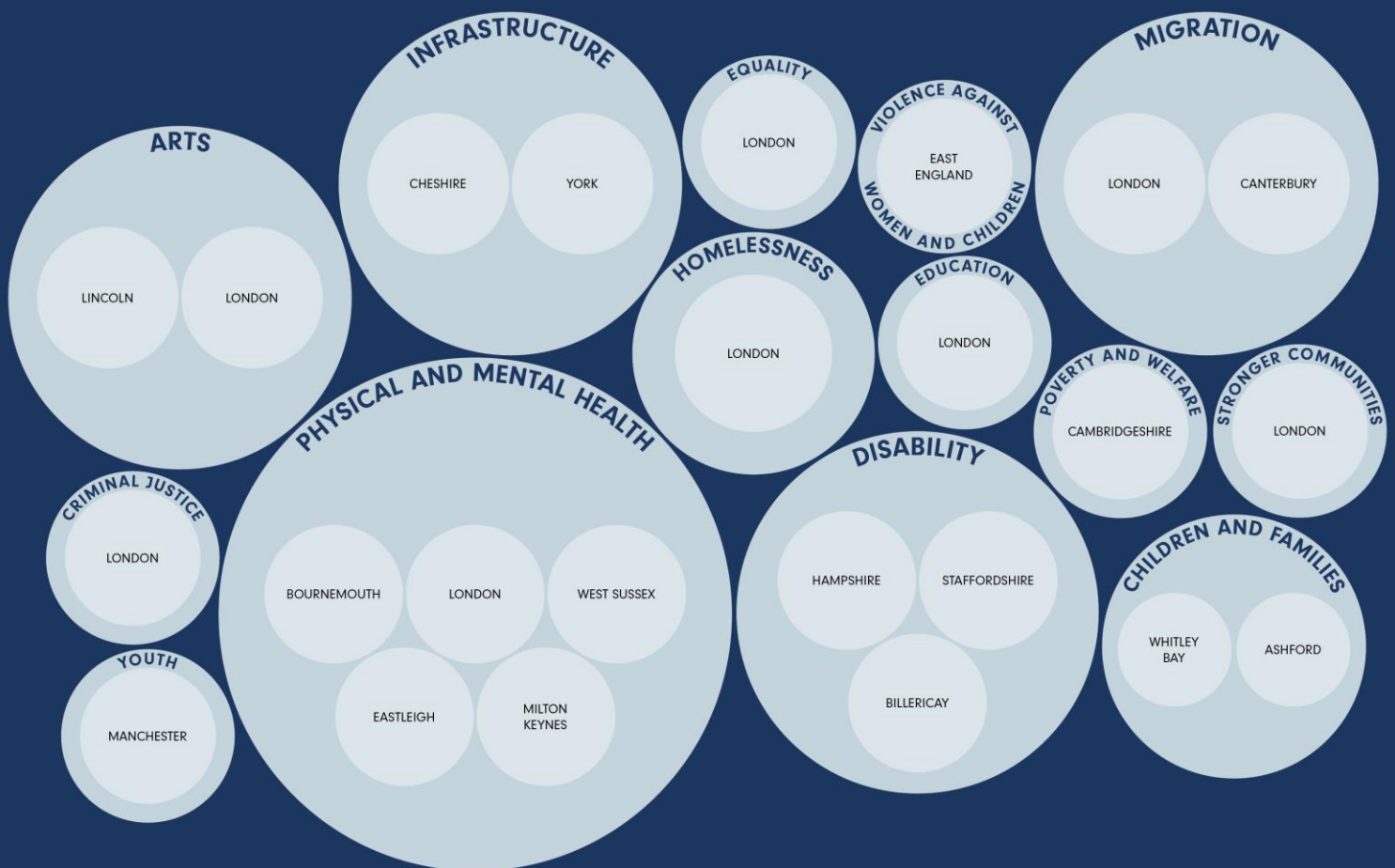# Building a positive legacy together

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

13 May 2021

WE HEARD FROM 26 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS

INFRASTRUCTURE
CHESHIRE
YORK

EQUALITY
LONDON

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN
EAST ENGLAND

MIGRATION
LONDON
CANTERBURY

ARTS
LINCOLN
LONDON

HOMELESSNESS
LONDON

EDUCATION
LONDON

POVERTY AND WELFARE
CAMBRIDGESHIRE

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
LONDON

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
BOURNEMOUTH
LONDON
WEST SUSSEX
EASTLEIGH
MILTON KEYNES

DISABILITY
HAMPSHIRE
STAFFORDSHIRE
BILLERICAY

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
WHITLEY BAY
ASHFORD

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
LONDON

YOUTH
MANCHESTER

Introduction

