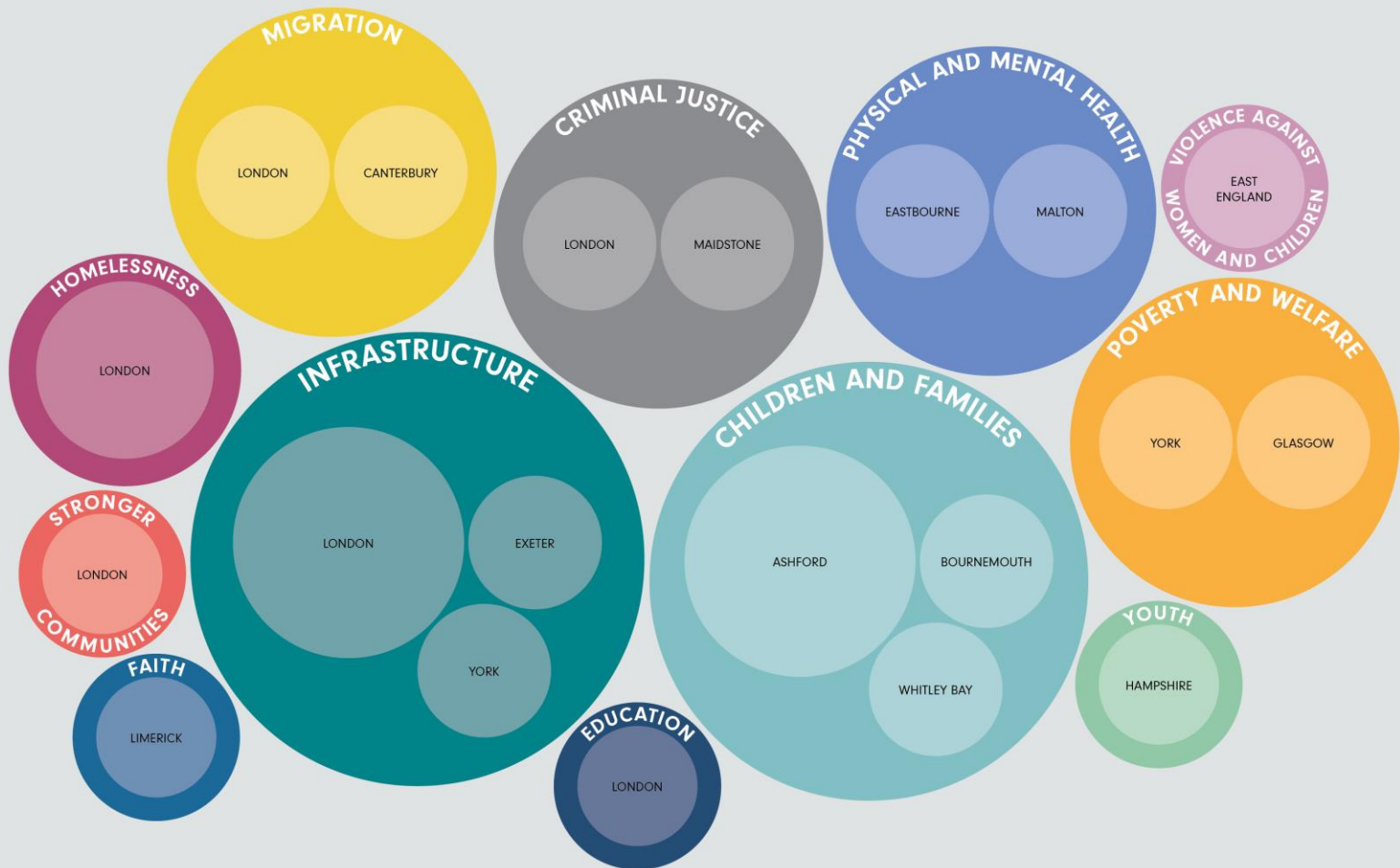
We offer funders feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This tenth briefing shares the experiences of 24 leaders participating in the sessions between 28<sup>th</sup> July and 21<sup>st</sup> August 2020, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise. Further briefings will follow as new groups meet.

