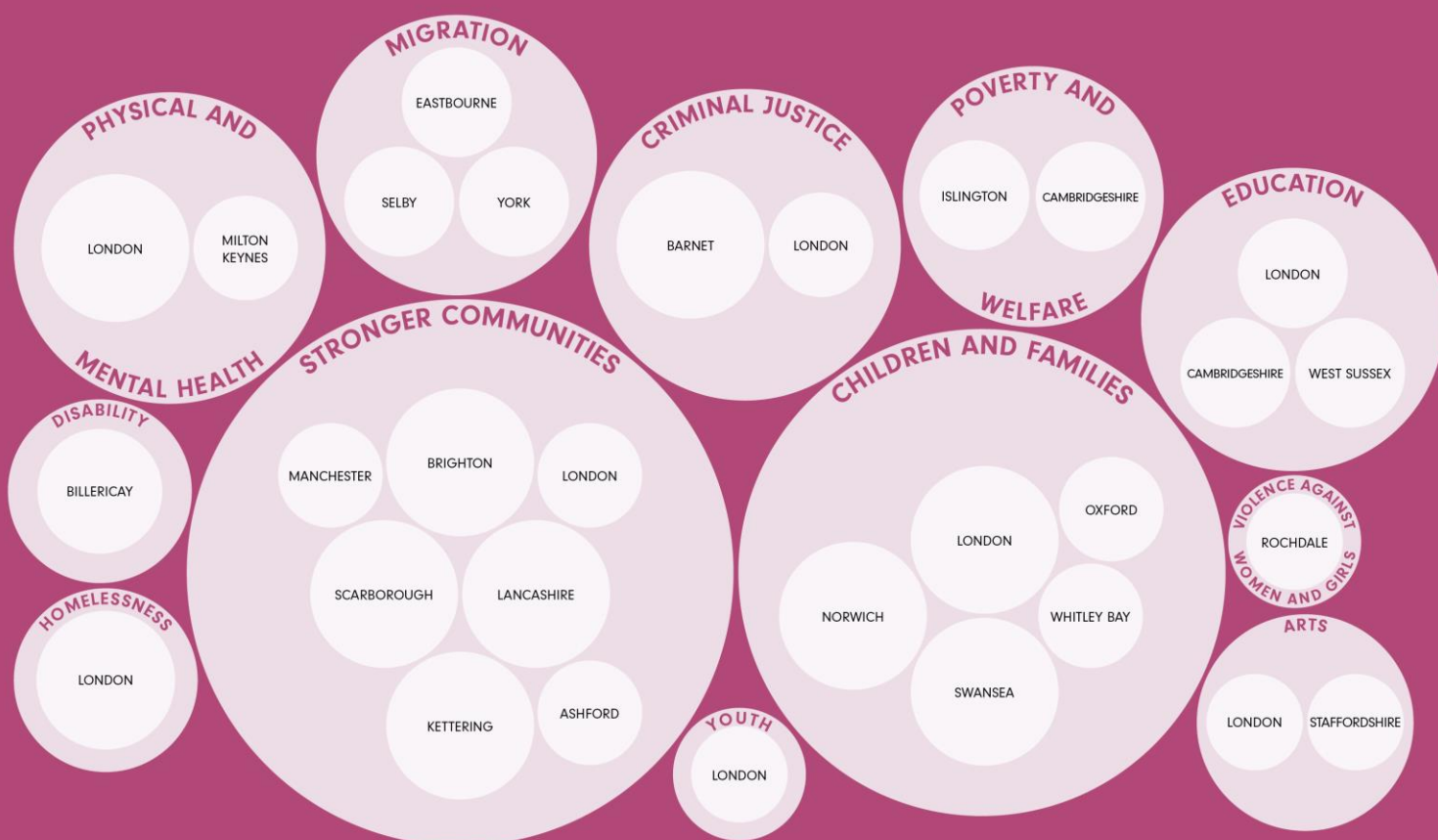# The certainty of uncertainty

Briefing 11 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis

27 October 2020

WE HEARD FROM 44 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS IN SEPTEMBER 