Recognising the tremendous pressure that charity leaders are under as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, IVAR has been facilitating online peer support groups for leaders of voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations since April 2020. Our aim has been 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.

For the last 12 months, we have been offering funders feedback on the kinds of challenges these organisations are facing, and the help they need. This briefing is the final in our series. It shares the experiences of 26 leaders participating in our final peer support sessions, and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise. We will continue to support VCSE leaders and their funders through a new project – Leading in Uncertainty – starting in June.
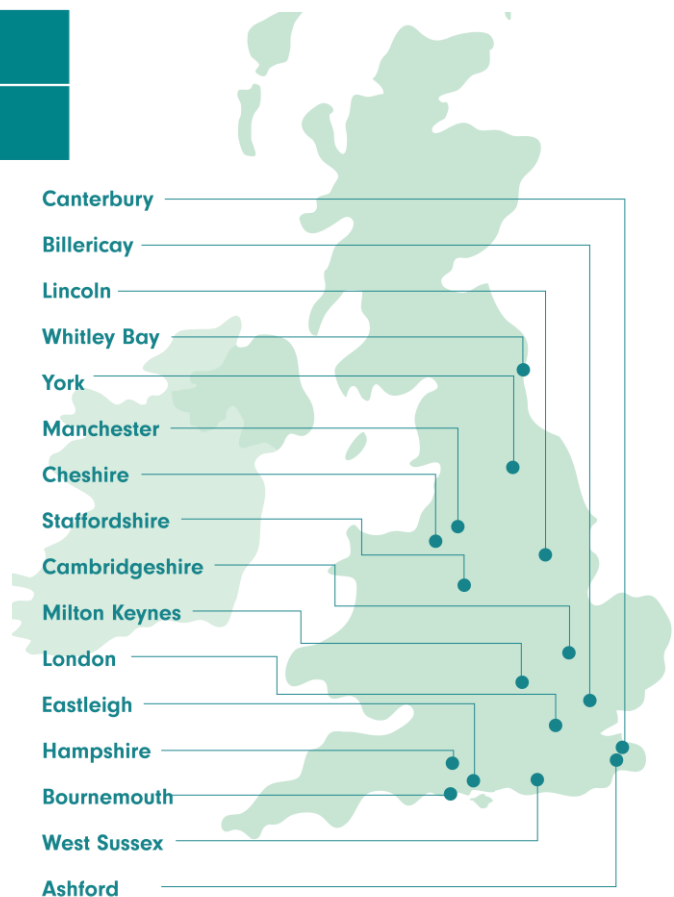
Who did we hear from?

Income ranges:

- UNDER £250K
- £250K – £500K
- £500K – £1M
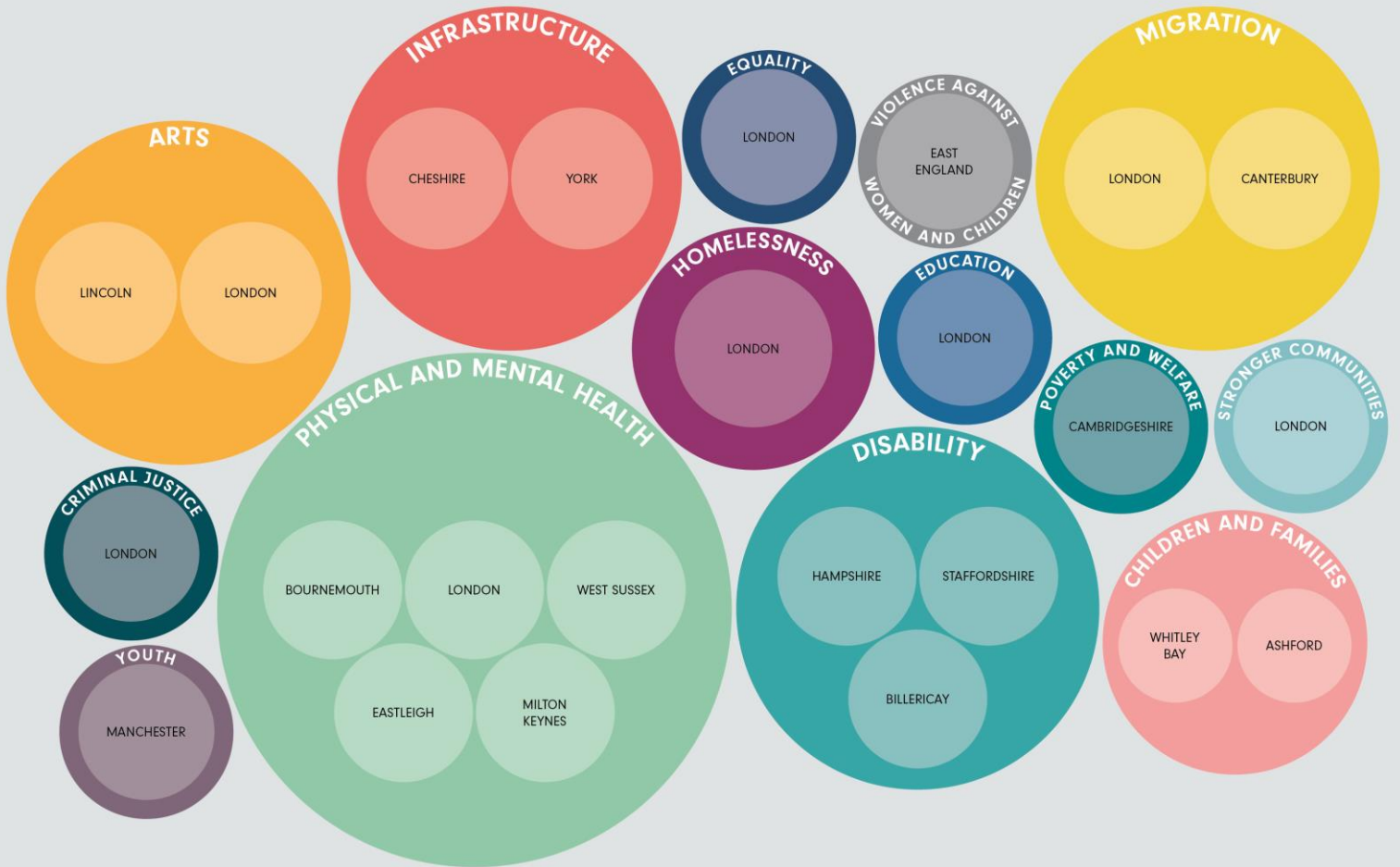- OVER £1M

We heard from 26 charities during our final online support sessions.

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

Main office locations:

- Canterbury
- Billericay
- Lincoln
- Whitley Bay
- York
- Manchester
- Cheshire
- Staffordshire
- Cambridgeshire
- Milton Keynes
- London
- Eastleigh
- Hampshire
- Bournemouth
- West Sussex
- Ashford

WE HEARD FROM 26 CHARITIES THROUGH ONLINE PEER SUPPORT SESSIONS

ARTS
Soundlincs
Mousetrap Theatre Projects

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Smell the Roses
Dads Unlimited

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Clean Break

DISABILITY
The Rainbow Centre
Borderlands Voices
Hamelin Trust

EDUCATION
Books beyond words

EQUALITY
women@thewell

HOMELESSNESS
The Upper Room
Hope for Southall Street Homeless

INFRASTRUCTURE
CVS Cheshire East
Welfare Benefits Unit

MIGRATION
CARAS
Kent Refugee Action Network

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
Centre for Chaplaincy in Education
Compassionate Cuppa CIC
Willen Hospice
The Coroners' Courts
Support Service
The Listening Ear

