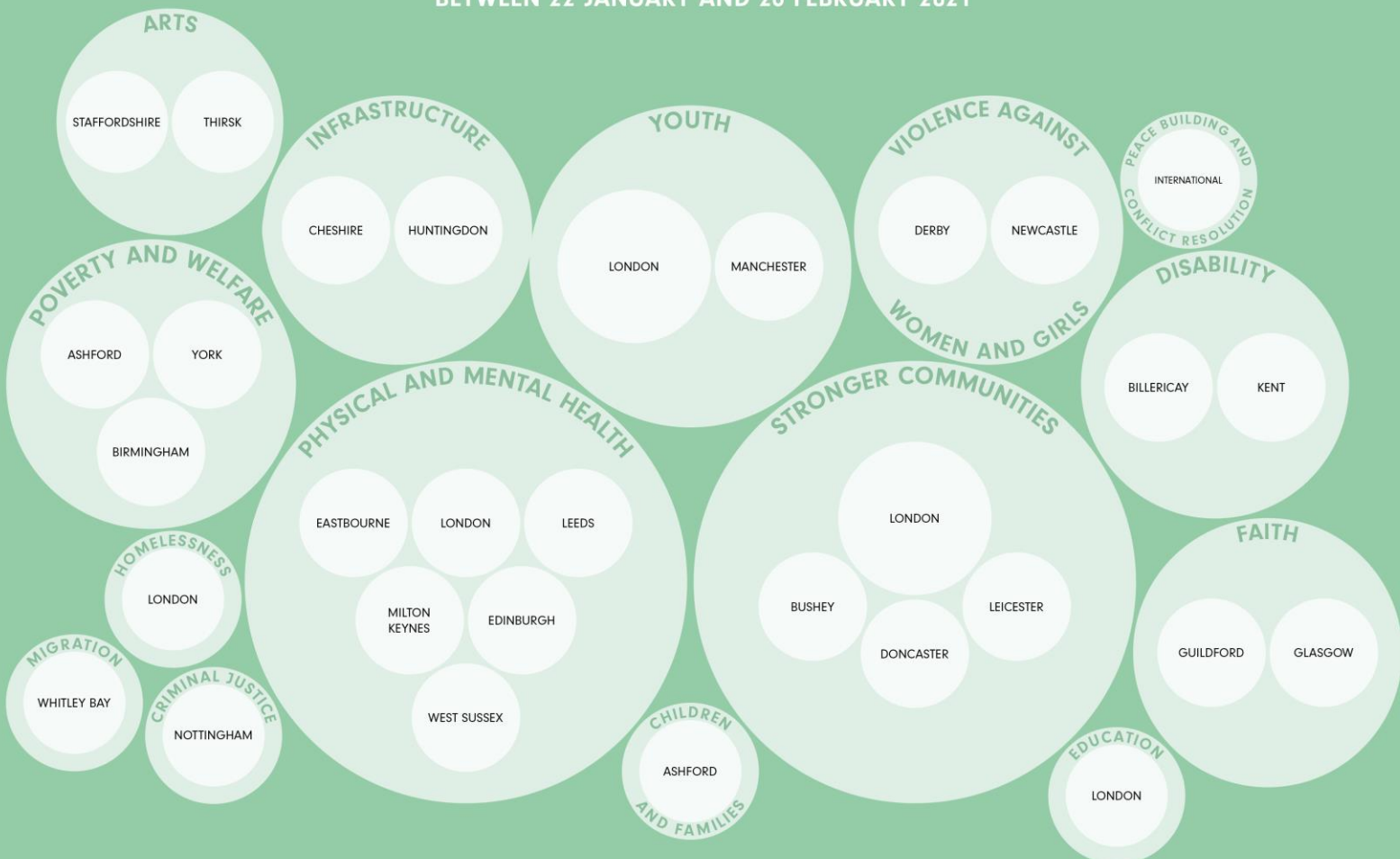# Show us you trust us

A briefing on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the Covid-19 crisis

18 March 2021

WE HEARD FROM 34 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 22 JANUARY AND 26 FEBRUARY 2021

ARTS
- STAFFORDSHIRE
- THIRSK

INFRASTRUCTURE
- CHESHIRE
- HUNTINGDON

YOUTH
- LONDON
- MANCHESTER

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
- DERBY
- NEWCASTLE

PEACE BUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION
- INTERNATIONAL

DISABILITY
- BILLERICAY
- KENT

POVERTY AND WELFARE
- ASHFORD
- YORK
- BIRMINGHAM

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
- EASTBOURNE
- LONDON
- LEEDS
- MILTON KEYNES
- EDINBURGH
- WEST SUSSEX

