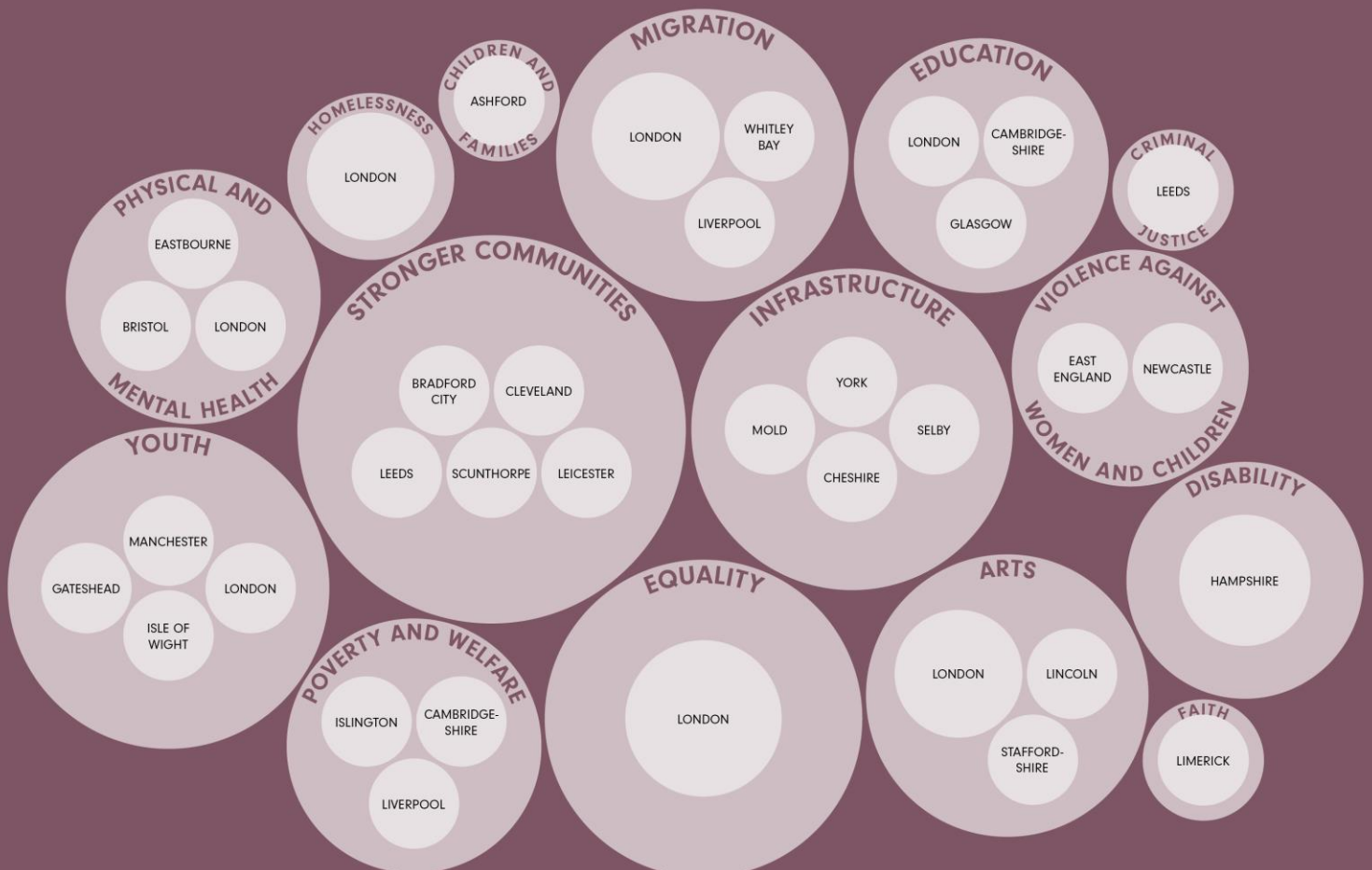


## Complicated and messy

*Briefing 12 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis*

24 November 2020

WE HEARD FROM 43 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 15 OCTOBER AND 4 NOVEMBER 2020

