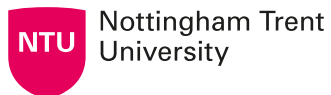


# Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19

October 2020



Funded by





# 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.



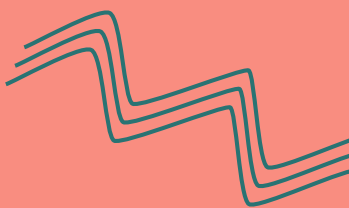
The Voluntary Action Research Group at Sheffield Hallam University

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

COVID-19 is having a major impact on voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE). Demand has gone up and income down, leaving some organisations “fighting for survival”, as they try to navigate the challenges that the pandemic has thrown at them.

Whilst a lot of attention has focused on the funding that VCSE organisations receive, the impact of the pandemic has had even wider ramifications, transforming working practices and service delivery models, either by socially distancing, or digitalising their work, developing new practices that for many would have been unthinkable just a few months before.

This project is about understanding what it has been like working in the sector during the pandemic, the challenges that organisations face and how have they sought to overcome them. The goal of the project is to get behind the headlines, to really understand these experiences and learn from them.

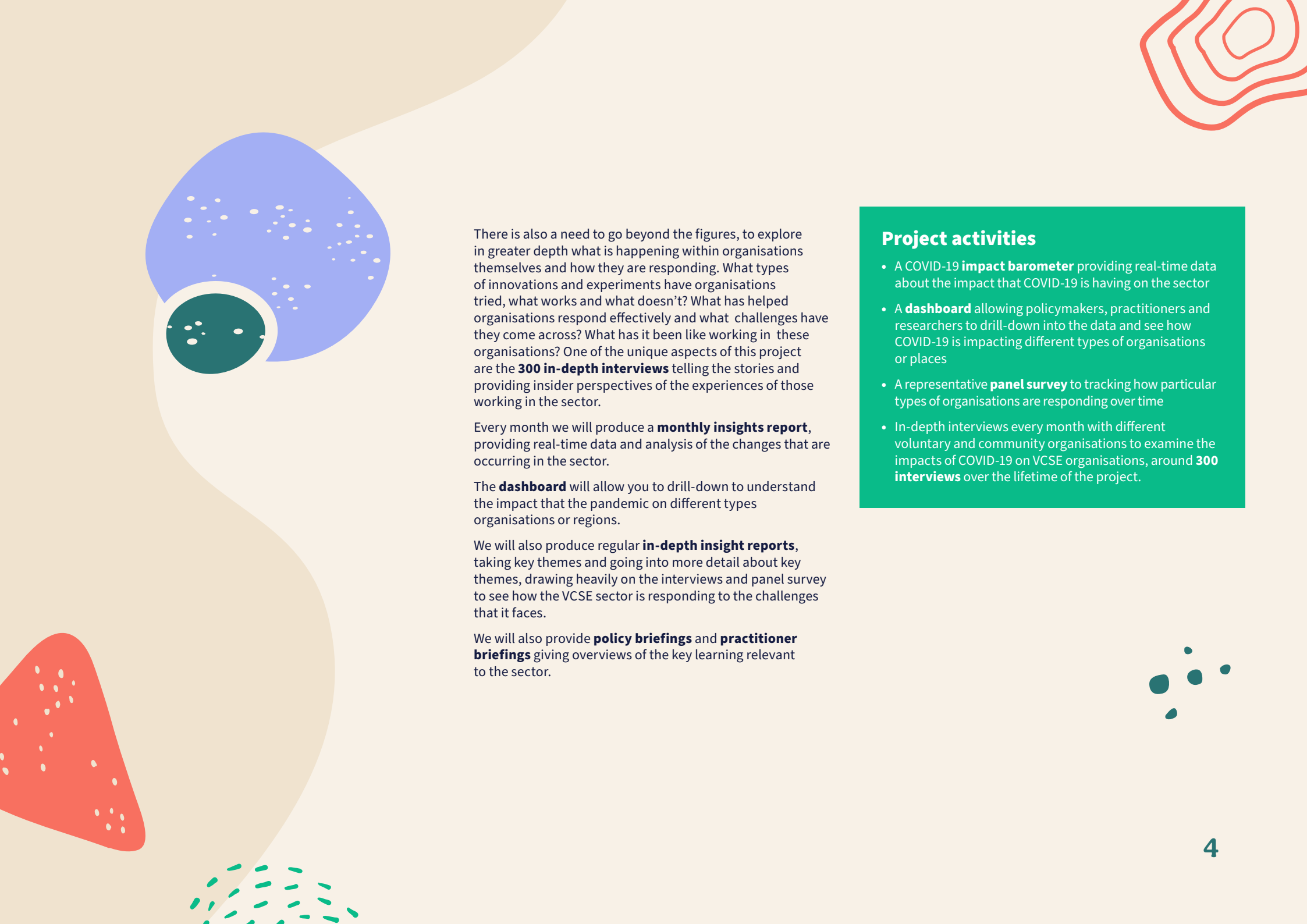
Whilst there is considerable attention on the impact COVID-19 has on the sector as a whole, and particularly high profile organisations, as the pandemic unfolds it is increasingly clear that the impact COVID-19 is having on the organisations within the sector is uneven, shaping the experiences of organisations and individuals in quite different ways. Some organisations are struggling to survive, hit by losses of income from fundraising or shops, whereas others have found new income streams and been able to expand services; some organisations have found it hard to