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 eleventh briefing shares the experiences of 44 leaders participating in the sessions between 4th September and 29th September 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:
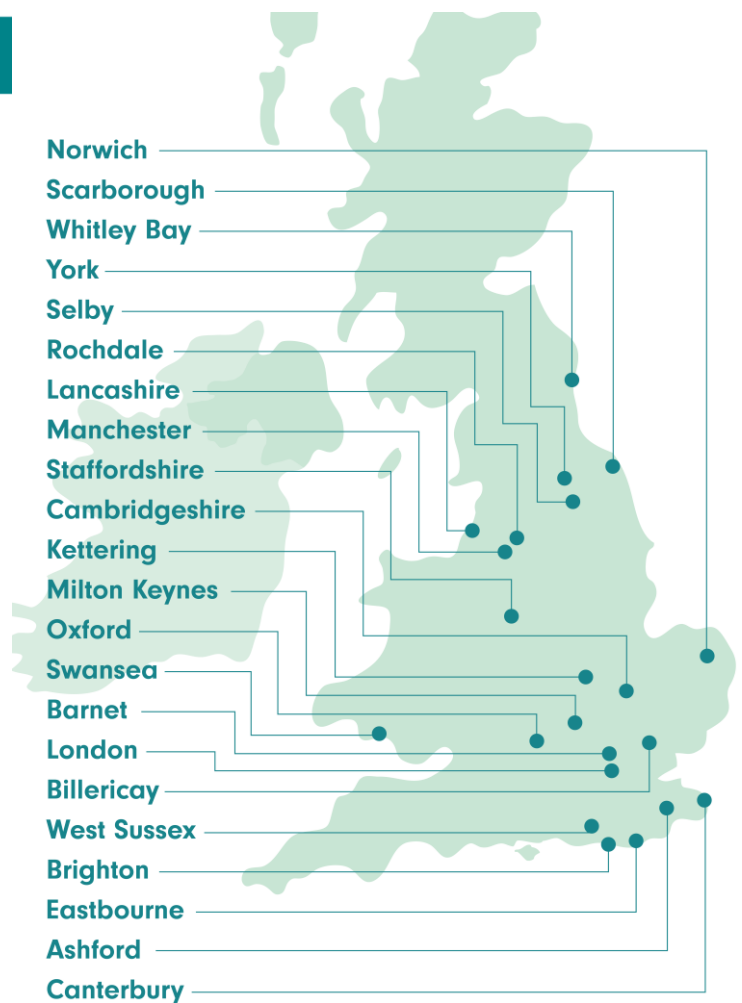
UNDER £250K