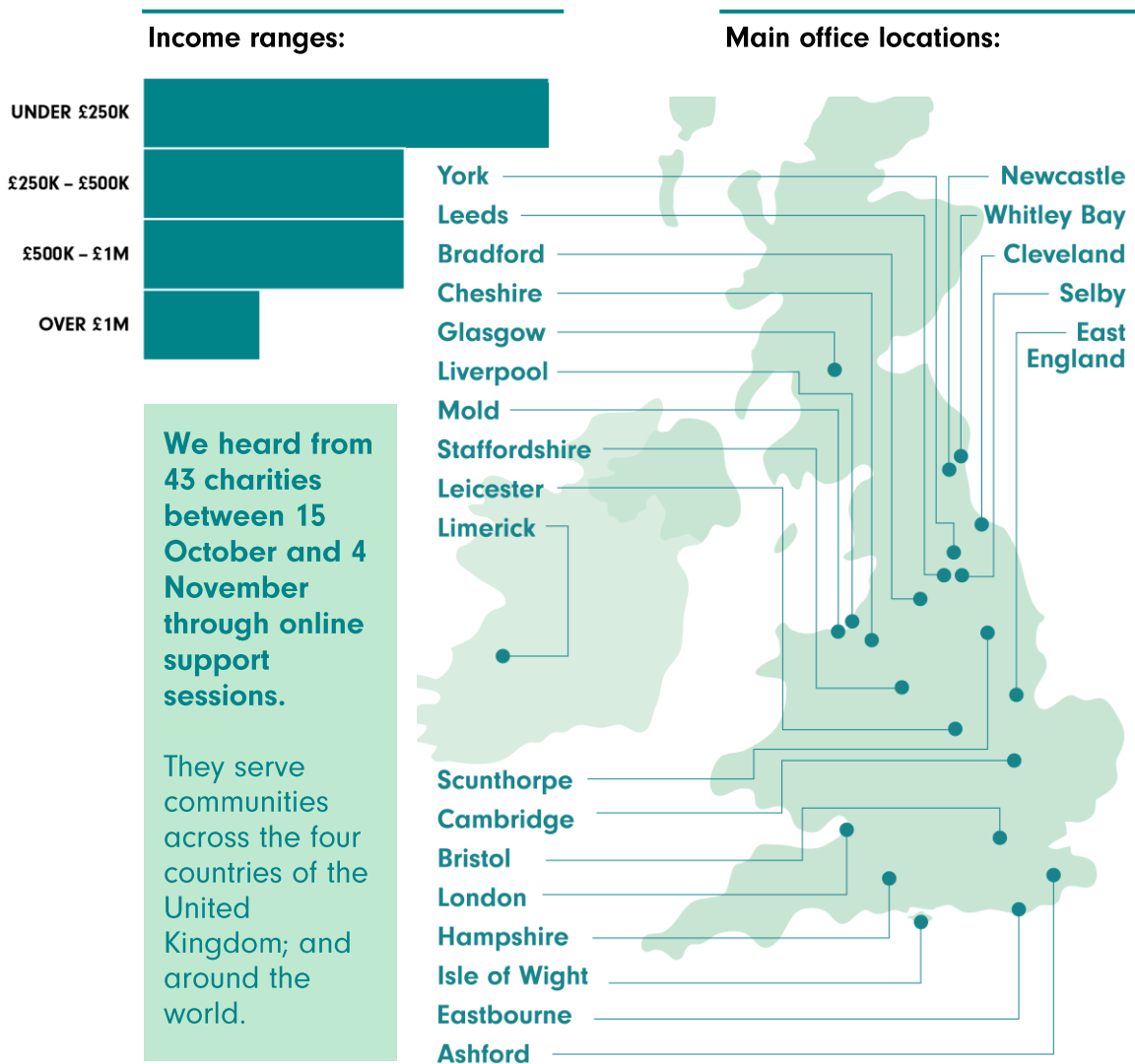


## Introduction

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.