adapt to the new socially distancing rules, whereas others have been able to use digital approaches to create new and exciting services. This project seeks to shine a light on these differences.

As the pandemic unfolds, with changing rules and restrictions, funding and support, needs and demands on organisations, it is increasingly clear we need good, real-time data to understand what is happening now, and how this is changing over time. Instead of just one-off snapshots, our **monthly barometer** surveys will give powerful insights into the trends occurring within the sector to help policymakers and practitioners consider how they might best respond.

We also want to understand how different types of organisations are being impacted and how this is changing over time. Our quarterly **panel survey** allows us to go into more depth about the way that the pandemic is changing within different types of organisation, tracking their experiences over time.

“ The goal of the project is to get behind the headlines, to really understand these experiences and learn from them. ”



There is also a need to go beyond the figures, to explore in greater depth what is happening within organisations themselves and how they are responding. What types of innovations and experiments have organisations tried, what works and what doesn't? What has helped organisations respond effectively and what challenges have they come across? What has it been like working in these organisations? One of the unique aspects of this project are the **300 in-depth interviews** telling the stories and providing insider perspectives of the experiences of those working in the sector.

Every month we will produce a **monthly insights report**, providing real-time data and analysis of the changes that are occurring in the sector.

The **dashboard** will allow you to drill-down to understand the impact that the pandemic on different types of organisations or regions.

We will also produce regular **in-depth insight reports**, taking key themes and going into more detail about key themes, drawing heavily on the interviews and panel survey to see how the VCSE sector is responding to the challenges that it faces.

We will also provide **policy briefings** and **practitioner briefings** giving overviews of the key learning relevant to the sector.

## Project activities

- A COVID-19 **impact barometer** providing real-time data about the impact that COVID-19 is having on the sector
- A **dashboard** allowing policymakers, practitioners and researchers to drill-down into the data and see how COVID-19 is impacting different types of organisations or places
- A representative **panel survey** to tracking how particular types of organisations are responding over time
- In-depth interviews every month with different voluntary and community organisations to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on VCSE organisations, around **300 interviews** over the lifetime of the project.

