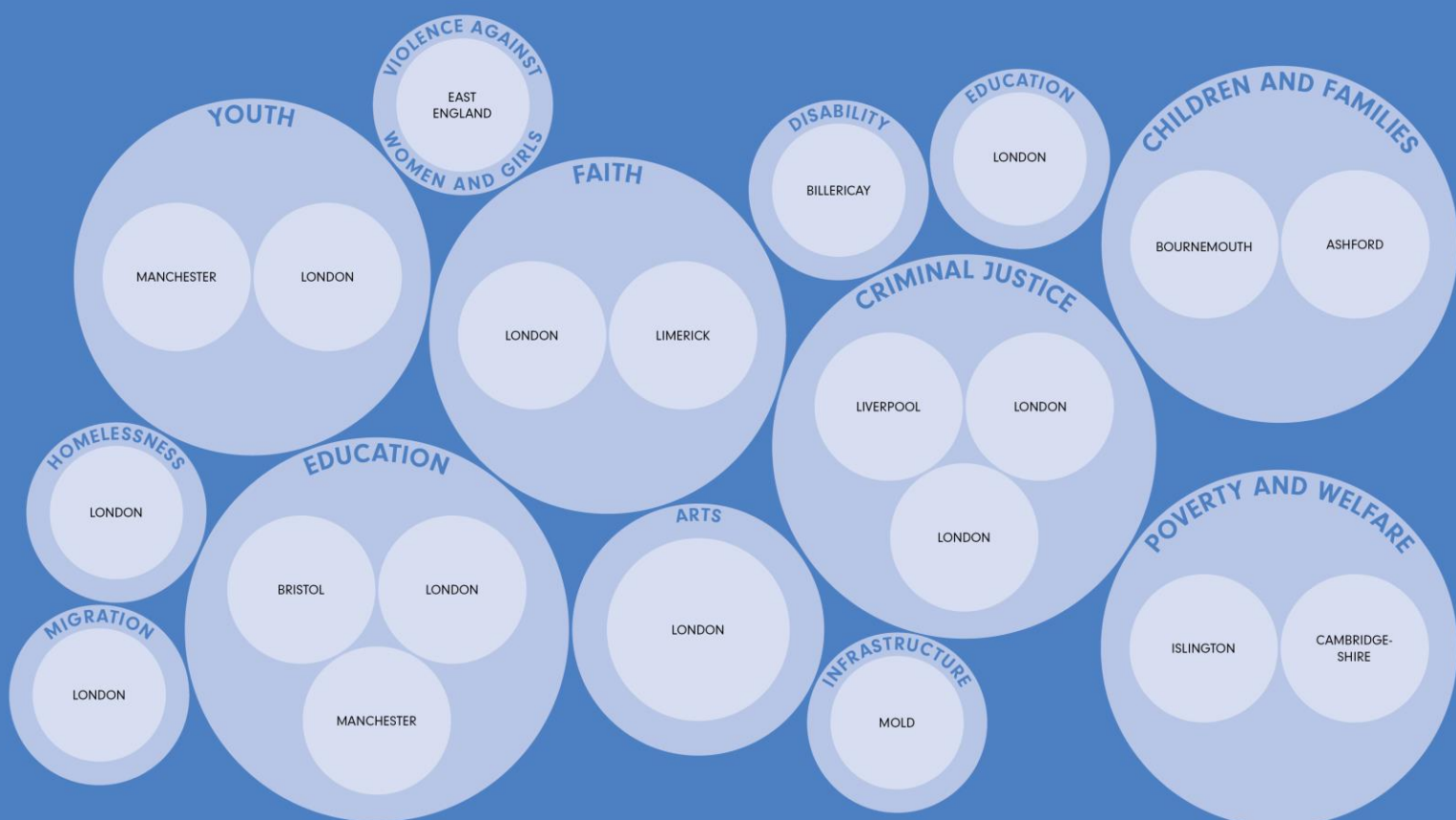


Steadfast endurance

Briefing 13 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis

16 December 2020

WE HEARD FROM 23 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS,
BETWEEN 11 AND 30 NOVEMBER 2020