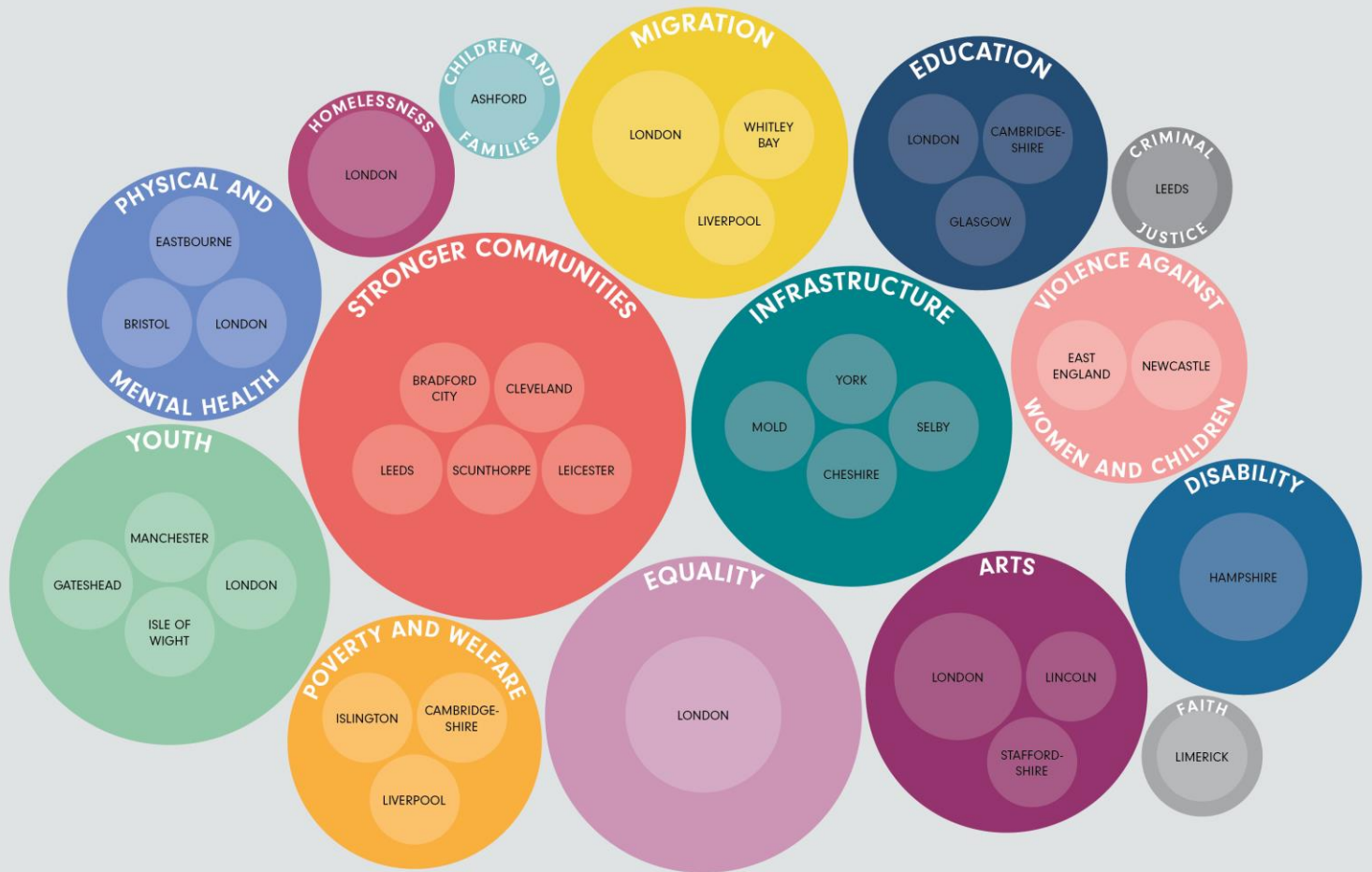
We offer funders feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This twelfth briefing shares the experiences of 43 leaders participating in the sessions between 15<sup>th</sup> October and 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise.

## Who did we hear from?



**Fields:**

**WE HEARD FROM 43 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 15 OCTOBER AND 4 NOVEMBER 2020**



**ARTS**  
 Borderlands Voices  
 Mousetrap Theatre  
 Projects  
 Soundlincs  
 icandance

**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**  
 Dads Unlimited

**CRIMINAL JUSTICE**  
 Together Women

**DISABILITY**  
 The Rainbow Centre  
 for Conductive Education

**EDUCATION**  
 Books Beyond Words  
 University of Glasgow  
 Hunts Forum of Voluntary  
 Organisations

**EQUALITY**  
 women@thewell  
 Charity Translators  
 Africa Advocacy Foundation

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

**HOMELESSNESS**  
 The Upper Room  
 Hope for Southall Street  
 Homeless

**INFRASTRUCTURE**  
 Flintshire Local Voluntary  
 Council  
 Selby District AVS  
 CVS Cheshire East  
 Welfare Benefits Unit