£250K – £500K

£500K – £1M

OVER £1M

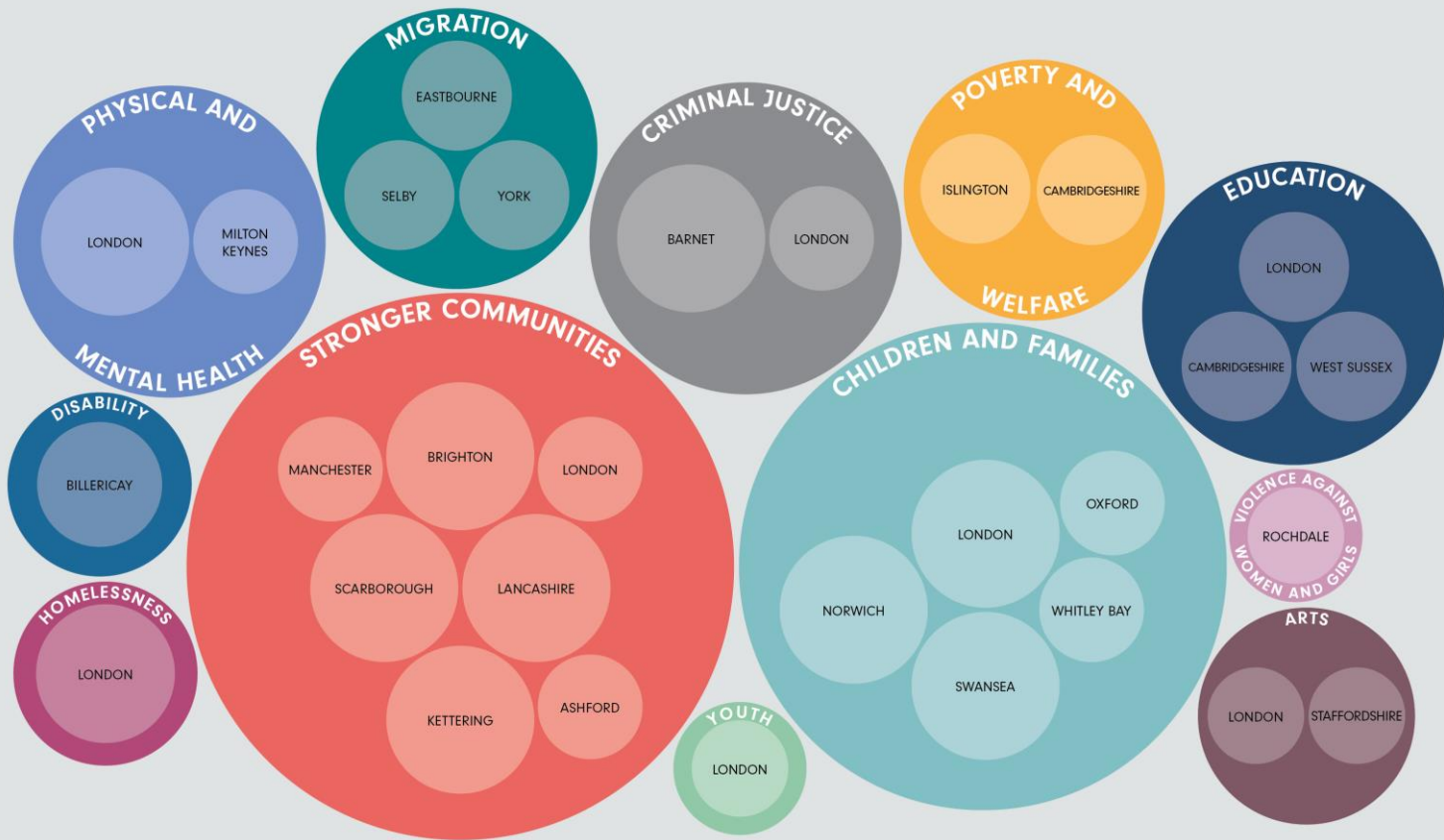**We heard from 44 charities in September through online support sessions.**

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

Main office locations:

Norwich
Scarborough
Whitley Bay
York
Selby
Rochdale
Lancashire
Manchester
Staffordshire
Cambridgeshire
Kettering
Milton Keynes
Oxford
Swansea
Barnet
London
Billericay
West Sussex
Brighton
Eastbourne
Ashford
Canterbury

WE HEARD FROM 44 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS IN SEPTEMBER 2020

ARTS
Borderlands Voices
Mousetrap Theatre Projects

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Family Links – the Centre for Emotional Health
New Routes Integration
Generation Exchange
New Routes Integration
Generation Exchange
Smell the Roses
Faith in Families
Clean Break
AOPM (Association of Panel Members)

DISABILITY
Hamelin Trust

EDUCATION
Books beyond words
Centre for Chaplaincy in Education
Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations

HOMELESSNESS
Centrepoint
The Upper Room

INFRASTRUCTURE
3VA
Selby District AVS
Welfare Benefits Unit

MIGRATION
CARAS
Kent Refugee Action Network

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
SLOW
Willen Hospice
The Coroners' Courts Support Service

POVERTY AND WELFARE
Holloway Neighbourhood Group
Cambridge City Foodbank

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
Community Transport Association
Aston-Mansfield
Dads Unlimited
Advocacy Alliance
Rochdale Circle CIC or HMR circle
Cransley Hospice Trust
The Trust for Developing Communities

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
WHAG

YOUTH
First Give

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

During the most recent peer support sessions, we heard more about the many ways in which VCSE leaders and their organisations are continuing to navigate the current context, including:

- Delivering adapted services (often through a blended model of face-to-face and online provision, enabling a speedy response to changing Covid regulations)
- Actively seeking funds to manage increasing or changing demand and to replace the loss of trading and other income
- Taking advantage of opportunities to contribute to cross-sector planning and/or local dialogue and delivery[1]
- Thinking creatively about their organisation's mid to long-term future

The day-to-day experiences of VCSE leaders, however, remain diverse. Some are in the midst of managing a period of organisational growth following an influx of emergency funding. Other organisations remain either closed or able to offer only *'the bare bones'* of their usual service: *'In normal times, we would organise 50 to 60 different social events every month, offer a driver service for transportation of older people to hospitals, and provide practical workshops to help older people get jobs for extra money etc. All of this is currently halted '*.