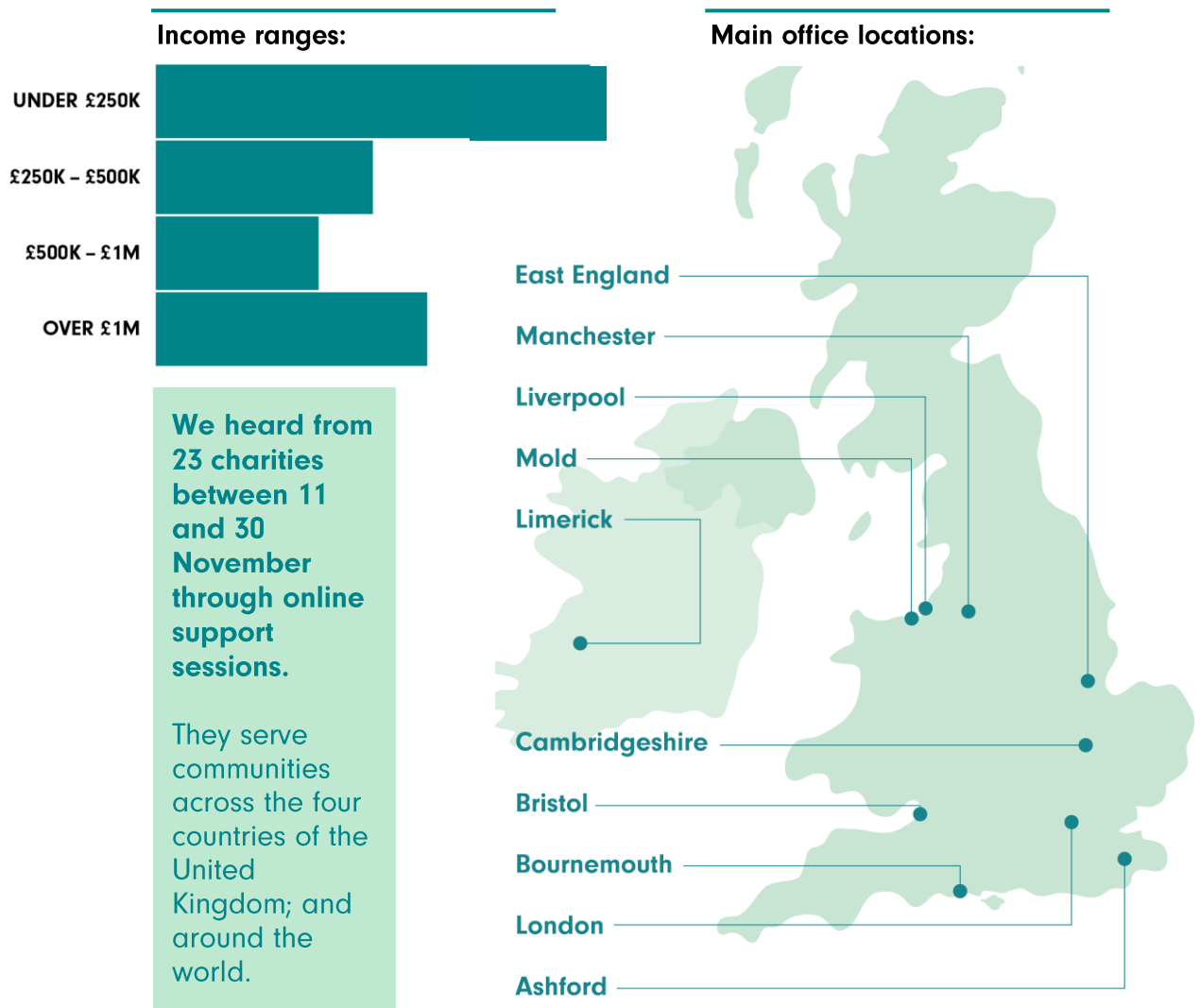


Introduction

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.