# COVID-19 voluntary sector impact barometer



## The monthly barometer survey

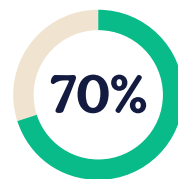
The purpose of the monthly barometer survey is to produce timely snapshots of the condition of the voluntary and community sector throughout the life of this project. We have tried to create a survey that is inclusive, quick and easy to complete. It will have a common core of questions that are asked every month in addition to a smaller number of topical questions that change every month. We plan to publish results as soon as possible after each wave closes and will do this via the [data dashboard https://bit.ly/31vMJpI](https://bit.ly/31vMJpI).

The first wave of the survey was completed between 21st September and 5th October. This generated responses from 697 organisations. The survey had a good level of response from all of the English Regions. We are keen to extend coverage of the survey to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for subsequent waves of the survey.

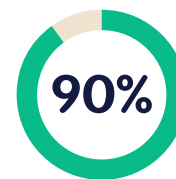
## A diverse sample

A wide range of organisation types and a hugely diverse range of activities are represented in this sample. The majority identified themselves as registered charities, around a third indicated that they have limited company status, smaller numbers reported being community interest companies or voluntary associations.

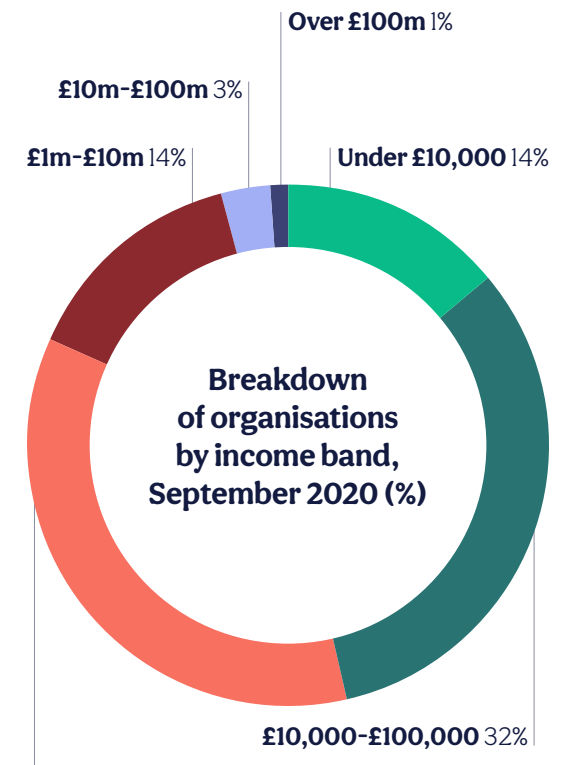
- 180** organisations (24%) identified themselves as social enterprises
- 95** organisations (13%) described themselves as a BAME organisation
- 83** organisations (11%) described themselves as a deaf and disabled peoples' organisation
- 39** respondents (5%) described themselves as an LGBTIQ+ organisation
- 89** respondents (11%) identified themselves as a women's organisation



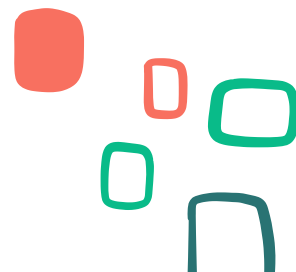
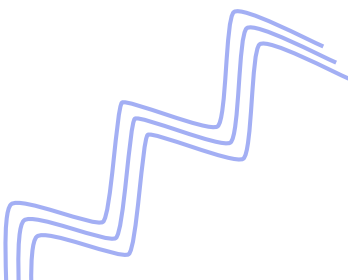
of responding organisations report that they employ paid staff



