Birds in a hurricane

Voluntary sector adaptation and resilience through and beyond Covid-19

May 2021

Introduction

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, we have spoken to over 1,000 voluntary organisations across our portfolio of research. In every conversation, whatever the focus, we have heard about how small charities, social enterprises and community groups have been coping and adapting.

Along the way, we have been capturing snapshots of the live situation through our regular briefing series, drawing specifically from our peer support sessions for voluntary sector leaders. We have been inspired by individuals, holding their teams and organisations together in the toughest of times. And we have reflected on how funders, in particular, could best support their efforts.

Here, though, our material comes from a wider range of projects – most of which began before the pandemic hit. In early 2020, we were facilitating local, cross-sector health partnerships, and looking at how small charities were using technology, not knowing just how vital these already important and interesting fields would become.

Our work has revealed some of what the extraordinary voluntary sector response to Covid-19 has cost for leaders, their staff teams and volunteers. And the ingenuity, dedication, creativity, compassion, and sheer hard slog that has characterised it. We have been in touch with a great diversity of organisations – from front-line community groups, through centre-based services to advocacy groups and sector support bodies – who have been affected in different ways. They have found common cause and support in coming together – sharing ideas and experiences, answers to questions, finding safe spaces to express exhaustion and doubt – helping them to gather their strength and keep soldiering on.

The pages that follow explore how organisations have survived – and in some cases even thrived – since the pandemic began. We share the things that we believe will help both voluntary organisations, and those who support them, to sustain and develop their contribution for the longer term.

Terminology

When we use the terms VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise), voluntary organisations or community groups, we are referring to all the value-driven entities that are part of civil society – including charities, social enterprises and unconstituted community groups.

We use the term 'BAME' only in quotes or when referring to external reports, otherwise we use 'ethnically diverse communities' or name the specific community that we are talking about.

Summary

Leading a small VCSE organisation is a tough job at the best of times: *'As a CEO, you're the HR department, the marketing department, the finance department, the operational manager and so on. It's difficult managing all this and the staff'*. But Covid-19 has turned the volume up right across the spectrum: *'I feel like a bird in a hurricane!'*.

Key pressures organisations have faced

- **Funding.** Many funders worked hard to provide emergency funding that supported rapid responses, and to take a light-touch approach; but the pipeline for longer-term applications remains seriously disrupted.

- **Increasing/changing demand.** Many organisations uncovered new needs. Some transformed their services; others went into a holding pattern, providing what support they could from afar. The sense of never being able to do enough was profound: *'People in need are falling off the radar'; 'Our users don't always cope well with change'.*

- **Going online.** The shortcomings of *'communicating on squares'* have become clear – from the loss of informal spaces, through to trying to support vulnerable service users, or even mediate conflict, virtually.

- **Taking care of their teams.** The welfare of staff and volunteers has been a pressing concern. To begin with, staff often *'threw their all into it'*, but, as the weeks turned into months, leaders wondered how long staff could *'survive this intensity'* and keep going.

- **Leadership.** Leaders have had to make *'tough decisions with no perfect answers'*, like whether to develop, flex or close services. There have been multiple balancing acts, for example between the welfare of users and that of staff.

The past year has been a *'story of extraordinary resilience and adaptation'*; a rare, shared period of experimentation and taking risks; and a time when new possibilities and options have sprung up: *'Learning from the crisis will stand us well in the future'*.

So, what has helped VCSE organisations to stay afloat in a period of adversity?

What has it taken to keep going?

- **Collaboration.** *'The need for joined-up thinking'* was pressing. The sense of urgency and shared purpose dissolved many common obstacles. VCSE organisations worked together to share data and enable cross-referral; they felt valued in partnerships for their distinctive reach and contribution; and they found and used a stronger voice.

- **Taking care of staff and volunteers.** From coffee mornings to candle making, leaders found ways to support their teams, and provide spaces for people to unload. Some used furlough funding in a supportive way to respond to individual circumstances; while others benefitted from experienced volunteers on furlough.