**MIGRATION**  
 IMIX  
 NACCOM

Asylum Link Merseyside  
 CARAS

**PHYSICAL AND  
 MENTAL HEALTH**  
 Holding Space  
 Self injury Support  
 The Coroners' Courts  
 Support Service

**POVERTY AND WELFARE**  
 Holloway Neighbourhood  
 Group  
 Cambridge City Foodbank

Vauxhall Community  
 Law and Information Centre

**STRONGER COMMUNITIES**  
 Queensbury Community  
 Programme  
 Sprout Health and  
 Wellbeing  
 Inspiring Family Solutions  
 CIC  
 Leeds Community  
 Foundation  
 St Philip's Centre

**VIOLENCE AGAINST  
 WOMEN AND GIRLS**  
 4Transform  
 Rape Crisis Tyneside and  
 Northumberland

**YOUTH**  
 The Key  
 Coram Shakespeare  
 Schools Foundation  
 Isle of Wight Youth Trust  
 Hideaway Youth  
 Project Ltd

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

It has now been eight months since the first national lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Since then, we have heard from over 400 VCSE leaders<sup>1</sup> about the range of ways they have adapted services and working practices to continue to serve the needs of their clients, whilst keeping everyone as safe as possible. We have also been inspired by how organisations continue to respond to new, or exacerbated, social and emotional needs.

*'We're supporting a group of people for whom things were difficult already, and then Covid hit. A lot of issues have been accentuated for them: they have a number of unmet health needs; they have a 15 to 20-year reduced life expectancy. We've been producing resources to help people get through each day and help them get 'the system' to support them properly. And we continue to make the case for unpaid family carers who feel forgotten about.'*

*'We are starting to see the numbers picking up as more people are losing their jobs.'*

Throughout our most recent discussions, the toll of this operating environment is becoming increasingly apparent, with leaders using words such as 'overwhelmed', 'overloaded', 'exhausted' and 'swamped' to describe how things currently feel for them and their teams:

*'It is really exhausting and depressing, and we are totally swamped with work.'*

*'The organisation can be nimble to respond but it means that we are growing in an unprecedented way and staff are knackered.'*

The sense of responsibility and pressure that many leaders feel is also palpable:

*'There's this enormous responsibility I feel towards the families we support, to be there for them, but also to do stuff strategically, as well as responsibility towards my staff and volunteers. The buck stops here.'*

*'A member of the team has resigned. Now we're down to eight. We're teetering on "one more pressure and we're gone". It's complicated and messy.'*

*'It can be intensely lonely: intense pressure, intense responsibility. What I'm really worried about is 'us' [leaders].'*

Good news is at a premium right now and some leaders spoke positively about recent changes they have experienced in the volunteering landscape. While some experienced significant reductions in volunteer numbers early in the pandemic – often due to their volunteers' vulnerabilities to Covid 19 –

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<sup>1</sup> Over 400 places have been taken up by VCSE leaders on our peer support sessions; some leaders have attended more than one session.

many have been able to engage new volunteers. Often these are professionals who have been furloughed, made unemployed or decided to take early retirement. One charity had benefited from private companies encouraging their employees to take time out to volunteer and support local relief efforts. Many of these new volunteers bring valuable skills: *'I couldn't actually dream of being able to afford them if they were paid staff'*. And their contribution to the sector's ability to respond cannot be overestimated. But leaders know many are likely to move on as the economic implications of the pandemic continue to play out.

Despite changing levels of restriction and lockdown, the operating context remains much the same for VCSE leaders. Used now to working in extreme uncertainty, they continue to adapt and manage services with agility and flexibility. So, it is unsurprising that the factors that remain front of their minds mirror those that we have seen in many of our previous briefings, namely:

- Protecting the welfare of their staff and of themselves
- Remaining mission-focused
- Balancing the need to plan with the imperative to remain highly flexible.