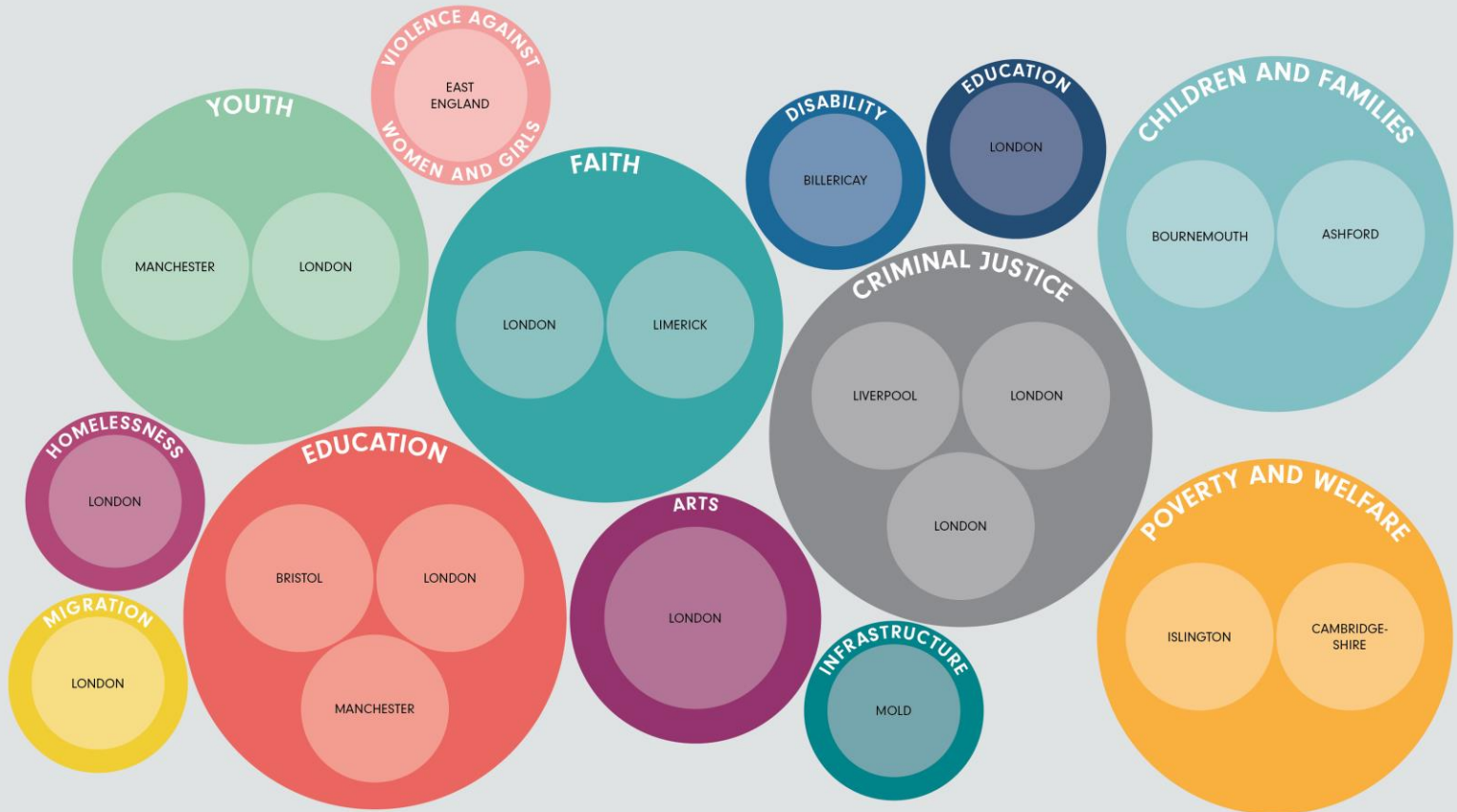
We offer funders feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This thirteenth briefing shares the experiences of 23 leaders participating in the sessions between 11th and 30th November 2020, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise. Further briefings will follow as new groups meet.

