

Look after yourself and your families first

*Charity experiences of
leading in uncertainty –
and what can help*

November 2021

Introduction

In recent months, we've facilitated online peer support sessions for 43 leaders of small and medium charities from across the UK. Our conversations focused on the experience of leading through a period characterised by unpredictability and complexity.

In this briefing, we summarise how charity leaders are experiencing and navigating the current context, with ideas and recommendations about what might make a positive difference - including contributions from participants Judith Walsh, Head of Development and Operations at Starcatchers; and Jess McQuail, Director of Just Fair.

Find out more about our [Leading in Uncertainty](#) work, which provides peer support for voluntary sector leaders.

Part one: The experience of leading in uncertainty

Leaders and their organisations are emotionally exhausted: *'we are dealing with a lot of animosity and conflict from different places, while recognising there is still a mountain to climb as we come out of the pandemic'*. Staff are working *'longer, harder, faster hours'*, and leaders are faced with the challenge of responding to their needs with flexibility and sensitivity, while trying to keep their organisations functioning and healthy. Exacerbating this challenge is an increase in demand for services, with *'no additional funding to grow or extend'*.

While there is widespread awareness and appreciation of the need for wellbeing strategies – *'being accountable for individual self-care'*, grants for individual support, finding spaces to share and offload – leaders are noticing a significant increase in the need for mental health support, both within teams and within communities: *'people have been siloed in their own world, without help'*.

Despite conveying their fatigue, leaders are proud about what their organisations have managed to achieve over the last 18 months:

'We have been flexible and adaptable.'

'We just kept going during the pandemic. We should feel confident to shout about all the good work we have done and the innovative ways we have delivered work in challenging times.'

'We have become more trusting of others, delegating tasks and letting mistakes happen for others to learn from.'

For many, technology has provided opportunities to improve accessibility to services, extending reach and helping to meet the needs of communities. Organisations have found that many people prefer interacting digitally. And the expansion of collaborative working, both with other charities and cross-sector partners, has further contributed to the breadth and depth of services available to people in need. Both technology and collaboration will require sustained investment to ensure that momentum is maintained.

However, despite the enduring optimism of leaders, and the many stories of progress and impact, serious concerns remain about the immediate future.

Funding

First, funding continues to be a major preoccupation. Although there is widespread appreciation of funders' emergency responses, there is also growing anxiety about the risk of a 'job done, back to normal' mentality taking hold:

'Funders need to ensure they do not revert to their previous ways of working, with onerous reporting mechanisms – which are a challenge for small organisations where leaders already play multiple roles. The pandemic and its effects continue to be at play for us, and funders need to be mindful about this and continue to be flexible.'

'Some funders seem disconnected with the realities of delivery in such uncertain times. They need to maintain the support and flexibility they have demonstrated over the past year. And trust organisations to know what is needed to rebuild and to continue to meet the needs of service users.'

'Funders need to think about strategic, long-term investments in organisations, that show trust in us.'

Office working

Second, leaders are now grappling with the complexities associated with returning to offices:

'How to do this in a sensitive way that recognises team members' personal situations and varying levels of nervousness, alongside what our organisation requires of people to do a good job.'

'How to reconcile teams and different types of staff that may have been divided during Covid. The importance of healing together and healing those divides.'

Making sense of the 'new normal'

Third, finding a language to describe the current period, as well as a more sophisticated sense of what lies ahead, is a preoccupation for many. Not least because of the labels that people are already attaching to life after the immediate emergency: *"Resilience" seems to be the buzz word currently. We really need to think this through and make sure that resilience doesn't just become a battle of endurance, which will lead to even greater issues through the inevitable fallout next year.'*

In thinking about the nature of what we are currently living through, leaders are concerned about the need to move forward in a way that is inclusive and supportive:

‘Covid has exposed the fractures in society. We need to be more reflective about how we operate in a humane way, not just dragging ourselves over the finish line. Are we actually transforming the way we see and do things or are we going to run at things headlong and hope it sticks?’