have volunteers

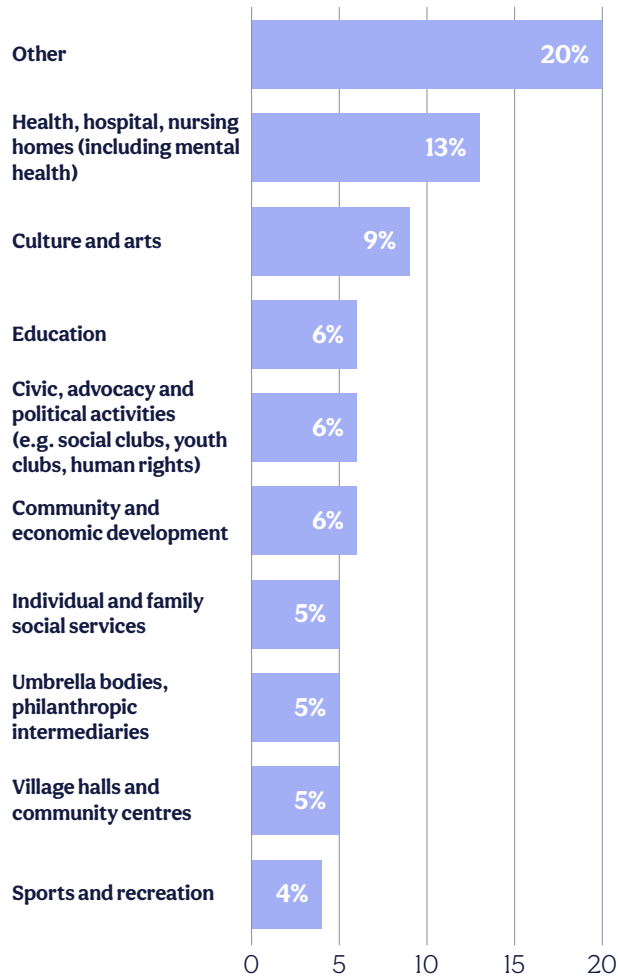


Breakdown of organisations by income band, September 2020 (%)



The most common activity types reported by survey respondents were in health, hospitals and nursing homes (including mental health) (19%), culture and the arts (14%), education (13%), community and economic development (10%).

**Breakdown of organisations by subsector, September 2020 (%)**



## Headlines

### People

**697** organisations responded to the survey

**70%** have a paid workforce

**90%** have volunteers

### Finances

**39%** reported a deteriorating financial position over the last month

**20%** had seen their financial position improve over the last month (a negative balance of 19 percentage points)

**53%** expect their financial position to stay the same over the next month

**34%** expect their financial position to deteriorate

### Services

**45%** reported that the range of services offered had decreased over the last 6 months

**36%** indicated that the range of services offered had increased over this period

**56%** expect demand for their services to increase over the next month

### Outlook

**80%** of respondents expect Covid-19 to have a moderate or significant negative impact on delivering their objectives next year

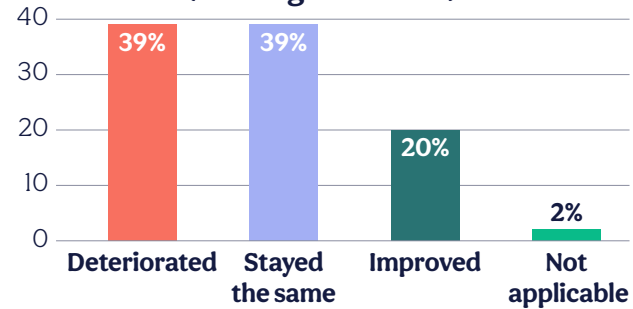
**10%** reported that it was quite likely or very likely that their organisation would no longer be operating next year

**66%** have moved some existing services online since March

## Finances and operations

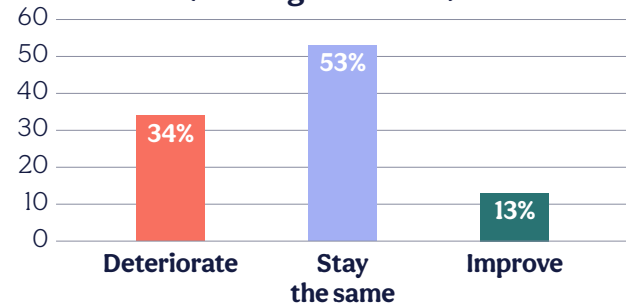
39% of the organisations reported that their financial position has deteriorated in the last month compared to 20% who reported an improvement in organisation's financial position over the last month – a negative balance of 19 percentage points. Social distancing measures were the most popular safety measure (26%), followed by hygiene measures (22%) and Person Protective Equipment (PPE) (19%).