Who did we hear from?



Fields:

WE HEARD FROM 23 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS,
BETWEEN 11 AND 30 NOVEMBER 2020



ARTS

Cardboard Citizens
Mousetrap Theatre Projects

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Dads Unlimited
The Listening Ear

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Revolving Doors Agency
Vauxhall Law Centre
Clean Break

DISABILITY

Hamelin Trust

EDUCATION

icandance

FAITH

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

HOMELESSNESS

Hope for Southall Street Homeless

INFRASTRUCTURE

Flintshire Local Voluntary Council

MIGRATION

Salisbury World Refugee Centre

POVERTY AND WELFARE

Holloway Neighbourhood Group
Cambridge City Foodbank

STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Eastside Community Trust
Aston Mansfield
Northmoor Community Association

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

4Transform

YOUTH

Hideaway Youth Project Limited
Young Citizens

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

It is increasingly clear how expert VCSE organisations have become in adapting their services and ways of working in line with the constant churn of public health guidance. With the experience of responding to two national lockdowns, a period of tentative and partial re-opening, and a tiered system of local lockdowns, they know what it takes. The growing challenge is how to keep going emotionally in the face of the relentlessness and depth of need, and the sheer weight of working at fever pitch for months on end:

'The need is very deep. Two people have died in the last week. One in a car park, one in a room.'

'Poverty ... debt ... domestic violence. They've always been there in our community but not to the degree that they are now.'

'I'm feeling really, really exhausted. I work for the charity 24/7 and this is the only way the charity functions. How do you find that balance between doing everything or nothing?'

'We're grieving as an organisation. We had to redesign everything – services, funding strategies. In some ways, the organisation we were in February is now irrelevant.'

Three concerns stand out as front of mind for VCSE leaders:

1. The limitations of online
2. Sustaining their teams
3. Thinking about 'what next'

1. The limitations of online

VCSE organisations moved online quickly at the start of the pandemic to maintain and develop services, and the pros and cons of online working have been a regular theme for discussion. Clear positives have been identified both for the reach and accessibility of services, and for organisational health, such as improving board engagement.

But the drumbeat of concern about those who cannot be reached through online services has been present throughout. The impact of digital exclusion means that some organisations are simply unable to meet the needs of all beneficiaries, while others feel overwhelmed by the mismatch between the scale of the problem and what they are able to do to address people's digital needs:

'We work in a poverty-stricken area so we didn't want to abandon people. We need to work face-to-face: we're not an online business.'

'We're an organisation that's based on human relationships, warmth and layers of communication that don't happen remotely but face-to-face. Everyone has English as a second language, so phone calls are more difficult.'

'We tried to address the digital divide: we bought refurbished laptops and distributed them to families for children trying to access learning. But this was a drop in the ocean of what was required.'

And cracks are beginning to show in team dynamics and communication, as everyone tires of remote working:

'You cannot underplay the human visual. I have had enough of seeing people on a screen.'

'We are finding communication is our biggest challenge at the moment.'

'Everything said in tension seems much bigger on the screen, making it more unsettling.'

VCSE leaders continue to work to manage both these challenges. Blended services, including both face-to-face and online provision, are proving valuable for many: *'For me, a blended approach is easier to cope with'*. And leaders are taking time to connect directly with staff, for example by arranging 15 minute catch-ups with individuals by phone. But it is clear that they are having to constantly assess, manage and balance the positive and negative implications of remote working and online provision.

2. Sustaining the team

VCSE leaders are seriously concerned about how much longer they and their teams can carry on at this pace:

'When it seemed this would last a few months, people threw their all into it, but now we're delivering services with PPE and social distancing in place, and making decisions about risks. It's getting tougher and harder on everyone.'