- **Discovering new ways to connect.** Going online provided unexpected benefits for many – reaching new people, enabling new conversations, and hearing more diverse voices.

- **Responsible, supportive funders.** Many funders shared risks, relaxed targets and reporting requirements and were active partners, saying: *'We want you to be responsive to your community needs'*.

- **Financial cushions.** Where they had them, reasonable reserves or unrestricted income gave leaders some assurance as they regrouped.
- **A space to share.** Leaders often talked about the isolation of their position. They valued opportunities to reflect, whether that was with their chair, trustees, an external coach (although most were reluctant to spend on support for themselves), or through peer support sessions.

It is clear that the pandemic has both stimulated new thinking and demonstrated the value and workability of approaches to funding and collaboration that VCSE organisations have been advocating for years. The intensity and visibility of need during Covid-19 has accelerated the pace of change, but its foundations feel fragile.

What next?

- **Judging progress.** We will all need to learn how to work well with uncertainty – having the confidence to act on the basis of 'what we think we know right now', then to look critically at how that went and try to do better.
- **Embedding joined-up working.** Can the collaboration, networks and the trust that have been established survive in the face of new challenges, lack of capacity, resumption of conventional roles and fierce competition for tight budgets?
- **Blended services and ways of working.** We have learnt about the ways technology can help us to work more flexibly, but also about its limits. We will need to take a mixed approach – to how we work, collaborate, and provide services.
- **Making digital inclusion a reality.** Many small VCSE organisations now have both the relationships and practical skills to reach communities so often left behind – but digital exclusion is a problem that needs to be tackled nationally.
- **Embedding a more responsive, agile, proportionate and trusting approach to funding.** Anything that funders can do to lighten the fundraising and reporting load, and to share the burden of risk, makes an immediate and tangible difference to small VCSE organisations.
- **New thinking about unrestricted funding and income diversification.** Many small VCSE organisations had turned to trading and donations to achieve flexibility – but both have been hit hard by the pandemic. A greater shift to unrestricted funding is urgently needed. VCSE organisations can then focus on listening to their communities and implementing solutions based on what they need.
- **Organisational health and wellbeing.** When resources are tight and demand is pressing, it can be hard to create time and space to *look after our people'*. The pandemic has shown just how vital this time is.
- **Mutual aid.** Many small VCSE organisations benefitted from the surge in community spirit at the outset of the pandemic. How can they retain volunteers and maintain good safeguards, while also avoiding disproportionate red tape, regulation and formalisation?
- **User voice.** Small and medium-sized VCSE organisations have a distinctive and vital contribution to make to the debate over 'what next?'. How can they best be supported in giving voice to their users? And how can their own contribution be kept in the public eye?

What has it been like to lead a small VCSE organisation through the pandemic?

Leading a small VCSE organisation is a tough job at the best of times: *'As a CEO, you're the HR department, the marketing department, the finance department, the operational manager and so on. It's difficult managing all this and the staff'*. But Covid-19 has turned the volume up right across the spectrum:

'I feel like a bird in a hurricane!'

Used to a turbulent environment and light on bureaucracy, most small VCSE organisations moved remarkably quickly in response to the immediate crisis of lockdown – whether this was to reshape, close or increase services, to introduce new ways of working, or negotiate furlough arrangements. But the duration of the crisis, and the extreme levels of uncertainty, have stretched many close to their limits.

Not everyone experiences the same pressures or in the same way. Some leaders watched weeks of closure turn into months, finally forced to take painful decisions to make furloughed staff redundant, saving what they could to preserve the work for the future. Others have been working at full tilt since March 2020, developing services and fundraising constantly in the face of ever-increasing need and demand. All feel a high sense of personal responsibility for these organisational decisions and their consequences for staff and for the communities and causes that they serve.

Over the last year, our briefings have told the unfolding story of their experience in detail. The key pressures leaders describe are:

Funding

The funding environment for many VCSE organisations changed overnight. The hit came from all sides – contracts cancelled, existing grants programmes put on hold, trading suspended, and donations diverted to headline campaigns: *'Organisations that have diversified have been paralysed during this time'*. Some funders moved quickly to support existing grantees, providing invaluable assurance to them. But this was little comfort to those whose programmes were closed or grants suspended.

Much of the funding system quickly pivoted towards short-term responses. Emergency funds made a welcome contribution in early weeks and months, despite the pressure on hard-pressed organisations of making so many applications for short-term funds. It was not long before leaders were desperate for more opportunities to bid for longer-term funding, offering them some level of control in the face of continuing uncertainty and/or rising demand.

Many funders worked hard to develop clear criteria and light-touch approaches, but too many application processes remained formulaic and burdensome: *'You somehow have to prove that you are desperate enough for the money, but you are also still functioning and not a liability'*.

Despite increasing awareness of the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people from ethnically diverse communities, community organisations too often found both statutory and independent funders unaware of differences between ethnic groups' cultural requirements:

> *'If more than one charity is serving BAME populations, it doesn't mean they are duplicating.'*

And too many funders continued to make disproportionate or unrealistic demands. For example, asking for three years of outcomes, when needs were changing week-by-week:

> *'Whatever we write will be out of date long before the decision is made.'*

The prospects for future funding remain a huge concern. The pipeline of longer-term applications to trusts and foundations has been seriously disrupted, while the environment for trading and donations remains highly challenging and the pressures on local authority budgets immense.

Increasing/changing demand

For many frontline and community-based services, there has been little or no let-up in demands and needs:

> *'Covid-19 has been like running a marathon at the pace of a sprint.'*

Often flexible and responsive by nature, *'small organisations often meet the needs of those who don't fit in standard boxes'.* The overnight closure of many mainstream services led to increasing demands on VCSE organisations with no-one else to pick up the pieces. Many found themselves supporting people they wouldn't normally help, or uncovering new needs, for example, when delivering to people's homes and seeing their living conditions. They had little time to think about anything except regrouping quickly and keeping going.

Where their work could not be shifted online relatively easily, other VCSE organisations could have hit a brick wall when the March 2020 lockdown was announced. Instead, especially in the early days, some completely transformed their offer, shifting, for example, from community arts work to co-ordinating food supplies and phone support for vulnerable people. Or they went into a holding pattern, providing what support they could to clients, but with their attention focused on being ready for the costly and challenging task of opening up buildings as soon as possible to create some space for people to meet and feel a sense of belonging.

Whatever their organisational circumstances, the sense of never being able to do enough has been profound. Throughout the pandemic, leaders have returned again and again to concerns about the impact on their most vulnerable users and on mental health:

> *'Our users don't always cope well with change.'*

> *'People are overwhelmed with loneliness.'*

'People in need are falling off the radar.'

The deep inequalities exposed by the pandemic have also been front of mind throughout. Everyone feels the need to enable their communities and users to have a stronger voice, and to have a greater voice themselves. Finding the time and resources to do this was quite another matter: *'There is no bandwidth for advocacy'*.

Going online

Going online has been more of a mountain to climb for some than for others but, mostly, organisations are coping. Quick to set up and use, Zoom, in particular, has clearly been a lifeline. The unexpected benefits – around reaching new people, enabling new conversations, increasing access, and hearing more diverse voices – have been well-rehearsed. Many small organisations have been quick to spot ways of using new connections to improve services, as, for example, in one area where a WhatsApp group now links supermarkets and food providers.

The organisational drawbacks of *'communicating on squares'* have also become clear – the loss of spaces for truly informal conversations and idea generation; the barriers of getting to know and support new team members; and the difficulties of having challenging conversations or addressing tense relationships with staff. These are amplified in service delivery, whether in building rapport with new clients, supporting vulnerable service users, or facilitating community relationships and mediating conflict: *'Race relations needs face-to-face – it's put us back 10 years'*.