**Change of the financial position over the last month, September 2020 (% of organisations)**

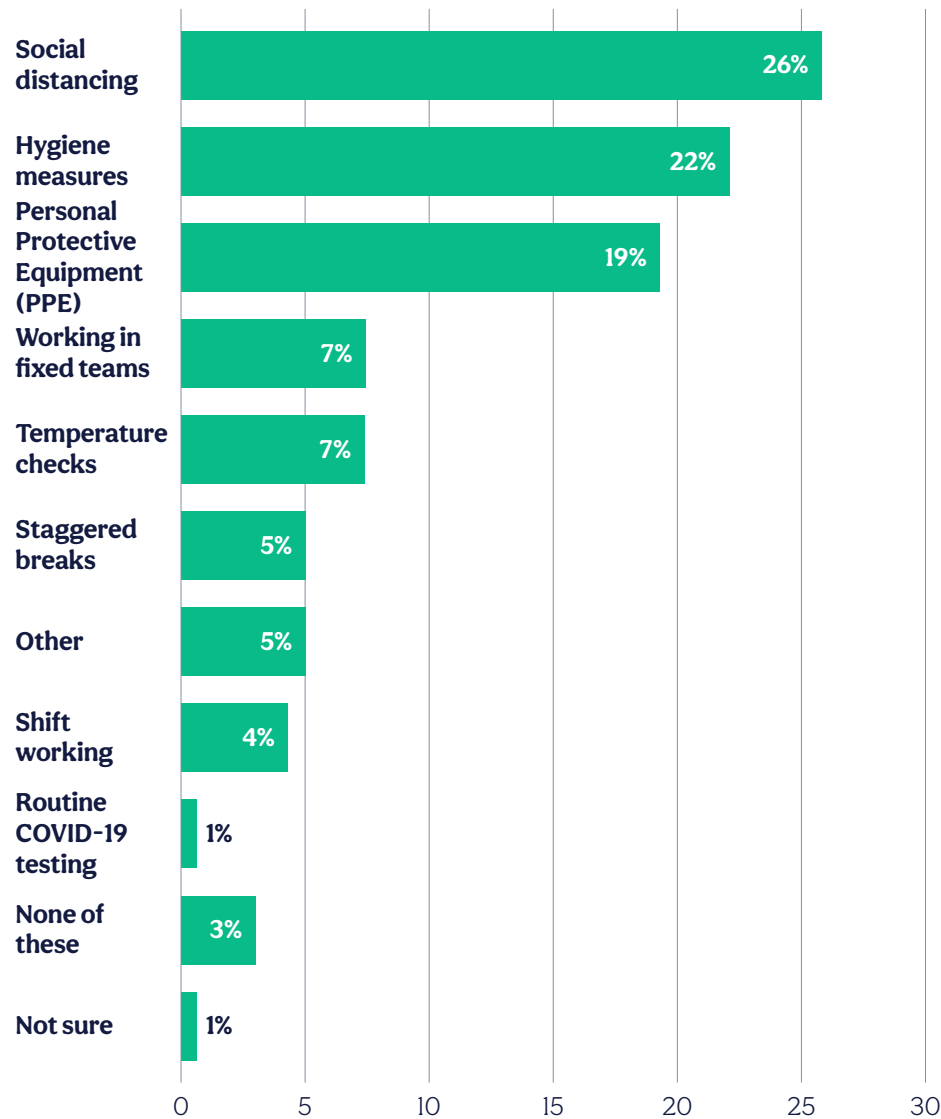


Expectations of financial position over the next month are slightly better. A majority suggesting that financial position will remain the same, while 34% anticipate a further deterioration. 13% expect to see an improvement.

