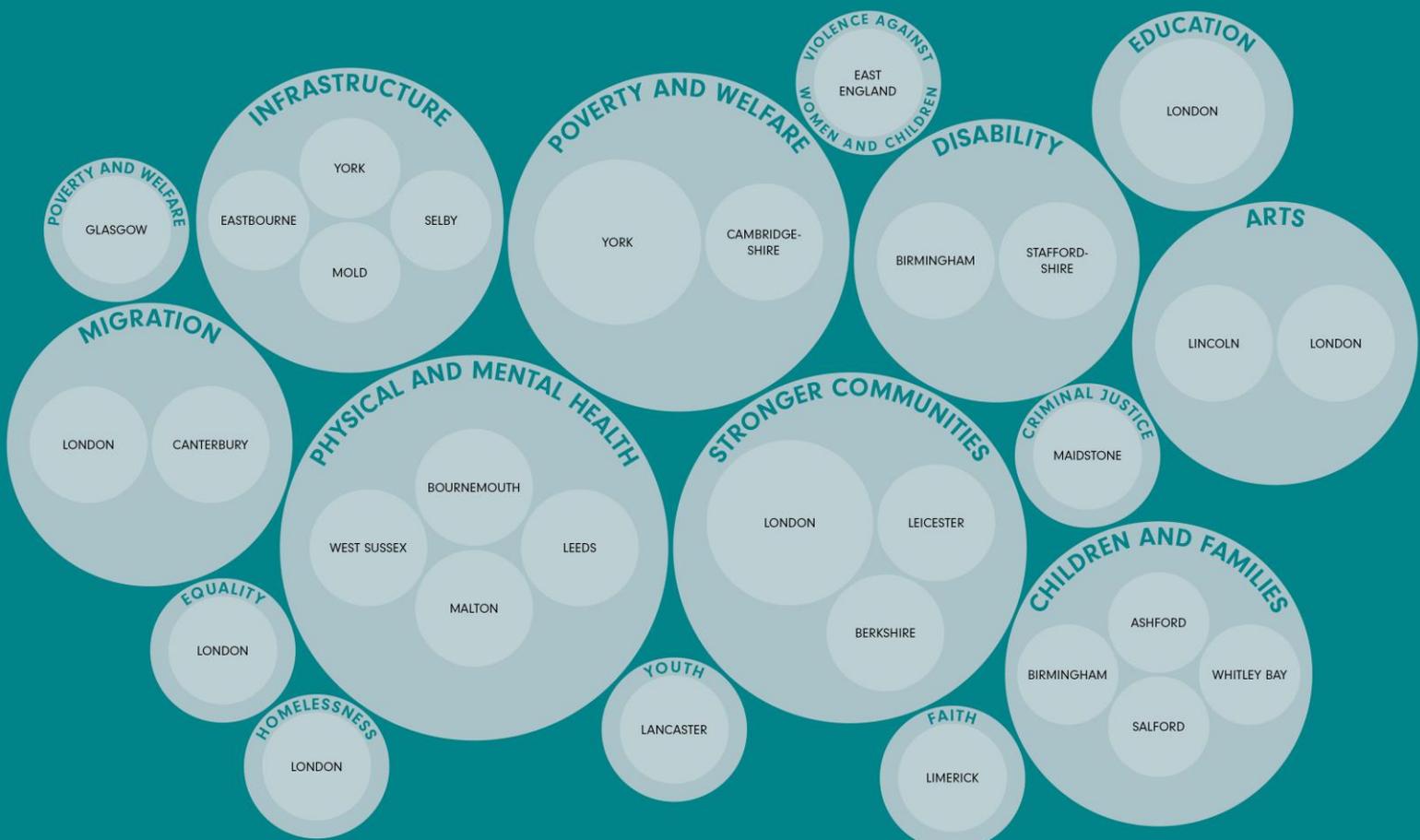


Chasing against time

Briefing 14 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis

17 February 2021

WE HEARD FROM 33 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 4 DECEMBER 2020 AND 20 JANUARY 2021.