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
- LONDON
- BUSHEY
- LEICESTER
- DONCASTER

FAITH
- GUILDFORD
- GLASGOW

HOMELESSNESS
- LONDON

MIGRATION
- WHITLEY BAY

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
- NOTTINGHAM

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
- ASHFORD

EDUCATION
- LONDON

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 briefing shares the experiences of 34 leaders and senior staff participating in the sessions between 22 January and 26 February 2021, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise.
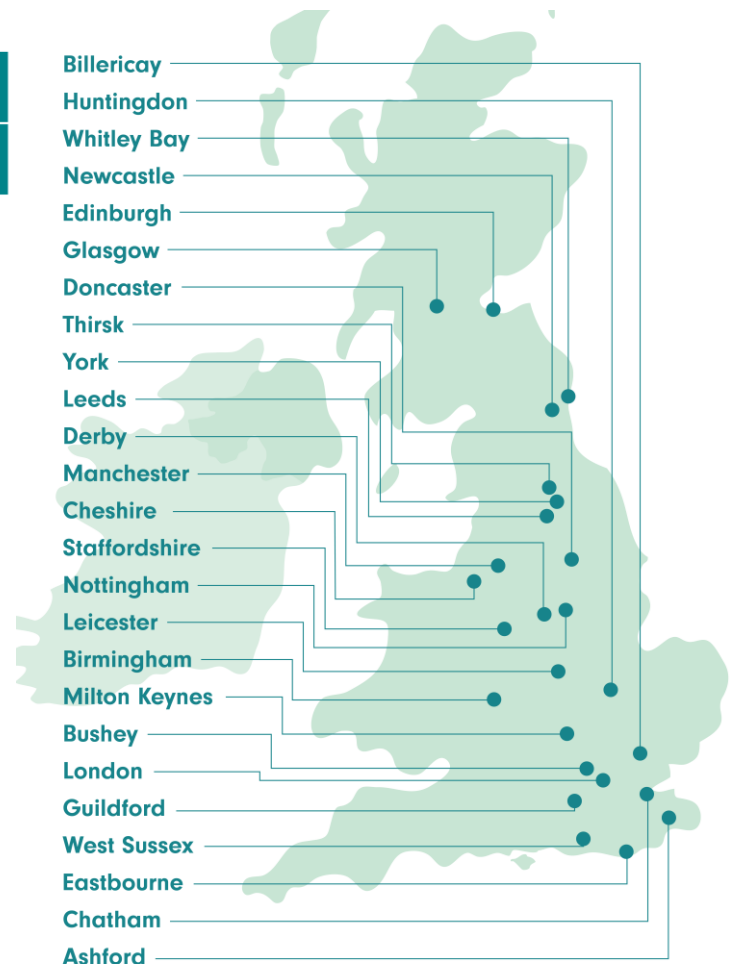
Who did we hear from?

Income ranges:

UNDER £250K	
£250K – £500K	
£500K – £1M	
OVER £1M	
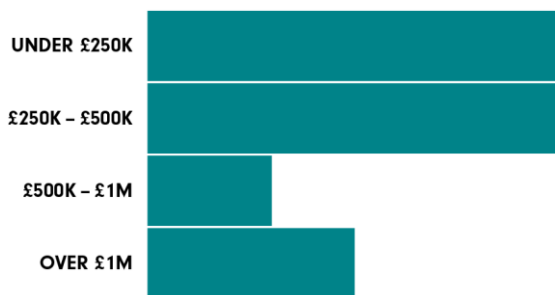
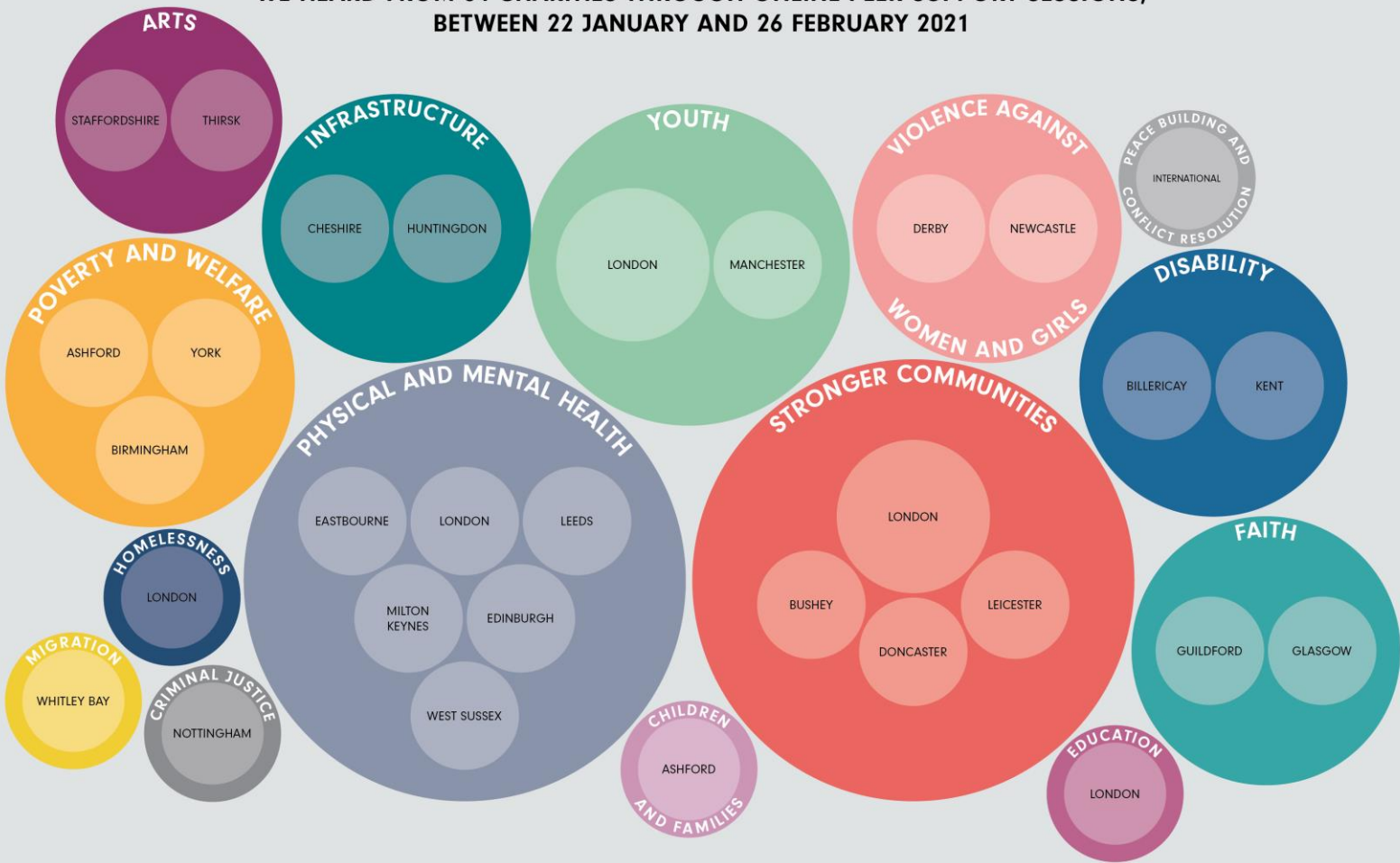**We heard from 34 charities between 22 January and 26 February 2021 through online support sessions.**

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

Main office locations:

Billericay
Huntingdon
Whitley Bay
Newcastle
Edinburgh
Glasgow
Doncaster
Thirsk
York
Leeds
Derby
Manchester
Cheshire
Staffordshire
Nottingham
Leicester
Birmingham
Milton Keynes
Bushey
London
Guildford
West Sussex
Eastbourne
Chatham
Ashford

WE HEARD FROM 34 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS, BETWEEN 22 JANUARY AND 26 FEBRUARY 2021

ARTS
STAFFORDSHIRE | THIRSK

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CHESHIRE | HUNTINGDON

YOUTH
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DERBY | NEWCASTLE

PEACE BUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION
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POVERTY AND WELFARE
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STRONGER COMMUNITIES
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HOMELESSNESS
LONDON

MIGRATION
WHITLEY BAY

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
NOTTINGHAM

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
ASHFORD

EDUCATION
LONDON

ARTS
Borderlands Voices
Rural Arts

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Dads Unlimited

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
IMARA

DISABILITY
Hamelin Trust
The Challenging Behaviour Foundation

EDUCATION
Books Beyond Words

FAITH
Wintershall CIO
Faith in Community

HOMELESSNESS
Hope for Southall Street Homeless

INFRASTRUCTURE
CVS Cheshire East
Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations

MIGRATION
NACCOM

**PEACE BUILDING
AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**
Rethinking Conflict

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
Battle Scars
Willen Hospice
Scottish Council on Human Bioethics
Centre for Chaplaincy in Education
Coroners Court Support Service
Holding Space

POVERTY AND WELFARE
RIFT Social Enterprise
Older Citizens Advocacy York
Father Hudson's Care

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
St Philip's Centre
Aston-Mansfield
b:friend
Green Connections CIC
Extraordinary Lives
The Choir with No Name

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
Safe and Sound Charity
Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland

YOUTH
Hideaway Youth Project Ltd
Young Citizens
Million Minutes

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

As we approach the anniversary of the first national lockdown, VCSE leaders have been reflecting on the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has brought, the lessons they have learned, and the implications for new ways of working that blend remote and face-to-face activity.

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

1. Transitioning to the 'new normal'
2. Managing emotions
3. Juggling demand, funding and resources.

1. Transitioning to the 'new normal'

For some leaders, there is an air of optimism and hope for the future as they plan ahead, focusing on transition to a 'new normal', rather than reverting to 'business as usual':

> *'Priorities developed alongside realism about strategy and the two came together. This has helped us develop a new case for funding bodies.'*

> *'Covid has been kind to us. More time to think about strategy and pivot to remote working.'*

> *'This is an opportunity to think about how to revise our activities – if it has not been working previously, replace it with something else.'*

There are widespread plans to move towards a more blended way of working – incorporating both older and newer approaches, and with an emphasis on online service provision and remote working practices:

> *'I don't see this as a temporary arrangement, this is my new normal.'*

> *'We will never go back to not having online provision; it's effective and cost effective.'*

For many, the creation of online services has led to higher engagement from their service users: *'We've been reaching people that we would never have reached before'*. This engagement is particularly important for frontline organisations, as Covid-19 has exacerbated many social issues experienced by the people and communities that they support. Looking ahead, leaders are planning for a higher demand on services due to increased need:

> *'We know as we come out of lockdown, more children will be exploited online. We're planning for continued increase in demand.'*

> *'We're at a turning point. The impacts of Covid are quite severe for us at the moment.'*

However, planning for the future continues to present puzzles and dilemmas. While transitioning to a 'new normal' is exciting for some leaders, there is a concern that the advantages of digital and online working have overshadowed the advantages of more traditional ways of working. This is particularly the case

for organisations that place high value on relational working, and have struggled to translate this online:

> 'I've heard some organisations say that, "We can work like this in the future" and that, "It's more efficient". I've heard some say that they are giving up office spaces. I'm not buying that at all: we can make greater use of tech, but, in my mind, nothing beats face-to-face communication.'

> 'It worries me that organisations are thinking that they will continue in this way. There is a lot of learning and good that we can take from last year, but we need to pick what has been good about new tech, but not take everything or continue with everything.'

> 'I definitely think there is a place for digital but I will be desperate to get back to face-to-face.'

2. Managing emotions

The exhaustion of leaders has been a recurring theme throughout these briefings. In particular, the difficulty of balancing the demands of providing emotional support to their staff, with managing their own feelings of isolation and *'dwindling resilience'*:

> 'I think we're all unaware of how much the last 10 months has affected us personally. And when you're trying to run an organisation based on relational working and that disappears, that's really hard.'

> 'You have to be resilient in your personal life and resilient in your work life. It's like Groundhog Day, every day.'

> 'I've become quite exhausted. I'm sick and tired of trying to keep the money rolling in. I'm fed up, trying to keep everyone motivated.'

As organisations turn their minds to life after lockdown, mental health and wellbeing remain central preoccupations for leaders, especially those juggling the distinctive needs of frontline staff, furloughed staff and those working remotely. In addition, increased demands from service users have placed further strain on all staff as they continue to work under difficult and demanding conditions:

> 'I am dealing with exhausted, tired and emotional clinical staff. There are increasing levels of emotional anxiety.'

> 'Our helpline staff are burnt out. They're not calling you because they're having a good day, they're calling because their world is falling apart.'

Providing emotional support and managing these issues remotely is difficult for leaders, particularly when remote working means that issues are harder to pick up on:

> 'In the office you could go in with a tea and take their calls while they go round the block to clear their head. But now it's call after call, and then they're left with their family.'