**Expected change of the financial position in the next month, September 2020 (% of organisations)**

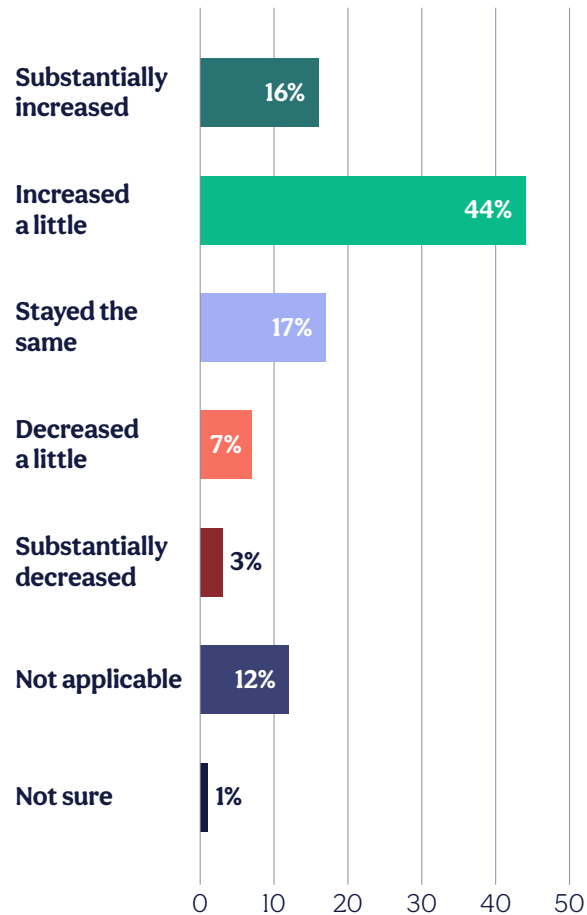


**COVID-19 measures taken or intended to take, September 2020 (% of organisations)**



When asked what difference these measures had made to operating costs, 60% of organisations reported an increase in their operating costs as result of implementing COVID-19 safety measures for their staff, volunteers and clients.

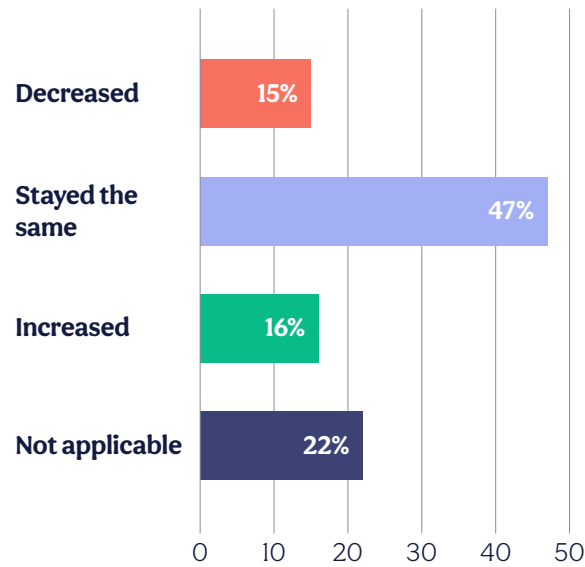
### Change in operating costs due to implementation of COVID-19 safety measures, September 2020 (% of organisations)