## Who did we hear from?



## Fields:

WE HEARD FROM 24 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS IN AUGUST 2020



### CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The Listening Ear  
Dads Unlimited  
Smell the Roses

### CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Why Me  
Unlock

### EDUCATION

icandance

### FAITH

Irish Institute for Catholic Studies,  
Mary Immaculate College, University  
of Limerick

### HOMELESSNESS

Hope for Southall Street Homeless  
ThamesReach

### INFRASTRUCTURE

Charity Translators  
Jewish Volunteering Network  
Welfare Benefits Unit

Young Camden Foundation  
Richmond CVS

### MIGRATION

CARAS  
Kent Refugee Action Network

### PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Next Steps Mental Health  
Resource Centre  
East Sussex Community Voice

### POVERTY AND WELFARE

Citizens Advice York  
The Louise Project

### STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Mer-IT Digital

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

4Transform

### YOUTH

Yellow Brick Road Projects

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

Since we published our [ninth briefing](#) in August 2020, little has changed. The context within which VCSE leaders are operating continues to be exceptionally challenging and, while the practical impact continues to vary across the sector, no-one is untouched: while some organisations are struggling to meet increasing demand, others remain closed:

*'We could do with increasing staff hours but we don't have the money ... I really don't know what to do about it.'*

*'We just had to shut up shop. Our insurance wouldn't cover us. It's heart breaking.'*

Three issues remain at the forefront of leaders' minds:

1. Staff and personal welfare
2. Supporting the most vulnerable
3. Adapting within a context of uncertainty

## 1. Staff and personal welfare

Six months into the crisis, VCSE leaders are very concerned about the morale and welfare of their staff and volunteers. In particular, they see the cumulative impact of Covid-19 as a result of adjusting to new working practices; responding to increasing demand or to long periods of furlough; the emotional toll of constant adjustment and sustained uncertainty; and juggling the demands of work and home life:

*'Everyone is going through their own pandemic... two staff have had Covid, one has had a child ... we can all be vulnerable during this time.'*

From the start VCSE leaders have been taking active steps to limit their levels of isolation, burnout and fatigue. Leaders are talking now about the need to prioritise further remedial action, for example trustees keeping in weekly contact with staff or granting additional annual leave.

VCSE leaders have also been discussing the strain of their own circumstances. Some have spoken about *'the weight of responsibility'* they feel, to the point of feeling *'personally liable'* for the job security of their staff, as well as their safety and wellbeing, and that of service users. Others describe the pressure on their services and the expectation that this is something they will be able to withstand without additional support – or even recognition that this is needed:

*'There are so many referrals coming from statutory agencies. I understand that they are under pressure, and it's nice to be appreciated, but we are overburdened.'*

*'What would happen if the whole of the voluntary sector furloughed its staff? Where would the service users be without their support?'*

Leaders know they need time out to gather new energy for the challenges ahead: *'If I don't have passion anymore, how can I lead a team? Holidays are really important'*. But, as often the only senior person in their organisation or leading a very small team, many are struggling to create this space in the face of the

relentless pressures and demands that have come to characterise the pandemic for VCSE organisations:

*'Every time I book in leave, there is a funding application deadline. And I don't want to take the risk of not applying.'*

*'The demand coming through the door is relentless.'*

## **2. Supporting the most vulnerable**

The sense of uncertainty stretching long into the future adds further weight to the concern felt by VCSE leaders for the most vulnerable, which has been a recurring theme of the online support sessions. Concerns now centre particularly on people for whom access to digital services is not possible, or those who have been shielding during lockdown. For example, a homelessness charity – which had to close down its night shelter – is anxious about the future housing situation for undocumented migrants:

*'The local authority is trying to work out whether they are illegally or legally housing them. We're just sitting and waiting for them to make a decision on this.'*

There are challenges on all fronts, whether this is in the serious delays individuals are seeing in addressing their access to rights and to justice, or the huge logistical barriers to reaching and building relationships with new clients in urgent need of support.

## **3. Adapting within a context of uncertainty**

VCSE leaders remain actively engaged in adapting their services and delivery plans to ensure they are both safe for their workforce and service users, and genuinely available and accessible. They have learnt a great deal over the last six months and are increasingly confident about exploring and implementing a range of options. For example:

- Many are adapting face-to-face services to ensure they are 'Covid secure' – for example, creating support bubbles whereby one member of staff supports the same group of service users and no others.
- Others are staying with digital delivery for the foreseeable future, radically redesigning their service offer to remain responsive and accessible for the longer term.
- Some have embraced the positive aspects of digital provision to open up new streams of work – many are talking about opportunities to increase service reach and some have found rich seams of potential. One organisation, for example, is reshaping its campaigning work to capitalise on the increased availability and accessibility of MPs.
- And some are making other changes to their delivery methods. For example, one organisation is recruiting younger volunteers due to the vulnerability of many of their existing volunteers.