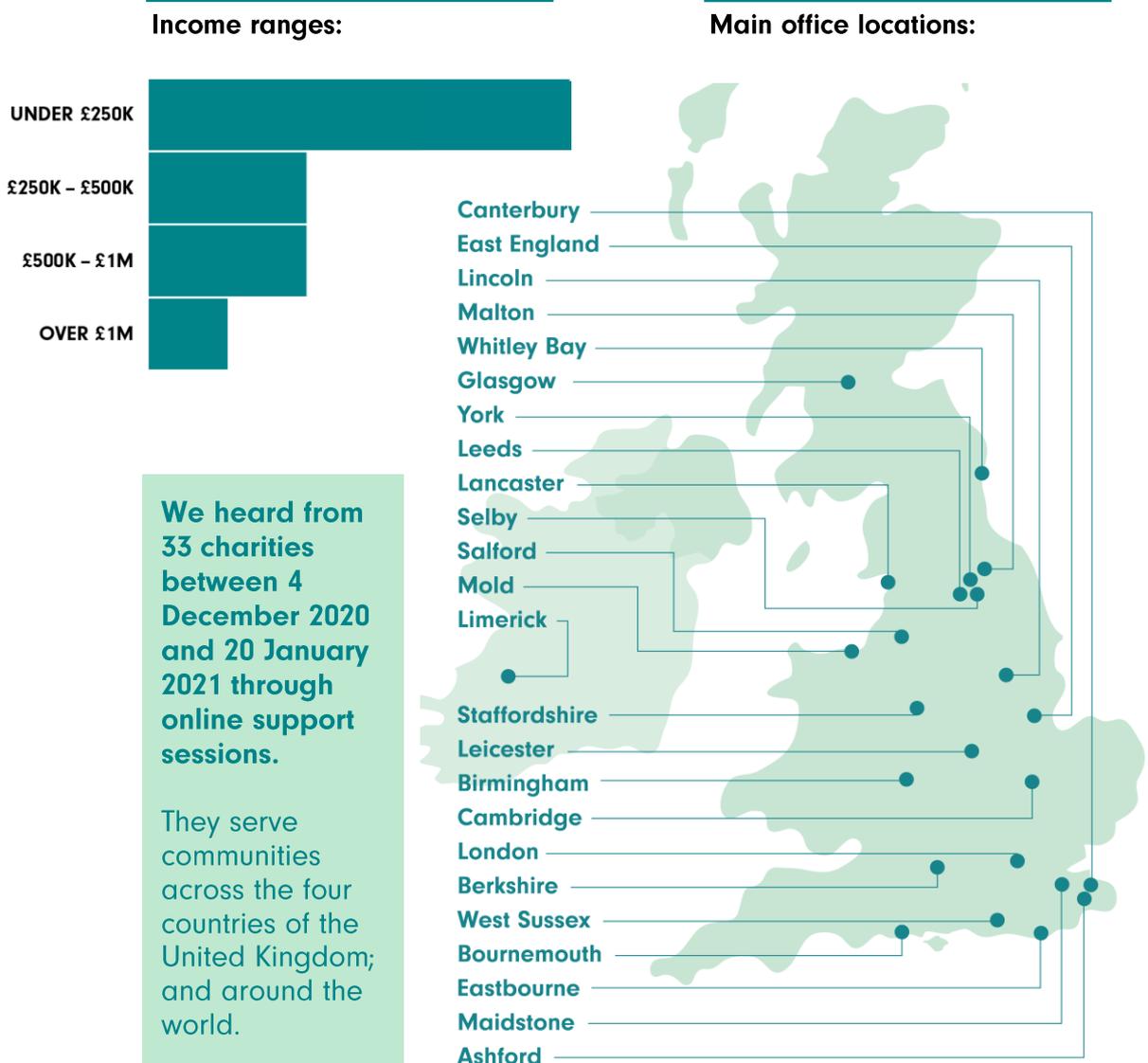


Introduction

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.