An online world is clearly not an equitable one. Digital exclusion is real, particularly among vulnerable users and poor communities. Research in the London Borough of Ealing[1] found that two thirds of people from BAME communities have limited access to or knowledge of digital platforms, a shocking indictment in a system that relies increasingly on online access to claim essential benefits and services. Small organisations have moved mountains to get people online, providing a combination of kit and individual support. But the cost of both devices and Wi-Fi is a huge barrier, and some people are simply unable or unwilling to go online. Organisations have used every means at their disposal – phone calls, regular drop-offs of food and essential supplies, through the window or outdoor meetings – to help keep people safe and connected during Covid.

Taking care of the team

Staff and volunteer welfare has been a pressing concern throughout, and leaders have regularly shared ideas and experiences for keeping their teams connected and motivated, responding sensitively to the strains of individual circumstances. Bereavement, illness, caring responsibilities, shielding, home schooling, intense and stressful work, long periods of furlough – all have had an impact on people's wellbeing.

Concerns have grown over time. To begin with, staff often *'threw their all into it'*. Although some volunteers had to step back because of vulnerability or caring responsibilities, the surge of community spirit at the start of the pandemic brought new people and new energy. But, as the weeks turned into months and serious

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[1] *Impact of Covid-19 on Ealing BAME Communities.* Survey conducted by United Anglo Caribbean Society; Golden Opportunity Skills and Development; CAME Women and Girls Development Organisation; Ealing Somali Welfare and Cultural Association; Horn of Africa Disability and Elderly Association; The Tamil Community Centre, published September 2020. The survey collected data from 342 BAME residents.

illness or death became more visible, leaders spoke of grief, burnout, distress and despair, of survivors' guilt and mental health fallout. They wondered how long staff could *'survive this intensity'* and keep going: *'Everyone is just so tired.'*

The challenges of leadership

In small organisations, all these pressures land at the feet of the leader – or a tiny number of senior staff. Developing, flexing or closing services; managing and supporting staff and volunteers; negotiating with funders and making bids; keeping up with changing rules and managing risk, these all call for *'tough decisions with no perfect answers'.* And for multiple balancing acts between:

- Being responsive and being safe and professional
- Previous priorities and new demands
- The welfare of users and the welfare of staff
- Responding to immediate needs and planning for the longer-term

All this led to an increased workload: some spoke about regular 13-14 hour days, not interacting with family or friends. The constant pressure to find solutions and keep positive often felt relentless:

'I'm fed up with being my own inspiration.'

Some were well-supported by trustees and able to turn to their chair or others for support and guidance. But this was not always the case. Several examples were given of trustees being out of touch with the human side of management, more interested in economy and efficiency than in staff welfare. Or of becoming too involved in day-to-day issues, blurring the lines of accountability and creating confusion.

Forward planning in radical uncertainty has been especially challenging. Some have been forced to redesign everything:

'The organisation we were in February 2020 is now irrelevant.'

Others struggled to look ahead, with all their energy focused on *'spinning plates'.* Unclear guidelines and changing rules meant even short-term plans fell apart quickly: *'We are having to plan and re-plan every 12 weeks.'*

What has it taken to keep going?

This has been a *'story of extraordinary resilience and adaptation'.* The past year has been a period of experimentation and taking risks. For several organisations, the pandemic has shown them what is possible: *'Learning from the crisis will stand us well in the future'.*

So, what has helped small VCSE organisations to survive, even flourish, in a period of adversity?

Collaboration

'The need for joined-up thinking' was a dominant theme in the early days. The urgency of the response to the pandemic forced organisations – from local authorities through to tiny community groups – to work together. VCSE organisations, especially those close to the ground, suddenly found themselves in

demand for their distinctive reach and contribution. There was an appetite for collaboration and previous barriers fell away in response to a *'tsunami of need'*:

> *'It's strengthened partnerships we've been fighting for, for years.'*

Collaboration was important for many reasons. Voluntary organisations described how it had reduced duplication and allowed for data sharing and cross-referral. They had been able to access each other's skills, for example, to deal with trauma, and to share policies and procedures. Local networks of small voluntary organisations were good at using each other's spaces. Particularly positive was the opportunity collaboration provided for peer support, with larger organisations willing to share useful contacts and support their smaller counterparts in seeking funding, although there was mixed experience of relationships in bidding consortia. Collaboration also gave VCSE organisations a voice in influential circles and allowed them to take part in national campaigns. Leaders highlighted the *'remarkable'* change in the homelessness sector, united in a common, national effort to get all rough sleepers off the streets and into accommodation: *'It inspires others'*.