### Workforce and volunteers

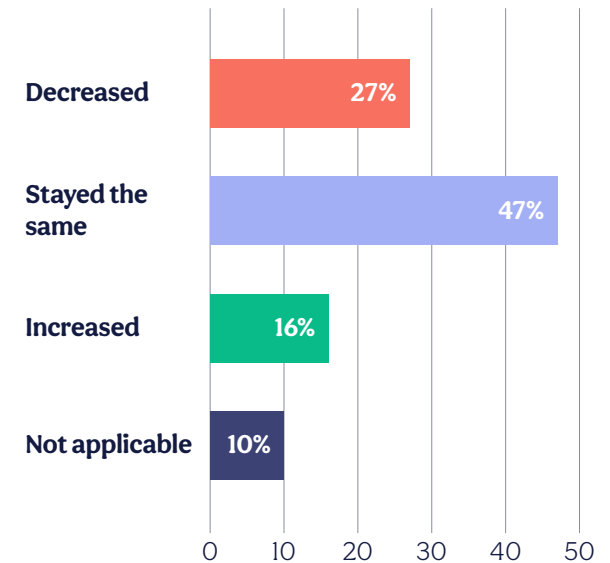
The size of paid workforce employed by survey respondents remained stable over the month preceding the survey.

### Change in paid workforce over the last month, September 2020 (% of organisations)



The picture for volunteers is slightly different with a negative balance of 11 percentage points recorded for numbers of volunteers. It is possible that this is related to the tapering-off of the Job Retention Scheme (Furlough) during September. This is an issue that we will explore further in subsequent waves of this barometer and panel surveys.

### Change in number of volunteers over the last month, September 2020 (% of organisations)

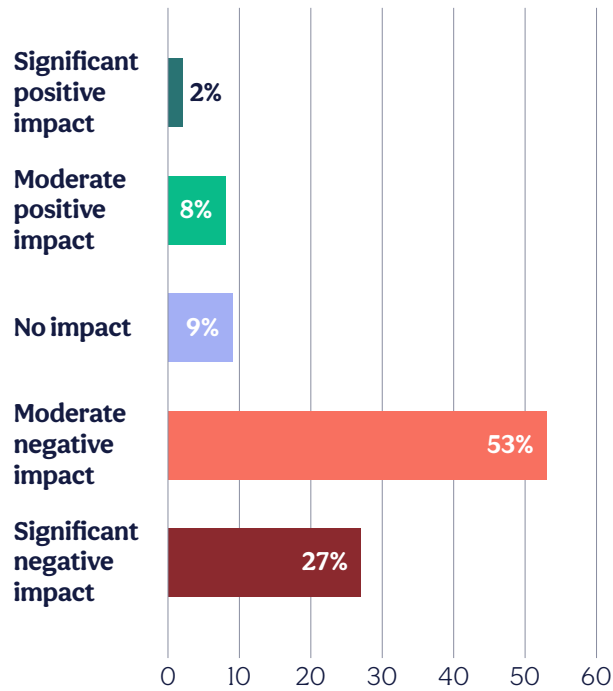




## Long term outlook

When asked about long term prospects, 80% predict a moderate or significant negative impact on delivering their planned objectives next year

### Expected impact of COVID-19 on delivering objectives this time next year, September 2020 (% of organisations)



Further data from the first wave of the barometer survey is available at <http://cpwop.org.uk/what-we-do/projects-and-publications/covid-19-vcse-organisation-responses/>

# Behind the headlines: Understanding sector responses to COVID-19

This project is about drawing out insights on what life has been like in the VCSE sector working through the pandemic. This next section provides a flavour of some of the emerging themes that are coming out of the in-depth interviews. These will be further developed in the forthcoming detailed reports.

## Being at the centre of life defining experiences

One of the key early themes has been the experience that many within the VCSE sector have felt at the heart of worldwide events. As has been widely reported many organisations and those working within them have found it tough, faced with demands that they had not expected, but many of the interviewees have reflected on the magnitude and significance of living and working in the sector during the pandemic, as a key experience in their lives.

“ this feels like it will be I think, the defining event period of my lifetime ... I think the fact that there was this kind of similar experience happening in almost every major city in the world at the same time, and the sheer oddness of particularly for living in a city of this level of weirdness was quite difficult to make sense of and process but there is a sort of novelty that's thrilling at the same time ”

For some this has been the most intense period of their working lives. Interviewees have talked about the energy, creativity and ingenuity that they needed to show to get things done, working evenings and weekends as they were inventing new ways to help people in need.