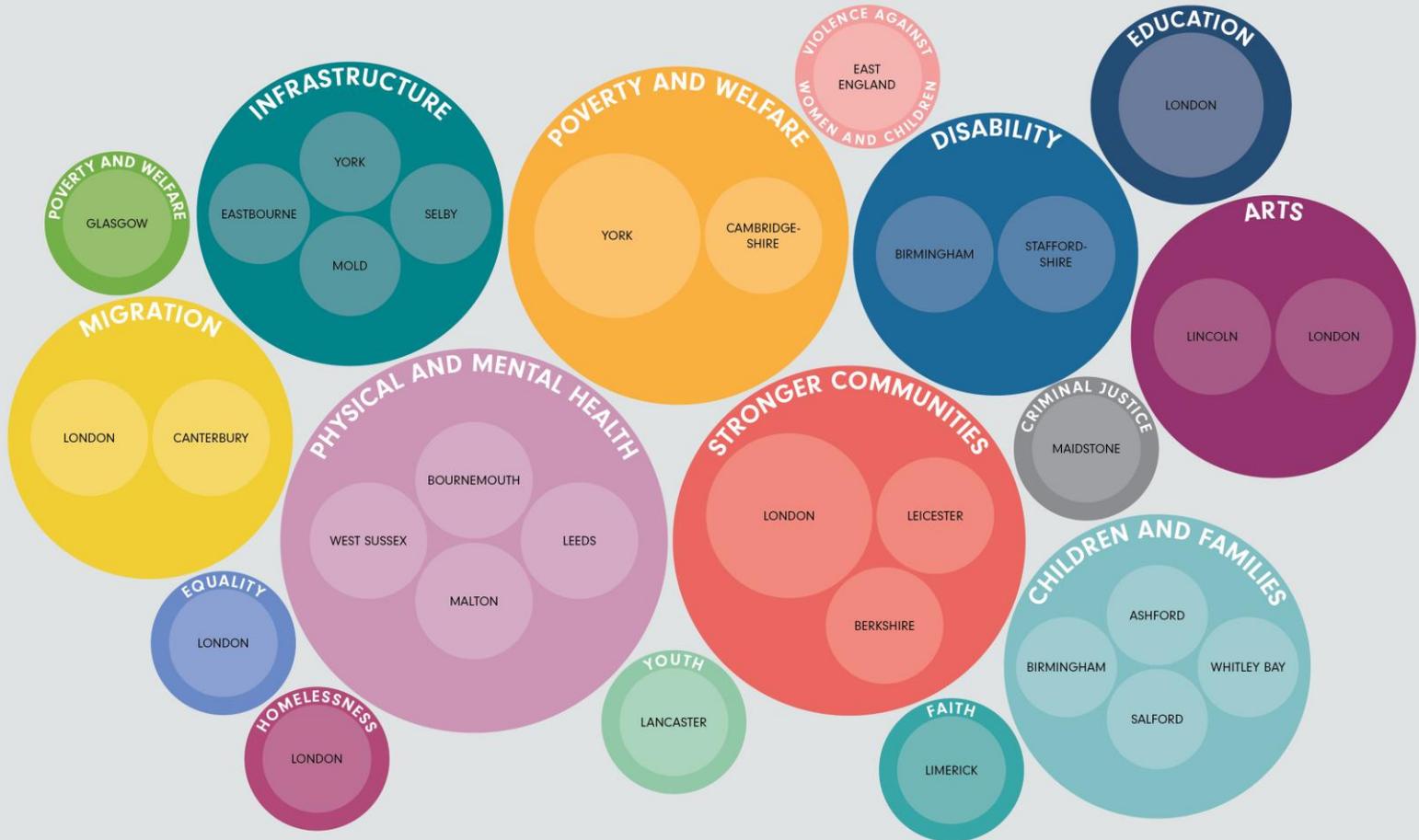
We offer funders feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This fourteenth briefing shares the experiences of 33 leaders participating in the sessions between 4th December 2020 and 20th January 2021, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise. Further briefings will follow as new groups meet.