But leaders are acutely conscious of the unpredictability of their operating environments, and the tentative nature of even the best of plans:

*'We are designing two recovery plans: one for now and one to plan for a second wave. It is a challenging experience needing two plans.'*

*'I feel in a state of limbo and we'll have to "suck it and see".'*

They describe how an all-pervading sense of uncertainty has seeped into much of their planning and decision-making, including:

- Worrying about re-opening services and then being unable to deliver them due to staff sickness (and subsequent periods of isolation).
- Weighing up the risk both to individuals and to reputation if their organisation is linked to a spread of Covid-19.
- Exploring more partnership bids for funding in anticipation of greater competition: *'Funders love to see efficient spending!'*
- Considering the possibility of merger in the light of murky prospects for long-term funding.

## 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 navigating uncertainty and adaptation well:

1. Trust and flexibility
2. Realism about what is possible in the current context
3. Access to peer support

### 1. Trust and flexibility

Trust and flexibility remain at the heart of what VCSE leaders need from funders: specifically, being trusted to make judgements about priorities and how best to deliver against them, and being given enough flexibility with the use of funds to enable them to adapt and respond quickly and efficiently:

*'[What is helpful is] funders really trusting your track record. When you've been doing good work for a long time, we need funders to rely on that.'*

*'[What is helpful is] funders having more trust in charities to spend their grants how they need to in changing circumstances.'*

### 2. Realism about what is possible in the current context

VCSE leaders need funders to understand the practical context in which their organisations are operating, and to factor this into their funding and decision-making processes. For example, *'funding application deadlines are often 1<sup>st</sup> September or 1<sup>st</sup> January, which is just after the holiday season'*, resulting in leaders cancelling long-awaited, and desperately needed, breaks. And, despite the imaginative emergency responses of many funders, these are by no means universal. Some leaders continue to talk, for example, about the burden of completing four-weekly monitoring returns, and point to the importance of more proportionate application and grant-management processes.



VCSE leaders are also looking for greater realism about what 'good performance' looks like in the current context, and what it is possible to deliver: for example, not holding organisations to account to pre-Covid performance indicators and/or recognising the costs attached to the provision of virtual services:

*'Funders need to be less reliant on numbers to prove effectiveness, because it's doubly hard at the moment.'*

*'Funders may assume digital services are cheaper, but they need to take into consideration planning time, and that it will mean the organisation has to run multiple small groups rather than one large group.'*

They are also calling for funders to 'look beyond the new and shiny', and to commit to more equitable distribution of funds across geographical areas and communities of need.

### 3. Access to peer support

Enabling VCSE leaders to come together to discuss their challenges and share ideas continues to be welcome as it has a direct impact on their emotional wellbeing, as well as their 'strength and resilience to remain hopeful':

*'It makes me want to be creative. It has drawn me out of my cloud of uncertainty.'*

*'Conversations with peers are such a good way of replenishing your tank. It's helpful to share similar challenges. There is such an abundance of integrity, passion, commitment. It keeps me going.'*

## Questions and opportunities for funders

Funders are, understandably, striving to create greater clarity and certainty in their programmes and priorities going forward. And VCSE organisations clearly need a more stable funding universe in which to operate, with much less reliance on short-term grants designed to meet emergency needs and tide organisations over as they adapt to changing circumstances.

The big question is how to move towards this in a way that recognises and intelligently responds to the constant challenge and upheaval that VCSE organisations and the people they serve are facing. The grim truth is that we are far from recovery and renewal. VCSE leaders have already had six months of operating at full throttle, are facing the prospect of many more months of rising need, external shocks, rapid adaptation and tough decisions about priorities and resources.

VCSE organisations are clear about what they need from funders – both now and for the future. From very early in this crisis, we have heard a drumbeat of consistent and emphatic messages from VCSE leaders – 'be brave', 'be flexible', 'trust us', 'be clear and open', 'understand the pressure we are under and reflect this in how you work', 'become more of a partner and less of an auditor'. Unrestricted funding, lighter touch reporting, and radically streamlined application processes are technical matters within the gift of most – if not all – funders, whatever strategic decisions they are making about priorities and programmes going forward. As we enter the autumn, with a long road ahead on the implications and impact of Covid-19, and a planning environment that is subject to so many variables outside all of our control, VCSE organisations need the funders who have embraced these changes to hold their nerve. And for many others to join them.

## Authorship

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