### **Staff and personal welfare**

From the earliest days of the pandemic, VCSE leaders have been putting in place working practices that aim to support the welfare of their staff and themselves in the midst of considerable change. We continue to hear about the concerted and dedicated effort going into care and self-care:

*'Get some time out from the digital and get some thinking time. It's important to pace yourself.'*

*'Turn your mobile data off when you're out for a walk so that you don't get all of the other notifications coming through.'*

*'Block out time for being outdoors: reflection time stops people being just reactive.'*

More recently, the focus has been very much on preventing staff burnout in acknowledgement of the impact the pandemic is having on everyone: *'We're already at a level of anxiety because there is a global pandemic, so it doesn't take much to push people over the edge'*. As such, leaders are going out of their way to take account of individuals' personal circumstances and provide spaces for staff to be honest so they can provide each other with support:

*'It's helped understanding people's personal situations, so understanding who's shielding for example, or who has childcare arrangements, so that we can respond individually.'*

*'It's our job to help service users and avoid suicide, but it is their life. We do our best and leave the rest. If staff are burnt out, they can help no one.'*

*'We have a WhatsApp check in with colleagues in the morning. It's evolved into a trusted space where you can say "I'm struggling today".'*

Despite these efforts, we have heard more stories of people resigning in response to work and/or personal pressures. And some of the negative aspects of working (predominantly) remotely – particularly on team dynamics, productivity, and routine management and leadership tasks, such as the performance management of staff – are causing widespread concern:

*'Our ability to work with each other is beginning to fray as we haven't seen each other.'*

*'It's hard to feel like you're hitting the ground running when all your interactions are remote.'*

*'I am just finding it difficult personally to engage in performance review when we know the individual's situation. However, I have to ask myself "is this fair on the other staff who are still working and giving their best"?''*

## **Remaining mission-focused**

While working hard to attend to staff and personal welfare, leaders remain focused on delivering their mission, keeping the needs of service users at the forefront at all times:

*'I know and understand that it is challenging for staff but we are all in the same boat, with less resource, not being able to see families and friends etc. How much harder must it be for our service users?'*

*'We could have folded and decided to all go on furlough, but we decided to stay. We wanted to plant ourselves in the memory of local people that we've been there when people needed us. We're here to do a service. We have the resources to do these services, so we decided to take a bold approach.'*

## **Planning in the midst of uncertainty**

VCSE leaders continue to reflect on their different approaches to planning in a context where options, timescales and implementation are subject to multiple variables beyond their control. And the process of planning can cause frustration and/or disagreements internally:

*'We're finding it hard to keep the momentum to plan strategy and then have it changed again. It's wearing thin but I know I still need to do it.'*

*'Everything is reversible at any moment, so now we don't put a date on things but expectations are still there.'*

*'Our trustees are still under some illusion. They think that by the middle of next year it will all be fine. I don't think they fully appreciate the impact of the current climate: it will get worse before it gets better.'*

Some leaders have felt emboldened *'to think positively beyond Covid'*:

*'We didn't get enough time for blue sky thinking so we've now ring-fenced time for future ideas, so we're thinking beyond Covid. It got us into some sense of normality: I listened to staff become enthused by things again.'*

Some find that a loose, fluid plan feels most useful, enabling them to stay agile and experiment with different approaches. For example, one organisation had devised their own tiered model for service delivery.

*'We have developed a scale from 4 to 1 where 4 is 'all out of office delivery', 3 is optional office delivery, 2 – everyone has the opportunity to go into the office, and 1 – whatever the new normal may be.'*

Others have taken the view that thinking about long-term strategy is an appropriate investment of time: *'Our USP is being threatened so we're working on a three-year plan looking at what may be reasonable assumptions for 2023'*.

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

VCSE leaders continue to welcome the opportunity to share and learn from one another, openly and honestly, in a safe environment, as well as lift each other's minds and spirits, and *'to talk about leading through uncertainty and how to lead empathetically when you can't employ your usual tool kit of change management'*:

*'Your team can feel like they're in an eyes down bubble and think it's only difficult for them. But peer support shows that everyone is in similar positions. It gets my team's eyes up and helps us to keep keeping on.'*

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

- Proportionate and relational funding practices
- Longer-term, core funding
- Realistic measures of 'success'
- Recognition of the contribution and diversity of the VCSE sector

### Proportionate and relational funding practices

VCSE leaders experience real difficulties when funding practices are not proportionate to the scale or size of funding they receive: *'It can take as long to produce a report for a funder who has given £500, as it can for a funder who has given £5,000'*. We heard about delays in funding decisions without any movement on delivery dates; and contracts cancelled – one of which had been in place for eight years – over a two-line email. In light of the pressures we know VCSE leaders are facing, as well as the incredible energy and fortitude of so many, such practices are adding unnecessary burden to an already overstretched sector.