First introduced in Leicester at the end of June, the increasingly widespread use of localised lockdowns across the UK has added another layer of complexity:

> *'We have services in different areas. Some areas are in lockdown, but others aren't.'*

> *'It feels like it's hard to get a sense of consistency. We can say, in principle, here's what we're working towards, but in practice it might look different in different local areas.'*

What remains clear is that VCSE leaders, along with their organisations, are working incredibly hard, and are absolutely committed, to doing everything in their power to continue to meet the needs of their beneficiaries in a way that is safe and adheres to current guidance:

> *'We're cracking on. Being safe but not being intimidated.'*

> *'We haven't stopped, because homelessness hasn't stopped.'*

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[1] For example, one organisation had recently been invited to more strategic meetings about debt and poverty, and another organisation had been taking part in weekly calls with their local Head of Communities at the Local Council, their local CCG and a few other VCSE organisations to *'see where community action could be plugged in better '*.

They are also continuing to think hard about how to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, the digitally excluded, and people who may previously have be unknown to services but who now require support. One participant's use of the 'proverbial swan' analogy felt particularly pertinent:

> *'While it may appear that things are calm and services are continuing, this is only possible because we are paddling furiously under the water.'*

Within this context, three things are currently front of mind for VCSE leaders:

1. Risk management
2. Balancing the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face vs online
3. Planning in uncertainty

Risk Management

A number of leaders talked about the level of 'risk' they are currently managing: *'I haven't been managing a charity, I've been managing risk. It's about Covid-19 risk management full stop'.* The types of risks they are managing include:

- **Doing something vs not doing something**: *'The risks that will come from stopping our service are too great ... It's about trading off what you have to keep going and what you can live without.'*

- **Deciding whether it is appropriate to support their more vulnerable beneficiaries to return to face-to-face provision**: *'We're having to make decisions around whether to encourage our older ladies to come back for their gentle exercise.'*

- **Managing the number of people in a particular space**: *'We can't have too many volunteers in the warehouse due to social distancing.' 'Some of the rooms aren't big enough ... which limits what activities we can do.'*

- **Reopening buildings and community assets that may be used by multiple groups**: *'We're confused as to whether the premises have to have their own risk assessments and/or whether those groups running activities require their own risk assessments.'*

- **Risks to staff and volunteers who may be working in situations where there isn't strict adherence to social distancing rules**: *'It seems very wrong that I am asking my staff to work with communities where public health guidelines aren't being met at the home level. We have markers outside our centre ... but no one follows them.'*

We have heard from leaders who are grappling with how to balance these different risks, including the reputational and financial risks associated with changes to their delivery models, as well as the different risk thresholds of individual staff members and volunteers. As a result, this is creating a huge workload, and the responsibility of striking the right balance is weighing heavily on leaders' minds.

Coping strategies include trying to take as measured a view as possible when assessing risk: *'When working out what's safe and what's not, we're looking closely at the data – so local data about number of cases, data about outside space, about masks. So, we're shifting away from "it's all too risky"'.* And using a

set of working principles to help with key judgement calls: *'The principles we work around are that we're committed to support people whilst ensuring it's safe to do so. And we won't do things just because there's funding around if it's not safe.'*

Face-to-face vs online

Many leaders have been adapting their organisations' provision and working practices to the online environment, embracing some of the advantages of remote services, such as increasing service reach, and attending meetings that they may not have been able to get to before (due to travel and time).

