

Respond, Recover, Reset: Two Years On

March 2022



Executive summary

It is undoubtable that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. From lockdowns, health and safety concerns, rising levels of demand and ongoing change and uncertainty, the pandemic transformed much of organisational life. This report tells the story of what happened during the pandemic within the VCSE sector.

The findings are based on 18 months of research, featuring 14 waves of a barometer survey, four waves of a panel survey and over 300 in-depth interviews. Combined together, these different data sets provide a clear and consistent picture of what the sector was facing, its key impacts and lessons learnt about the way the sector was affected and how it responded. This report captures these experiences and lessons.

So how did organisations navigate the pandemic? Our research highlights the diverse and complex experiences of organisations across the sector. For some organisations the pandemic has been devastating, seeing losses of income, staff, volunteers, and projects in ways that they will struggle to rebuild. Other organisations, however, have thrived. The pandemic has led to new services, ways of working, stronger relationships, new-found confidence and, in some cases, stronger and more resilient organisations.

“Over half the organisations we surveyed said their digital capabilities have improved and they can now reach more or increasingly diverse people, such as broader range of groups, geographies and demographics.”

Rising demands and falls in income

One of the key stories is of increasing demand for services and falling incomes. As our barometer data highlights, the first period of the pandemic was one characterised by significant financial pressures and anxiety at a time of rising demand for services. In September 2020, 14% of our barometer respondents thought that they might not survive the year, but as emergency support became available, organisations' confidence increased. However, there remains widespread concerns about future funding and many organisations feel vulnerable.

Flexible funding practices

As a response to the pandemic, many funders pivoted to provide emergency support and adopted a more flexible approach, allowing grants to be re-purposed or relaxing requirements, enabling organisations to respond to the immediate crises that they and their communities faced. Some organisations, particularly those with good relationships with their funders, were well placed to benefit from these changes, but others, if they were not part of the right networks, did not have pre-existing relationships with funders or did not meet the eligibility criteria of some of the relief and recovery grants, struggled to navigate the pandemic.

Shift to digital ways of working

Changing work practices, particularly the introduction of digital ways of working, was also another profound change for the VCSE sector. Approximately two in three respondents to the barometer reported moving online, representing an important transformation in the VCSE sector. Over half the organisations we surveyed said their digital capabilities have improved and they can now reach more or increasingly diverse people, such as broader range of groups, geographies and demographics. However, extensive concerns were voiced about digital exclusion and the limitations of working online.

Volunteering in flux

Whilst many volunteers had to step back from their volunteering during Covid-19 due to social distancing, shielding and changes in services, the pandemic also brought new volunteers to organisations and communities. Some volunteer roles could be recast with a shift to digital or remote roles. The pandemic has accelerated trends towards more flexible volunteering and the use of technology in co-ordinating and engaging with volunteers. The research raises questions about the long-term implications of the pandemic on volunteering, including the effects of the pandemic on the role, position and influence of volunteers.

Wellbeing brought into sharper focus

The increased demand and constant changing landscape have placed increased pressures on many staff, trustees, leaders and volunteers. The burden of workloads and responsibilities, particularly those supporting communities that faced multiple impacts due to the pandemic, has forced more attention, conversations and actions focused on the wellbeing of staff and volunteers in many organisations.

Taking steps on equality, diversity and inclusion

Also under increased attention in the sector were issues relating to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), particularly in response to anti-racism movements, the disproportionate impacts on people from ethnic minorities from Covid-19 and revelations of racism within the sector. Many organisations and funders we interviewed felt they needed to respond and take action around EDI.

Working with others in the response

The pandemic propelled organisations to work together to address the needs of communities and the challenges of the pandemic. More and stronger connections were made within the VCSE sector and across sector and organisational boundaries. Organisations spoke of walls being broken down and organisations more readily and easily working together. There is an appetite to sustain more collaborative working, but organisations are concerned that this is becoming more difficult and traditional barriers to partnership working are re-appearing.

“For some organisations the pandemic has been devastating, seeing losses of income, staff, volunteers, and projects in ways that they will struggle to rebuild. Other organisations, however, have thrived.”

Drawing on networks and support to navigate the pandemic

External support, including from infrastructure organisations, funders and experts as well as networks with peers have been important in helping VCSE organisations navigate the pandemic. Faced with the uncertainty of Covid-19 and the regularly changing health and funding landscape many of those in the sector, including leaders, reached out and connected with others. Local and national infrastructure organisations played an important part in helping provide information, guidance, and mutual support.

So the pandemic was a disruptor, accelerator, connector, and transformer, changing many aspects of organisational life. For many organisations Covid-19 sped up existing plans by 5 or 10 years, stimulating change, particularly around the use of digital and remote working.

It also highlighted existing strengths and weaknesses in individual organisations and the VCSE sector as a whole. Some of the shifts will be temporary, simply changes to get through a difficult situation. But other changes will have more long-lasting impacts, exposing organisations to new ways of doing things, questioning existing practices, and broadening horizons and possibilities.

Looking to the future

So what does this mean for the future of the sector? Can the legacy of some of the innovations, changes in practices and learning be built on, including embedding collaboration, building open and trusting funding practices with a long-term focus, refocusing on equality and inclusion, developing digital, focusing on staff and volunteer wellbeing and improving data about the sector in the future?

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Rob Macmillan (Sheffield Hallam University), Ed Mayo, CEO (Pilotlight), Paul Reddish, CEO (Volunteering Matters), James Richardson, Senior Policy Advisor, DCMS and Jay Richardson, Campaign and Advocacy Officer (Money4You). Your insights have been invaluable.

Project partners



The Centre of People, Work and Organisational Practice at Nottingham Trent University

The Centre of People, Work and Organisational Practice is based at Nottingham Trent University and works with organisations and policy-makers to understand and to seek to improve how people are managed within organisations. We are committed to producing theoretically rigorous work that is not only published in top academic journals but also transforms lives and society. Working with collaborators from different parts of the world, CPWOP has conducted research with and for organisations such as the CIPD, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Government Equality Office and the Lloyds Foundation. The centre focuses on the way in which people are managed in the face of critical challenges facing the economy and society, given growing concerns about work quality and a proliferation of insecure and precarious jobs within the UK economy.



The Voluntary Action Research Group at Sheffield Hallam University

The Voluntary Action Research Group (VARG) brings together researchers from across Sheffield Hallam University. VARG serves as a forum to showcase and build on internationally significant research and evaluation and shaping debates about the past, present and future of voluntary action.



National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

With over 15,500 members, NCVO is the largest membership body for the voluntary sector in England. It supports voluntary organisations (as well as social enterprises and community interest companies), from large national bodies to community groups working at a local level. NCVO believes its members, and those with a stake in civil society, need the best quality evidence base to help them inform policy and practice, and plan for the future.

Introduction

On 23rd March 2020 the UK Prime Minister announced a national lockdown in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic. He told everyone you must work from home where you can, avoid seeing family and friends, and only leave the house once a day for exercise, shopping for basic necessities or medical need.

Overnight, shops, pubs, cafés and offices shut, schools were closed to most pupils, and our lives shifted dramatically. The changes for the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector were profound. Most face-to-face activity had to stop, many services were suspended, and fundraising events (from the London Marathon to village fetes) had to be cancelled. The charitable sector was projected to lose £4.3bn (DCMS, 2020). For many, the challenge of supporting communities rocked by the pandemic, collided with those of working from home and juggling responsibilities such as caring and home-schooling. Considerations for staff, volunteers and service users at high risk of Covid-19, together with the ongoing uncertainties of the pandemic made working in VCSE organisations highly demanding.

“ This report, released on the two-year anniversary of the first UK wide lockdown, provides a chance to look back on what took place during the pandemic, what has been achieved, experienced, and learnt by those working, volunteering, and engaging with the VCSE sector. ”

So, what have we learnt? This report, released on the two-year anniversary of the first UK wide lockdown, provides a chance to look back on what took place during the pandemic, what has been achieved, experienced, and learnt by those working, volunteering, and engaging with the VCSE sector. It captures some of the stories, presents some of the data, and draws together the lessons and implications from these findings for the future.

The Respond, Recover, Reset project looked to understand how the UK's VCSE sector has been impacted by the pandemic and how organisations have responded. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19, the study began in June 2020, and ran until December 2021. The research aimed to 1) provide real-time data about how the pandemic was impacting the VCSE sector, and make this useful to policymakers and practitioners, 2) understand how the pandemic has changed working practices within the sector and 3) contribute to understanding about what helped build resilience for VCSE organisations across the UK.

A central question that runs throughout this report is what implications Covid-19 will have on the VCSE sector. There have undoubtedly been significant changes for many organisations, including the development of new digital services, online forms of volunteering and hybrid working. It is also clear that in many ways, Covid-19 was a disruptor, and an accelerator, forcing or encouraging change. Yet what stays? Two years on from the onset of the pandemic we need to ask, are these temporary shifts in response to an unusual crisis, or a trend, a new way of working or doing things that has changed the way the VCSE operates in the long term?

This report brings together the findings from our 18-month study, exploring the insights from the trends across the 14 waves of our barometer, the 4 waves of the panel survey and from more than 300 interviews. The first part of the report explores key trends looking at how the sector was impacted by the pandemic. The following section introduces how organisations have navigated the crisis with a focus on internal organisation and management. The report then examines seven key themes which have shaped how VCSE organisations have responded and adapted to the pandemic. For each we explore what has happened during the pandemic, what has been learnt and possible implications for the VCSE sector. The final section brings together the findings from the research to explore priority areas and think about ways to support and strengthen the sector. It asks what will help make the sector more resilient for the future?

What we did

The aim of this project was to create real-time relevant data about the way that Covid-19 was impacting the VCSE sector. We did this through 3 forms of data collection:

Barometer

- 14 waves
- 6,378 responses received
- Rotating questions - unique data (longitudinal)
- Open to all to complete
- Tailored to the VCSE sector

Panel

- 4 waves over 2021
- 412 participants
- Theory based/based on academic literature
- Working with organisations consistently, we aimed to be representative
- Focused on crisis leadership and organisational responses

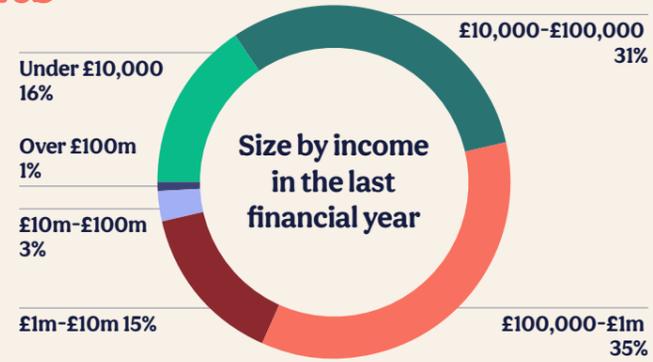
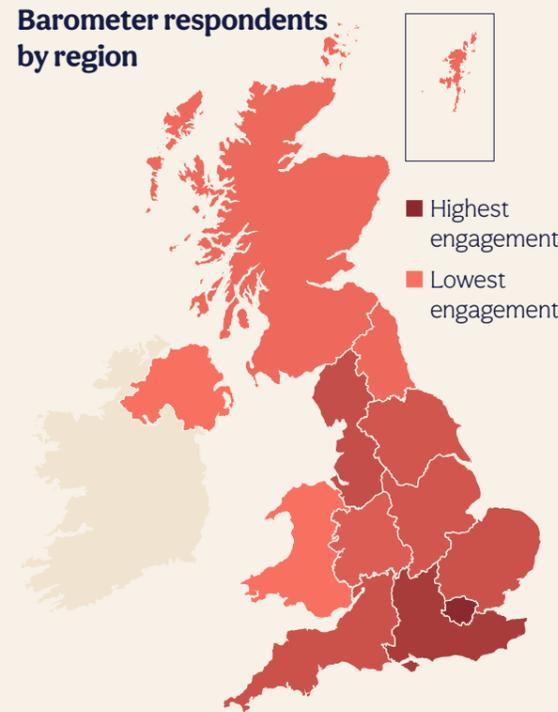
Interviews

- Over 300 people were interviewed
- Wide range of sizes from tiny local charities to international organisations
- Interviews captured a wide range of topics including professional and personal aspects
- Focused on the lived experience of working through the pandemic

We did all this and released the barometer and report just **2 weeks** after data collection was completed!

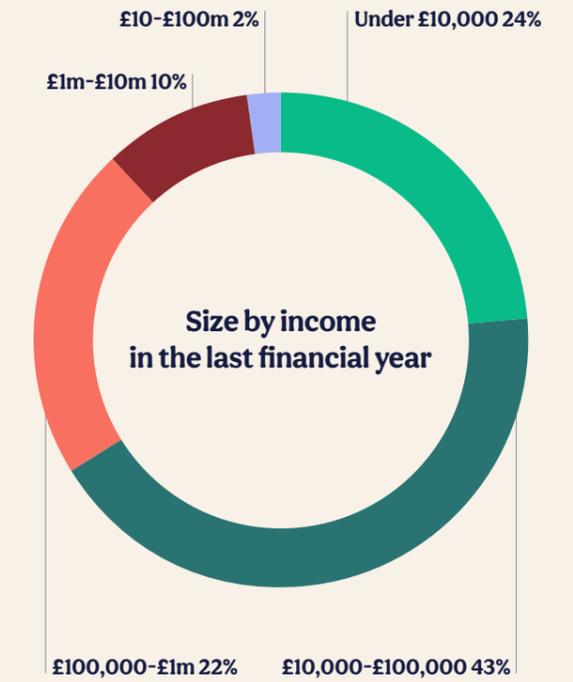
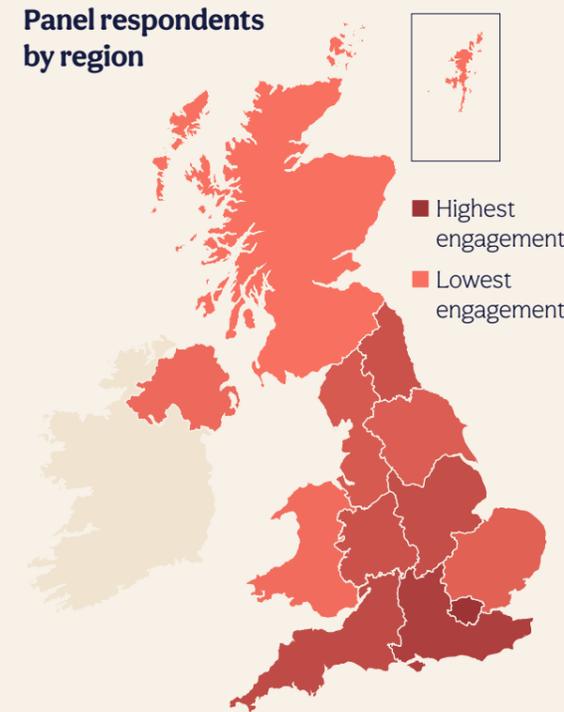
Barometer respondents

Barometer respondents by region

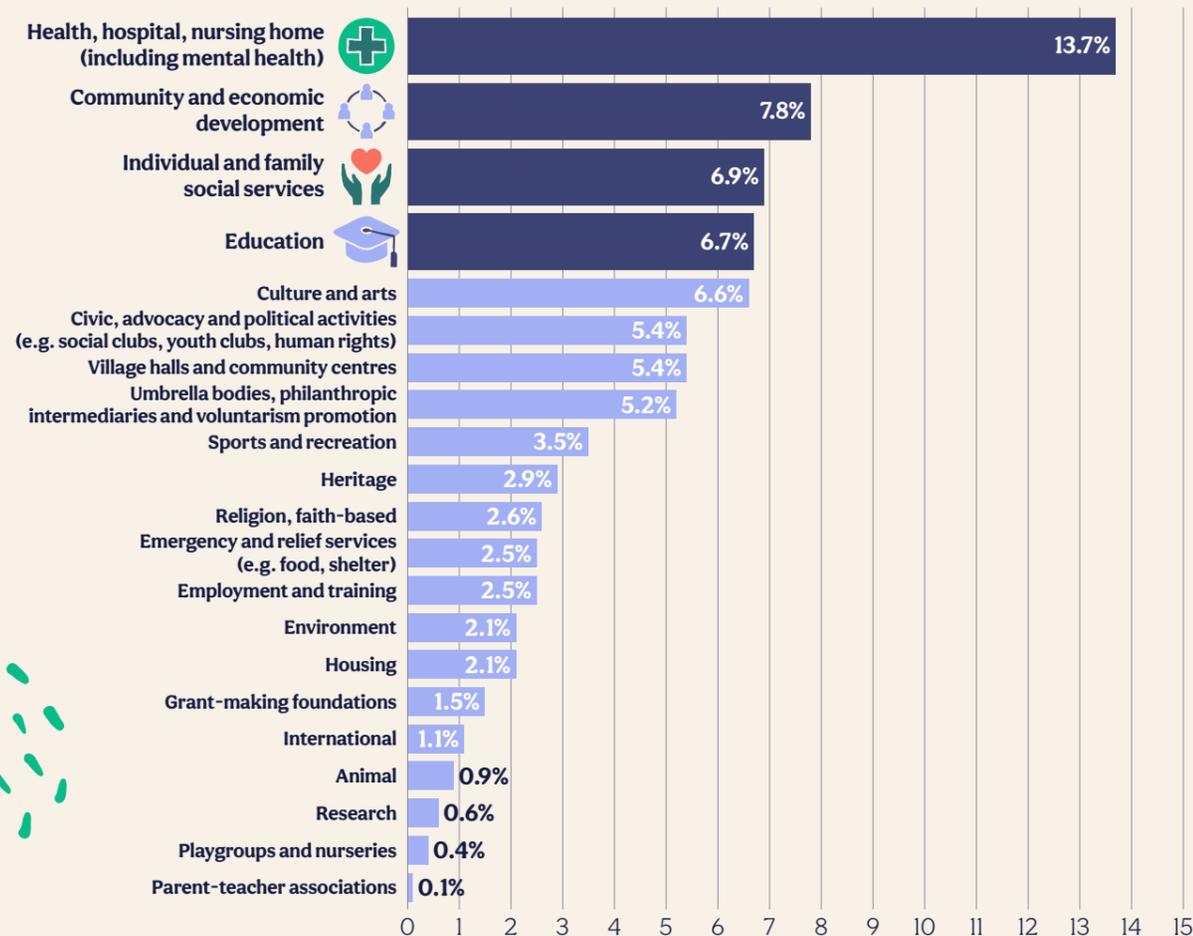


Panel respondents

Panel respondents by region



Survey participants by activity



Interviewees

Carrying out interviews allowed us to capture the richness and nuance of individuals' lived experiences of working through the pandemic. Interviewees often commented that taking part in the research gave them an opportunity to step back, reflect, and learn.

It's always very interesting being interviewed for these things. It does give you time to think and reflect on stuff.

Senior manager, Funder, UK

It's nice to talk about it, because it helps me to think through as well what the experience has been, and that helps me in my sort of learning, and so on as well. So, it's been useful for me as well.

CEO, advice services, England

It's so good just to be able to speak so much.

CEO, infrastructure organisation, UK

I think this is really important, which is obviously why I wanted to participate, but you're doing something that is necessary, and I really appreciate the fact that you're taking such time and care to do it.