However, leaders also recognise the benefits of greater attention to their own wellbeing:

> *'Just taking some time off, even though there is nowhere to go and doing mundane things helps. It doesn't have to be productive, it can be restorative.'*

> *'What got me through the first year was peer support with other CEOs and having that confidant.'*

3. Juggling demand, funding and resources

With most emergency grants due to expire at the end of March, concerns about funding remain high. Without any certainty about longer-term funding, the future looks bleak and murky – especially for organisations witnessing increased demands for services, and the continued fallout from statutory services having been cut to the bone:

> *'We're all passionate about the work we do and we're all aware of the scale of need. At the same time, resources are becoming scarcer and we all want to do more.'*

> *'You're feeling like you're stretched in every direction when what you'd really like to do is just make sure your capacity is covered.'*

Many leaders have reacted to their squeezed funding and resources by adapting and scaling back their ambitions: *'We can't do all of it all the time – it is ok to do a bit and that is better than nothing'.* A more pragmatic approach to goals and aspirations also allows leaders to concentrate their limited resources around what their service users really need:

> *'We need to be realistic. We cannot maintain this level that we're at.'*

> *'We knew the funding situation was going to get difficult and we had to be realistic about the capacity that the staff team would have.'*

> *'Because local authorities are being cut, we are trying to diversify. But it's hard.'*

While project-related funding has enabled some organisations to survive, there is an immediate and urgent need for the security and freedom of unrestricted core funding in order to plan for the future and deliver the best possible response to people in need: *'I don't want to survive, I want to thrive.'*

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

In our last briefing, VCSE leaders discussed the support that funders could provide through: supportive funding structures; collaborative working; and certainty beyond March.

All remain critical as VCSE leaders continue to adapt and respond to the needs of their service users, plan the transition to their 'new normal', and try to maintain the emotional wellbeing of their teams.

A number were explored again in the most recent peer support sessions, which focused on:

1. The need for long-term and unrestricted funding
2. Involving organisations in future plans
3. Championing the sector.

1. The need for long-term and unrestricted funding

While many leaders are appreciative of the emergency funding that was offered in 2020, attention is now focused on what happens next. For many, there has already been a resurgence of competition within the funding environment, alongside deep anxiety about long-term financial security. Organisations in receipt of emergency grants are coming under pressure to source longer-term funds, rather than *'limping from one bit of money to another bit of money'*:

> *'Funders are being generous and kind this year. We are not so confident they will be next year. And we'll be losing the Government support which has carried us over. Next year will be scarier than this year.'*

For most leaders, one solution to this state of instability and insecurity is long-term, unrestricted funding:

> *'We don't want more money for service provision; we just need more money for staff to deliver the work.'*

> *'We need funders to say, "We know you will use it for what is needed and you are doing a good job", without the restrictive conditions attached. Show us you trust us.'*

> *'Listen to us more and just fund what we are doing.'*

2. Involving organisations in future plans

Tied in with requests for more long-term funding, VCSE leaders are also calling for more collaborative relationships with their funders, especially in relation to the development of future funding plans: *'Help organisations to think outside of themselves and to work with others to come up with collective solutions'*. Organisations that work closely with their service users have expert knowledge of their communities and are well-placed to identify and articulate needs, as well as design responses. This knowledge needs to be seen as an asset which funders can draw on as they make critical decisions about longer-term support.

3. Championing the sector

Funders have a key role to play in helping to communicate and promote the vital contribution of small and medium VCSE organisations. In particular, leaders are looking to their funders to act as *'vocal cheerleaders'*, amplifying the voice of their organisations, especially in relation to wider calls for greater investment from local and national government.

Questions and opportunities for funders

Drawing on our latest conversations with leaders, three key messages for funders stand out:

1. Trust and patience
Trust and patience remain at the heart of the response needed. That extends to a more collaborative approach to setting priorities and designing processes that are attuned to the uncertainty and unpredictability that we are all now living with.

2. Learning
This continues to be a critical time for learning. Moving out of the third national lockdown, with the prospect of some kind of recovery and renewal, funders clearly will not be able to fill all the gaps or support all the groups they want. There is still a task to do in supporting the frontline, sustaining valued services and creating space for people to regroup as the longer-term impact of the pandemic becomes clearer. That places a premium on listening, talking and learning, in order to inform and shape future priorities and adaptations to practice.

3. Unrestricted funding
In this context, unrestricted funding is the most useful and important contribution that funders can make to the work of VCSE organisations.

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

Authorship

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