A catalyst for change

During our peer support sessions, we listened and learned from leaders’ experiences. Alongside stories of struggle and anxiety, we heard how organisations have embraced opportunities to do things differently. We asked two people to share what has been made possible, and how they’ve embraced new ways of working.



Look after yourselves and your families first. Whatever work you can do after that is enough.

Judith Walsh, Head of Development & Operations, Starcatchers



A fair workplace in unfair times

Judith Walsh, Head of Development & Operations, Starcatchers

Starcatchers is a Scottish Arts and Early Years organisation that creates performances and creative activities for babies and children from birth to 5 years, as well as the adults who care for them.

Like many arts organisations, the Starcatchers team is made up of both employed and self-employed individuals. The decision to cancel our face-to-face work and close our office in March 2020 meant that we couldn't deliver services in the way that we used to. Many companies had to – or chose to – cancel their freelancers' fees at the same time as cancelling events. We chose a different tack. We asked our community artists what could be offered to families instead of face-to-face delivery. We were able to stay connected with vulnerable families, adapting our services and being responsive to new needs as they emerged.

For the freelancers whose delivery couldn't be adapted, such as the cast and crew of our theatre tour to Japan and Edinburgh in April-May 2020, full fees were paid. Contractually, there was enough time in the cancellation clause to pay partial fees. However, there was a strong sense that it was our job to argue for these fee protections for individuals, particularly as there was no way for them to secure alternative work to replace ours – how could we expect them to want to tour this show for us after the pandemic if we cut them loose in this extremely precarious time?

As well as logistical concerns, the pandemic also brought forward personal worries. How could we be paid our salaries if we weren't delivering what we had said we would? Would incomes be reduced to match activity? How could we fulfil our roles properly with kids off school, vulnerable relatives to care for, and the real risk of getting very sick? Would there be the pressure of performance review if we didn't manage to do as good a job as usual?

The Board of Trustees started meeting fortnightly in March 2020 to support the organisation through the crisis. To help address these worries, they sent a powerful message to the Starcatchers' team when the lockdown hit: *'Look after yourselves and your families first. Whatever work you can do after that is enough'*. This message was governance-level permission to staff that they prioritise personal health, household wellbeing and caring responsibilities; and that salaries would be secured at their usual levels, with no reductions to mirror reductions in the available working hours.

Through all the juggling and constant adaptation over the last 18 months, the approach set out in the Board's initial memo has become ingrained. Now, with activity levels at high output again, we've hung on to the understanding that Starcatchers values us and respects our individual ability to decide what a good/bad workload looks like for us, what is positive/negative for our household wellbeing, and what supports/detracts from our abilities to care for others. To my mind, we're closer now than ever before to creating a fairer and more equitable workplace, going beyond the principles of Fair Work and flexible working, to embed equalities and inclusion policies in all our practice.



We know that working in partnership is key to keeping on top of an ever-increasing workload and making real change.

**Jess McQuail, Director
Just Fair**



How partnership working allowed us to make real change

Jess McQuail, Director, Just Fair

Just Fair is a specialist human rights charity, leading work to promote economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) in the UK

Everyday rights such as housing, food, and social security are not recognised, incorporated, or fully implemented in the UK, and many people do not have the knowledge or skills to claim these rights (their *economic, social, and cultural rights* (ESCR)) or hold to account those with duties and obligations.

These challenges were formidable even before Covid-19 laid bare and exacerbated the historic and structural inequalities that exist between us, disproportionately affecting so many groups of people and their capacity to exercise their own power.

With the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, legal protection of our rights has also diminished. All this in a time of climate emergency, which jeopardizes the human rights of us all.

Against this backdrop, over the last 18 months at Just Fair, we have needed to be really vigilant in holding the UK Government and public bodies to account for their implementation of human rights commitments, working with many partners to monitor,

advocate and raise awareness of a vast number of social injustices and their relevance to ESCR issues.