Senior manager, Funder, UK

What we produced

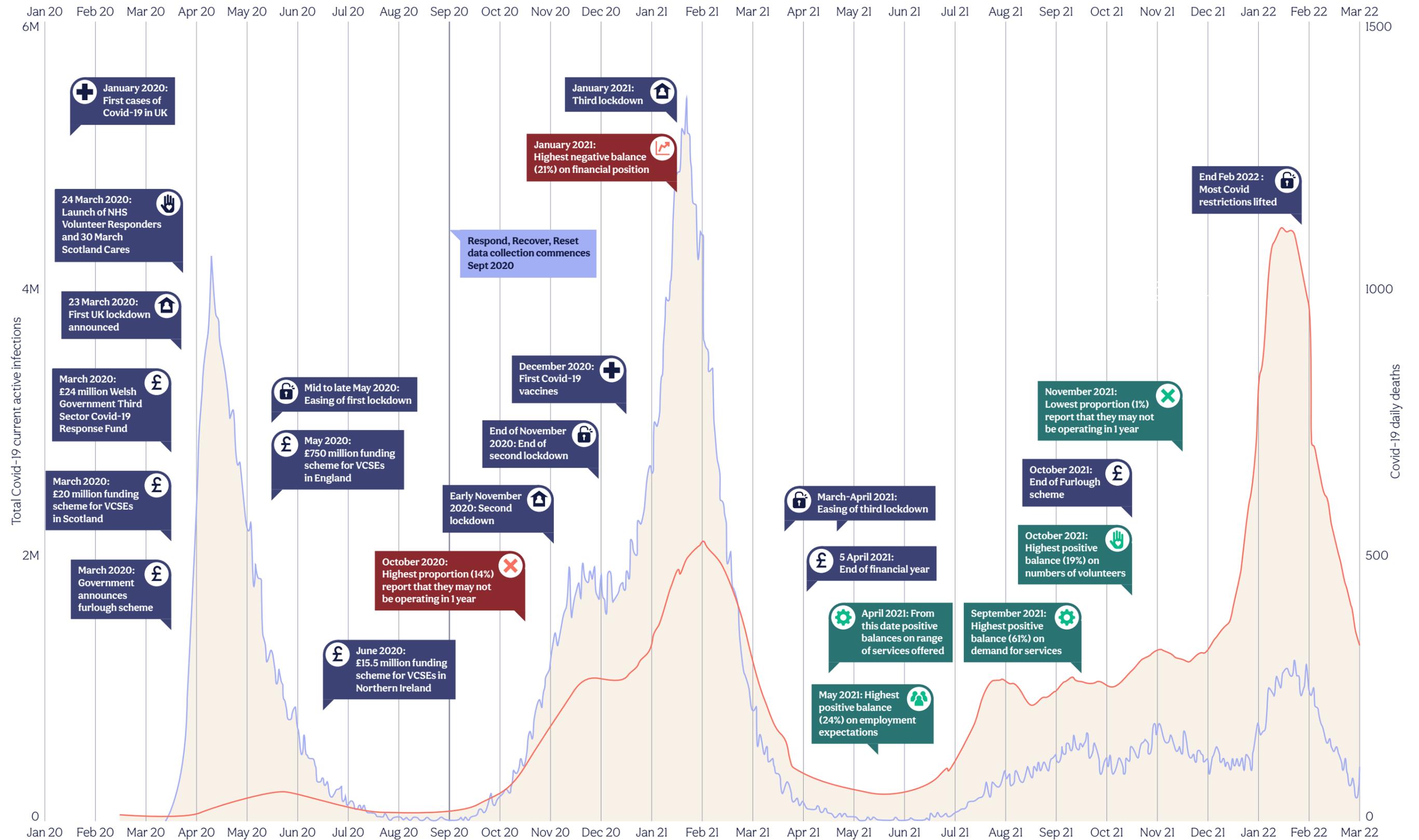
Wave	Data collected	Published	Subject
1	September 2020	October 2020	Sector Responses To Covid-19
2	October–November 2020	November 2020	Wellbeing
3	December 2020	January 2021	Lessons Learned
4	January 2021	February 2021	Volunteering
5	February 2021	March 2021	Financial Impact
6	March 2021	April 2021	Relationship With Local Authorities
7	April 2021	May 2021	Changes To Volunteering
8	May 2021	July 2021	Equality, Diversity & Inclusion
9	July 2021	August 2021	Digital Inclusion
10	August 2021	September 2021	Leadership & Resilience
11	September 2021	October 2021	A Post-Pandemic Future
12	October 2021	November 2021	Funders And Funding Trends
13	November 2021	December 2021	Infrastructure
14	December 2021		



Key trends: How the VCSE sector was impacted by the pandemic

Key trends in the VCSE sector have been tracked in our research using data from 14 waves of the barometer survey between September 2020 and December 2021. This helps us understand the impact of Covid-19 on VCSE organisations during the pandemic and how this changed over time.

The Covid-19 timeline in UK and key impacts on the voluntary sector



■ = Active Covid cases in the UK*
 ■ = Covid daily deaths in the UK*
 *Data for Covid-19 active cases and daily deaths drawn from reported cases by <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/uk/>. Numbers may vary from actual cases, particularly in March 2020 when community testing was low.

Trends overview

The VCSE barometer survey provided a unique source of real-time insight, by providing consistent monthly accounts of the impacts of the pandemic on the voluntary and community sector. This data was published in regular monthly reports, and via the monthly barometer dashboard, in order to make these insights available to the sector and the wider policy community. Upon reflection, as the project has come to a close, the barometer survey provided useful perspectives on the impact that the pandemic has had on the sector; including some of the ways in which VCSE organisations were able to respond to unprecedented circumstances.

“ Organisations introduced a wide range of changes that were necessary in order to comply with Covid-19 regulations, and to maintain safe environments for employees, volunteers and service users. ”

The first wave of the survey began in September 2020, and the responses underpinned the first six months of our research. Organisations reported great **concern about their finances**, and their deteriorating position, during a period when **demand for services** rose strongly, and was expected to increase further. At the same time, successive waves of the survey tracked the ways in which organisations adapted operations to the conditions of the pandemic. Many of these adaptations mirrored those reported by businesses, for example in surveys such as the ONS Business Impacts of Covid Survey; some were **clearly unique to the VCSE sector** due to distinctive operating models, and the nature of the services provided, plus the **extensive involvement of volunteers**.

Organisations introduced a **wide range of changes** that were necessary in order to comply with Covid-19 regulations, and to maintain safe environments for employees, volunteers and service users. These safety measures were very consistent with those adopted by other types of organisations. Also, in common with wider experiences of other sectors, **services delivered face-to-face were particularly affected during this period**. The barometer recorded a consequent narrowing of range of services provided, and a **shift to on-line service provision/working arrangements** where this was practicable, and organisations had the infrastructure in place to facilitate this change. Our research also demonstrated sectors use of the ‘furlough scheme’ during this period.

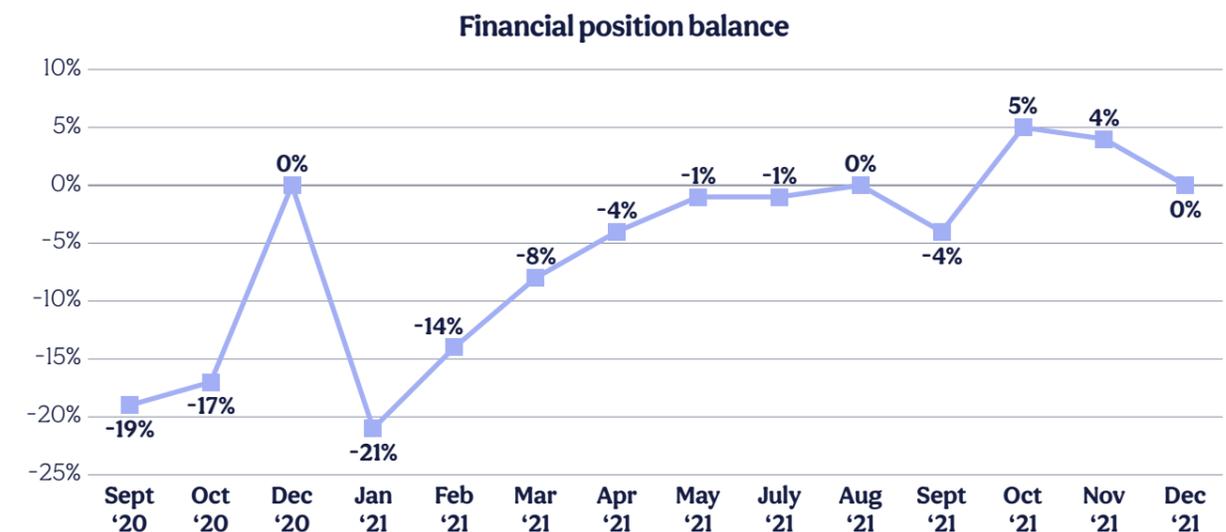
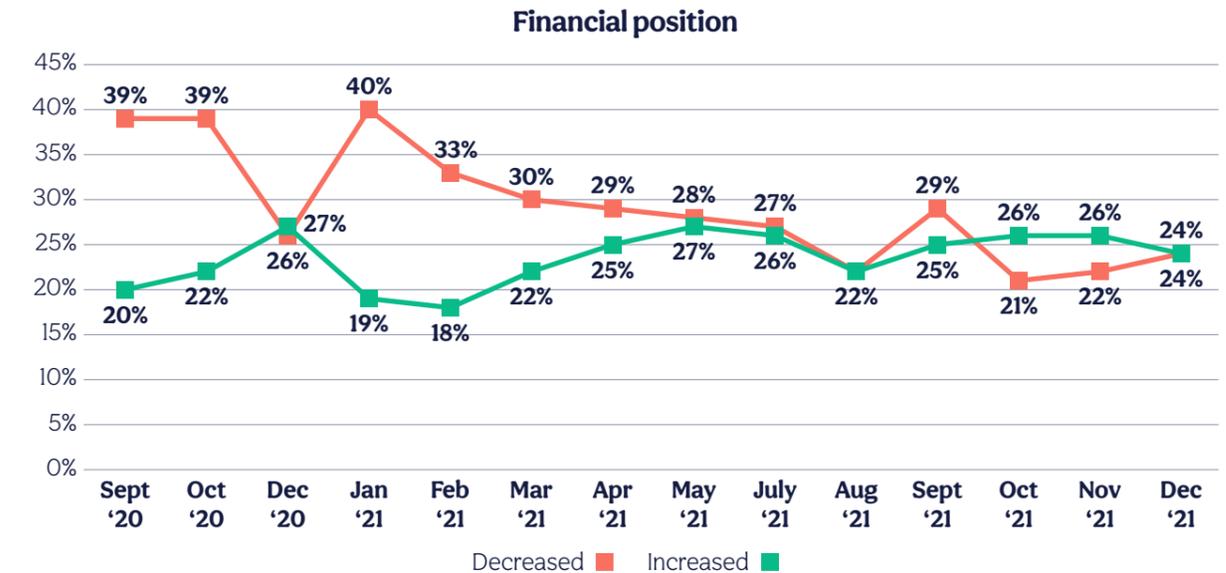
Between Easter and September 2021, we saw notable changes to the overall pattern of responses to the survey. According to our data, the progressive easing of lockdown and restrictions evidenced some stabilisation to the financial position of respondents. Fewer reported concerns regarding the **long-term survival of their organisations**. And thus, a more positive picture for **employment levels in the sector** and a widening of services emerged. It is also at this point, that we observed a notable slow-down toward online service provision, prevalent throughout the first 12 months of the survey.

The next section of this report examines these trends in more detail. We provided a questionnaire that was quick and easy to complete and borrowed from common practice in business surveys. Similarly, in reporting trends based on the barometer survey we report simple trend lines, in addition to net balances which aided interpretation of the data. Where questions followed the format (for example asking whether a particular variable had increased decreased or remained the same), we calculated a net balance by deducting the ‘decreased’ from the ‘increased’. The purpose of using net balances is to provide a simple characterisation of the balance of sentiment revealed by the survey at a particular point in time.

Finances and funding

Data from the barometer survey illustrates how the financial position of VCSE organisations changed over the course of the pandemic. Overall, the findings present a particularly bleak picture up until April 2021, before which between 30% and 40% of VCSE organisations said that their financial position had deteriorated over the last month, peaking

in January 2021. The situation stabilises during the later stages of the pandemic, with organisations more likely to say their financial position had improved. However, even when this was at one of its highest levels in May 2021, 28% of the organisations still reported a deteriorating financial position.



Except for the December 2020 survey (anomalous due to the proximity of Christmas and a lower response rate), we saw strong **negative balances** indicating a deteriorating financial position throughout the first six months of the survey. This concern about finances is also associated with the **highest levels of anxiety about prospects for organisational survival**.

The data revealed how **vulnerable** VCSE organisations felt, particularly during the early stages of the crisis. In September 2020, one in seven (14%) barometer respondents thought it was **unlikely that their organisation would be operating in a year's time**. During the year, optimism grew and by September 2021, over 95% of respondents consistently reported that they **expected their organisation to continue operating**.



Likelihood of not operating this time next year

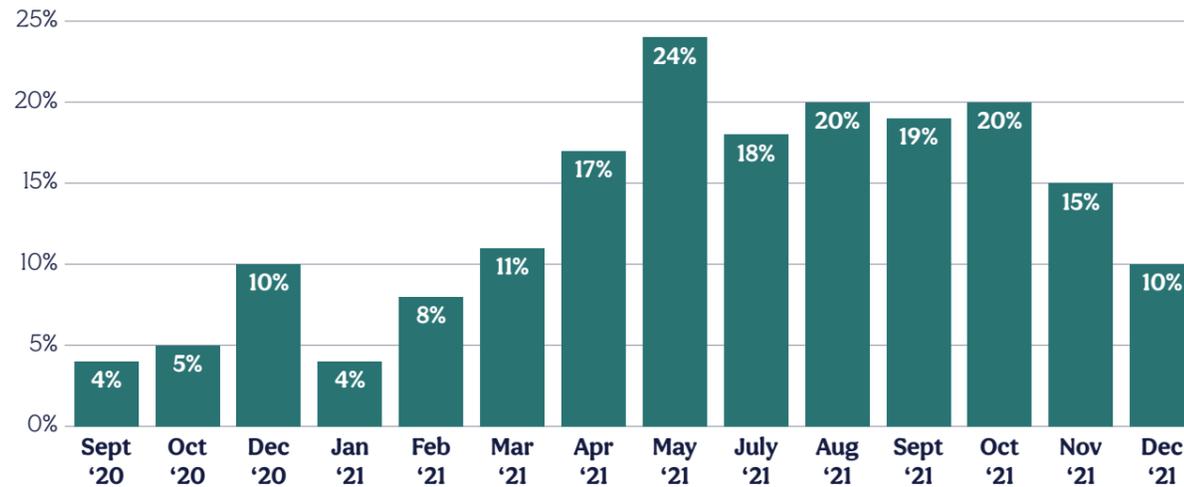


Employment expectations

It is noteworthy, that we concurrently see evidence of **the financial position of many organisations stabilising** and greater confidence of organisational survival. We also see evidence of a more positive employment outlook within the sector. The net balance of employment expectations was positive throughout this series, but strengthened markedly over the Summer of 2021 before softening again

as we approached the end of the year. This end of year softening may be reflected via the arrival of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 and the uncertainties generated. This would be consistent with the effect that Omicron appears to have had on the wider economy at this time – evidenced by the negative growth in GDP reported by the ONS (2021) for December 2021.

Expectation of changes in the workforce balance

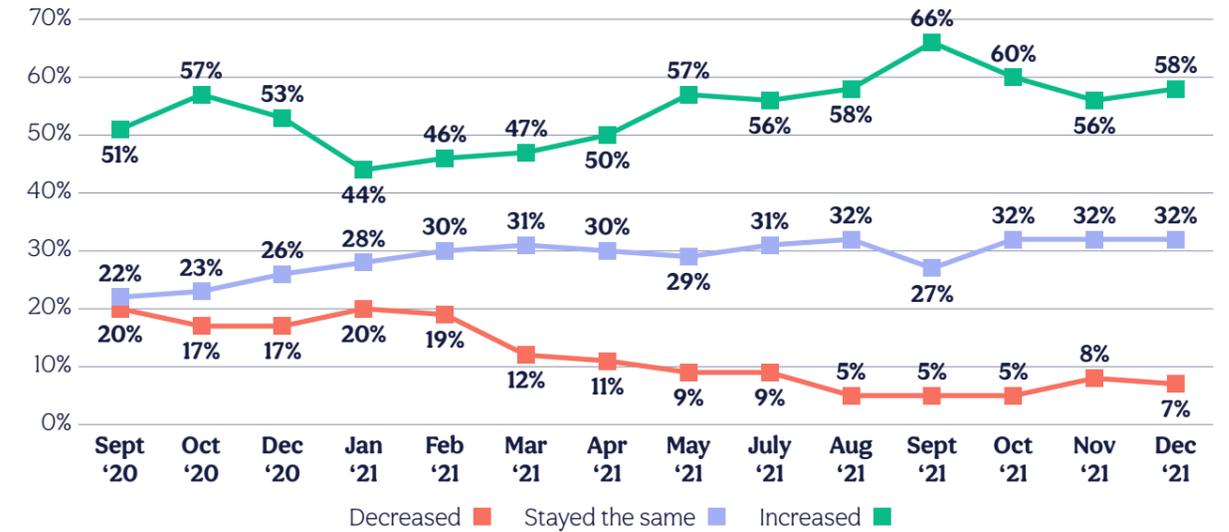


Demand for services

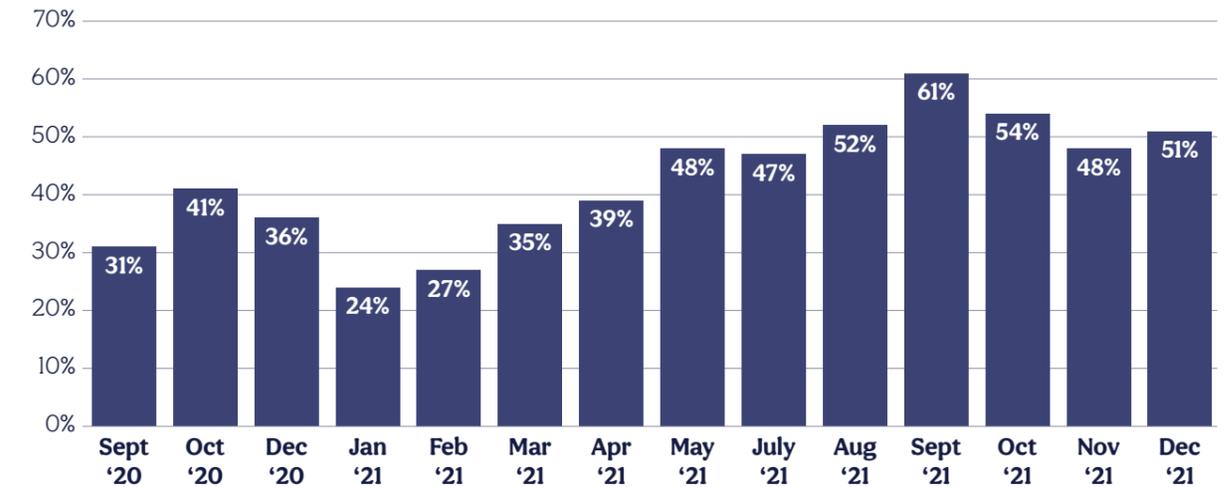
VCSE organisations faced significant increases in demand during the pandemic. The needs of users and communities grew and changed substantially as a result of Covid-19, with **the closure and scaling back of many mainstream services** putting further demands on VCSE organisations and the sector. This is one of the areas where the experience of VCSE organisations most obviously diverged from that of many private sector businesses during the pandemic.

Our research shows **demand for services continued throughout the pandemic.** At most points between September 2020 and December 2021, over half of organisations responding to the barometer reported an increase in demand compared to the previous month. This peaked in September 2021 when two in three organisations said demand had increased from August 2021.

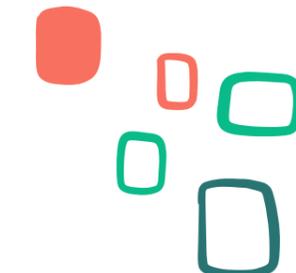
Demand for services



Demand for services balance



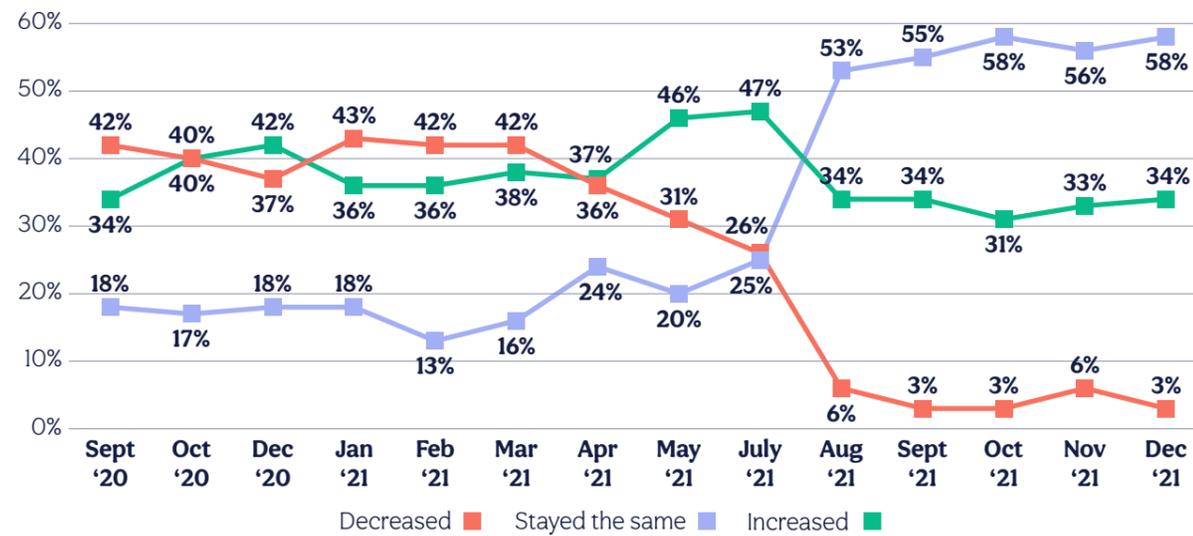
The net balance on demand for services over the course of the project illustrates a striking trend. It reflects both the growing needs of services users and communities and perhaps also the relaxation of restrictions from the Summer of 2021, that enabled the reinstatement of some face-to-face services.



Changes in the range of services

One of the ways in which organisations responded to the pandemic was to change the range of services that they provided. In general, the first six waves of the survey saw reductions in the range of services offered outweighing the increases. In common with other indicators, the pattern of responses changed during the Summer of 2021. It is at this point that we have noted stronger positive balances against the range of services offered, plus a marked rise in the proportion of respondents who reported no change to the range of services offered.

The range of activities / services offered due to the pandemic



“ In common with other indicators, the pattern of responses changed during the Summer of 2021. It is at this point that we have noted stronger positive balances against the range of services offered, plus a marked rise in the proportion of respondents who reported no change to the range of services offered. ”

The range of activities / services offered due to the pandemic balance



It should be noted that it was necessary to revise the reference period for this question – due to the wording of our original question and the length of time that had elapsed since the onset of the pandemic by late Summer 2021. Trend lines for increase and decreases in the range of services offered were diverging before this point, but this necessary change is likely to have contributed to the scale of this divergence evident during the later waves of the survey.

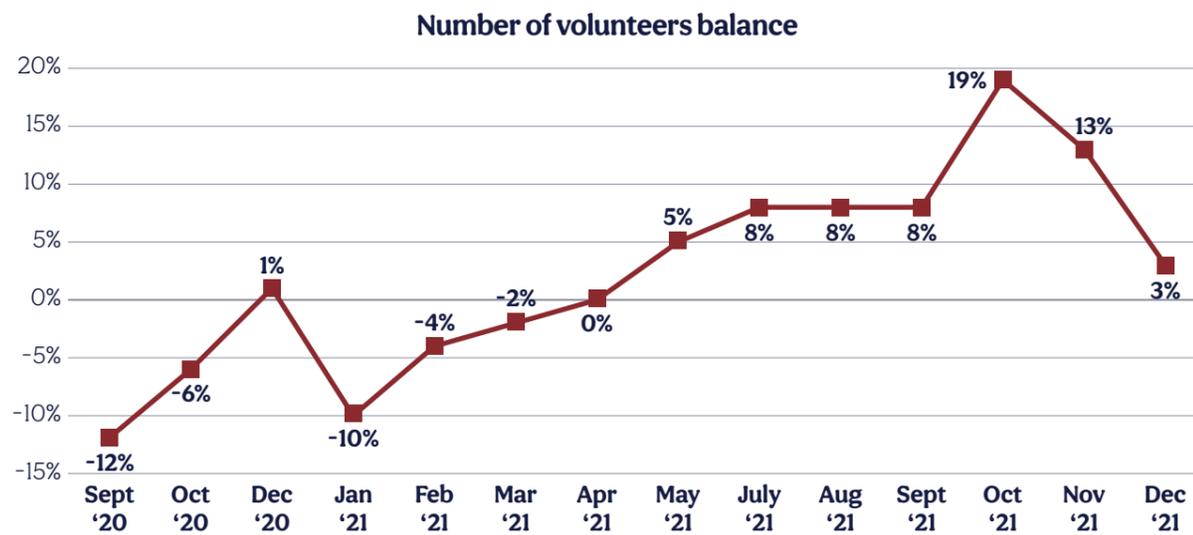
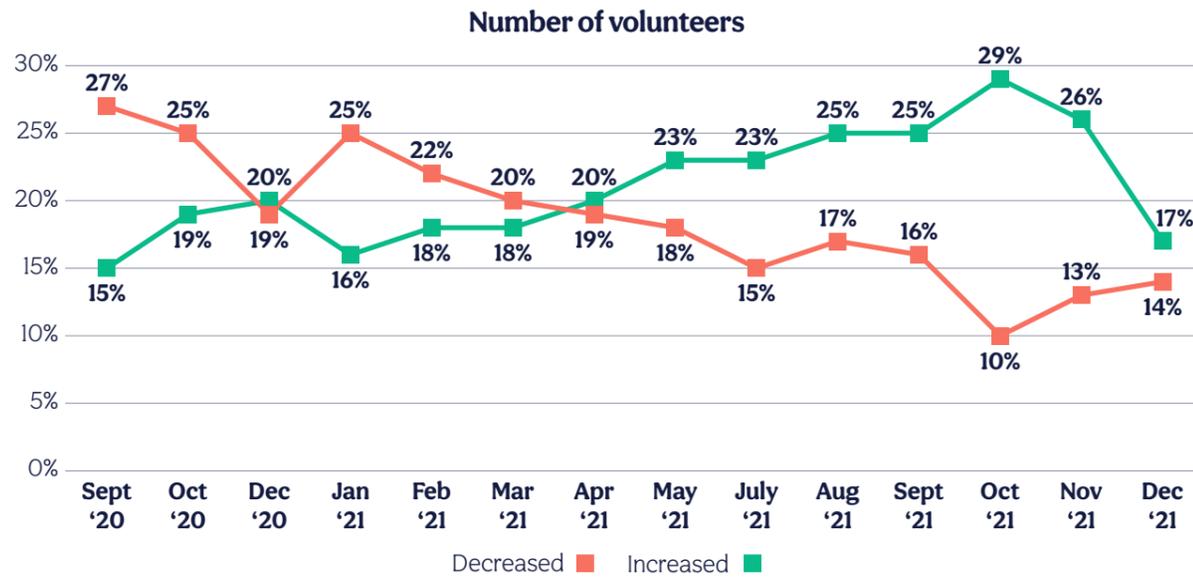
Moving online

The pandemic accelerated a shift in the use of technology and delivery of services online. This is one of the areas where we see the greatest consistency between our quantitative and qualitative data collection. We therefore address this shift more fully in the reporting of our qualitative data. This is also an area where the experience of voluntary sector organisations is not dissimilar that of private businesses as reported in a variety of business surveys and monitoring reports.

The overall trend across 14 waves of the survey shows a significant and consistent increase in the proportion of services delivered online by VCSE organisations during the three phases of lockdown. From September 2021 greater stability can be observed which is likely to reflect both the easing of restrictions and the fact that by this point in the chronology of the pandemic many organisations had already moved those services that they could online.

Volunteering

There was a changing pattern for volunteering over time. Between September 2020 and July 2021, respondents were likely to report that their volunteer numbers had declined rather than increased, compared to the previous month. This trend, however, starts to change in July 2021 with a higher proportion of organisations reporting an increase in volunteer numbers, in line with the easing of restrictions.



This story is clearest when viewed in terms of net balance, this was reported for numbers of volunteers over the last month. Again, we note that the December survey was anomalous. The time series demonstrates negative balances in relation to numbers of volunteers for the majority of the first six monthly surveys. Summer 2021 clearly represents something of a tipping point with a marked transition to

positive balances being reported for the rest of the series. The final December 2022 survey again suggests a softening, that may be associated with the way in which some organisations restricted volunteering or the behaviour of volunteers changed in response to the advent of the Omicron wave of Covid-19.

Conclusions

The story of the pandemic, as documented in our monthly barometer survey, is consistent with that revealed in our more in-depth qualitative interview research. Our data suggests that the early months of the pandemic were characterised by significant financial pressures, and anxiety, at a time of rising demand for services. A large-scale switch to online operations (where practicable), plus a narrowing of the range of services provided by organisations was, perhaps, somewhat inevitable, as face-to-face working and service provision were curtailed by successive lockdown restrictions and related regulations. It is only when these restrictions were eased (during the Summer of 2021), that we see evidence of a return to more 'normal' patterns of service provision and operation. VCSE organisations responded to Covid-19 regulations by adapting their working practices, in ways that were consistent with those adopted by other types of organisations. At the very end of this section, we note some softening of our indicators that may reflect the way in which VCSE organisations responded to the Omicron wave of Covid-19.

Managing through a pandemic

As the trend data highlights, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the VCSE sector. Whilst these statistics provide insights into the impacts overall, the sector is hugely diverse, made up of individual organisations and groups, all with their own experiences, perspectives and reactions to the pandemic.

The rest of the report brings out these experiences through combining data from the barometer and panel surveys, together with the interviews we conducted. The following section explores how organisations managed and organised through the pandemic, and how this shaped their responses.

Much like the general population, for many working in the VCSE sector, the pandemic came as a shock. Most people we interviewed described their early experiences of Covid-19 as one of confusion, uncertainty, stress, and anxiety. Seemingly overnight the 'normal' ways of working and plans for the year had to be abandoned, and a new reality emerged. Our interviewees describe the early phases of the pandemic as one of continual meetings, outreach to members, staff, volunteers and the community, ramping up advice and guidance, and trying to represent their members interests to policy and decision-makers. **Managing and responding to uncertainty** was an ongoing challenge throughout the pandemic and for many this uncertainty continues, particularly in terms of prospects for funding.

Adaptation and innovation have been some of the central features of organisations' response to the pandemic. Many of our interviewees reflected on the **speed of their response**, stating, often with pride and even surprise, how rapidly they responded to shifting services from face-to-face **towards online delivery**. For some organisations this was about creating completely **new programmes or areas of work** in response to the pandemic, but for many others this involved **adapting current programmes or accelerating existing plans**, which had long been in the pipeline but had not yet been enacted. Their capacity to adapt in the early stages of the crisis reflected, in part, their different starting points, including the extent to which a digital strategy was already in place. For many organisations, having existing services and ways of working that they could scale up or accelerate were important:

“ We had business continuity plans in place but of course, a lot of that was around the electricity going out or those kind of things or the internet going down, not a pandemic, but we were able to obviously lift quite a lot of that so we're relatively prepared. We set up a gold command and a silver command and a bronze command. So, the senior leadership team were meeting daily in the lead up to lockdown and for about a fortnight after lockdown to make sure that the business was up and running. So, the whole process going into lockdown actually worked really smoothly... I think it was three days before national lockdown. So, everybody had managed to sort of tidy up desks, take home essential equipment and things ”

Senior Manager, Employment and training, Overseas

Thus Covid-19 required innovation and change, often forcing organisations to do new things they had not thought about or tried before.

“ So, I think that's one of the things out of Covid, it's forced us all to do things differently and it has tested some of our assumptions and proved them wrong, as a sector. So, it's been an interesting part of it ”

CEO, National Infrastructure Organisation, England, Scotland & Wales

Now, two years since the start of the pandemic, many of our recent interviewees are looking at which elements of these changes and innovations should remain or be further developed.

Leaders of VCSE organisations faced considerable challenges in responding to the crisis and often needed to make **quick decisions**. With many sources of income such as fundraising drying up at the beginning of the pandemic (see funding section), decision-makers had to make difficult choices about whether to make people redundant, or later furloughed, if some services and plans could be mothballed, or other areas accelerated.

“ We created very quickly a new slate of key priority projects, some of which had already been in train... we...put huge priority against... transitioning a very rich portfolio of face-to-face events to completely virtual. We did that incredibly swiftly and with great impact, such that the reach and impact and satisfaction and engagement with our events went manifold ”

CEO, Employment and training, Overseas

The regularly changing environment in which VCSE organisations worked, meant that organisational leaders had to make decisions where there was a high level of ambiguity. Many leaders described this situation as challenging and stressful, juggling multiple and competing demands which were impacting them personally (see wellbeing section):

“ Horrendous, I think, is a good way to describe it. There was so much stress ... There I was trying to keep a team together, trying to keep the services running and then suddenly finding that my carefully laid out funding plan was completely gone and that I had to do all these emergency applications, that I wouldn't normally have to do this time of year. I would have done some big ones in the beginning of the year, and then I would have been calming down a bit throughout the summer, but the summer was just madness ”

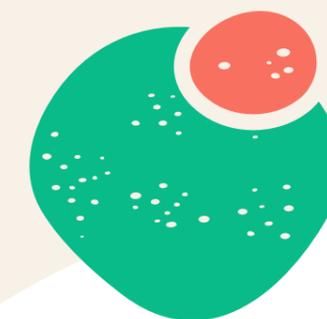
Senior Manager, Individual and family social services, England

The need for rapid decision-making, particularly within the context of increased health, financial, and organisational risks, meant that organisational leaders often had to engage and work more closely with their **Boards and trustees**, who themselves were having to deal with their own challenges. Whilst some organisational leaders told us they felt let-down and disconnected from their trustees during the pandemic, many reported working collaboratively with boards and trustees, with a strengthening of communication and relationships. This was seen as critical for the survival of some organisations during the crisis:

“ I think our trustees, they really rose to it as well, because they took up a lot of responsibility ... they had checked in with staff members while I was off, and that was really positive and that was actually very much appreciated by the staff, they felt, actually there is people looking out for me and yeah, I've got support ”

Senior Manager, Civic, advocacy and political activities, England

To be able to navigate through the crisis, some organisational leaders said they had to step back from immediate demands, to enable them to explore different ways of doing things. Having the headspace to reflect on the challenges and having connections with others in the sector was vital (see [external networks and support section](#)). By way of contrast, some leaders who struggled during the pandemic said they often felt isolated and disconnected from others, and unable to find time to reflect on what was going on.



The commitment, motivation and hard work of staff, Boards and volunteers was commonly identified as key to the resilience of organisations during the pandemic. Many of our interviewees described staff, Boards and volunteers going above and beyond what would normally be expected of them, often working long-hours, in difficult and constantly changing circumstances. Some interviewees described feeling motivated by the sense of mission, purpose and belonging that arose from being part of a great national effort, responding to the challenges of the pandemic. However, doing this over a prolonged period has, as we will explore below, had significant implications for wellbeing.

“What I would want to do really now, is to think back to what it is about the way in which [the organisation’s] been working, and its culture and habits and so on, that actually meant it responded effectively.... the way in which the people’s commitment and ability, the staff’s commitment and ability, the volunteers that were involved within the organisation responded, was effective. Really effective”

Trustee, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

It is notable from the wide range of organisations we interviewed how **variable the experience** was during the crisis. Some organisations thrived, developing new services, ways of working or funding, whereas others were unable to operate, and some closed. An interplay of **different factors shaped the options that organisations had** and the way that they responded, including the nature of the work they did (particularly the extent to which it could move online), funding arrangements, and individual capacities, experiences and personal circumstances of people that worked and volunteered within them. This variability can be best shown through the stories of three organisations who we separately interviewed but all on the same day.

The first organisation was a small research and information charity, with a long history of doing innovative and creative work but had been hit hard by the pandemic. With only one and a half staff members, most of their funding cut, and the building they were occupying soon to be closed, their CEO felt it was unlikely to survive. During the interview the CEO described **feeling isolated and disconnected from support** of both their trustees and the wider sector. They reflected they felt lost and confused and could not imagine the future for their organisation.

The second organisation was a large hospice, a sector that was at the epicentre of the pandemic response. As a result, the organisation’s visibility and reputation increased during Covid-19. They were able to build networks with local authorities, health providers, and funders, in ways that they felt would **build their reputation in the long term**. Simultaneously, because many volunteers had to step back, often for health reasons, the managers of the organisation saw the pandemic as an **opportunity to reconfigure the way that volunteering was structured**, something that volunteers had resisted previously.

The third organisation worked in prisons predominately through the involvement of volunteers, who, when the pandemic struck, were suddenly unable to be involved. Given that their operating model had been dependent on volunteers, this could have been fatal for the organisation. However, just weeks prior to the pandemic they had a large fundraising event, bringing an income of about £250k. This large amount of money meant not only could they survive the pandemic, but funds could be used to **redesign their operating model**, including the way that they engaged with staff, volunteers and prisoners during Covid-19.

All three of these organisations show the **multifaceted and variable experiences**, a combination of leadership, funding, operating models, adaptability, and some luck, shaped the impact of the pandemic and their response.

Whilst the emphasis has often focused on the negative impacts of the pandemic for VCSE organisations, some have said that they have **come out stronger**. Interviewees, including leaders, described how their confidence and self-belief has grown through the experience of ‘rising to the challenges’ of the pandemic, and they now have a greater sense of what they believe is possible and can be achieved.

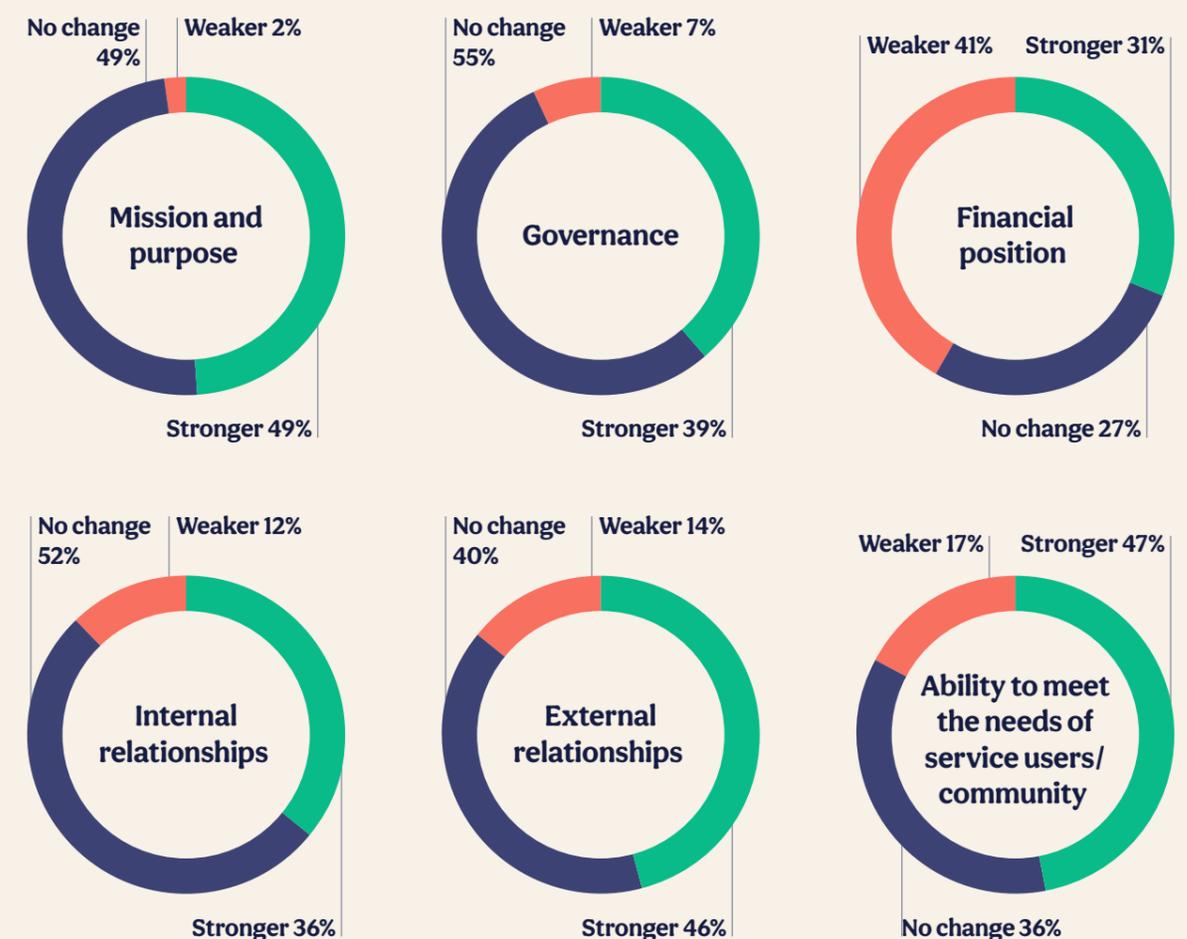
Reflecting on the resilience of their organisations, 69% of respondents to our December 2021 barometer thought that their organisation’s **ability to respond to a crisis or change has improved** compared to 2019, whereas less than 9% felt it had deteriorated. This demonstrates how the experiences of the crisis, and how organisations have adapted, has helped them feel more prepared.

Some organisations felt that the pandemic has **strengthened them in different ways**. They reflected that whilst Covid-19 brought significant challenges and was very difficult, working through these challenges also led to **positive benefits** in terms of changing their services, and building connections with external stakeholders, which might not have happened under previous conditions:

“I think as an organisation it has made us stronger. It’s definitely increased our profile within the health service and within our external stakeholders, amongst other charities etc. So, I think in many ways it has made us stronger. It has made us more resilient... dealing with the issues that we have had to face like many other organisations. And really challenging ourselves to think, you know, why did we always do that way? I think if we hadn’t had the pandemic, it would be so easy to just fall into a routine of doing things because that’s the way we’ve always done it”

CEO, Health, England, Scotland & Wales

Reflecting on the positive changes in their organisations, nearly half of respondents to the December 2021 barometer said that they had a **greater sense of mission**, stronger relationships with external organisations, and provide better services than prior to the pandemic. 54% of organisations also said that their **digital capabilities had improved**, 55% thought that their services now reached new or different people, 50% said their **range of services had improved** and 51% thought the profile of their organisation had improved.





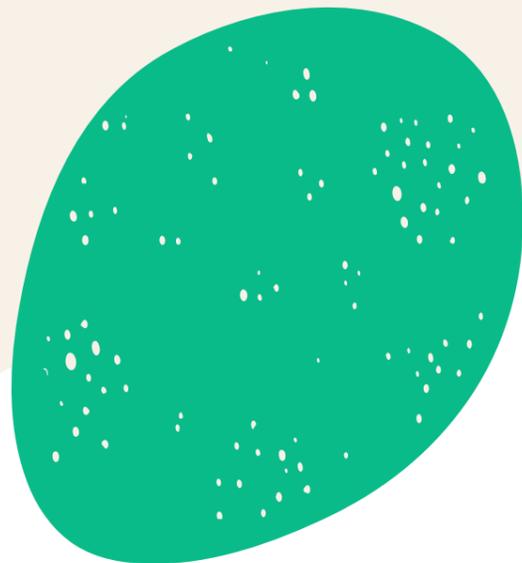
However, others we spoke to felt that the pandemic has **significantly weakened** their organisations. Unable to access emergency funds, translate their services online or build connections with other organisations they have said they felt vulnerable, isolated, and feared closing. 41% of organisations reported a weakening financial position and 38% a **deterioration in their access to long-term funding**. Another key dimension of future resilience, staff wellbeing, has been negatively impacted for some organisations with 29% reporting staff wellbeing having deteriorated during the pandemic. This suggests that despite many organisations having developed a clearer sense of purpose, **financial vulnerability and staff and volunteer wellbeing remain key weaknesses and areas of concern**, potentially undermining future resilience and the learning that has occurred over the last two years.

We can see that the pandemic has had a mixed and complex effect on VCSE organisations and their ways of working over the last two years. In the following sections we explore specific factors that our data highlights were important in shaping how VCSE organisations responded to the crisis. We look at what happened, identify some of the key learning and explore the implications for the future. We do this across the following key themes:

- **Finances and funding**, explores the impacts of the pandemic on the finances of the sector and the funding environment, with a focus on how funders responded to the crisis. It reflects on how funding practices changed, particularly how more flexible, streamlined, and responsive funding processes were developed and asks if they will continue beyond the pandemic.
- We examine how **volunteering** changed during the pandemic and how Covid-19 has accelerated existing trends, shifting some organisations towards new practices. Questions are raised about the implications of this for volunteering including, blended ways of working and flexible volunteering.
- **Equality, diversity and inclusion** have been brought into sharper focus over the last two years. We reflect on the way organisations have responded and ask wider questions about how much the sector can be transformed.

- Throughout the pandemic **staff and volunteer wellbeing** has been a central concern, with individuals and organisations facing the consequences of lockdowns alongside intense workloads and levels of responsibility. Has the pandemic opened individuals and organisations up to be able to discuss wellbeing more, or in the desire to return to normal, will this focus be lost?
- A shift to **digital ways of working** was a central feature of the pandemic, with social distancing requiring many organisations to move online. We explore some of the enablers for this change and examine the implications for the future.
- **Collaboration and partnerships** have been important in the VCSE sector's response to the pandemic. We examine what organisations have learnt from working with others and ask questions about how the sector might best embed collaborative ways of working in the future.
- **External networks and support for VCSE organisations** have been important in helping organisations navigate through the pandemic, including support from infrastructure organisations, funders and peers. This final theme examines how external support and networks can be strengthened beyond the pandemic.

In the final section we will examine the implications for the future and explore the key lessons for the sector.



Finances and funding

This section of the report reflects on the impacts of the pandemic on the finances of VCSE organisations and the funding environment, with a particular focus on the practices and behaviour of funders. It draws on the experiences of different stakeholders we interviewed, to identify key areas of learning and implications of the findings for the future of funding. We captured views from VCSE organisations and funders/commissioners, exploring their key lessons.

What happened to funding during the pandemic?

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the finances of VCSE organisations. Many sources of income, including from charity shops and public fundraising, were curtailed and face-to-face delivery paused. At the start of the pandemic, 14% of barometer survey respondents said they were worried about survival, and many organisations were concerned that their income was drying up.

Research examining changes in the income of charities during the pandemic found 'the median reduction in income for UK charities, for organisations reporting after March 2020, is 13%' and that a quarter of organisations 'experienced a reduction of over two-fifths of their income' (Mohan et al, 2022). Smaller organisations (with an income less than £100K) have been most significantly impacted, experiencing the largest relative declines in income (Clifford et al, 2021). NPC's [Behind the Figures report](#) (2020) explains how different organisations were financially affected according to their income models. Charities with government contracts fared better compared with VCSE organisations 'whose income was dependent on charity shops, training, or other forms of commercial activities, that couldn't go ahead at this time'. Commenting on the impact of the pandemic on public fundraising, one of our research participants said:

“ In terms of marketing and fundraising, our whole marketing plan, and strategy, for that financial year, I would say went off a cliff and through a black hole, because our funding is made up of lots of different elements, and a key plank of that is events, community fundraising, corporates, individuals, and Trusts ”

CEO, Emergency and relief service, England

In response to drops in income, many organisations drew on their financial reserves during the pandemic. By February 2021, our barometer survey reported that more than two in five responding VCSE organisations (46%) had to use their reserves to cope with the impacts of Covid-19. However, research suggests that many organisations already had low levels of reserves when the pandemic hit (Mohan et al, 2022).

Some organisations were able to draw on Covid-19 relief and recovery grants. Analysis of 56,000 grants made during the pandemic, shows that one in ten charities received a grant representing around “25% of the total charity income in the UK” ([360 Giving](#)). Most grants were for six months or less. There were examples of organisations in our research, who said these grants were a lifeline for their organisation during the pandemic:

“ We received emergency funding from a number of different sources. So, yeah, we were fine. We came out of Covid, the numbers looked very different underneath it, but we were okay. We about broke even for the year, so we were able to cover our costs. A mixture of emergency funding, re-securing some funds and using the furlough scheme but between the three things, we made it work ”

CEO, National Infrastructure Organisation, England, Scotland & Wales

However, other organisations shared how they were unable to access relief and recovery grants, because their organisation didn't meet the criteria, or their work was not focused on 'Covid-19 relief':

“ I found really interesting, and I suppose probably because of my role, personally is the response from some of our donors and funders and it's been kind of quite an affirmative process in some respects, and quite negative in others. So, where it's been negative is the funders who have said your activity is not Covid related, we are giving out emergency funds but you can't have any. And we've had one or two of our key funders who have said that which is quite frustrating ”

CEO, Disability, England





In our interviews, organisations commonly told us they were able to re-purpose their grants, their contracts were extended, or their targets were relaxed, enabling them to continue or adapt their services. We observed how some funders pivoted quickly to provide ‘emergency funding’ to VCSE organisations and groups, providing additional funding to existing grantees and opening-up new, short term funding opportunities. However, this was not universally experienced. Some organisations had their funding withdrawn, and grants pulled at a time when demand for services grew substantially.

Wider issues raised during our research have included access to funding for minority groups. Some charities reflected on the barriers they faced and how they felt subjected to a higher level of scrutiny compared to other organisations. Indeed, some funding structures, systems and language were seen to, at times, exclude certain groups. Evidence from 360 Giving suggests that amongst 174 grant-makers which distributed relief and recovery grants in the UK, 15% were for organisations working with a ‘particular ethnic or racial origin’, with 14% for those working with disabled people and 11% for organisations working with the elderly (360 Giving, 2021). There were also a number of examples of grant-makers making concerted efforts to reach more marginalised groups during Covid-19, including ring fenced funding for BAME organisations, and programmes to support people that were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (see also NPC, 2022).

While our barometer trend data suggests that the financial situation of VCSE organisations stabilised to some extent during the course of 2021, findings show that many organisations continue to feel financially vulnerable and anticipate a challenging financial environment. Research from the Charity Commission reports that many expect the pandemic to continue to impact income, and “a significant minority expect to generate less revenue from donations and fundraising in 2022” (Charity Commission, 2021). Our final barometer survey in December 2021, revealed that two in five organisations (42%) think that the pandemic has weakened their financial position, and for nearly half of respondents (48%), financial security is one of the most pressing issues for their organisation going forwards. This points to how vulnerable organisations continue to feel.

Interviewees commonly reflected on how demand for services had continued to rise, with fundraising and other income generating activities yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, putting financial pressures on organisations:

“ So, issues have increased for people, poverty has increased for people, complexity has increased. So, there’s more demand on if we think about food, insecurity, if we think about debt advice, job insecurity, all of those kinds of things and yet the organisations that offer those services and support to people in the places we work, they’re probably having their funding reduced because there’s no additional Covid money ”

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

What is the learning?

The funding environment changed substantially during the pandemic. What can we learn from the way funders adapted their approaches, practices and behaviours?

In our research, it was widely reported from VCSE organisations that funders adopted more **flexible approaches** during the pandemic, although this was not experienced by all. In the October 2021 barometer survey, one in three respondents said that their funders changed the duration, targets, or reporting requirements of their grant in response to the pandemic. Organisations appreciated a ‘lighter touch’ approach to monitoring and evaluation, along with how quickly they could re-purpose their grants and, in some cases, a shift to unrestricted funding. This allowed organisations to cover areas such as core costs, moving their activities online and adapting services to meet the changing needs of service users and communities:

“ Core funding, running costs, pandemic response – anything that helps the organisations navigate the remainder of this financial year. What we’ve actually said to them, they can use that funding for up to 12 months because again it’s grants of up to £15,000 and rather than putting a limit and saying you’ve got to spend that money in the next six months we’ve said, look you can use that in the next 12 months for anything you need to, for your organisational running costs ”

Senior Manager, Local Government, England

Funders commonly recounted how providing a flexible approach, and being closer to grantees’ needs, has created opportunities to **know grantees better, build trusting relations, and learn more about their organisations**.

“ They’ve not asked for their normal reporting criteria; they’ve asked for a narrative report. Nobody has pulled any funding. Again, it goes back to a bit of relationship management. A lot of these projects, we’ve had for a number of years, so we have an existing relationship. I think we’ve been able to just reassure them and the local authority – both local authorities, Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan – because they know the value of our work and we report frequently back, I think that’s made it easier for them to just carry on doing what they need to do while not having to worry about us, sort of thing ”

CEO, Community and economic development, Wales

However, these experiences were not universal, and there were interviewees who recounted how their funders stuck rigidly to targets and requirements during the pandemic. Some also suggested that removing such targets risks making it challenging to evidence impact.

Funders highlighted the importance of being “**attentive**” and “**responsive**” to the needs of organisations. The pandemic offered an opportunity for **better communication** with examples of grant-makers expanding their digital communications to keep grantees informed, answer questions or address concerns. Our research suggests that the changing practices of funders has helped strengthen some relationships. In the December 2021 barometer over a quarter (29%) of VCSE organisations said their relationship with funders had improved during the pandemic, while 11% said it has deteriorated.

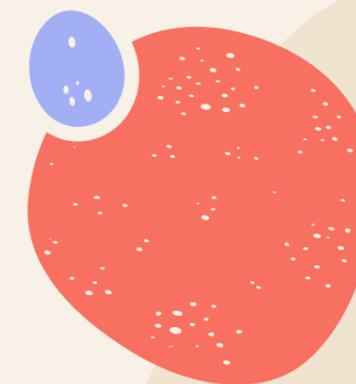
The **grant-making process** was often made less complicated. Funders told us how digital was used to speed up the process, and enable quicker decision-making on grants, with applications submitted online. Some VCSE organisations, however, felt that funding processes were overly burdensome during Covid-19 with long forms to complete for relatively small pots of money.



In our research there were several examples of **joined up working** between funders. This included grant-makers pooling funds and working together to increase access to funding for hard-to reach organisations and communities. In some cases, the sharing of information, training and learning from other funders, stimulated change or informed funding practice within their own organisations.

“ this [pandemic] has certainly been a catalyst for getting that collaboration going and I guess the big test will be whether it lasts beyond the crisis response, sort of thing. But I’ve certainly been on a lot of funder calls and stuff facilitated by people like NPC where there’s been a lot more conversation between funders but whether that results in a more joined up approach to things like evaluation and application. So, I think that’s yet to be seen really ”

Senior Manager, Grant-making foundation, England



What are the implications for the future?

Embedding flexible funding practices beyond the pandemic

As highlighted by IVAR, Covid-19 has shown that “lighter, more flexible, more trusting practices are possible” (IVAR, 2021a). Many funders developed a more relational approach and personalised their efforts according to grantees’ needs. However, these funding practices have started a debate about how feasible it will be to maintain new approaches in the future. How can the experiences of the pandemic be built on to embed these positive relationships? How can we ensure this is not at the expense of more equitable and fair funding? The eight ‘commitments’ developed by IVAR to support ‘open and trusting’ funding practices could be useful for grant-makers to work towards and VCSE organisations to advocate for. This includes the adoption of practices that enable flexibility and are proportionate (IVAR, 2021b).

Moves towards more unrestricted funding is likely to be a key part of a more open and flexible approach going forwards. Indeed, there were examples of funders in our research who said that Covid-19 led to a shift in thinking about unrestricted funding in their own organisation. How can funders best work towards more unrestricted funding approaches? Wider research provides useful lessons on the opportunities and barriers of ‘no strings attached’ funding and how organisations might tackle these, including issues relating to risk and judging impact and success (IVAR, 2021a).

More broadly, our research raises questions about how flexible practices that worked during the pandemic can be further developed and embedded by funders? How can flexibility be best balanced with the need to assess progress and impact?

Long-term funding

A common issue raised in our research by VCSE organisations was the need for long-term funding, in particular core or unrestricted long-term funding. Organisations noted how this would bring stability to their organisations, services and workforce and enable organisations to better plan. Having responded to the pandemic, some organisations are reporting feeling concerned about their future, particularly their financial security in an environment of increased demand for services.

Some funders in our research voiced a commitment to striving for more long-term funding and helping organisations to grow through multi-year commitments:

“For us it’s much more about if they’re doing good work. We know the work that they’re doing, we will continue to support them if we can. And we take that long-term approach and long-term relationships with organisations which is kind of why we moved to the closed programme”

Senior Manager, Grant-making foundation, England

Wider research from Charities Aid Foundation (2022) recommends that multi-year, unrestricted funding from funders should be the norm to help support the resilience of VCSE organisations. How can the learning from the pandemic be used to build a stronger commitment to sustained long term support for VCSE organisations from funders and commissioners? How can the perceived challenges of this approach be best tackled collaboratively?

Embedding collaboration and working together

Our research found a number of examples of funders and grantees working more closely together during the pandemic. Some reflected on how the relationship had been strengthened and was more trusting. Funders highlighted the importance of working directly with grantees and those they work with and listening to those with lived experiences:

“If you don’t talk directly and involve them directly in the work that you’re doing, then you’re not doing it properly”

Senior Manager, Grant-making foundation, England, Scotland, Wales & Northern Ireland

The experiences from the pandemic may pave the way for more collaborative approaches to funding, where funders and grantees work together to identify the best approaches to address the needs of users and communities. Other research similarly highlights the need for mutuality in funding arrangements through “approaching challenges together” (IVAR, 2021c) This could potentially play an important role to efforts to make the funding environment and funding practices more equitable and inclusive. How can funders and VCSE organisations build on the experiences of the pandemic to work more collaboratively and equitably to better meet the needs of users and communities?

Volunteering

This section of the report explores the impacts of the pandemic on volunteering within VCSE organisations. It draws on the experiences of organisations we interviewed to identify key areas of learning. The focus here is on volunteering through groups, clubs, and organisations and on volunteers supporting service users, communities and organisations in non-trustee or Board roles.

What happened to volunteering during the pandemic?

Covid-19 led to considerable and rapid shifts in volunteering within communities and across the VCSE sector. During the early stages of the pandemic, many people put themselves forward to volunteer. There was a rise in volunteers getting involved informally in their communities through helping neighbours and mutual aid (see DCMS, 2021 and Scottish Government, 2022). Some VCSE organisations took on new volunteers to help them meet the urgent needs of communities and users and, in some cases, to step in for volunteers who had to stand down during the crisis. One in four organisations (24%) responding to the April barometer said that between March 2020 and May 2021 the number of volunteers they involved increased. Some organisations reported being ‘inundated’ with new volunteers early on in the pandemic. The social distancing requirements and lack of organisational capacity to involve and support more volunteers however meant that not all could be matched to roles.

Many people involved during the first year of the pandemic were reportedly new to volunteering (Together, 2021), with furlough providing the opportunity to get involved. Some organisations in our research reported how new volunteers were typically younger than their existing volunteers.

While for some VCSE organisations the pandemic boosted volunteering, the opposite was true for many others, where existing volunteers had to step back from their formal roles, particularly when told to shield or when services stopped or changed. Over one in three VCSE organisations (36%) responding to the barometer survey reported a decline in the numbers of volunteers they involved between March 2020 and May 2021. This considerable decline chimes with wider evidence (for example Charity Commission, 2021), with some of the biggest drops in volunteering reported amongst older age groups who were having to shield (DCMS, 2021). This had a significant impact on many VCSE organisations and groups, particularly those reliant on volunteers, at a time when demand grew sharply.

Some organisations were able to adapt their services or activities, often through a shift to remote or online services with some volunteer roles and activities able to be recast. This included, for example, face-to-face volunteer befriending roles pivoting to telephone support and volunteer peer support groups moving online. Services were entirely transformed in some organisations, shifting to provide emergency support to communities. In some cases, VCSE organisations, co-ordinated and mobilised thousands of volunteers to respond to the crisis. The crucial role of volunteers in helping meet the needs of communities during the crisis was repeatedly highlighted in our research by VCSE organisations, funders and local authorities.

As the pandemic ebbed and flowed and as restrictions eased and tightened repeatedly, there was a mixed picture of how organisations approached volunteering. In a large part this reflected the nature of their activities, the centrality of volunteers to services and the extent of financial pressures. Organisations reported that they lost some of their new volunteers when they returned to paid work after furlough ended. Some brought back their existing volunteers as early as they could but had to ask volunteers to step back again when restrictions tightened. Others waited to re-introduce them and two years later some have yet to do so.

One of the biggest challenges has been the ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic. Volunteer managers spoke of the toing and froing and the operational challenges of trying to co-ordinate and manage volunteers in an uncertain environment. Organisations highlighted that some volunteers have not come back to volunteering after the long break, with plans to recruit more volunteers to support their work. Some mentioned difficulties in recruiting volunteers for specific roles, leaving a ‘volunteering gap’ in their organisations (see also NatCen, 2021). One in five VCSE organisations responding to the December 2021 barometer said ‘filling volunteer roles’ was one of the most pressing challenges they face.

Given the financial pressures on many VCSE organisations, extensive concerns have been raised about the capacity within organisations to support and manage volunteering going forwards. Some expressed that the lack of volunteer management capacity was a key vulnerability for their organisation. Many are facing the ‘huge challenge of building volunteering up again’ and highlight the additional support needs of volunteers following the pandemic, particularly around wellbeing (see Stuart et al, 2021). This is all within the wider context of pressing and growing needs of service users and communities.



What is the learning?

The pandemic led to new and different ways of co-ordinating, engaging and supporting volunteers. VCSE organisations experimented with different approaches and developed new thinking. Our research captured lessons from VCSE organisations and learning which could be useful beyond the pandemic.

Organisations had to rapidly rethink and re-organise volunteering with the onset of the pandemic. In some cases, this meant volunteers took on a more front and centre role and engagement with their organisations deepened. The opposite was true in others, where volunteers had to take a step back and, in some cases, staff took on their roles. Where volunteers got involved in new and different ways, VCSE organisations shared how they developed a new understanding about the roles volunteers could do. They spoke of how the pandemic had ‘opened the minds of staff’ about the **capabilities and skills of volunteers**:

“ For quite a few organisations, [the pandemic has] shown a whole new way of involving volunteers. And the renewed appetite and interest in it will hopefully lead to a much bigger, continued, sustained growth in volunteering, and more interesting ways to involve volunteers in your charity. Rather than just consigning them to the margins, or the really routine roles, or unskilled roles ”

CEO, National Infrastructure Organisation, England, Scotland & Wales

The pandemic forced some organisations to establish, expand and formalise **remote or online volunteering opportunities**. Some developed micro-volunteering offers with ‘bite-size’, short and specific activities, such as writing postcards to people in the community at risk of isolation. As highlighted elsewhere, these are not ‘new’ forms of volunteering (McCabe et al, 2020) but for many organisations this was a significant shift and innovative ways of working. VCSE organisations learnt that remote and online volunteer roles presented considerable opportunities. They were able to open-up volunteering opportunities to a wider and more diverse pool of people, bringing different skills and experiences, with physical access and geography less of a barrier. They learnt that remote and online roles could give volunteers more flexibility, enabling them to fit volunteering around their own lives. However, concerns about **digital exclusion** were repeatedly highlighted with organisations making significant efforts to increase access to digital roles including providing volunteers with digital skills training and mentoring or securing funding to provide equipment to volunteers.

The pandemic has also accelerated the **use of technology** in the co-ordination and management of volunteers including the use of apps to co-ordinate volunteer tasks and platforms such as zoom and WhatsApp for communication and support. VCSE organisations learnt the **value of these tools** to ease the co-ordination of volunteers, including the use of apps to enable volunteers to choose tasks. There were examples of organisations collaborating in their use of technology to help co-ordinate and manage volunteers. However, there have also been lessons for VCSE organisations about the limitations of technology with concerns about **exclusion** and the drawbacks of online compared to face-to-face for providing volunteers with emotional support.

Indeed, how best to connect and engage with volunteers during the pandemic has been a key area of learning for VCSE organisations. Underpinning this has been the importance of **maintaining communication** with volunteers and providing space (often virtual spaces) for volunteers to connect with each other. Where volunteers had to stand down from their roles, organisations experimented with different approaches to keep volunteers engaged including online training and social activities, newsletters to keep volunteers informed and the development of new activities and roles for volunteers. Some mentioned, for example, how they invited volunteers to get involved in research projects. These worked well to keep volunteers engaged, with some organisations planning to continue with a wider range of opportunities beyond the pandemic. The importance of ongoing **two-way communication** with volunteers was highlighted and it was often necessary to engage with volunteers in different ways, particularly those who did not have access or were less confident in using technology. The pandemic has stimulated VCSE organisations to re-evaluate how they connect with their volunteers and how volunteers connect with one another:

“ I think what I’ve learnt is – previously I’ve always communicated with volunteers in lots of different ways, and I will continue to do that but one thing, I think we relied on the newsletter too much..., because of that we didn’t get the feedback as much as we should have done from volunteers and I would definitely change that now, and make sure those opportunities are available and I’m more accessible. And, you know, just little and often rather than, here’s a newsletter ”

Senior Manager, Community and economic development, England

Much can also be learnt from the ways organisations adapted their practices to **make it easier to volunteer** during the pandemic. To meet the needs of communities and to respond to the surge in interest in volunteering, some organisations actively reduced bureaucracy and sped up the process of getting involved. This enabled individuals to volunteer more quickly but some highlighted concerns about whether organisations struck the right balance between informality and managing risk. Commenting on the importance of this, one organisation said:

“ Just because something is done as an emergency response we still wanted it to be really well-organised, we wanted our volunteers to feel safe because that’s our USP that that’s what our programme is like, volunteers feel safe and they’re well-trained and we wanted to make sure that was still the case ”

Line Manager, Culture and arts, England

The experience of Covid-19 has forced some organisations to rethink how much formality they need and how they might retain some of the **less formal and more flexible practices** adopted during the pandemic. This includes keeping volunteer application processes simple, speeding up onboarding, providing online training and offering more flexibility. Flexible approaches included enabling volunteers to choose how much volunteering they wanted to commit to and when, providing a diverse range of opportunities and offering the choice of online training going forward. Flexibility was seen as important in encouraging those new to volunteering to stay involved:

“ So, we have adapted to be able to support them to volunteer out of hours, which again has meant that if people did get back to work they didn’t have to lose the service that we offer ”

CEO, Health, England

Lastly, VCSE organisations shared wider learning about their approach to volunteering and how the pandemic was an opportunity to **‘re-think’, ‘re-design’** and **‘re-set’** volunteering. In some cases, this was about using learning from the pandemic to develop new volunteer roles or adapt the systems and structures that support volunteers. For others it represented a more fundamental shift:

“ Let’s try and come at this differently. It’s again, it’s a legacy from this huge impetus we’ve had... since COVID, since Black Lives Matter, there’s been this huge impetus on kind of ripping up the rule book and saying, none of that has worked, we’ve got to find different ways of doing things here. And every time, for us, it means starting with local communities.... It’s about the community doing it for itself ”

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England



What are the implications for the future?

Re-thinking communities and volunteering

The pandemic highlighted the vital role and contribution of volunteers to communities. It brought, in many cases, VCSE organisations closer to their communities and users. Our research points to how the pandemic has accelerated a move in some quarters towards more 'community led' or 'community power' models, focusing on the problems that need to be solved and the role communities can play, with a shift away from 'transactional' approaches to volunteering (seeing volunteers as resources to be deployed):

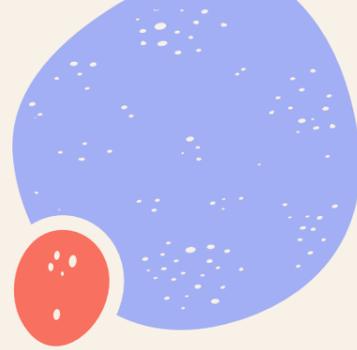
“ I think we've been on this journey for a while about working alongside people and not seeing people as volunteers and beneficiaries or the worthy and the needy but just people that connect together. And then when they come together, they're able to do amazing things. And I think for a lot of charities with a traditional volunteer role structure, Covid has challenged that in a good way and my hope, therefore, is that many more charities will start to think about their role in communities slightly differently ”

CEO, National Infrastructure Organisation, England, Scotland & Wales

Will the pandemic stimulate a fundamental shift in the way the sector interacts with communities? Can the sector embed a more relationship-based approach to volunteering, empowering communities and volunteers?

A potential shift in the role, position, and voice of volunteers

The pandemic could have long term implications on the position and influence of volunteers within VCSE organisations. As we have seen, volunteers' relationship and connection with organisations has deepened in some cases, but in others this relationship has been 'hollowed out' by the pandemic. There are examples of volunteers taking on more complex roles and responsibilities, and others where staff had to step into volunteer roles. Will volunteers be expected to take on roles previously carried out by paid staff? What are the implications of this on the relationship between volunteers and staff and on volunteer wellbeing? How will the voice and influence of volunteers be affected by changes in their role and position?



A renewed focus on inclusive volunteering

The events of the last two years, notably Covid-19 and anti-racism movements have brought diversity and inclusion issues to the fore in the sector. The pandemic stimulated many new people to get involved in volunteering, however it also exacerbated and created new barriers to volunteering, including the digital divide. Organisations learnt a great deal from their efforts to make it easier to volunteer during the pandemic but expressed disappointment that they struggled to retain many new and more diverse volunteers. Organisations will need to consider how the pandemic has affected the diversity of volunteers and the barriers individuals now face in getting and staying involved (see also [NCVO, 2021](#)). Does the way volunteering is organised and managed support diversity? How can barriers to volunteering be addressed within organisations? How can the sector be best supported to address barriers to inclusion?

More blended, flexible and responsive approaches to volunteering

There has been a significant shift in the way VCSE organisations involve and connect with their volunteers, accelerating many existing trends. The future is pointing to a more blended approach to volunteering, where the best parts of digital and the best parts of face-to-face are adopted to co-ordinate, manage and support volunteers. Flexibility will be important to enable people to fit volunteering around their lives and responsiveness from organisation to meet the changing needs and circumstances of volunteers. How can blended approaches best meet the needs of volunteers and service users? How should flexibility in volunteering and the realities of meeting the needs of users be best balanced? How can roles be made more flexible whilst simultaneously ensuring volunteers feel engaged and connected with organisations?

The potential of volunteering stunted by a lack of resources and support

VCSE organisations are concerned about pressing demands and financial pressures. Will volunteers be expected to do more with less resource to support them? Volunteer management capacity has been identified as a vulnerability for some organisations going forwards. This presents significant challenges for organisations and the sector more widely. How can organisations work together to share resources and expertise to support volunteering? How can funders better support volunteering going forwards, including through flexible funding approaches?

Equality, diversity and inclusion

This section of the report explores the way the pandemic, and other wider events, impacted practices and attitudes about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the VCSE sector. We recognise that this is a complex and contested topic, where there are various interpretations of the key terms, ideas and principles. This was reflected in our interviews. Our interviewees often saw issues of equality, diversity and inclusion within a framework of structural power, systemic racism, and intersectionality, as well as making sure everyone feels included. This demonstrates the range of ways that individuals and organisations across the sector think about and respond to EDI. It is also reflected in the language used, where some people use the term Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic or BAME and others questioned these terms.

What happened during the pandemic?

During the pandemic the focus on equality, diversity and inclusion has intensified, particularly for those not already working in the area, for three key reasons. First, George Floyd's brutal murder in May 2020 sent shockwaves around the world, highlighting the racism, discrimination, and inequality experienced by black people. This led thousands of people to protest at racial injustice, heightening attention on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. For many interviewees working within the VCSE sector, the increased prominence of these protests made attention on racism urgent and requiring action.

“ Then along comes the Black Lives Matter thing and we were really challenged on that too, we had to step up hugely on that, so a massive amount of pressure ”

CEO, Professional association, UK

Second, as the [Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS) data demonstrates, the disproportionately higher deaths from Covid-19 of people from ethnic minorities raised questions about how racial inequality was shaping the health and social outcomes of many people in society. Furthermore, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on older people, disabled people, young people, and the members of the LGBTQIA+ community highlighted multiple, and often intersecting forms of inequality across society. Some of our interviewees, particularly those working within organisations that work most closely with these communities, stated they had seen at first hand the disproportionate impacts that Covid-19 had within these groups, and how it highlighted existing inequalities in society.

Equality means actively working towards equality of opportunity and equality of outcome in order to provide better treatment and better outcomes for all. **Diversity** refers to recognising and valuing the differences that exists between people or groups of people. It also means engaging a range of different people in your workforce, in volunteering opportunities, and in the activities or services your organisation delivers, ensuring that people or groups are not underrepresented. **Inclusion** refers to the experience people have within organisations, and ensuring people of different backgrounds, experiences and identities feel welcomed, represented, respected and are fully able to participate.

Third, accusations of racism within various VCSE organisations, highlighted by campaign groups such as Charity So White, emerged shortly before and during the pandemic, have drawn attention to the experiences of ethnic minorities within the VCSE sector. Recognising these experiences, some of our interviewees have also highlighted how other groups such as disabled people or people within the LGBTQIA+ community also encounter exclusion within the VCSE sector. These lived experiences highlight the need for a more inclusive VCSE sector.

“ I think everyone was talking about Black Lives Matter, everyone. Every organisation had to make a statement about it. Had to do a social media post about it and I don't know, I feel like it's tailed off a little bit ”

Senior manager, Individual and family social services, local, England



The combination of these factors, happening during the pandemic, has meant that for many within the VCSE sector, interest around social justice, equality, diversity, and inclusion has been amplified. Some of our interviewees, particularly those who are at the forefront of these debates, stated they thought that this has increased the urgency of questions about how the sector operates, arguing that funding mechanisms, culture and practices of the sector can lead to discrimination and exclusion. For some this has led to calls to decolonise the VCSE sector, to think deeply about its origins such as the philosophical roots of philanthropy, about the power-relations that exist throughout the sector, and to examine some of the historical and current sources of its funding and everyday culture and practice. Yet, at the same time, these discussions have been occurring against a political and cultural backdrop of an 'anti-woke' agenda, and a questioning of structural racism, as the controversies surrounding the [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#) report demonstrates.

Some organisations have also responded by undertaking **training and development** to think through their organisational culture and practices. Some interviewees talked about conducting micro-aggression and unconscious bias training to help address racism. For some organisations these types of practices were initially focused on paid staff and trustees, with the long-term aim of involving other volunteers. However, some interviewees stated that such processes were challenging and sometimes they received push-back from those that did not want to participate. Many campaigners, and researchers also question the effectiveness of interventions such as unconscious bias training ([Noon, 2018](#)), arguing that more long-term systemic change is needed.

What is the learning?

For some organisations the events of the last 24 months have highlighted that many organisations, and the sector as a whole is not as diverse as it should be, and how organisational practices and culture of the sector can end up excluding key groups of people. Thus, as a result of the increased attention on EDI throughout the pandemic, a large number of VCSE organisations are **rethinking their practices**. In our June 2021 survey 74% of responding organisations stated that they have plans in place to address EDI and 59% stated they had revised their EDI plans since March 2020. Organisations also reported that they were working with more diverse groups since the start of the pandemic and 15% involved more diverse volunteers. Many organisations also reported that they were seeking to diversify their Board and those in decision-making positions:

“ I think what we've realised through this is just the need to diversify the board as well as that. Which I think has just been partly led by Covid and there's kind of more voices around the table and more subject matter experts, if you will, but also the whole Black Lives Matter movement bringing that to front and centre ”

Trustee, Civic society/advocacy, Regional, England

The need to involve more **diverse decision-makers**, particularly trustees has been a long-standing issue within the sector ([ACEVO/Voice4Change, 2020](#)), which has only intensified during the pandemic. Whilst there is at least greater awareness of the need to be more diverse, achieving this is a long-term process. Responding to this, some infrastructure organisations and larger VCSE organisations have developed specific **leadership development programmes** for women or ethnic minorities to try to address the long-term under-representation of specific groups within these positions. Similarly, some organisations have responded by exploring how to **diversify their volunteers**. These organisations stated they are looking into the recruitment and retention of volunteers from a variety of backgrounds. Other organisations also reflected how the events of the last two years have encouraged them to rethink how to **extend the reach of their services to different communities**, and to ensure that they are serving the needs of a wider range of people. Some interviewees highlighted that the pandemic has revealed the importance of involving people with **lived experience** in decision-making, such as developing services through co-production (see [The National Lottery Community Fund, 2020](#)), using their knowledge and expertise to develop better services. Inclusion of users and user voice will need to be a key area of focus moving forward.

Events over the last two years have also prompted **funders to respond** to the BLM movement and the disproportionate impact they believed Covid-19 was having on particular communities. For some funders this was about making available specific funds targeted towards underrepresented groups. Others not only made funding pots available, but also adapted their application processes and developed their connections to grassroots organisations who might otherwise be excluded from receiving funds. Some interviewees, for example, commented that some of the grassroots organisations that work with more diverse communities were not always structured in a way that would make them seem 'eligible' or 'safe' from a funders viewpoint or even in the right networks to know that the funding was available.

“ I think some of it was just assumptions that people would write things in certain ways and then a lot of people applying because they were setting up... a lot of very new organisations were setting up to deal with the response, particularly around getting food to people but they'd maybe never written a funding application before and they weren't writing it in the right way ”

CEO, Community and economic development, Scotland

Some funders, therefore sought to put in measures to connect to a wider range of groups to get funding and support to the communities that needed it most. However, more recent interviewees have reported that many funders seemed to be reverting to 'business as usual', with these specific funds being withdrawn. Some of the large national funders have channelled their funding through more specialist organisations supporting specific communities, using participatory approaches to funding and engaging people with lived experience in the decision-making process.

Another key action that some VCSE organisations, particularly those that represent underrepresented groups, have been involved in is **advocacy**. They have looked to give voice to their members about how Covid-19 policies, such as lockdowns, were impacting them, and put these views to policymakers. Our interviewees engaged in these activities reflected that the extent to which they were successful in representing their members needs and interests was in part shaped by the existing connections that they had with policymakers. For those involved in advocacy, they stated it helped to highlight the importance of organisations that represent different groups and the need to build better connections with decision-makers.

What are the implications for the future?

Improving diversity of leaders and trustees within the VCSE sector

One of the key implications of the rise in focus on EDI during the pandemic has been the intensified attention on the diversity of trustees and senior leaders. However, as some of our interviewees have highlighted, the **lack of data** around the demographic **make-up of trustees and senior leaders** is a central challenge to identify how quickly the sector is transforming. As the charity Money4YOU have recently highlighted through their campaign #OperationTransparency, data around the make-up of trustees, allocation of funding, or the leadership of charities is not currently visible, particularly the equality of funding allocation. How can the sector as a whole improve its data around EDI in a way that supports improvement? What are the opportunities for regulators, such as the Charity Commission or OSCR Scottish Charity Regulator, to collect and make available equality data to shift this conversation?

Funding and EDI

The pandemic has raised questions about the **ways in which funding is allocated, administered, and targeted**, and how many existing processes exclude organisations that represent diverse communities. As a response, some funders changed their processes or created funds that were targeted at particular communities, or practices that support inclusion. Yet, despite this, some of our most recent interviewees, particularly those that work within EDI focused organisations, expressed concern that as we move out of the pandemic some of this attention on EDI over the last two years is beginning to wane.

When we spoke to some commissioners, they also acknowledged the lack of funding for minoritised groups.

“ I think the joint strategic commissioning board, part of its function will be to say, we know over the last 10 years the BAME sector has lost out. Covid shows that's a really dangerous position. So, we need to look at the equity of what we are funding ”

Senior manager, NHS, England

This raised questions about how funders can ensure more equitable access to funding opportunities both within and outside of a crisis situation. Since then, some funders have already started to talk and implement changes to support more black-led and grassroots organisations. Some of our respondents argued there is a need to put the members of marginalised groups front and centre in making funding decisions.



Staff and volunteer wellbeing

Work is already occurring in this area, for instance NPCs work around equitable funding practices, but there is still a long way to go, particularly to engage key decision makers to make this a priority. So will the more flexible, and targeted funding focused on support for EDI continue or will this be seen as a more specific response to Covid-19? How can funders embed and develop practices that support EDI in the sector? There are many new practices that are being experimented with to make funding more participatory and inclusive, yet development of these practices is still limited to a few funders.



Indeed, some interviewees see the pandemic as opening-up more fundamental questions about the funding relationship, the sources of wealth and power which shapes so much of the sector, whereas others are concerned that key decision-makers, particularly trustees of large funders and foundations, are still detached from these issues.

Striving for a more inclusive VCSE sector

The past two years have spotlighted EDI within the VCSE sector, resulting in increased (although many argue insufficient) action to address racism and other forms of exclusion. This has certainly made questions of EDI more prominent for many organisations, which many of our interviewees have stated has required them to make statements and review their policies and procedures. Yet it is clear that significant change is required. Questions remain as to how deep, or significant such changes will be? Are such moves largely symbolic or can real, sustained change occur? How can substantial shifts occur in terms of changing the culture, organisational structures and practices that can enable real and long-lasting changes to the sector?

Indeed, how significant do these changes need to become before they really make a difference to peoples lived experience? A number of leaders of smaller VCSE organisations told us they found it difficult to know what actions to take. This raises questions about what can be done not only at an individual organisational level but also a sector wide level to support organisations seeking to change practices? Can organisations work more collaboratively and creatively to transform the sector, where people learn from each other to create long-lasting change?



This section explores staff and volunteer wellbeing throughout the pandemic, focusing on the impact of increased workloads on staff wellbeing. It reflects on some of the ways organisations tried to mitigate these challenges of overwork and burnout and the lessons that were learnt as a result. The implications of the findings for the future are explored, including how organisations can better support the wellbeing of staff and questions to consider when bringing new strategies for wellbeing into the organisation.

What happened during the pandemic?

Wellbeing is a broad and complex topic, and one that can often be difficult to detach from other agendas within organisations. **Wellbeing intersects with a wider range of issues than we discuss here.** Factors such as overwork and feelings of isolation, have perhaps been obvious focal points when addressing the topic in relation to the pandemic, especially for those who have worked throughout. Many reported dealing with increased workloads alongside the general pressures of living through such an event, which alone, has demonstrable impact on wellbeing for the general population (Xiong et al., 2020). Throughout the pandemic many organisations experienced **increased demand for services**, alongside the continued challenges of unfamiliar and ever-changing environments, against a backdrop of short and long term **precarious financial situations**. This resulted in staff restructures, redundancies, and large numbers of staff in the sector furloughed. Coupled with this, many volunteers had to step back from their roles, and organisations were impacted by staff and volunteers needing to shield and self-isolate. Consequently, many staff and volunteers who were still working, often had to take on more responsibility and undertake different roles. Increased workloads and responsibility can come at the expense of staff wellbeing (Smith et al, 2022) as the **focus of the organisation, and particularly the needs of beneficiaries, was often at odds with the health and wellbeing of staff.** As one interviewee told us:

“ What I think as a sector we’re very bad at doing is supporting ourselves. You put all your energy and your focus into the people you’re supporting but actually your staff team is crumbling around that ”

CEO, Local infrastructure organisation, England

In our research, there were widespread reports of an increase in staff workloads and working hours to meet the needs of beneficiaries and service users, alongside helping the organisation adapt and survive through the challenges of the pandemic. **Two years on, staff in many organisations are still working at these ‘crisis levels’ of work.**

For the purposes of this section of the report we refer to ‘staff’ as all paid employees within a VCSE organisation, this includes CEOs/leaders/managers/frontline staff, the majority of which reported taking on additional responsibilities and roles as a matter of need. ‘Volunteers’ refer to those involved in unpaid roles and activities, including trustees and board members.

Wellbeing can be sustained during short periods of crisis, however, when it is ‘diminished for prolonged periods of time’, workers become prone to ‘forms of distress which are likely to negatively impact their mental health and impair their ability to perform to their full potential’ (Brown et al., 2020). The interviews undertaken as part of this project have shown that **whilst there has been some recognition of increased levels of work and pressure, there remains important questions for how organisations deal with health and wellbeing.** A common theme emerged where participants would consider their own wellbeing as secondary to the needs of service users:

“ I think quite rightly, you’re going to people that desperately need... help, at the end of the day, not being too dramatic, but save lives, or as we perceived it, and I think that first year, 2020, it was just rushing around trying to do the best you could. I would have really appreciated some support, even somebody to talk to, that I found myself without a natural sort of circle of others ”

CEO, Research organisation, England

Interviewees often talked about service users or members of the community ‘suffering’, ‘struggling’, or in ‘desperate’ situations, and there was genuine concern for what would happen to them if the organisations were unable to support them. All of this meant that staff frequently went above and beyond what was expected, often **neglecting their own wellbeing in order to support others.** When reflecting on their individual experiences this would at times broaden out to concerns regarding wellbeing as an organisation/collective:

“ I was on my knees – we were absolutely exhausted, we were up against it. There wasn’t a spare minute in the day. There really, truly wasn’t a spare minute. And it didn’t let up at all ”

Senior manager, Health and social care, England

In addition to this, there were concerns from a number of organisations about the wellbeing of their volunteers who had stepped back from their roles, particularly for those for whom volunteering was crucial to their social and support networks. Some organisations spent time working with and supporting these volunteers through the challenges of the pandemic.

At a time when relentless challenges were being faced by VCSE organisations, it was recognised by some interviewees that the wellbeing of staff and volunteers was often overlooked, as other concerns took priority. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that wellbeing, broadly speaking, had become a hot topic in public discourse, and this translated into conversations around burnout, stress, and work-based pressure, for those who had worked tirelessly throughout a very long period. Our research points to the need to keep the wellbeing of staff and volunteers at the forefront, and that the human cost associated with the intensification of work, which staff and volunteers have experienced (alongside the ongoing pressures associated with an event of this magnitude), is not forgotten (Smith et al, 2022). The idea that staff can continue to perform at crisis levels, has long been highlighted as unsustainable, with concerns for the negative implications on individuals (Brown et al., 2020).

What is the learning?

Within organisations, staff at all levels found increased workloads challenging. Senior leaders faced the responsibility of decision making, ensuring the survival of their organisation, ensuring the needs of beneficiaries were met, and the responsibility of the wellbeing of their staff and volunteers. The leader of one organisation told us

“ It’s carrying the weight of the charity, and the future of the charity on my shoulders. I mean, we are financially okay at the moment. Next year is a different story in itself. So, it’s that constantly, all right, I’m going to apply for new funding, going to do this, going to make sure my staff are okay as well ”

CEO, Civil and advocacy organisation, England

Comments such as this were common across our interviews and highlight some of the pressures leaders were under in managing their organisations through the crisis. However, organisations also found coping mechanisms for what they were facing. Interviewees discussed how barriers to conversations around mental health, had been broken down and new networks of support developed. Some described how **this ability to share, or simply have conversations around mental health, not only broke down traditional barriers, but also had an impact in terms of organisational policy.** One organisation initially made a strategic decision to close their offices which was reversed when they realised that being able to come into the office was important to the wellbeing of a number of staff. In another organisation an interviewee described how a member of his team, who lived alone, became distressed at the thought of having to take annual leave during lockdown:

“ There were a couple of my team who really struggled... so we had a conversation at one point, I remember talking about annual leave and one of the team, it nearly brought them to tears, just the thought of having to take annual leave and being stuck in one room for a week. So, we changed our own policies... we completely went flexible over that just to ensure that those added stresses for us as a team, there weren’t those added stresses ”

CEO, Specialist infrastructure organisation, National

Many of our interviewees also discussed the **way communications were ‘permanently changed’** on the topic of wellbeing, including the ways in which they would approach senior leaders, and how management had also taken a more personal approach, regularly checking in for conversations with staff members to ensure they were coping:

“ I think there’s been a lot of openness from leaders and honesty and I think they’ve been kind of wearing the situation well, and it’s felt like the leadership hasn’t been hollow, but it’s been quite authentic, so recognising that sharing a little bit about their own personal experiences... or their own mental health and what they felt they needed to do to stay on top of it, has been, as I say, quite transparent and they’re encouraging and really leading from the front ”

Frontline Manager, Research organisation, National

While many organisations highlighted the value of external networks and collaborations, there was a clear focus on developing internal networks during the pandemic. In particular, organisations developed networks for staff and volunteers to connect virtually with each other either formally or informally. Informal communications, where staff and volunteers were able to be honest about how they were feeling, were hugely important:

“ I think talking to people, whether that’s personally, organisationally, all of that is hugely important. One of the things that I found for individuals who were struggling, and they were struggling with the same sorts of issues and once they started to articulate them, it felt easier and better and more manageable. So I think really, communication is really key and finding different ways to do that is really important ”

CEO, Local Culture and Arts organisation, England

It was also interesting to note how organisations tried to replicate the interaction of the office using the technology available to them:

“ I was slightly worried about people feeling isolated. I think there’s probably been more phone calls, more WhatsApp check-ins with each other. We have a running commentary throughout the day ”

Line manager, Regional Environmental organisation, England

While interactions like these may not completely replicate the day-to-day interactions that staff had maintained previously, organisations learnt that they could help to bridge some gaps and keep connections and relationships going.

While many people found remote working challenging, for some of those with caring responsibilities, chronic illnesses or difficulties with mobility, changed working practices and more flexibility have made work more accessible. It is vital that such recognition is not lost, particularly in the intensified calls for a ‘return to normal’, which often neglects not only the fact that there remains an ongoing pandemic, but what this means to those in high-risk vulnerability groups, where concerns and pressure will not ease despite policy assuming this will be the case. Some organisations talked about the anxiety felt by some volunteers coming back to roles and the additional support they needed with examples of health and wellbeing plans and wellbeing sessions for volunteer being put in place. **Organisations should continue to provide understanding, accessibility and flexibility to staff and volunteers and must appropriately consider the ways in which they might provide support to those who need it.**

What are the implications for the future?

Wellbeing is about more than healthy snacks and yoga sessions. While these may have a place in the strategy of an organisation, addressing wellbeing is complex, it takes time, and it is an on-going process. There's no magic bullet but there are steps that can be taken, for example the [What Works Centre for Wellbeing \(2020\)](#) identifies five principles for wellbeing at work, which detail how organisations can begin the process of improving wellbeing or can build on what they have already done. In addition to this here are some further areas to consider:

Embedding a focus on wellbeing within organisations

The pandemic has demonstrated that change is possible over a very short space of time, and we now have choices over how we take our learning forward. Improving workplace wellbeing means critically examining what is leading to poor levels of wellbeing and addressing this holistically. In other words, exploring factors in the workplace and in the work itself which impact on wellbeing and mental health and finding ways to deal with these rather than placing additional pressures on staff to take part in quick fix wellbeing sessions which do not tackle the root causes of why wellbeing is at low levels in an organisation. Mental health and wellbeing must be an organisational priority for staff and volunteers at all levels, as without them, the needs of beneficiaries will not be met. [ACEVO \(2020\)](#) recommend that Boards and trustees take an active role in prioritising this for all staff within an organisation. Ultimately, within the sector, the pressures on organisations to deliver work when funding is short term and limited means that there are often tensions between the needs of the organisation and the wellbeing of staff and volunteers. While there have been losses in this area over the course of the pandemic there have also been gains. How do we acknowledge the tensions in wellbeing within organisations and within the sector more broadly?

Flexible working

As highlighted in the report [Time to Flex \(Hewitt, 2022, p5\)](#) 'Covid-19 has taught us that we can work differently - and more flexibly - when the will is there'. The pandemic has accelerated flexible working practices, including home working, and accommodations for working in more accessible and flexible ways have been made throughout the pandemic. Staff have had varied experiences throughout the last two years with some welcoming the opportunity of home working and identifying positive effects on work/life balance, while others have felt isolated. What is important now, as we move through the next stage of the pandemic and beyond is that organisations **ensure that new ways of working are flexible enough to accommodate the needs and circumstances of different individuals within the workforce**. This will need to recognise that there are multiple forms of 'flexible working', beyond working from home, which can be considered and adopted (see Hewitt, 2022). How do we build on what has been learnt over the pandemic to embed flexibility within organisations and the VCSE sector? [Time to Flex \(2022\)](#) provides useful learning and ideas to support flexible working within VCSE organisations, including building flexible cultures and developing job roles.

Keeping communications open

The pandemic has **created space for wider conversations around mental health and wellbeing** in the workplace. While there were some opportunities for this pre-pandemic, it has shown that barriers can be broken down further through honest and open conversations between colleagues, friends, and collaborators. What is crucial now, is that these conversations, and our approach to them is not side-lined, as we move beyond the lockdowns and restrictions of the previous two years. This is something that everyone in an organisation can contribute to, ensuring that channels of communication are kept open, and volunteers and staff at all levels are able to speak freely. **It is important that the progress of the last two years does not lose traction**. We need to recognise that wellbeing is an organisational journey that is in a frequent state of change depending on a wide range of factors, both within and outside of organisational control. The crucial question is how do we keep the lines of communication open and be receptive to what we hear as a result?

Digital and technology

This section of the report explores the ways VCSE organisations adopted technology and digital tools to respond and adapt during the pandemic. It focuses specifically on the benefits of digital ways of working, the challenges navigated by organisations and the limitations of digital approaches. The section concludes by exploring what these changes might mean for the future.

What happened during the pandemic?

The pandemic led to a **rapid uptake** of digital technology within the VCSE sector. Lockdowns and social distancing measures forced many to adapt and seek ways to sustain some degree of 'normality - or at least of productivity' via digital innovations and 'networks of digital technologies and platforms already in place' ([Holmes & Burgess, 2020](#)). Many organisations **pivoted to deliver services online**, developing digital solutions to help maintain operations and support service users. If they could, staff moved to **remote working**, relying on online and digital tools. VCSE organisations kept in touch with colleagues, peers, volunteers, and service users through WhatsApp, and other digital or social media platforms. Some organisations looked to **digital fundraising** to help fill gaps in [income](#).

Indeed, as data from our barometer [survey](#) shows, much of the movement in terms of digital, took place in a very short space of time. **65% of organisations reported a shift to online services by September 2021**.

Whilst there has been a **significant increase in the proportion of services delivered online by VCSE organisations**, our interviews highlight how organisational '**digital journeys**' have been diverse, presenting a mixed picture of digital adoption and adaptation. These experiences typically fell into four broad groups within the sector.

Firstly, there were those with **an existing digital strategy in place**, who described a sense of feeling in a stronger position and better able to hit the ground running, compared to others who were less experienced and had fewer or no digital practices as part of their day-to-day activities. Those that had digital plans (and digital ways of working) already in place were typically able to adapt to the crisis more rapidly. Some reported the pandemic gave the opportunity to **accelerate existing long-term digital plans**. This included, for instance, further integration of internal administration processes and improved data management.

Some highlighted that being in this strong position enabled them to support other organisations, sharing digital skills and knowledge, for example, running webinars and workshops, reaching out via existing networks and, in some cases, purchasing software licenses and sharing equipment:

“ The fact that we were digital, a remote organisation and have been for so many years...put us in a really great position... we were able to as a team, to quickly get our heads together on that professional level and say 'right, what do we know that we can now share that we don't already have in resources'... we ran a series of webinars around how do you go office-less... we managed to mobilise our whole team... to focus on those webinars and interestingly... we've never seen such quick sign up to a set of webinars as we did for those ”

CEO, Specialist infrastructure organisation, England, Scotland, Wales & Northern Ireland

Secondly, there were a number of interviewees who felt that their organisation had **not fully embraced digital prior to the pandemic**, but Covid-19 brought much needed digital change. Not having the time to dedicate to moving online, and the **lack of priority given to progressing digital plans were cited as barriers**. Some felt that there was a **lack of confidence or understanding** for what was involved or what was needed to take digital to the next level. The pandemic, however, created the impetus and momentum to make digital changes and develop new models of delivery:

“ We had an events programme for the Spring which all had to go either online or be scrapped... So our paid staff refunded people and we put a new programme in with webinars and things like that. I think it was a huge turnaround for our events officer and I think that was a really busy time for them... we focused some of our resource and put that up I think within a month of lockdown as well. So, we were able to pivot really quickly and that was useful ”

Senior manager, National Infrastructure Organisation, England & Wales



Thirdly, there were some VCSE organisations who said the pandemic had landed them in very **unfamiliar territory**, they had to **innovate out of necessity** rather than as part of considerations for any future plans. This meant they had to quickly pivot and find ways of moving online to keep things running as best they could.

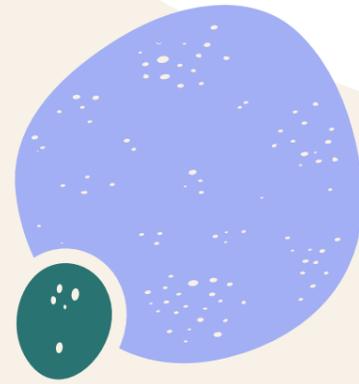
“ For me, although, I’m keen to get back to face to face delivery for some things, I’m going to continue with that online presence, and I think lots of other organisations are as well because you just see the value of it. Alongside that has been some skills development, like loads of people, from knowing nothing about how to use all these various platforms and technologies to feeling reasonably comfortable with them. I’m not an expert by any means but you learn such a lot of stuff. So that’s been good and that will be good for the future ”

CEO, Culture and arts, England

Often, **resources were extremely limited**, staff would have to utilise personal equipment, and make **quick decisions** based on **limited digital skills** within an often very small team. Interviewees described a sense of needing to think very rapidly about **‘what could be done at a distance for free’ or at a very low cost**. Some of the immediate ideas for the best ways to stay in touch with staff and volunteers, as well as service users, leant on connecting through methods such as telephone and email, but also utilising platforms which had either not previously been used, or had been set up but neglected:

“ I think from probably the first week of April, it could have been the end of March actually, I started doing weekly Facebook updates so that we could get the same information out quickly. We’d never done Facebook live like that before. We’d never done online... events before. We switched very quickly to doing that and they were incredibly successful. ”

CEO, Health, England



Finally, **for some organisations moving services online was not possible** because their work needed to be face-to-face, or digital options presented **too many challenges**, including concerns around safeguarding. Those working with marginalised and vulnerable groups described how, despite trying as best they could to keep services running, they faced far too many barriers to online delivery, including poor digital access amongst service users:

“ I don’t know what it’s like in England, but in Northern Ireland there’s a real push towards everything being done digitally. I think there’s a concern that we suddenly all just jump into this digital world and say, ‘That’s where we are now.’ You know, for some people that is never going to work and for others it’s going to be much less effective ”

Senior manager, Community and economic development, Northern Ireland

For these organisations, moving online was not the solution to meeting the needs of their users and the pandemic was about trying to survive as best they could and **finding other ways to innovate**.

Whatever the digital journey, organisations commonly raised issues about digital exclusion and worries that individuals are missing out on services with the shift to digital ways of working. **The UK Charity Skills Survey** shows the biggest challenge for organisations relating to digital during the pandemic are worries about excluding people or groups from services. Further, over 1 in 5 organisations have had to cancel services because their users don’t have the skills or technology to use them.

What is the learning?

Many organisations reflected that retaining some form of remote or digital working was likely beyond the pandemic. They shared their learning on the benefits of moving online including cost and time savings, improved accessibility for some groups (such as those with chronic illnesses, mobility issues, and those with caring responsibilities), efficiency (including for those with staff members and volunteers spread across different areas), and increased reach, as geographical boundaries became less of a barrier:

“ There’s a lot of benefits that we wouldn’t... it would have taken us years to get to and now within six or seven months, we’re in a position where we can scale, deal with some of the issues of face to face and have sort of our partners much more engaged in that offer, whereas previously they weren’t..... into April we knew we needed to look at virtual mentoring as our future response. And it worked and we did it. We were agile and able to pivot really quite quickly ”

CEO, Young People, England

However, participants also highlighted what they had learnt about the limitations and challenges of digital ways of working. Alongside issues of digital inclusion, organisations noted concerns around wellbeing, particularly in relation to staff working remotely and how best to accommodate the individual needs of staff, volunteers, and service users. For some, despite increasing their reach, there **remained a desire to strengthen and maintain bonds and ties with local communities** in non-digital ways:

“ I think for the community sector we’d say it’s a myth that digital and online makes things simpler and easier. It doesn’t actually. It doesn’t technically and it doesn’t in terms of the work that you want to be able to do with local people as well ”

CEO, National Infrastructure Organisation, England



The urgency of the crisis meant many VCSE organisations were forced to develop new models of digital delivery, and some were **surprised** by how quickly they were able to adapt and how much their organisations were able to deliver and keep connected with services users. Some front-line workers developed **bold, creative, meaningful ways** to meet needs and maintain contact with their users:

“ Yes, I mean as soon as we knew about the first lockdown, obviously the whole team came together and tried to look what we could deliver online, because obviously we are a face-to-face service delivering family and youth services. So, we developed different platforms where probably it would’ve been messages, get in contact with us. We created lots of different videos and podcasts, exercise videos to keep people active, podcasts talking about mental health, creative pods and play videos. We also made a series of healthy eating videos ”

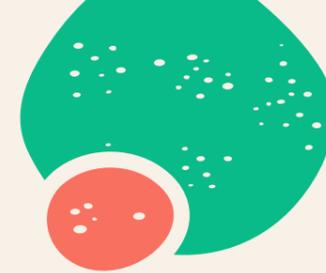
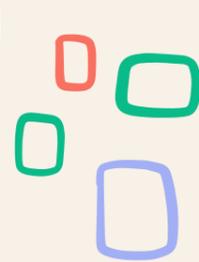
Line Manager, Sports and recreation, England

Many felt that the experiences of the pandemic had developed their organisation’s digital capabilities and a number pointed to their learning about the role of technology in **enabling them to adapt and be agile**:

“ So, I think, getting your IT so that it allows you operational agility to move things from remote, back to the office, and back again... Operational agility is the biggest lesson I’ve learned. And we need to, particularly looking at how we train volunteers, in the future; we need to build that agility into our volunteering roles. Because that was a curve where we weren’t able to do that So that’s how operationally, we should learn from it. ”

Senior Manager, Civic, advocacy and political activities, England





The shift to digital brought into sharper focus concerns around **digital exclusion** and organisations in our research described how they acknowledged the many intersecting and complex socio-economic issues at the heart of this. Some made extensive efforts to respond as best they could, including with initiatives to purchase equipment and get it to those who needed it most. Interviewees shared examples of how they looked to tackle digital exclusion **in collaboration** with other organisations and agencies, including funders, local authorities, and businesses.

“ I think the other thing is it exposed the social gap. So, the haves and have nots. So, the fact that we’ve been providing 170 laptops for young people who haven’t got them, nearly all of them are from minority ethnic backgrounds. So, we’re trying to bridge that divide which has become exposed, and I think, I would say what this year has done, is make explicit which was implicit in the organisation ”

Senior Manager, Young People, England

More widely, organisations shared learning about building on the experiences of the pandemic to review digital changes made during Covid-19, take forward and accelerate digital models that worked and further develop blended services. Organisations spoke of **‘taking the best from both’** and offering that as a blended approach. They shared the challenges they faced including concerns about the financial costs and complexity of delivering digital and face-to-face services simultaneously and worries about staff not having skills and expertise to take forward blended models of delivery. Organisations spoke of the usefulness of talking with staff, volunteers and service users about their needs and **working in partnership** to deliver services in new ways. Wider research points to the importance of ‘taking time to get feedback from users, iterating and developing the service; then getting more feedback; then iterating again’ (Caffyn et al., 2021, p16).

“ Although we had to make drastic changes very quickly because of the situation, what has actually helped do is inform our longer-term strategy about the way that we deliver services in the future. So, going forward, we are looking at more of a sort of hybrid model really, focussing face to face on the people who really need it most by working with local community partners, and then having a telephone online system for the general population....So, I don’t think it’s done a lot but it has shown us and element of – I would say two words – ‘resilience’ and ‘flexibility’ ”

CEO, individual and family social services, England



What are the implications for the future?

Addressing digital exclusion

Digital inequality has been highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic and remains a significant challenge for the VCSE sector. A permanent shift to digital services in some organisations and ongoing digital changes means addressing digital exclusion will need to be a key focus for the sector, funders and policy makers going forwards. Recognising that this is about more than access to equipment and connectivity but also skills and confidence and inclusive digital design (Roscoe and Johns, 2021) will be an important part of this. There are many initiatives and ideas from the pandemic and pre-Covid-19 that can be built on, including VCSE organisations partnering with digital experts and the involvement of digital champions to help develop the skills and confidence of service users, staff and volunteers (see Catalyst). Can VCSE organisations use the learning from the pandemic and existing resources in the sector to help address digital exclusion, increasing access and building confidence in their users? How can VCSE organisations collaborate with digital partners to help make their services more inclusive? What role can, and should, funders play in supporting VCSE organisations in digital inclusion efforts, through funding and non-financial support such as digital training and access to digital experts? How should VCSE organisations best judge their progress in tackling digital exclusion?

Future of hybrid work and blended services

The pandemic has forced considerable digital change on VCSE organisations, with many developing and experimenting with blended approaches to service delivery and working practices. This includes exploring how digital can work alongside face-to-face to give users, staff and volunteers choice, flexibility and promote inclusion. How can VCSE organisations take forward blended service models that meet the needs of users and their organisations? How can VCSE organisations work with partners to develop blended services and ways of working? Can the sector better share learning and examples of what works to support the development of blended services and hybrid working, including through peer networks?

Skilling up the sector

Evidence from the [UK Charity Digital Skills Survey 2021](#) suggests that one in three organisations think that a lack of digital skills or expertise is the biggest barrier to achieving organisational priorities and getting the most from digital. Although, there has reportedly been considerable improvement in digital skills levels during the pandemic (Amar and Ramsay, 2022). In our research, some organisations highlighted that the pandemic had shaped the type of skills their organisations needed and the impact of this on volunteer and staff recruitment. The role of external support including webinars and online workshops in supporting digital change and skills development during the pandemic were highlighted. Improving the digital skills of staff and volunteers and keeping skills up to date is likely to play an increasingly important role in VCSE organisations and the resilience of the sector. How can VCSE organisations join forces with other organisations to improve digital skills of staff, volunteers, and service users, including through skills sharing, training and peer networks? What further role could support providers, including infrastructure organisations, digital agencies and networks such as Catalyst, play in upskilling the sector?

Funding and support to build digital resilience

Many organisations are looking to embed digital services and ways of working or develop digital strategies and plans. However, **financial** constraints and pressures on VCSE organisations are likely to act as a barrier to digital investment and development. Wider evidence suggests that the need for digital funding is increasing with demand particularly for digital core costs and digital training for staff and volunteers (Amar and Ramsay, 2022). VCSE organisations will need additional funding and support to consolidate digital practices and services, invest in infrastructure and to build on the momentum from the pandemic. How can funders better support organisations on their digital journeys, including through unrestricted grants and non-financial support?



Collaboration and partnership

Collaboration has been an integral part of the VCSE sector's response to the pandemic. This section of the report explores inter-organisational collaboration and partnership during Covid-19, key learnings, and implications for the future. For the purposes of this research, 'collaboration' is understood broadly to include all interactions across the boundaries of two or more organisations (IVAR, 2011d). This might include interactions between VCSE organisations and those in the public or private sectors, such as local authorities and health agencies, as well as collaboration between VCSE organisations themselves. When organisations spoke of 'collaboration' in our research they often talked about the sharing of information and resources, working with others, 'joined up' activities, alliances and partnership working.

What happened during the pandemic?

Faced with the sudden, extensive and urgent challenges of the pandemic, organisations needed to work together to tackle the problems facing communities and their service users. There was a significant shift towards more joint working, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic. In our research, it was widely reported amongst interviewees that **new relationships were forged, and connections strengthened**. This was seen across the sector, however, not universally experienced. Collaboration took many different forms, from new referral networks and co-ordinated multi-agency work to identify and meet needs in communities to funders working together to better support organisations during the crisis (see [#RespondRecoverReset, Funders and Funding](#)).

Interviewees expressed how the **collective experience of the crisis** – the sense of shock, loss, and urgency – brought organisations together in a shared sense of purpose to respond to the crisis. Many expressed a need to work collaboratively and described wanting to do so, in order **'to do things better together'**. New **'partnerships of necessity'** formed to tackle the challenges facing communities (Macmillan and Ellis Paine, 2020).

Organisations spoke extensively of **developing new and stronger relationships** with other VCSE organisations and statutory agencies, including local authorities and health bodies. Results from our April 2021 barometer survey, for example, found that two in five (39%) VCSE organisations **worked with local authorities on responses to Covid-19**, with half of respondents indicating an improved relationship with local authorities as a result of this collaboration (see [#RespondRecoverReset, Relationships with Local Authorities](#)). Organisations spoke of **barriers broken down** and individuals working across organisational boundaries in ways which seemed too challenging before Covid-19. The emergency context shifted assumptions and practices in ways which helped organisations work together:

“ The Covid-19 crisis thus created a situation which required multi-interdependency, opening up many more meetings, relationships and connections, developing new working practices that's the sort of partnership working which in a different world would have taken 18 months ”

CEO, Local infrastructure organisation, Scotland

Technology and the use of digital platforms made collaboration easier. New and strengthened **networks**, connecting people within and across sectors enabled the sharing of experiences, learning and support, playing an important role in stimulating collaboration and partnership working.

Many felt that stronger relationships and collaboration, driven by the pandemic, led to greater **visibility and recognition of VCSE organisations and the sector**. Several local authorities involved in our research commented on how the sector brought expertise and understanding of local areas. Some VCSE organisations felt that for the first time they had a 'seat at the table' and were able to contribute to local decision-making. Local infrastructure organisations commonly reflected on how the pandemic and their work during the crisis helped to raise their profile and the role of infrastructure more widely (see [#RespondRecoverReset, Infrastructure Organisations](#) and [McMullan and Macmillan, 2021](#)).

While many organisations were positive about the relationships and collaboration that developed during the pandemic, others highlighted weaknesses, including organisations excluded and **competition within the sector**:

“ There has been some increased competition in certain areas which I, personally find really disappointing because I think it's somewhat unnecessary. But people are driven, organisations are driven by the need to survive, to thrive and get money. And some organisations will create that almost protective bubble around themselves and go – I must focus on protecting my own organisation ”

CEO, Specialist National infrastructure organisation, England

A **lack of joined up working and poor communication** were reported in some areas. There were a few examples of interviewees who felt their organisation, or the sector more widely, were **excluded from forums and partnership arrangements** led by statutory agencies or were invited to participate too late. Others described practical difficulties of knowing who to speak to in organisations, and understanding 'who did what', leading to confusion, with either overlapping roles, misplaced effort, and/or gaps in provision. Wider research also points to the specific challenges for smaller organisations and how some felt that during the pandemic "they were 'left to it', which failed to maximise the goodwill and potential contributions of different smaller charities" (Lloyds Bank Foundation, 2021, p19).

As the crisis abated, early optimism about **sustaining collaboration and partnerships**, was replaced in some organisations with what they saw as more siloed ways of working returning. Concerns were raised that **barriers to collaborative working were reappearing**, and relationships with organisations becoming more challenging. **Competition between VCSE organisations** was highlighted as a challenge, with some discussing how they felt the trust built with the statutory sector (or with funders) had started to ebb away, together with the **re-introduction of procurement processes and less flexible funding practices**:

“ The other bit that I think has probably shifted in terms of optimism for me is there was during Covid an optimism that different ways of doing things were possible, particularly in our relationships with the public sector. And we're probably starting to see a drift back towards more difficult ways of working... The automatic trust that you can just trust a third sector organisation to take the money and do the right thing with it, that's been forgotten ”

CEO, Local Infrastructure organisation, Scotland

What is the learning?

The pandemic demonstrated the **value of collaboration** and what can be achieved when organisations work together and across organisational boundaries. Organisations shared how working with others helped them better meet the needs of communities and users and led to more effective ways of working. Collaboration through the crisis helped some organisations better understand who does what and who might be best placed to support or deliver services:

“ We've also been able to look at where there's duplication for them across the third sector. Perhaps we're providing services to somebody that would be better provided by somebody else and so on. And Covid has given us a chance to analyse that much more closely because we've got to know those organisations much better ”

CEO, Health support charity, British Crown Dependency

Organisations reflected on how adopting a more **open, flexible** and less bureaucratic approach facilitated joined up working during the crisis. Examples were given of statutory agencies simplifying systems and organisations being more willing to pass information and data on to other agencies and VCSE organisations, helping improve, for example, referral systems. The urgency of the crisis meant that resources, including staff time and data were more readily shared between organisations.

Interviewees spoke of how they learnt the value of being **open with others** and how **trust** developed between organisations. **Regular contact**, enabled by technology, and a **willingness to be honest** and open helped break down inter-personal and inter-organisational barriers:

“ Covid shifted people's thinking around why are we all hiding our uniqueness away from each other, and those sort of community meetings that happened every Friday on Zoom there was a sort of dropping of the veil between organisations, and you could see other people's vulnerabilities, you could see other people's strengths and make those connections almost on screen and say well actually, I can help with that ”

CEO, Local health and social care, England



The **importance of pre-existing relationships** and latent networks was a key area of learning for organisations. Those that had these in place pre-Covid were able typically to collaborate more easily and quickly (see also [Burchell et al, 2020](#)). Those that did not, reflected that this would have helped in their response:

“So, knowing what I know now, I would have done much more work at building trust and relationships pre-Covid than I did”

CEO, National infrastructure organisation, UK

Organisations shared some of practical challenges of collaboration and partnership working, including ensuring forums, networks and activities are inclusive of different voices and managing the different agendas of organisations. Some learnt that they needed more **clarity about the respective roles** of different organisations that worked together:

“What’s your role, what’s our role? And let’s just get that down on a piece of paper... ‘So let’s just be clear, this is what you’re going to do, this is what we’re going to do, this how we’ll deal with the situation’. And that’s a real lesson to then take to those partnerships”

CEO, Local Economic and Social Development organisation, England

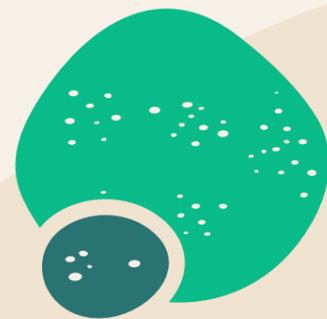
The importance of striving for more **equity** in collaborative working was also mentioned. A few interviewees noted power imbalances in their relationships with other organisations, including local authorities. Wider evidence points to practical approaches that can be taken to move towards more fair and equal practices, including sharing decision making power and knowledge within partnerships and co-creating solutions to issues and problems (see [NPC, 2021](#)).

Finally, organisations reflected on their learning about **sustaining collaborative working** and partnerships. The importance of organisations **sharing a common purpose and an ongoing commitment to working together** was highlighted. Keeping communication channels open, maintaining spaces for discussion (both physical and virtual) and committing resources to joint working were also seen to enable sustained collaboration:

“You’ve built new relationships with community organisations, voluntary sector, social enterprise sector, let’s build on those new trusting relationships in the way that we do business day in, day out in the new world. And yes, the jury is still out about whether or not we’re just reverting back to traditional power dynamics”

CEO, Local Infrastructure organisation, Scotland

There are many examples of how organisations are actively working to solidify relationships and collaborative ways of working, including through peer networks and forums, new consortium, the sharing of facilities and ‘back of house functions’, and new joint projects and bids. Organisations mentioned plans such as shared volunteer roles between organisations and working together to develop training and apprenticeships to address challenges around staff recruitment. More widely, some areas are co-developing visions and strategies and embedding the voluntary sector within plans, including integrated care systems.



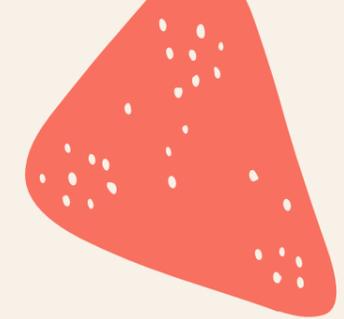
What are the implications?

Supporting collaborative practices to embed joined up working

The benefits of collaboration during the pandemic have been widely acknowledged and our research showed there is an appetite amongst VCSE organisations to continue to work more closely with others to address issues and meet needs. How can organisations best embed (or in some cases re-ignite) collaborative ways of working? The Rebalancing the Relationship project ([NCVO, 2021](#)) provides useful learning on how certain ‘collaborative behaviours’ are important in helping organisations to work together. These include nurturing a collaborative organisational culture (through, for example, ensuring strategy and decision-making processes support collaboration) and being open to collaborating with other organisations. How can organisations across sectors build on the experiences of the pandemic to develop and solidify collaborative practices and embed joined up working?

Building a better landscape that supports and enables collaboration

VCSEs are concerned that funding uncertainty and the current commissioning and procurement landscape discourages collaboration – potentially undoing the good progress made through the pandemic. How can learning from the pandemic shape a more positive environment for collaboration? How can collaboration be incentivised through commissioning and procurement? How can we, across sectors, ensure systems and processes don’t get in the way of organisations working together to tackle needs and issues?



New collective, long-term thinking

The pandemic catalysed a shift towards a more collective, joined up approach to addressing needs and problems. How can this be sustained and built on in the long term? Some organisations are exploring fundamental shifts to the ways they work together to address community needs and sustain themselves in the long term, pooling organisational resources and functions:

“So I think everyone now recognises that actually yeah, we need to bind together, spend this next couple of years getting this model right so that when the cuts bite three years down the line it doesn’t affect us, we’re sustainable, we’ve got our market, we know how to share resources, we’re practiced at it. If we had three years advanced notice with Covid this is what we would be doing”

CEO, Local health and social care organisation, England

How can we best share, use and learn from these examples to inform a longer-term approach to collaboration to better meet the needs of communities?

Embedding equity in collaboration

While the pandemic has opened-up opportunities for joint working, some organisations felt excluded from networks and partnerships. How can we ensure joined up working is more inclusive and accessible to organisations and groups that might face barriers to participation?

Some also experience unequal power dynamics when working with others. How can organisations develop a more even playing field within collaborations and partnerships? [NPC’s work on equitable collaboration \(2021\)](#) highlights that this should start by ‘acknowledging existing power imbalances’ and then ‘agreeing structures and ways of working to actively redress them’. As such, it’s important to ask how can we build on existing examples of equitable practices to embed this more widely in the sector?