'I'm finding it emotional. We're not machines.'

'If you are frontline staff and dealing with distress, you take that on, which makes the responsibility overwhelming.'

Leaders are using a range of approaches to actively support the welfare of staff. Some of these are simple disciplines of self-care, such as encouraging and enabling staff to take a break wherever possible. Others focus on providing opportunities for teams to connect emotionally and socially, whether this is taking time to celebrate successes or creating different kinds of space (e.g. 'listening Thursdays' and a candle making workshop during December). A number are investing in clinical or professional supervision for frontline staff who are supporting people experiencing difficult, and at times traumatic, situations. However, some have had to take the difficult decision to step back to protect the welfare of their staff:

'Our staff are burnt out delivering care and support, along with many testing positive and having to isolate. So, we had to stop some of our services because of the impact on our staff.'

'We are struggling quite a bit, to be honest. We are seeing an incredibly marked rise in mental health issues amongst our staff at all levels of the organisation. We closed the organisation on the second lockdown – not because we had to for the business, but because we felt our staff were not going to be able to sustain themselves if we stayed open.'

Most leaders carry this heavy load of responsibility with little or no personal support:

'You shoulder everyone's problems; there is nowhere else to pass that on to. You can't share this with your team.'

'As a Chief Officer, you are the HR department, the marketing department, the finance department, the operational manager. It's difficult managing all of this and the staff.'

A safe space in which to discuss, offload and share ideas around some of these challenges with their peers makes some contribution to reducing the isolation, anxiety and doubt that leaders can experience:

'It's really useful to just sound off to people you've never met before but are in the same position. Otherwise you can feel completely on your own.'

'It's good to know you're not alone. Stresses and anxieties are not unusual.'

3. Thinking about 'what next'

As VCSE leaders have become increasingly adept at balancing the need to be agile and responsive with the limitations of organisational capacity and resources, they are increasingly concerned about achieving some stability and security for the future. Their attention is turning to questions about "what next?" for the sector. For example:

- What might the longer-term landscape look like?
- Will VCSE organisations be *'prepared to support the wave of need that will fall out of the pandemic'*?
- Will there be a healthy and sustainable VCSE sector left *'come February, March next year'*?
- What will happen once the vaccine has been distributed?
- How will organisations resource the additional capacity required to offer a blended delivery model of both face-to-face and online services?

For some, beginning to focus again on their organisations' longer-term aims and direction over the next three to five years has felt productive:

'To take out the Covid lens is quite helpful. Instead, plan as you would and then look at how you might need to adapt around it.'

'At our board away day the focus was deliberately to not think about the here and now, but to focus on the future. Everyone found that very refreshing.'

But this is by no means easy given the amount of uncertainty that remains. Some feel like they are *'starting from scratch'*, given the degree to which the organisation has been radically changed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic:

'We have aspirations, but it's really difficult as we have no idea what's realistically going to happen next year.'

'We're not quite sure what questions to ask or what's needed, as the landscape has changed so much.'

All are clear that flexibility must be incorporated into any longer-term strategic plan:

'The key is to have a clear goal but flexibility on the way to reaching it and the approach required to get there.'

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

In [briefing 12](#), VCSE leaders discussed the support that funders can provide through:

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

All remain critical as VCSE leaders continue to adapt and respond to the needs of their beneficiaries, begin to plan for the future (rather than operate solely in crisis mode), and consider how best to sustain their organisations and their work. A number were explored again in the most recent peer support sessions, which focused on:

- Supportive funding structures
- Showcasing the contribution and value of the VCSE sector
- Investing in skilled trustees

Supportive funding structures

VCSE leaders identified a number of ways in which some funders are struggling to be as supportive as they might be in current circumstances.

Spending deadlines: Spending schedules are not helping organisations to make sensible decisions about managing continuing uncertainty. Many grants are still short term and framed within the idea of a finite emergency. But strict spending deadlines create pressure on organisations to spend now, even when they can see more pressing priorities only weeks away:

'We have been successful in funding applications. But it's a different headache trying to spend the money before 31st March: having to spend the money this quickly is the biggest issue for us.'

'Organisations are being pressured to spend these funds in a short period of time. This has meant they have had to turn funding applications around really quickly.'

Funding activities instead of needs: Some leaders argue that many emergency grants were too focused on specific activities. Organisations had to *'fit activities to meet funder requirements'* instead of funders trusting VCSE organisations to deliver what was needed.

Inconsistent expectations: Funders are not always clear about the rules of eligibility, sending out inconsistent messages: *'You somehow have to prove that you are desperate enough for the money but also that you're still functioning and you're not a liability'.*

Volume or quality: Restrictions and safety measures mean that many face-to-face services are working with much smaller numbers. Some organisations have found funders informed and sympathetic: *'I'm saying to funders: "the numbers are down but this is what we have done for these particular clients"; and they've focused on quality, not numbers.'* But others feel that services are being penalised, even though they are urgently needed:

'We used to be able to work with hundreds of people, and now we can only have 26 people in the centre, including staff. Funders need to understand that we can no longer work with hundreds of people unless we're online, but we're not an online service.'

Showcasing the contribution of the VCSE sector

Some leaders spoke passionately about the need to demonstrate and showcase the value and contribution of the VCSE sector throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Their fear is that, without this recognition, the sector will not be appropriately resourced or respected going forwards, threatening the survival of many organisations, and leaving thousands of people unsupported:

'If you don't value us, within six months statutory agencies won't be able to help and neither will we.'

'We're the least recognised, but when the pandemic happened everyone turned to the sector as we know our communities and we can react.'

'When people lose their jobs, have poor mental health, people will come to us, but we may not be able to support them if we are not supported. The sector is in trouble.'

Investing in skilled trustees

The pandemic has demonstrated the difference that an informed, supportive board makes to VCSE organisations, especially to their leaders. However, the experience has been very mixed.

Some leaders have benefitted from excellent, well-judged support and guidance, both from their chair and from the board as a whole. Others have felt abandoned by their boards, or frustrated by their lack of informed engagement or understanding of the challenges, especially in relation to fundraising: *'Something the Trustees don't get is that, once you've done one big application, you can't just cut and paste it to the next one. It is actually a very intricate balance of finding the right funders, crafting the applications and building relationships'.*

Leaders recognise their own responsibilities in this. To create the informed, respectful and positive relationship they need from their boards, organisations need to invest in finding, supporting and developing their board members: *'We haven't trained our trustees well enough so I don't get these helpful comments or feedback from them'.*

Questions and opportunities for funders

In our [last briefing](#), we acknowledged the tough strategic decisions facing funders about how best to focus their funding in the light of radical uncertainty and overwhelming demand. Whatever these decisions, we urged funders of all kinds to recognise how deeply the ways in which they are implemented – how applications are sought and assessed, how funding is given, and the way in which grants and funding relationships are managed – impact on the morale and effectiveness of VCSE organisations.

From our recent discussions, we can highlight three ways to offer meaningful and practical support:

1. **Long-term, unrestricted funding has never been more vital.** VCSE organisations have become expert in adapting to different and complex operating contexts. With flexible, trusting support they can plan for the future, while remaining steadfast and available for those that need them now. The security of longer-term unrestricted funding is the most effective antidote to the unsettled state of the sector and to the challenges ahead.
2. ***'We are not machines.'*** There is an inextricable link between the health and wellbeing of people, and the quality and impact of their work. If you value the latter, you need to be ready to invest in the former.
3. **The VCSE sector needs champions.** Funders know the importance of the work it does and the distinctive role it plays. All now have a contribution to make in pushing the VCSE sector's value and concerns up the agenda – with, for and alongside the organisations that they fund.

Authorship

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