We are a small NGO, and given our limited capacity, this has been difficult and demanding. However, we know that working in partnership is key to keeping on top of an ever-increasing workload and making real change.

Whilst our ability to establish new partnerships was limited during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 (due partly to a lack of networking opportunities), we were able to use existing contacts to get work done. We connected with [London TravelWatch](#) to lobby Transport for London (TfL) to reduce the Oyster card auto top-up limit from the £20 minimum, and stop plans to take away people's ability to pay cash at all London stations.

During the pandemic, TfL stopped accepting cash payments at over 200 underground, DLR and overground stations. We were disappointed to learn of TfL's plans to make this permanent and extend it across all London stations; and were in conversation with TfL over the auto top-up rate. We argued that the current auto top-up rate made public transport inaccessible to many and was potentially discriminatory to those on lower incomes. While some may be able to afford the price of travel, £20 is too high an amount to be taken from their personal bank accounts at one time.

As a result of our partnership with London TravelWatch, TfL have committed to reduce the auto top-up limit to £10 from January 2022, and have stopped ([for now](#)) their plans to make all London stations cashless. Together with London TravelWatch, we were able to use international human rights frameworks to make the point to TfL that barriers to transport limit people's access to their everyday rights such as their right to work and their right to education. These changes will enable people on lower incomes, or those who rely on cash payments, to be able to access safe and inclusive travel in London.

'Forming a coalition of different organisations to make the case for keeping cash was absolutely critical to the success of the campaign. The arguments that JustFair made to TfL around human rights legislation were a unique and really useful contribution in persuading them to change their minds.'

Emma Gibson, Director of London TravelWatch

This is a strong first step, and together with London TravelWatch, we will continue to make the case that all decisions which impact equal access to public transport must be fully informed by human rights, equality, and non-discrimination considerations.

While there is still a way to go, the success of these campaigns is one example of how working in partnership is critical to achieving the better protection and promotion of everyday human rights – our ESCR – in the UK. You can find more information about our campaign with London TravelWatch [here](#).

Part two: Recommendations for charity leaders and their funders

Although leaders continue to demonstrate great fortitude and stoicism, there is a palpable sense of them needing ‘*support through a changing landscape*’:

‘This has been like a conflict. Everything’s been shaken up. People who weren’t on the bus in realising that things wouldn’t go back to normal are the ones suffering most now. People who can manage change are going to be the people who come through this quicker. For everyone, there is a need to reflect and review, but no space or support to do so.’

Three messages stand out:

1. **Offer unrestricted funding:** The clearest and most consistent thing that we hear from charities is to ‘*trust organisations to know what is needed*’. The best way for funders to do this is to offer unrestricted funding that organisations can direct to where it is most useful. Our [recent research](#) unpicks how foundations can overcome common challenges to offering unrestricted – or less restricted – funding to the organisations they care about.
2. **Attend to staff wellbeing:** Leaders are grappling with how to balance supporting their staff, with continuing to function well as an organisation. The last 18 months of constant adaptation and change have looked different – for some, they have been characterised by a huge increase in demand; for others, an almost total shutdown of services for prolonged periods. But both of these scenarios have taken their toll on the mental health of staff and leaders alike. This is something that charities need to think about in their plans for future delivery; and that funders need to consider for the organisations they support.
3. **Celebrate collaboration:** The immediate emergency of Covid-19 led to many new partnerships forming – as described here and through our wider work¹. The challenge now is to cement and grow partnerships with the potential to solve the social, economic and environmental issues that lie ahead. For funders, this means spotting opportunities to connect people working in similar or related fields.

¹ www.ivar.org.uk/collaboration

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 Annie Caffyn and Ben Cairns, based on work carried out by the IVAR team.

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.

With special thanks to Starcatchers and Just Fair:

