

# Planning in uncertainty

*How can the voluntary  
sector be agile in and  
beyond the pandemic?*

*September 2021*

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Commissioned by:



# Introduction

We facilitated three online peer support sessions for 23 leaders of organisations funded through the [Children, Young People and Families Early Intervention Fund and Adult Learning and Empowering Communities Fund](#) (CYPFEIF & ALEC Fund), administered and coordinated by Corra Foundation. Our conversations during June and July focused on the experience of planning for a future characterised by unpredictability and complexity.

In this briefing, we summarise how voluntary sector leaders are experiencing and navigating the current political, social and economic context; with ideas and recommendations about what might make a positive difference, including contributions from participants Marguerite Hunter Blair, Chief Executive of Play Scotland, and Eddie McConnell, Chief Executive of Down's Syndrome Scotland.

This work forms part of IVAR's [Leading in Uncertainty](#) programme, which provides peer support for voluntary sector leaders.



*Corra's team hopes that the capacity building sessions we deliver give leaders and senior staff from third sector organisations the time & space to discuss and explore pressing issues. Grantholder feedback consistently affirms that "peer support" is often the biggest benefit of such events, as they highlight common issues, irrespective of cause and/or scale of the organisation.*

**Malcolm Dunn, Grants Advisor  
Corra Foundation**



# Part one: Leaders' experiences of planning in uncertainty

Leaders and their organisations are exhausted. Those who attended our *Planning in Uncertainty* sessions are not alone in their weariness, as over 1,000 voluntary and community leaders across the breadth of the UK have expressed similar feelings during our work over the last year.<sup>1</sup>

The period since the Covid-19 outbreak has been a hard, relentless slog, which has taken its toll. Reserves – physical, mental and financial – have been drained. And a perfect storm is brewing, as more volume and complexity of need meets organisations with diminished human and financial resources:

*'It feels like we are at the tipping point of burn out, and our organisation is on a knife edge.'*

*'There is a powder keg – of stress and depletion and running on empty – that is ready to explode.'*

*'It's a question of when, not if, the financial squeeze comes.'*

For many, the lifting of restrictions and the prospect of returning to '*something resembling normal*' feels like '*an illusion and the offer of false hope*', masking difficult choices about blended working arrangements for staff and blended delivery models for services:

*'We are juggling multiple expectations, balancing multiple demands and interests. There are hurdles every step of the way. It feels like we are building the train track in front of us as we career into the future.'*

Despite conveying their fatigue, leaders are positive and proud about the achievements and efforts of their organisations since the outbreak of the pandemic:

*'People just kept giving.'*

*'We've tried to be everything to everyone.'*

As well as being creative about continuing to meet needs in the face of restrictions, leaders have recognised the importance of '*not standing still, not treading water*', as well as shifting to a more open style of management: '*more dynamic, more collaborative, more transparent about knowns and unknowns – but still trying to project confidence about what we can do and the value that we can add*'.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ivar.org.uk/briefing-paper/birds-in-a-hurricane/>

Many have learned to become more agile and ‘emergent’ in their work:

*‘We are living more comfortably with risk, not allowing it to stop us doing something, just doing it differently.’*

During the sessions we listened and learnt from leaders’ experiences and what they felt was needed in order to plan effectively during uncertainty. We asked two participants – whose words resonated with the group – to summarise the importance and value of the contributions made by voluntary sector organisations during the pandemic, and to reflect on what it will take for them to continue being able to deliver for their communities.

## Rethinking funding for the future

*By Marguerite Hunter Blair, Chief Executive of Play Scotland.*

For many of us in the third sector, we don’t just care about the job, the organisation or how to access the latest funding stream — we care passionately about social justice issues. We are highly motivated and energised by our ability to make a positive difference on the ground, and in real-time, for people in our communities.

Working with memberships, partners and a wide range of stakeholders, we innovate, energise and build capacity to deliver amazing results in our sectors and for funders.

The wobbly bridge, which can quickly become a tight rope without a safety net, is an uncertain funding foundation.

This doesn’t just jeopardise posts, salaries, pensions, and staff development — it is a barrier to attracting and retaining talented people who seek career progression and financial security. It also fosters division over collaboration as organisations seek to sustain their footprint and future.

Evidence shows that five-year core funding is essential to achieving outcomes; it is also a valuable lever in attracting additional funds and investment partners. ‘Building back better’ must include rethinking this hand-to-mouth approach to funding which can feel disrespectful, debilitating, and demeaning for voluntary organisations.



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**Marguerite Hunter Blair**

## Building forward differently

*By Eddie McConnell, Chief Executive of Down's Syndrome Scotland and Chair of the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities.*

It's 18 months since we ushered everyone home and locked the door of our office in Edinburgh. We haven't been back since.

And yet, like so many in our sector, we haven't been busier, and we haven't drawn breath. While this villainous virus took hold and wreaked havoc in families and communities, charities — the length and breadth of the UK — stepped forward and stepped up. This is what we do.

Individually and at pace, we remodelled our service delivery in response to the unprecedented need for support. Collectively, we were a vital component of the national response to the emergency. By putting the needs others first, we saved lives and we protected the NHS.

As we re-open society with restriction lifts, we have a choice. Either we can return to how things were pre-COVID, or we can start anew.

We can leave behind, forever, the woeful world of competing interests: where power and control were vested in the hands of a few to the detriment of so many, and boundaries preserved hierarchies and extinguished innovation. We can recognise what can be achieved through deep collaboration, respect and trust in one another's abilities and purpose.

Ultimately, what matters is what works, evidenced in the response of so many charities and charity workers throughout the pandemic.

I have no desire to 'build back better'; I'm not even sure what that means. I am more motivated and inspired to 'build forward differently'. This is the moment for leaders across the third sector to be big, bold and brave — it's time to put third sector first (#ThirdSectorFirst).



“

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**Eddie McConnell**

# Part two: Navigating uncertainty

## Recommendations for voluntary sector leaders and their funders

### 1. Know your value

Eddie's encouragement for being '*bold and brave*' resonated across all three sessions with leaders. Moving to the front foot and exercising some agency over the circumstances organisations find themselves in will be critical for them to perform at their best during uncertainty:

*'Think about circles of control, and what is in your power to influence and change. Don't undervalue yourself. Don't apologise. Be clear about the costs. We can't keep saying "Yes". If you want to reduce our funding, we will have to reduce our services.'*

Exercising agency might start with organisations reminding themselves of their roots and the essential purpose of their organisation. That is their spine: who they are, why they are here, as well as what their contribution can be. Even though much of the rest – the number of people they can serve, the range of outputs they can deliver, the outcomes they can achieve – may now be subject to some guesswork.

*'We can be certain of our core and our assets – our people, our track record, the value that we bring; and we can articulate our goals and ambition. This is our guide for the way forward: focusing on what we know now about what can make the most difference and where we can add the most value.'*

### 2. Plan flexibly

Uncertainty is here to stay, and voluntary organisations now find themselves in a permanent state of transition. This will require a different approach to planning – moving away from detailed project plans and specific outcome targets to a narrative about organisations' core values, core offer, and core commitment to be responsive and flexible in how they meet their charitable objects, '*always listening deeply to our beneficiaries; balancing ambition with pragmatism*':

*'We don't know what we can deliver in the next three years, so we need to shift expectations about what a plan is. Now, it's more of a framework, with a shorter horizon and flexibility baked into everything.'*

*'We need to make peace with uncertainty. And we need to meet uncertainty with agility.'*



### 3. Focus on wellbeing

In addition to flexible planning, voluntary organisations will need healthy and motivated workforces, *'equipped and supported for the rocky road ahead'*. This will require a serious commitment to wellbeing, and an approach that is characterised by patience, empathy and kindness:

*'We need to be open about mental health: naming it, attending to it, prioritising it. It's not a luxury, it's a necessity.'*

### 4. Collaborate and connect

Despite the heroic efforts of many voluntary organisations over the last 18 months, the complex problems faced by the individuals, families and communities that use their services require coordinated and multi-faceted responses. A premium will need to be placed on open and generous communication and behaviours – both internally, so that individual organisations themselves are aligned, and externally, in order to privilege collaboration over competition. This will require changes to the practices of funders, in particular their tendency to pit organisations against each other.

Voluntary sector leaders may also benefit from [connecting with peers](#), especially those outside of their networks, to share ideas and concerns as they plan in uncertainty.

### 5. Fund reliably

Voluntary organisations are imaginative, ingenious and resolute when it comes to finding ways to meet the needs of their user groups. Despite blockages and obstacles, they are ready and willing to respond to rising demand for their services from people with increasingly complex needs. But that will require a move away from the hand-to-mouth approach described by Marguerite, to [more flexible and sustained support from funders](#). Without that, the stability of vital services will be at risk.

#### Further reading

IVAR continues to support leaders and funders by providing spaces for learning and dialogue, to encourage a deeper understanding of what leaders, and their organisations, need from funders.

Our work is underpinned by our [Open and trusting grant-making](#) initiative and our [Leading in uncertainty](#) peer support sessions, where we hope to understand and inform positive changes to practice.

We invite leaders and funders to join us on these free programmes of work; join our communities; and access useful insights.

## **Authorship and acknowledgements**

This briefing has been written by Ben Cairns, based on work carried out with Charlotte Pace.

Thanks to the participants of the sessions for giving up their time to be involved and for sharing their experiences and ideas so freely and openly with us. A special mention to Marguerite Hunter Blair of Play Scotland and Eddie McConnell of Down's Syndrome Scotland – two leaders who graciously contributed their reflections. Our thanks go also to Corra Foundation, for supporting the work.