External networks and support

The networks and support VCSE organisations have drawn on during Covid-19 are an important part of the picture of how organisations have navigated the pandemic. This section of the report explores this and identifies key areas of learning and implications of the findings for the future. Here, we look beyond money and funding to examine the importance of non-financial support.

What happened during the pandemic?

The immediate response to the crisis meant VCSE organisations had a complex mix of needs, from supplies of PPE to help with using zoom and moving services online. Organisations sought support, help and guidance from a wide range of organisations and individuals including national and local infrastructure bodies, statutory agencies, local organisations and for-profit businesses and consultants. It is not unusual for large numbers of providers to be involved in supporting VCSE organisations (see [ISRC and Sheffield Hallam, 2014](#)), however, our research suggests that the nature of support changed, and demand increased during the pandemic. The December 2021 barometer survey, for example, found that two in three VCSE infrastructure organisations reported an increase in demand for their services during the pandemic (see [#RespondRecoverReset, Infrastructure Organisations](#)).

Our research, however, points to an **unequal uptake of support amongst VCSE organisations**. There were examples of leaders who said they felt entirely *isolated* during the pandemic and others who were able to tap into extensive national and local support networks:

“ I did feel quite alone in my sector and I’m sure there were others in the sector who were feeling exactly the same... that opportunity to maybe provide a supportive network. I wasn’t aware of one necessarily, so that’s something I think going forward, would be really important to develop really. This network of leaders in the voluntary sector who can share or just be there to just voice your anxiety to, and know that people can understand that. Something that you can’t always do with your board and your chair ”

CEO, Civil advocacy, Community Interest Company, England

Many **infrastructure organisations scaled up their direct support and guidance** to members, VCSE organisations and other agencies during the pandemic. In the December 2021 barometer survey, over half (54%) of frontline organisations said they had used the services of local infrastructure organisations during the pandemic, with advice and guidance, information provision and networking cited as the most important forms of support. Their role in setting up and facilitating **networks and forums** was repeatedly highlighted in our research, giving those in the sector the chance to share experiences, learning and build **partnerships**:

“ I think, as an infrastructure organisation, representing the community sector... they actually glued the communities together. They brought them together on a regular basis – it wasn’t a one-off... So they were like a kind of conduit between the private sector and the public sector. So absolutely invaluable support we received from them ”

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

Some **trusts and foundations** have also played a role in supporting organisations beyond providing funding, through scaling up or providing for the first time, non-financial support to their grantees and, in some cases, the wider sector. This included training, guidance, coaching and networking opportunities across a range of areas from governance to digital:

“ That’s something that we have seen from the feedback so far, is the massive relief on just having a funder provide space that they can go to and talk to, because they wouldn’t make that space their time because, as you say, they’re not even managing to have breakfast ”

Senior manager, Grant-making foundation, England



More widely, some organisations accessed other forms of external support from **skilled volunteers** (often through brokers or employers) or **charged for services** from for profit businesses and consultants. This took many forms from practical support to deal with the immediate crisis to organisational development support to help organisations adapt and improve. Some mentioned, for example, the value of external support in helping them think through future priorities and organisational strategies:

“ For me it means that we are looking at kind of how we move forward in the longer term, and what is our capacity, and do we have strong enough foundations for the stuff that we want to do in the future. So, I mean, [the consultant has] been looking at strategy, our policies. I mean, she’s been brilliant. She’s just like looking at everything ”

CEO, Local health and social care, England

What is the learning?

Many VCSE organisations and those working in the sector have benefitted from external support during the pandemic. What can we learn from the ways organisations have drawn on this support?

The **value of peer networks** and the benefits of retaining networks as we move beyond the pandemic is a key area of learning. Organisations spoke of how valuable these were for sharing experiences and for peer support. Leaders, in particular, noted the importance of networks for mutual support and their own **personal wellbeing**:

“ We’ve built up a lovely, little network of chief execs... we meet quite informally but it’s been a really good benefit because it is hard when you’re at the top. You have to put on this, everything’s happy, everything is great, I’m looking after you all. You know, put on a very professional face. But to realise that other chief execs are also feeling quite vulnerable and worn out and exhausted, and it’s okay to feel like that. I think that is certainly something I personally have found useful ”

CEO, Local health and social care, England

Organisations, however, learnt the need for a balanced approach, **retaining involvement in networks** but stepping back from ones which they didn’t have capacity for. Some spoke of network ‘fatigue’ and the challenges of fitting networking into demanding work schedules.

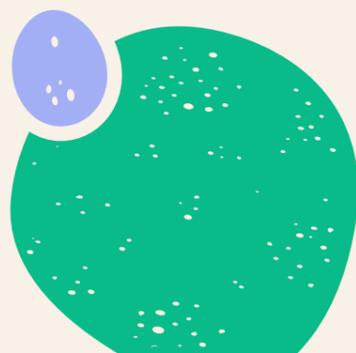
Lessons also came from the way **funders** worked and connected with VCSE organisations. Organisations highlighted the importance of **personal approaches and flexible, bespoke support**. Funders noted the need for a responsive approach, adapting support to meet the changing needs of VCSE organisations:

“ We’ve kept it quite open and fluid, because we really want it to be driven by the grantees to see where it would go, and that’s been great because a lot more of it has come out of it than we could possibly have thought of ourselves or imagined ”

Senior manager, Grant-making foundation, England

There has also been wider learning about the **value of support provided by local infrastructure organisations**, although access to support was not universal. Some infrastructure bodies reported that they made considerable efforts to extend their reach, including providing support to mutual aid groups. The benefits brought by local infrastructure convening and supporting peer networks was particularly highlighted in our research (see [#RespondRecoverReset, Infrastructure Organisations](#)).

Lastly, the findings point to lessons about the role and value of external providers in supporting **organisational development** during and beyond the pandemic. VCSE organisations shared how direct and bespoke support - whether through funders, skilled volunteers or consultants - was an important part of their approach to moving forward and build the strength of their organisations.



What are the implications?

Continued demand for external support from the sector

Many VCSE organisations expect the needs and demands from users and communities to continue to grow. Organisations feel vulnerable and uncertain about the future. Within this context, the demand for external support from VCSE organisations is likely to grow. In our research, the need for support in areas relating to income and funding, including funding information/guidance and help with accessing funding were particularly highlighted. How can the sector build on the opportunities from the pandemic to strengthen support for VCSE organisations, including through the use of technology and networks? How can we work collectively and collaboratively to meet the support needs of the sector?

Embedding blended approaches to networks and support

The rapid shift to digital ways of working has opened-up opportunities to extend the reach of networks and support. However, the limits of technology have become clear during the pandemic and digital exclusion means some organisations and individuals will not have access to [online networks and support](#). Blended approaches to support and tackling digital exclusion will need to be key priorities. How should support providers best embed a blended approach to ensure equal access to networks and support?

An evolving ecosystem of support for VCSE organisations

Pressures on funding may force more support providers, such as local infrastructure organisations, to charge for support services in order to generate income. What implications could this have on access to support, particularly for smaller organisations and those facing financial pressures?

Trusts and foundations have played an important role in providing 'funding plus', non-financial support to VCSE organisations during Covid. How could this inform funders' approaches to supporting organisations going forwards? What role could and should funders play in supporting the longer-term development of VCSE organisations?

The pandemic encouraged a renewed interest and willingness to collaborate across infrastructure organisations at the local and national level, including around skilled ('pro bono') volunteering. How can support bodies work more effectively together to improve access to support for VCSE organisations?

Different thinking about sector support and organisational development

The pandemic has stimulated individuals and organisations to connect and work more [together](#). There is significant potential to build on this to promote the sharing of learning and strengthen mutual support between organisations and individuals within the sector. Shared learning is identified as an important starting point for VCSE organisational development (see [Patterns for Change](#)). Some of those involved in our research suggested that the pandemic was an opportunity to move towards a more collective approach, looking at issues as a whole and addressing these together rather than at the level of individual organisations. How can we maintain and build on collaboration to better support one another in the sector? How can we move towards more collective approaches to help organisations and the sector thrive?

Strengthening the VCSE sector for the future

Covid-19 has disrupted, challenged and in some ways transformed the sector. The last two years have seen many new practices, ways of working and connections that have accelerated existing practices and brought innovation, opening-up new ways of thinking about what is possible and what is needed. The challenge is to build on what has been learnt and the positive changes stimulated by the pandemic.

The following provides some reflections and key questions on what VCSE organisations, policymakers, funders and commissioners, infrastructure organisations and researchers could do to help strengthen VCSE organisations and the sector for the future.

Embedding collaboration

The pandemic highlighted the value of collaboration, partnership working and the importance of building relations and connections with other organisations and key stakeholders. Organisations that were better connected, or could form alliances with others, were often better placed to respond to the crisis and emerging needs. The pandemic saw many examples of silos broken down between VCSE organisations or with public sector organisations.

But without the urgency of the pressing needs of the pandemic, there is a danger that collaboration is being de-prioritised, resulting in barriers rebuilt and relationships weakened. Given the value and importance of collaboration throughout Covid-19 this could be a missed opportunity. So how can organisations and the wider sector build on this for the long-term?

Investing, maintaining, and developing connections with others within and across sectors will be vital to collaborative relationships, useful for joined-up working and crisis response. This takes time, energy and can be frustrating, particularly with many other pressing demands. However, as the pandemic has highlighted, these connections can be vital, particularly in times of challenge. There are many bold and creative examples of collaboration that can be built on including organisations joining forces on digital and data.

It is important, however, to consider who might be excluded or marginalised by, and within networks. Addressing power imbalances and inequality is vital to ensure partnerships are inclusive of different voices and are not tokenistic or exploitative (see [NPC Equitable Collaboration](#)).

For funders, collaboration will need to be part of approaches going forwards, particularly in terms of developing ideas and solutions with the sector and facilitating collaboration between organisations. This may be through networks, Communities of Practice and Funding Plus models that build-in opportunities for collaboration and learning into programmes ([Smith et al 2021](#)).

Useful resources

[Rebalancing the Relationship](#) (NCVO, ACEVO, Lloyds Bank Foundation) - includes principles and practices to support organisations to work collaboratively

[The Bridge Builders Handbook](#) (The Relationships Project) - a guide to help with building relationships and connections

Building open and trusting funding practices with long-term focus

Covid-19 was a disruptor. It forced changes to funding practices, and in doing so revealed what is important and adds value. For funders and commissioners there are opportunities to reflect on what can be learnt from these changes.

The pandemic demonstrated what can be achieved with more flexible approaches to funding. As we move from the immediate crisis of Covid-19, it is a good time to ask what parts from the flexible, responsive, and streamlined funding approaches can be adopted and adapted for the future. Can the improved relationship between funders and grantees be maintained? Can the more honest, constructive, and open discussions between funders and grantees that some experienced be sustained?



However, such approaches are not infallible. Streamlined processes need to be balanced with risk management, concerns about equity and the need to demonstrate progress and impact. A drive to strengthen relationships with grantees will equally need to be balanced with the need to make funding practices more equitable. Acknowledging and working through such tensions is going to be an important part of rethinking future funding practices. Equally, our research has highlighted the need for long term funding to enable VCSE organisations to navigate the ongoing uncertainty and meet the needs of service users and communities. Access to long term funding remains a key concern within the sector.

Useful resources

[Open and trusting grant-making \(IVAR\)](#) - eight commitments for funders to support open and trusting grant-making

[Towards more flexible funding \(IVAR\)](#) - ideas from grant-makers about making funding more flexible

Re-focusing on equality and inclusion

The pandemic has intensified questions around equity and inclusion in many areas of society. This was particularly highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement, digital exclusion, and revelations about the culture and practices within the VCSE sector. As organisations rebuild from Covid-19, equality and inclusion needs to be part of the focus for a more sustainable and inclusive future.

For funders and commissioners, some of this response is about understanding who their funding reaches and how their funding practices can include or exclude individuals and groups. The disruption of the pandemic revealed that funding approaches and processes can change rapidly if required. Taking this learning will help inform which practices are necessary and which, unwittingly, contribute to exclusion. Capturing, sharing and using better data can enable funders to know where to target their resources.

For VCSE organisations and the sector more widely, this is about cultural and institutional change. There are many things that individual organisations and the sector collectively can do, as highlighted in ACEVO's [Home Truths report](#), and the pandemic has intensified the need for action. It is important that the impetus on equality, diversity and inclusion is not lost.

Useful resources

[Home Truths: Undoing racism and delivering real diversity in the charity sector](#) (Voice4Change and ACEVO)

[Guidance on equity, diversity and inclusion \(NCVO\)](#) - including ideas on taking action on EDI

Digital beyond the pandemic

One of the most significant shifts during the pandemic has been the move to digital. Many organisations moved services online and experimented with new digital ways of working. It has expanded their reach, shown what is possible and developed new working practices, whilst also demonstrating some of the challenges and limitations of digitalisation. Two years on there are opportunities to capitalise on this learning and build the sector's digital resilience for the future.

VCSE organisations are appraising which elements of digital are worth retaining and consolidating, recognising that digital may not be the answer or right option for some users, staff, and volunteers. What technology, infrastructure and skills are needed to be able to embed digital changes and continue to develop digitally? Who is included and excluded through online delivery and working and how this be addressed? Where are there cost and environmental savings to be made? Can blended models of service delivery and hybrid ways of working meet the needs of service users and the organisations? How can digital complement face to face services and working practices?

There are opportunities for VCSE organisations to connect with others to develop and improve digital approaches and skills, including through networks and digital champions. Collaboration on digital will be important, including shared digital resources, platforms, and joint project development.

Financial pressures within VCSE organisations will act as a barrier to investment in digital. Funders and support providers will need to play a key role in building the sector's digital resilience. Unrestricted funding would enable organisations to support core digital costs and ongoing development and non-financial support including digital experts, training and networks would help build digital skills, capabilities and collaboration.

Useful resources

[Catalyst](#) - network and resources to help VCSE organisations grow digital skills and processes

[Charity Digital Skills report 2021](#) - digital barometer survey for the sector including skills and support needs

Focusing on staff and volunteer wellbeing

Covid-19 has brought increased attention on staff and volunteer wellbeing. Our research highlighted not only the wellbeing implications of the pandemic itself but the effects of high levels of demand and responsibility on VCSE sector staff. Feelings of pressure and stress, including amongst leaders, and frontline staff have been common, and some have also expressed anxiety and feelings of guilt that they have not been able to do enough in the face of the pandemic.

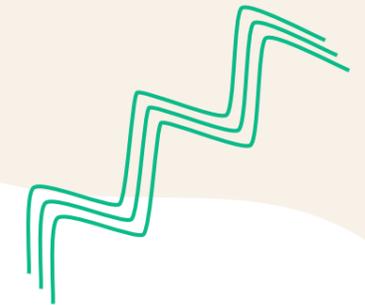
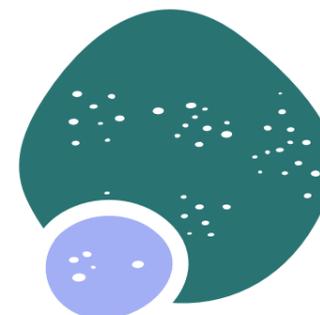
Concerns around wellbeing remain, with some claiming we are facing a societal mental health challenge. Increasing demand for services and pressures on organisations, including concerns about financial vulnerability, means that a focus on the wellbeing of leaders, staff and volunteers will continue to be important beyond the pandemic, particularly as they work with many communities and groups facing these challenges.

Embedding culture and practices that support wellbeing is vital, for staff, leaders, and volunteers both for individuals and the long-term sustainability of organisations. This is more than just having wellbeing strategies and sessions, but a holistic approach to wellbeing where it is embedded into the culture, expectations, and practices of the organisation. But this also needs to recognise the tensions that come with working in the VCSE sector, particularly balancing the needs and demands of service users with the wellbeing of staff and volunteers.

Useful resources

[Five principles for effective action on workplace wellbeing](#) (What Works Centre for Wellbeing)

[Time to Flex: embracing flexible working \(NCVO/ACEVO/Starfish\)](#) - ideas for adopting flexible working practices



Better data

Covid-19 revealed data poverty as a core weakness for the VCSE sector. As Kenley and Wilding argue in "contrast to the private sector" the VCSE sector struggles to produce "recognised, reliable, and timely data", making it "difficult for government to develop long-term strategies that enable the sector to maximise its potential" (2021:1-2). This need is recognised by DCMS's [National Data Strategy](#) identifying improving sector data as a key strategic priority. Consequently, the sector struggles to articulate its capacity and needs to policymakers, and funders, who in turn lack data to decide where to place limited resources.

This project has sought to address this gap. Our monthly barometer, panel survey and interviews have captured data designed to understand the impact of the pandemic on the sector, and the way it shapes practice. We are not alone, other national and regional attempts have been made across the country, for instance multiple "state of the sector" reports conducted by local VCSEs. However, much of this has been fragmented and disjointed, as they ask different questions and run at different time points, making comparisons difficult. With the Levelling Up agenda, consistent and joined up data allowing local and regional disparities to be identified and understood, would give the VCSE a stronger voice. NPC advocates for a 'shared intelligence' approach which would allow 'charities, funders and service providers of all kinds to access more and better quality data, strengthen evidence led-grant making and service provision, and improve collective reflection and analysis'. Beyond the pandemic there are opportunities for new, joined-up data to benefit all.

Useful resources

[Data Collective](#) - helps organisations access and analyse better data

[From shared data to shared intelligence - NPC](#) (thinknpc.org)

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For further resources see our website <http://cpwop.org.uk/further-resources/>

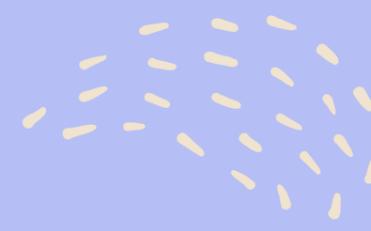
Project team and author credits

This project has been a joint effort with many people involved.

The research was led by Professor Daniel King. Will Rossiter led the Barometer alongside Dr Ghazal Vahidi, Professor Helen Shipton led the Panel Survey alongside Dr Hoa Do and Adam Kitt, Professor Tracey Coule with Jo Stuart developed the Qualitative Interviews, and Dr Sarah Smith lead the Qualitative Coding alongside Dr Juliana Mainard-Sardon, and Dr Nene Ibokessien. Outreach was led by David Dahill and Dr Catherine Spellman. Interviews were conducted by members of the team and Adeline Coignet and Oliver Chan. For NCVO Véronique Jochum, Lisa Hornung, and Keeva Rooney helped to develop the initial methodologies and approaches, and Anya Martin and Oliver Chan provided analysis and feedback for the remainder of the project with the support of Alex

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The research was led by Centre for People, Work and Organisational Practice at Nottingham Trent University, alongside Sheffield Hallam University and NCVO.



Afterword

When the pandemic hit two years ago it quickly became apparent that the impact was going to be felt across the VCSE sector and we needed meaningful data to aid decision making and understanding of what was happening. Speed was of the essence.

Two weeks from the inception of the idea we had assembled the core team, developed and submitted the proposal and had a range of key stakeholders willing to support the project. We are extremely grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council not only for funding this work (ES/V007610/1), but also the rapid response, meaning that not only did we get the decision promptly, but we could begin the project quickly.

Rapid response has also the hallmark of this project. In keeping with the ambition for real-time data, the dashboard created around a week after each wave of the barometer and the mini-reports one week after that. This work is testament to the hard work, willingness to collaborate and dedication of everyone involved, not only

for the research team, but wider research support teams and the hundreds of participants and users of this data.

We hope what is produced here is useful and will contribute to the future direction of the VCSE sector. We are keen to talk to anyone who would like to know more about this work, or how we can work with you. Please contact us at CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk or daniel.king@ntu.ac.uk

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