Who did we hear from?



Fields:

WE HEARD FROM 33 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 4 DECEMBER 2020 AND 20 JANUARY 2021.



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| <p>ARTS
icandance
Soundlincs</p> <p>CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Caritas Diocese of Salford
Dads Unlimited
Meriden Adventure
Playground Association
Smell the Roses</p> <p>CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Unlock</p> | <p>DISABILITY
Borderlands Voices
Learning Disability England</p> <p>EDUCATION
Books Beyond Words
Solutions Not Sides</p> <p>EQUALITY
women@thewell</p> <p>FAITH
Irish Institute for Catholic Studies,
Mary Immaculate College,
University of Limerick</p> | <p>HOMELESSNESS
Hope for Southall Street
Homeless</p> <p>INFRASTRUCTURE
3VA
Flintshire Local Voluntary Council
Selby District AVS
Welfare Benefits Unit</p> <p>MIGRATION
CARAS
Kent Refugee Action Network</p> | <p>PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
Battle Scars
Centre for Chaplaincy
in Education
Next Steps Mental Health
Resource Centre
The Listening Ear</p> <p>POVERTY AND WELFARE
Cambridge City Foodbank
Citizens Advice York
Older Citizens Advocacy York
The Louise Project</p> | <p>STRONGER COMMUNITIES
Achievement for All
Aston – Mansfield
St Philip’s Centre
The Guardian Foundation</p> <p>VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
4Transform</p> <p>YOUTH
Lancashire Youth Challenge</p> |
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What is now front of mind for leaders of VCSE organisations?

The emotional impact of the pandemic and the future of the sector continue to be front of mind for VCSE leaders. In particular, the relentlessness of a third national lockdown and the burnout of leaders and staff were real concerns.

This briefing covers sessions across both 2020 and 2021, giving us an insight into how the preoccupations of leaders shifted from December – when we heard about some of the positive lessons learnt since March, and a sense of optimism going into a new year – to January, when morale was lower and people felt more fatigued:

'This particular juncture we are at is the most tough for us as leaders. The atmosphere has changed – there was optimism before and the possibility of things getting back to whatever the new normal would be. But now it's all about difficult decisions to make, hard positions to take and fighting with local authorities and funders. We're in the thick of it all at the moment.'

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

1. Sustaining their teams during more uncertainty
2. Funding beyond March 2021
3. Planning for the future beyond the crisis

1. Sustaining their teams during more uncertainty

The start of 2021 has brought about even more change and uncertainty for VCSE leaders. The emotional impact of a third national lockdown has left many feeling overwhelmed, burnt out and concerned about the future of their sector.

At our peer sessions in December, VCSE leaders had talked about the urgent need for a relaxing break over the Christmas period:

'This year has taken such a toll ... we're limping over the line.'

However, the Christmas period turned out not to be restful as they had anticipated, bringing instead more uncertainty. A change to the rules around social gatherings meant that many Christmas plans were changed at the last minute, leaving leaders feeling that their much-needed break had been snatched away from them. Unable to rest or recuperate from a gruelling nine months, many entered the new year feeling even more exhausted and burnt out. And the announcement of a third national lockdown shortly after Christmas further exacerbated this:

'On the one hand, returning to lockdown is a bit like returning to something that we all know quite well; but on the other hand, we've had to part-furlough staff who have childcare responsibilities.'

'We had this awful decision, time again, to furlough staff – which is just too hard.'

The priority for many leaders during the early stages of the most recent lockdown has been maintaining staff morale. While many have taken positive action (including weekly catch-ups, leadership training and social activities), this has

come at a cost to their own wellbeing – the enhanced caring role has to be juggled alongside crisis management, planning for the future and *'having to be an expert at everything'*. This pressure is exacerbated for leaders of smaller organisations, who are taking on several roles at once, and feeling close to burnout:

'The tank is becoming dry. I wake up every morning surprised I haven't crashed. Enjoyment out of my life has gone because I'm so tired.'

'You cannot say tomorrow: "I need it to all stop". It's a bit like parenting. How do you say that this job is not possible, because ultimately you have to find the solution.'

However, despite these very real concerns about both survival and the future, VCSE leaders are also mindful of what 2020 has taught them. Throughout the pandemic, organisations have been forced to think creatively, from moving services online to collaborative working. For many, 2020 has shown how adaptable, flexible and resilient the sector is:

'Taking things online has helped us to achieve things that we might have otherwise struggled to.'

'We're still standing, we're still looking forward – that actually is really amazing.'

'Covid forced us to think differently and it's not all negative.'

Covid-19 has also changed the way that many in the sector work. For some leaders, this has led to a more open and human leadership style: *'I am managing more with honesty, sharing more about myself, rather than managing from a distance and being cold. I am trying to create a family, to let people be emotional and honest'*.

And many leaders have become more realistic about their goals and aspirations, evaluating and then focusing on what really matter to their service users: *'A lot of the time we feel like we're not doing enough, but right now "good enough" is enough'*.

2. Funding beyond March

VCSE leaders continue to have serious concerns around funding, specifically long-term funding. While the focus to date has been on the provision of short-term and emergency grants to organisations affected by the pandemic, most of this funding expires in March, and there is very little clarity about future plans or prospects.

Many organisations are dipping into their modest reserves or applying for multiple rounds of short-term funding just to keep going. Without sufficient security beyond March, VCSE leaders are worrying about the immediate impact on staff and service users, as well as if and how to plan for the future:

'Funding is drying up rapidly. Not sure how I'll maintain the organisation beyond March. I'm finding this very stressful: I just don't know where I'll find the money and we're paying peoples' mortgages, you know.'

'We are chasing against time to try and make as many applications as possible and hoping our reserves last a little longer before these funds come through.'

3. Planning for the future beyond the crisis

For many leaders, it is difficult to plan ahead whilst still being in the midst of the pandemic, and when what lies 'ahead' is unclear and remains subject to so many variables beyond their control. Pre-occupied with managing the impact of Covid-19 on their organisation and service users, there is precious little time to think about the future: *'Balancing the need for day-to-day reactions to the decisions that are changing every single day, along with trying to think of the future, which is just too difficult to see, has been the toughest things to do as leaders.'*

Within the context of these significant constraints, leaders are struggling to achieve balance between remaining flexible to changing Covid-19 guidance and thinking about life beyond the crisis:

'The funding system is making it harder for us to plan, yet it wants us to plan. But instinct says I shouldn't plan too much and need to be flexible.'

'As an organisation, I'm struggling to imagine what we'll be doing next year – what's blended and where should we be. I've got settled with this virtual side of stuff – adding the face-to-face back is scary for me.'

'Up and down, you feel like you're bobbing up and down. Opening and closing things constantly. We spent a lot of time doing planning and prep and that has all fallen apart now.'

And for some, planning for the future has brought fundamental questions about mission and charitable objects to the fore – given the significant shifts to what services have been provided during the pandemic, how they have been delivered and the need for longer-term delivery plans and models.

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

In [briefing 13](#), VCSE leaders discussed the support that funders could provide through supportive funding structures; showcasing the contribution and value of the VCSE sector; and investing in skilled trustees.

All remain critical as VCSE leaders continue to adapt and respond to the needs of their beneficiaries, redouble their efforts to plan for the future, move beyond crisis mode, and consider how best to secure funding beyond March.

The first of these was explored again in the most recent peer support sessions, which focused on:

1. Supportive funding structures
2. The importance of collaborative working and building partnerships
3. The need for certainty from funders beyond March 2021

1. Supportive funding structures

The need for funders to be supportive of the uncertainties of the sector has been a recurring theme throughout these briefings. During the latest peer support sessions, leaders highlighted two particular issues.

Having realistic expectations of funding bids: While some funders are adopting a more flexible and adaptable approach to bids for longer-term funding, many require unrealistic levels of assurance. Leaders described the level of data being asked for by some funders as disproportionate to what their organisations can feasibly or reasonably provide or predict right now:

'There needs to be a change in mentality – before we put in bids where service delivery levels could be determined, but now the world can look different once the work is being delivered.'

Being sensitive and understanding of the distinct challenges facing VCSE

organisations: Many leaders reported that funders don't seem to understand the real issues in their sector. They need funders to demonstrate an understanding that organisations are operating in very trying times, and that this is reflected in the way they evaluate both bids and performance:

'We're used to being open and transparent and being scrutinised. That's really difficult when the assessor doesn't seem to understand the context, and just says: "you've got great outputs, but you're failing on your outcomes"!'

2. The importance of collaborative working and building partnerships

VCSE leaders appreciate opportunities to speak with others going through similar things. Connection and building trusting networks are highly valued – either through online interactions or, for some, from having a supportive trustee board:

'My chair's my rock; my board have been our foundation.'

'Hats off to the trustees who have rolled up their sleeves and decided to work alongside staff.'

While working collaboratively is generally seen in a positive light, some remain wary of losing their organisation's voice when working in a partnership, and stressed the importance of both purpose and trust when working with others:

'In our experience, it is important to build networks and partnerships with organisations that add value to your work and a bid.'

'I'm honest about how hard it is to go and see if you can trust people in a partnership – will they act decently? Trust is huge.'

3. The need for certainty from funders beyond March 2021

Many leaders describe their funders as being accommodating during the early stages of the pandemic; the emergency funding they received was instrumental in keeping their services open. However, looking ahead, they require more clarity and assurances about what the funding environment may look like in 2021/22.

More specifically, their organisations desperately need access to longer term, unrestricted funding:

'On one hand, funders have been fantastically flexible in accepting changed outputs and coming back and saying that our focus has changed or shifted. But we are desperately looking around for where the funders are for new funds and we think they're holding back on us a bit.'

There is so much psychological and emotional stuff that goes with fundraising that funders don't realise. We really need the ones who will be in the long haul with us through the process.'

'De-restrict funding. Trust us to do the right thing. Support the organisation, not the service.'

Questions and opportunities for funders

The expectations of last spring – of emergency, recovery and renewal – have been blown asunder. At the time of writing, there is not even certainty about summer holidays. In this context, the pressure on VCSE organisations is intolerable. Our recent discussions reinforce the value that funders can deliver if they:

1. **Provide long-term, unrestricted funding** – we repeat this call because VCSE organisations identify it as the single most powerful thing that funders can do to support them. It enables them to be agile and decisive in dealing with the ever-changing demands of the current uncertainty, while planning as best they can for whatever the future holds.
2. **Adopt simple and flexible practices** that accommodate the ongoing unpredictability caused by Covid-19 and respect the intense strain under which everyone is working. In particular, be realistic about what can be promised by applicants, and honest about how funding judgements are being made.
3. **Share the risk.** During the emergency many funders have adopted less onerous approaches to due diligence and shown greater trust in VCSE organisations themselves to make the best use of funds. A commitment to sustaining this approach for the foreseeable future powerfully demonstrates empathy with, and support for, the sector.

You can read more about how other funders are working towards more open and trusting grant-making, and join our community of practice, at www.ivar.org.uk/flexible-funding.

Authorship

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