However, others spoke positively about, and appreciated, words of thanks they had received from funders, as well as the conversations they had had back in March and April. An overriding message for funders is to *'carry on into the future; don't stop now'*: to keep investing in proportionate and relational funding practices that have been established by so many during the early response to Covid 19.

## **Longer-term, unrestricted funding**

Leaders continue to tell us how important longer-term, unrestricted funding is to their organisations. It provides stability, space and capacity for them to continue to adapt, reflect and strategise in line with shifting and emerging needs:

*'Short-term grants are filling a gap but they are also pushing the can down the road because of limited availability of new longer-term grants. We are heading into a situation where all our long-term grants will come to an end at the same time. This is far from our preferred safe, staggered approach.'*

*'Funders need to be aware of the reality of what it means to 'plan' in the current environment. There is no single orientation point: you take what you can from moment to moment.'*

Unrestricted funding (described by many leaders as 'core funding'), in particular, helps organisations retain good staff, continue to deliver essential services, and ensure they are adequately resourced to invest in local, collaborative relationships that have been essential to many during the pandemic:

*'Core funding gives us sustainability and the ability to retain good staff.'*

*'People want to fund the new, bright and shiny but we know what's needed: funding the helpline and casework, things that there's a constant need for. And you just need core funding to do that.'*

*'We contacted all other organisations to see how we could coordinate our bids and discuss what we were doing and how we were doing it. All of that took a huge amount of time and effort – setting up the meetings, having the meetings, coordinating actions. It doesn't just happen on its own: collaborative working takes time.'*

But unrestricted funding is still far from a default position, and it is more likely to benefit organisations with existing funding relationships: *'There is also a need for funders to give this flexibility to their new applicants.'*

## **Realistic measures of 'success'**

Leaders reflected on the correlation between severity of need and the capacity to meet that need. For example, some are reaching fewer people but seeing them more frequently in response to the complexity of their needs. Others are running a blended service delivery model, essentially managing parallel online and face-to-face services: *'it requires double the amount of teamwork and supervision, etc'*. In this context, funders will need to



understand that they will ‘receive applications that cost the same but with fewer numbers of people being served’. This will require imaginative thinking about ‘measures of success’, and how these can be evidenced and reported.

## Recognition of the contribution and diversity of the VCSE sector

VCSE leaders want funders to continue to recognise, celebrate and be mindful of the contribution and diversity of the VCSE sector, and to ensure that funding criteria and processes take into account, for example, the needs of organisations of all sizes; the importance of continuing to invest in early intervention and prevention services (not only crisis responses); the role of infrastructure and umbrella organisations in supporting the sector; and the long-term stability of the sector:

*‘Really small organisations are fundamental to reaching groups with the most severe needs. But funding odds are stacked against them or are geared more to medium-sized organisations. Where is the equity with whom you’re funding here?’*

*‘Infrastructure is desperately needed to bring attention to, and help to amplify, the voice of the sector.’*

*‘Charities are overstretched and under-resourced so we need to push back otherwise we will collapse. And then we won’t be able to help anyone.’*

## Questions and opportunities for funders

In our [last briefing](#), we concluded that ‘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’. In order to do this, we urged funders to:

- Retain a sense of urgency
- Take decisive action, providing a clear sense of direction where possible
- Move on from short term emergency grants
- Make more agile judgements about funding that are based on the ‘*spine of an organisation*’, as well as trust
- Make ALL funding unrestricted

Funders are all facing tough strategic decisions about how best to focus their funding in the light of radical uncertainty and overwhelming demand. Making these decisions with equity, inclusion, and transparency at their heart will be vital.

And the ways in which these strategic decisions are implemented – how applications are sought and assessed, how funding is given, and the way grants and funding relationships are managed – are of utmost importance:

By **streamlining their processes and simplifying reporting**, funders can remove heavy burdens from leaders under extreme pressure.

By **giving unrestricted grants**, funders will provide the stable foundations from which VCSE leaders can motivate, support and lead their teams to deliver the best for the most vulnerable in our communities.

By **making sensitive investment in supporting funded organisations** to function well under extreme pressure (rather than defaulting to technical 'capacity building' offers), funders can help sustain the organisational resilience that has seen so many VCSE organisations through the challenges of 2020 as they face a new year which, even with the promise of vaccines, is going to be a very bumpy ride.

## Authorship

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