Collaborations were simpler when they grew from existing relationships – the sense of urgency and shared purpose stripped away many common obstacles. It was easier to meet up and involve people with Zoom, although still difficult for some small VCSE organisations to find the capacity that partnership working required. And the strain that everyone was working under – whether in the public or voluntary sector – was a constant challenge.

Taking care of staff and volunteers

Leaders have worked hard to find ways to support their staff and volunteers. They described coffee mornings, and fun activities – especially over Christmas – like candle making. They stressed the importance of allowing time off and building in time for self-care. One organisation had closed for three weeks over Christmas, others introduced a more flexible working day. Some mentioned gift tokens. Others emphasised the importance of celebrating success. Many had taken great care to provide safe spaces to unload. One organisation had set up a listening club, another a buddying system. Some had paid for trauma counselling or clinical supervision.

Furlough funding was used in a supportive and creative way, with organisations doing their best to respond to individual circumstances and to make sure furloughed staff felt valued and in touch. Some rotated staff on furlough and others benefitted from experienced volunteers, furloughed by peer organisations in their networks.

There will be much to learn from the experience of online – and often more flexible – working. However, there are also concerns about the pressure that so many staff have been under for so long, and burnout may become more apparent once the immediate crisis begins to fade and people can allow themselves to relax.

Discovering new ways to connect

Small VCSE organisations are the frontline of support and access to services for many vulnerable people and marginalised communities. For those that could, the first step was simply to reassure people *'we are still here'*. Value-driven and close to their communities, they have been quick to adopt different ways of working

and to mobilise resources to reach and support people, who might otherwise fall through the net.

New ways of working have had positive consequences. Going online has widened reach for many, while arts and media organisations, in particular, are increasingly offering creative ways of connecting – a YouTube channel here, a film there – demonstrating how going online can add value now and for the longer term. Others have started contacting people by phone – in one case, fast-tracking a scheme that was already in their plans, in another giving phones to clients – so that contact is more regular than it was in the past.

Some have found people able to open up more readily about their wellbeing and emotions (although not so much about debt, which was still surrounded by stigma): *'They wouldn't normally tell you their issues'.* Others found unexpected strengths in their service users: *'Having to be more "hands-off" has led to less hand-holding and more independence'.*

Responsible, supportive funders

VCSE organisations praised agile funders who had been willing to adjust to the new world, who had shared their risks, relaxed targets and reporting requirements and been active partners. They stressed the importance of trust and of funders being human rather than contractual, with accountability based on shared learning. They welcomed simplified application processes, respectful relationships and inclusive policies. This experience was by no means universal but hugely valued when it happened, often for emotional as well as practical reasons:

> *'The biggest relief was getting emails from three funders saying we're not going to pressure you for targets you were due to meet in the next three months. They have also said: "If you want to do things that weren't in the original bid, come and tell us about them, we'll more than likely say yes. We want you to be responsive to your community needs". That's taken a weight off my shoulders.'*

Financial cushions

Where they had them, reasonable reserves or a healthy level of unrestricted income gave leaders some assurance as they regrouped and made plans. It is very hard for small VCSE organisations, reliant largely on project funding, to build reserves and – with trading and donations dropping through the floor – some were looking at significant holes in their budgets. Many were anxious about whether and when to use these precious resources, when rebuilding them might prove impossible: *'Do we draw down now or save for recovery?'.*

Organisations who had been forced to close their services had often saved money, despite the non-financial costs. For them, furlough funding was a lifeline, although redundancy levels increased as the months went on with little prospect of reopening at pre-pandemic levels.

A space to share

Leaders of small VCSE organisations often talked about the isolation of their position:

> *'As CEO, you straddle the operational and strategic. You do stand alone in many ways.'*

There is a burden of personal responsibility for making the right call in the face of so much uncertainty: *'I've always been the person that people have looked to for decisions. As a result, everything can seem very personalised'.*

Some benefitted from a good chair or skilled and empathetic trustees. Mostly reluctant to spend on their own support, some did invest in external coaching: *'It was incredibly useful. I was just reacting, reacting, reacting and my head was spinning with what-if scenarios'.* Others learnt to delegate more, making better use of the skills in their teams. Having safe spaces to download and offload proved valuable, especially for sharing experiences and ideas with other leaders of small VCSE organisations from across the UK and many different fields.

For many voluntary organisations, time to plan would have been a luxury. A few genuinely thrived on the energy of speed and uncertainty. But others, who had to slim or close down services, nonetheless valued the opportunity to reflect. They found it refreshing to think about the medium term and *'take out the Covid lens'.*

What next?

It is clear that the pandemic has both stimulated new thinking and demonstrated the value and workability of approaches to funding and collaboration that VCSE organisations have been advocating for years. The intensity and visibility of need during Covid-19 has accelerated the pace of change, but its foundations feel fragile. The challenge is to capture and build on what has been learnt, so that small VCSE organisations are able to propel themselves forwards, not be pushed 'back to normal', or so low down the list of priorities that their contribution is lost:

> *Smaller charities have the potential to contribute to the transformational change needed if the economy and society is to 'build back better' following the pandemic. But we found that **their transformative capacity is currently constrained** by the local and national public policy environments in which they operate.*[2]

We end with reflections on some key questions and challenges that both VCSE organisations and those who support them may need to consider if this transformative capacity is to be strengthened and developed to help meet the challenges ahead.

Judging progress

For many, the pandemic has raised important questions about *'what success looks like'.* We all want to know how to make our best contribution and where we are being less effective but, as we move out of emergency mode, there are no simple answers about what to do and how to do it. We will all need to learn how to work well with uncertainty – having the confidence to act on the basis of 'what

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[2] Dayson, C., Baker, L. and Rees, J. (2021) *The 'Value of Small' in a Big Crisis. The distinctive contribution, value and experiences of smaller charities in England and Wales during the COVID 19 pandemic.* Sheffield: CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University.

we think we know right now', then to look critically at how that went and try to do better. We need reporting systems and indicators of progress that support this forward-looking approach.

Embedding joined-up working

Joined-up working has proved its worth – small VCSE organisations have become more visible, their contributions more recognised. Can the collaboration, networks and the trust that have been established survive in the face of new challenges, lack of capacity, resumption of conventional roles and fierce competition for tight budgets? The hope must be that they can if the task is clear and compelling:

> *What happens to partnership working, or working collaboratively, under the context of extreme pressure? The answer is that all the junk that usually gets in the way of collaboration – like ego and territory – falls away, because the work becomes the thing that matters most and is at the centre. The idea that we have to make something happen stays at the centre.*[3]

Blended services and ways of working

There has been a huge shift in the use of technology and small voluntary organisations have been quick to identify ways in which it can help them work more flexibly, increase their reach, and develop their services. But, for many, the changes have been made on a shoestring. Embedding and building on them efficiently will call for resources and access to expertise.

We have also learnt more about the limits of technology – about what it can't help us do and who it can't help us reach or support adequately. Blended approaches are needed – based on what works best online and what works best face-to-face – in how we work together as teams, collaborate with others, and in how we provide our services.

Making digital inclusion a reality

The moral and practical imperative to tackle digital exclusion is overwhelming. Small VCSE organisations can only nibble at the edges of this challenge with current resources. But many now have both the relationships and the practical skills to reach people and communities so often left behind by large social policy initiatives.