However, VCSE leaders continue to be preoccupied with what is being lost due to a lack of face-to-face connection, and the problems associated with digital exclusion. They highlighted how difficult it can be to resolve issues and tensions within a team over zoom, or how much their staff are missing the supportive face-to-face conversations they would usually have had with their colleagues:

> *'As colleagues, we're entering into conversations from different starting points which can be really hard to resolve over a zoom call.'*

> *'When we shared an office, people could say "I've got so much on" and someone else would help ... that doesn't happen now.'*

Some leaders also reflected on how more informal conversations that may have taken place alongside either a discrete activity (such as a craft group) or during a drop-in service, are not as easy to have online. Finally, concerns around digital exclusion are widespread and increasingly urgent:

> *'While the move to online services has meant some organisations are able to reach new service users, it creates huge problems when trying to reach those that are experiencing digital poverty or are not digitally literate.'*

> *'Some of our services users have said they don't want it online or over the phone. They just want it face-to-face ... they might not feel safe over zoom ... or there may be confidentiality issues.'*

> *'I'm worried some funders are putting this in the "too difficult" box or think small organisations don't have the right skills. But we know how to get isolated people in our communities online. They trust us and we know how to explain things and help them even when we can't be face-to-face.'*

Planning in the midst of uncertainty

Throughout this series of briefings, the difficulties associated with planning in the midst of uncertainty have been a consistent theme. We have heard how leaders have been carefully judging how much time and energy to put into *'hypothesising and strategising when there have been so many unknowns'.*

During recent discussions, leaders were still talking about how to strike a balance between remaining responsive and agile, and providing stability and security regarding their organisation's future. This is proving to be a very difficult and increasingly frustrating task, given the level and speed of changes, often on a weekly or daily basis.

> *'Every time you plan, it then changes – constantly. So, it takes up a lot of mental capacity and it is really frustrating.'*

> *'It's changing all the time. It's hard to plan anything as we have to be so responsive. This is a real challenge.'*

> *'We plan for walks with our service users and then rules are suddenly changed, which has been a major challenge. But we need to move with the fluidity of the situation, in a pragmatic way.'*

Some leaders have decided to plan on the basis that, in 12-18 months' time, things may be much the same (i.e. no vaccine and remote working): *'Adaptive was the word that came up last time, but now it's about future planning. I'm rewriting the business plan'.* And for some, there is now a need to give serious consideration to future options, *'ruling nothing out'*:

> *'I am working with trustees and encouraging them to think strategically about our charitable purpose, not just maintenance of the organisation. And I'm working with the senior team who are not happy with my idea of the need for merger. So, it's quite an uncomfortable place to be in. But a CEO's job is often uncomfortable ... Merger and collaborations aren't a bad thing. They might help save a dying charity.'*

Despite the turmoil in their operating environments, the ingenuity and dedication of VCSE leaders persists: *'We're open but it's on my mind that we may need to close again. But we know how to do this, and we will be able to do this more quickly.'*

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

Covid-19 is having a significant emotional impact on VCSE leaders, with words such as *'weary'*, *'exhausted'*, *'challenging'* and *'heavy'* being used in recent discussions. The level of demand on services remains high, as does the complexity of need: *'I am having some very challenging and exhausting moments with people and the complex issues that Covid has either highlighted or exacerbated'.* Some leaders are particularly worried about the winter months ahead; many are finding it a difficult context in which to lead.

> *'It is difficult to lead from your sofa.'*

> *'People want answers for everything, but I don't have them ... I'm basically winging it.'*

However, there is a real sense of pride in what the sector has been able to achieve so far, which some have found helpful to reflect on:

> *'We're still here aren't we?! We are still developing and changing, adapting as organisations working in this sector.'*

> *'I feel better about myself now than I did ... being able to sit back and realise what is possible and what we've achieved in this period.'*

In terms of support from funders, VCSE leaders' needs remain much the same:

- **Adopt realistic, fair and transparent application deadlines**

  'It's been hard work as the deadlines have been tight and funders have said there's a limited chance of getting funding if you don't put your bid in within the first few days as it will have gone.'

- **Set realistic expectations about what can be delivered in the current context, as well as the associated costs**

  'I can't see any way of maximising beyond 25% of services ... how long are funders going to be sympathetic to this? The cost of a meal service doesn't change much, as overheads are the same regardless of meals provided.'