POVERTY AND WELFARE
Cambridge City Foodbank

STRONGER COMMUNITIES
Aston-Mansfield

**VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN AND GIRLS**
4Transform

YOUTH
Hideaway Youth Project Ltd

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

With the further lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, and a clear 'roadmap' for future easing, leaders have been in reflective mode. Conversations have focused on their mixed experiences of life during the pandemic, and the implications for the state of the sector and their role within it:

> *'It's been the hardest year of my professional career because I've been totally out of control, but there will be a legacy that is positive as well as negative.'*

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

1. The role of leadership moving forward
2. Long-term planning and the 'new normal'
3. The support of networks and infrastructure bodies

1. The role of leadership moving forward

Leaders have been reflecting on the amazing work of the VCSE sector in supporting communities during the pandemic, and are hopeful that the visibility of this work will give the sector the recognition it deserves:

> *'Voluntary organisations have been very visible. Unlike other sectors that have shut services, we haven't.'*

> *'In times of adversity, you do see the best in people. I am so proud to work with my staff and trustees. To come together and to do the very best that we can do – I'm proud to be a part of that.'*

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many leaders have taken on a more active role in the day-to-day management of their organisations and have talked about *'role modelling as a leader'*, such as consciously having space in their diaries for lunch breaks and walks to encourage staff to do the same. Leadership styles have also become more flexible and adaptable:

> *'We can be flexible, we can be creative and we can change.'*

> *'Up until this last year, I have been someone that's said, "I hate change", whereas now, change is the new normal ... and constant change is here to stay.'*

> *'We are much more aware of how to navigate the uncertainty.'*

While enhanced awareness and management of staff wellbeing has enabled leaders to see staff as *'whole people'* rather than just workers, and to *'become more human'*, some have struggled to *'know where to draw the line'*:

> *'There is a lot of responsibility on the leader to care for the workforce's mental health – what and where is the individual's responsibility?'*

Juggling these additional aspects to leadership have taken their toll on people's health:

> *'I'm feeling fatigued.'*

'I need a holiday from Covid, from work, and the house. I am done now. I need a proper break.'

2. Long-term planning and the 'new normal'

While the impact of Covid-19 is still being felt across many aspects of organisational life, leaders do have a tentative sense that *'the worst is behind us'.* Many are asking, *'What now?'* and, *'Where do we go from here?',* signalling a departure from short-term emergency planning, into long-term strategic thinking:

> *'What happens when people are given back their freedom? We and the Government need to be prepared about how we will respond to being locked up for a year.'*

Planning for the 'new normal' is focusing on *'reviewing and refreshing delivery',* with an emphasis on *'retain, develop or remove":*

> *'We're thinking about changing our model. I have identified what I call the "Covid cohort" – those who have not had the usual experience we try to facilitate. So, we're experimenting with a new dimension of our work.'*

> *'It needs to be people-driven, whether this is face-to-face or virtual. We need to trial things out and see if it works.'*

A key planning issue for leaders is how to balance the need and appetite for change with the importance of managing expectations, especially given the turbulence of the operating environment:

> *'We can't do everything and it's important to say what we won't be able to do from time to time, being pragmatic about what change is possible and what isn't.'*

> *'I want to lead my organisation but I don't want to make decisions for my staff that I will have to back down from. I don't want to give it to you and then take it away – it still feels so uncertain.'*

> *'People expect you to make decisions but you can't make decisions like you would normally do, due to the level of uncertainty.'*

At the same time, questions about new working arrangements are uppermost in people's minds. For some, a blended approach for services and staff, mixing traditional face-to-face working with online working, feels appropriate:

> *'Have our first face-to-face event coming up. Feels almost that we're slowly going back to normal, but a lot of our online networking groups are not going back to face-to-face. People still want that hybrid opportunity to stay at home.'*

For others, the lure of being together with their staff team in the office is powerful:

> *'Working from home has played its course. Having the office space has really renewed excitement amongst the team that they will be able to see someone face-to-face.'*

> *'One of the reasons we've gone for the office model is because we know that working from home can be boundary-less. It's an ethical struggle.'*

> *'Without an office, I cannot set organisational culture and say, "This is how we do things here".'*

Engaging with these different choices and opportunities is bringing some succour to leaders, many of whom remain drained and depleted after a year of intense personal and professional challenges. For some, there is a glimmer of hope, especially with the resumption of some essential services. However, for most, there is unease about *'things moving forward too quickly'* and a fear of being *'too hopeful'*:

> *'We have been running on empty for such a long time. We see the light at the end of the tunnel. We have been holding everything together for so long, that if we relax, we don't feel we have any energy left.'*

> *'They are walking towards the light and increasingly their legs are feeling like lead.'*

> *'We're doing this all very slowly. We're not running towards it, we're walking very gingerly.'*

3. The support of networks and infrastructure bodies

As noted in many previous briefings, a spirit of mutuality and openness, and a sense of shared, common endeavour has been seen as a positive outcome of the pandemic. Peer support has been a lifeline during Covid-19, with many leaders participating in networks convened by funders or other VCSE organisations. Similarly, the value of infrastructure bodies has been widely appreciated, although the failure to convert that value into stable funding remains a concern:

> *'Those that have used our services do value our role more and it has cemented the need for them, but there is no funding that is following this.'*

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: long-term and unrestricted funding; involving organisations in future plans; and championing the sector.

All remain critical as VCSE leaders continue to plan the transition into their 'new normal'. A number were explored again in the most recent peer support sessions, which focused on:

1. Flexible funding practices
2. Clear and open communication

1. Flexible funding practices

During the pandemic, funders have shown great flexibility in their funding practices:

> *'We had some restricted funding, and I contacted funders and they were flexible and we could release those funds. It gave us longevity. That flexibility and understanding that a charity will do their very best to spend funds well: I think funders understand that more now. And that's probably*

where we were trying to get a few years ago, and it was a horrific way to get it, but we got it.'

'We got extra funding from an existing funder just because they understood what we were going through, or were given funds early, without having to ask for them.'

However, many leaders are fearful about funding *'going back to normal'*, moving away from the open and flexible funding practices that have enabled so many organisations *'to survive the pandemic'*. This is a particular worry for organisations whose emergency funding is due to expire soon:

'We've had enough short-term funding to make those changes, but we don't know where the money will come from to support longer term.'

'Funders are reverting back to wanting onerous detail about what the money is spent on. The future is so hard to predict: we should be able to be more autonomous about what the money is spent on and to demonstrate why that was the case.'

'Please just fund our core service.'

For smaller organisations, particularly those with less resource (who may struggle to find the time to fill in applications and cannot compete with larger organisations with in-house grants staff), there is a real risk of being shut out:

'If I'm on my own, how can I dedicate all this time to applying if I don't know if I'll even get it?'

For smaller organisations' vital, often hyper-local, work to be sustained, funders will need to be more proactive and creative in their engagement:

'Really consider the grassroots organisations.'

2. Clear and open communication

The need for open communication between funders, intermediary bodies and VCSE organisations remains a preoccupation for leaders. This is particularly important for people putting in funding bids, when having a clear timeline, criteria and feedback process is key:

'When we got told that we're not receiving the funding, they also said that they could not give feedback. It's hard not knowing anything when, on paper, we meet all of the criteria.'

More specifically, some leaders spoke of their frustrations about communication when working with local authorities:

'We have been trying to improve our relationship with local councils. There was a lot of talk around us about what essential local services were doing. It's frustrating as we're saying, "Well come and ask us!", rather than asking other people not involved.'

'When do you put your foot down and say, "This is what we need"? When do I put my boundaries up and say, "We cannot provide any more services unless you pay us"?'

'Local authorities find it hard to address complex problems. We have to work hard to get their attention.'

Questions and opportunities for funders

Drawing on our final set of conversations with leaders in IVAR's emergency response project, two key messages for funders stand out:

1. Patience and empathy
Trust and patience remain at the heart of the response needed. In particular, leaders will need time to work out how best to enact their duty of care – to their beneficiaries, as well as to their staff and volunteers. There can be no one-size-fits-all route back to stability. This will need to be uppermost in funders' minds as they re-set their funding criteria and processes; it calls for a premium on both flexibility and empathy.

2. Mutuality
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 will require listening, talking and learning, in order to inform and shape future priorities and adaptations to practice. Above all, it will mean approaching these challenges together, recognising and respecting the different assets that we all have to contribute.

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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