Embedding a more open and trusting approach to funding

There is new energy among funders around the idea that 'how we do it matters'. Anything they can do to lighten the fundraising and reporting load and to share the burden of risk makes an immediate and tangible difference to small VCSE organisations. It provides a practical framework to help deliver renewed commitments to equity, diversity and inclusion. And it makes a start in rebalancing the power dynamic at the heart of funding relationships.

You can join our community of over 70 funders working towards open and trusting grant-making on our website: www.ivar.org.uk/flexible-funders.

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[3] Beer, T. (2021) Four ways now can be a moment for transformational learning. IVAR.

New thinking about unrestricted funding and income diversification

Unrestricted funding enables small voluntary organisations to listen to and hear their communities, and implement solutions based on what they need. With tight budgets for contracts and the continued dominance of project funding in many trusts and foundations, many had turned to trading and donations to achieve flexibility. With both hit so severely during the pandemic and economic prospects so uncertain, a greater shift to unrestricted funding is urgently needed.

Organisational health and wellbeing

When resources are very tight and demand pressing, it can be hard to create time and space to *'look after our people'*. The pandemic has shown just how vital this time is. Valuing and supporting staff and volunteers; responding sensitively to the pressures facing individuals; keeping people connected; taking care of teams; creating space and support for leaders; building and developing trustee boards that deliver both oversight and added value – these all underpin the ability of voluntary organisations to make their strongest contribution for the future.

Mutual aid

Many small VCSE organisations benefitted from the surge in community spirit at the outset of the pandemic. Finding the resources to train and support new volunteers was not always easy, especially where they were dealing with vulnerable clients. However, it brought new people and new energy that voluntary organisations hope to build on in the future. The growing interest in nature and green space has already given a boost to environmental organisations. But there is much to think about – retaining volunteers; the durability of informal support; resourcing mutual aid in poorer communities; maintaining good safeguards – all the while avoiding disproportionate red tape, regulation and formalisation, which create barriers.

User voice

The pandemic has exposed huge inequalities and the threadbare fabric of support that has been left by years of austerity and changed labour practices. There are long-term systemic issues that will outlive the crisis and we cannot afford as a society to go 'back to normal'. Small and medium-sized VCSE organisations have a distinctive and vital contribution to make to the debate over 'what next?' How can they best be supported in giving voice to their users? And how can their own contribution be kept in the public eye?

In conclusion

We have all been affected by the pandemic. It has upended our lives, both at home and at work. Across our families and our organisations, we see exhausted and anxious faces. And the uncertainty isn't over. At such a moment, there needs to be a premium on patience and kindness, and a concerted effort to bring imagination and empathy to our work. If the last year has taught us anything, it is that voluntary organisations have these qualities in abundance; and that if they are trusted and respected, they will deliver for those they exist to serve.

Resources

- **Judging progress through balancing data with intuition:** Our [briefing series](#) following learning and evaluation in trusts and foundations during Covid-19; in particular *[More data is not the answer](#)*.

- **Open and trusting grant-making:** [Join our community](#) of 70 funders working towards eight commitments that were co-designed by charities and funders, and that build on London Funders' *We stand with the sector* statement.

- **Two practical ideas to increase unrestricted funding:** [A blog](#) from Nick Addington, Chief Executive of the William Grant Foundation and member of our open and trusting grant-making community of practice.

- **Giving voice to people with direct experience:** This is explored on pages 26-32 of *[Small charities and social change](#)*, and through *['Lived experience' in grant-making practice.](#)*

- **Getting started with collaboration:** [A framework for joint action](#); and [a briefing](#) with examples of how cross-sector partnerships worked together in response to Covid-19 – and the eight factors that enabled them to work effectively together.

- **Using technology:** *[Start somewhere](#)* brings together advice from small voluntary organisations on overcoming the barriers to using technology, pointers for support organisations, and things for funders to think about – such as how they can support infrastructure, training and experimentation costs associated with 'digital transformation'.