  'With social distancing you are able to deliver activities but to smaller numbers and this doesn't look as impressive on funding applications, and it can look more expensive.'

- **Provide longer-term, non-emergency grants, as well as more proportionate application processes for shorter-term funding**

  'National funders have become so fixated on crisis responses that it's become very hard for them to move forward.'

  'I'm unsure about putting in applications for six-month grants given the time that needs to go into making applications for short term funding.'

- **Adopt processes, practices and funding structures that align with principles of trust-based grant-making (e.g. unrestricted funding)**

  'Allow us to change what we're doing without having to jump through too many hoops.'

  'Funders need to trust us to know what we can do and achieve in our communities. We know how disproportionately some are going to be impacted, so funders need to give us a more blank paper rather than being too prescriptive with too many targets.'

- **Standardise reporting practices to reduce the burden of reporting**

  'We've secured lots of emergency funding. I really hope they standardise the reporting as I've never had so many different funders.'

- **Recognise, and take account of, the diversity of the sector**

  'The charity sector is not a homogenous, fluffy sector. We are not all the same, in fact we are very different and our situations are different. My frustration is that some funders and commissioners have no idea about these differences.'

  'There's still other problems in communities beyond Covid that need attention and funders need to be mindful of that. We are all trying to make a positive difference.'

- **Provide reassurance about the mid to long-term funding strategies that will help protect the sustainability of the VCSE sector in the future**

   'We're at a changing over point with emergency funding coming to an end. We're trying to plan for the future, so a good medium-term approach to grant-making would be helpful.'

   'Funders need to realise what happens if we're not going to be there in five years' time.'

In addition to support from funders, it is clear that VCSE leaders are appreciative when they have a strong, capable and supportive board that helps establish a *'clear vision'*, brings *'knowledge and expertise'*, and *'recognises the hard work'* that is being put in. Some leaders would also like the role and value of the sector to be more acknowledged by the statutory sector, including their involvement in local level planning: *'The voluntary sector has filled a lot of gaps without any support from the statutory sector and the government doesn't really recognise that'*.

Questions and opportunities for funders

The shift from emergency response to the long haul of an unfolding public health crisis, with huge social repercussions and no clear end in sight, is hugely challenging for funders and VCSE organisations alike. As was noted in briefing 10, *'the grim truth is that we are far from recovery and renewal ... VCSE leaders are facing the prospect of many more months of rising need, external shocks, rapid adaptation and tough decisions about priorities and resources'*.

From the most recent peer discussions, it is clear that leaders are acutely aware of this, as they carefully consider how best to steer their organisations through *'the certainty of uncertainty'*. Using a combination of shrewd risk management, blended service delivery models (wherever possible) and ingenious planning, many are managing to do so.

In the face of unprecedented challenges, funders and VCSE organisations will both benefit from a stronger culture of mutuality, actively building common cause between them, and using their respective skills and assets to tackle the tough times ahead. All funders can support this aspiration by continuing or committing to practical grant-making and grant-management that speak directly to current realities, enabling VCSE organisations to do the best they can:

Retain a sense of urgency – the need for a clear sense of direction from funders for at least the medium term is now pressing. There is no perfect way to proceed. Agree what most matters to you at this time, based on your values, priorities and *'what we know so far'.* Then take decisive action.

Move on from short-term emergency grants – recognise that short-term funding is sub-optimal for both funders and VCSE organisations. Commit to longer-term grants so that grantees can focus more attention on getting on with the job.

Make more agile judgements about funding – even in the fastest application processes, detailed project plans and proposals will be out of

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date long before decisions can be made. Make funding decisions based on *'the spine of an organisation'* – its mission, values, aims and track record. Trust these organisations to make good operational judgements about volume of activities, delivery mechanisms and managing risk day-to-day.

Make ALL funding unrestricted – with months of experience now behind them, VCSE organisations are becoming adept at negotiating the complexities of a volatile environment. No longer doing everything for the first time, they are moving quickly to shift the balance between online and face-to-face services in response to local lockdowns or redirecting resources to pressing areas of need. Make this possible by giving unrestricted funding.

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, Annie Caffyn and Eliza Buckley.