“ it was probably the most intense period I've ever worked at the company. It's hard to sort of put into words the volume and the speed that stuff was coming through because obviously once the helpline launched and everybody was trying to access it at once it wasn't just the hours that we were working, it was the constant, there was no break ”

Yet others, who were furloughed, as organisations tried to save money, described feeling 'unloved', worried about redundancy and experienced a type of bereavement. It is clear from what we have heard so far that there are many different experiences of COVID-19.

## Transforming practices

Another early theme is the way in which organisations have transformed how they work. The rule book about funding, evaluation and monitoring has often been put to one side as funders, grantees and volunteers all worked together to develop new ways of doing things. Funders, who normally have long application processes and detailed monitoring procedures quickly pivoted, with many developing new funding streams, and with it highly streamlined processes from mid-March onwards, as they saw the impending crisis emerging.

“ The conversations were that we needed to be acting quickly and the organisations we fund will be required to do more work so we should be releasing more funding ”

Similarly, many infrastructure organisations rapidly invented new ways of working to respond to the challenges that they faced. They, for instance, bought Zoom licences to allow local organisations to meet virtually, or transformed services to be online. There are numerous examples of organisations transforming their work quite radically.

## Accelerated existing plans

A common feature was that these transformations were largely made possible because they were building on, scaling or accelerating existing plans. Many organisations were already planning on making some of their services and operations digital, for instance by introducing telephone befriending services, new online portals for information or allowing working from home in ways that were previously not possible. The pandemic allowed, or required, these plans to be rapidly accelerated, gave impetus to ideas that were planned but not prioritised or that previously people were sceptical about. For instance, one organisation spent years trying to develop a digital befriending service, but volunteers had been resistant preferring face-to-face. However, the social distancing measures changed the situation and highlighted the need for digital systems.

“ [Previously the telephone befriending service] wasn't a very popular option, to be honest with you. The beneficiaries certainly preferred going out and actually physically seeing the person that they were supporting and the beneficiary preferred someone to come and see them as well ... I think there may have been a movement to try and digitalise elements of it but not in the way that now everything is digital and there is no face to face engagement ”

## Living at work: Well-being during the pandemic

With many organisations making dramatic changes in how they worked, developing new services or transforming working practices, increased demand has been placed on those working within them. Whilst many described this as energising, it has also led to people working more intensively and concerns about burnout. Many interviewees described the challenges of balancing increased demand with their own well-being and the well-being of their staff, working from home, struggling with the boundaries between work and home life. Working in the sector for some brought additional pressures as their work often focuses on causes they feel personally committed to.

“ So if you're working in retail it's not about you as an individual, the issues you're dealing with whereas with identity politics it is every day. And again, those blurred lines between where your working day finishes and where your personal life kicks in again started to blur even more during lockdown which yeah, I personally found quite unique actually in a way I'd never really experienced and having worked in identity politics for nearly 18 years ”

Many organisations are finding ways of encouraging well-being, through doing check-ins and meet-ups to encourage social interactions, mindfulness and well-being sessions and also learning to say no to extra demands.

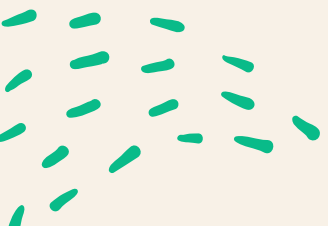
“ it was tiring and hard and people were stressed and worried but we were very clear as an organisation that ... nobody should be pushing themselves too hard ”

## Changing how we work

COVID-19 has transformed many of the ways that organisations work, with trustees, senior leaders, operational staff and volunteers working together in new ways.

“ [COVID-19 has] completely transformed the way we work with them and all the people who were saying you can't possibly meet via video conference, it's not the same are now saying you can't possibly make me travel all the way down from Edinburgh because it's a waste of my time. And that has also improved our efficiency and responsiveness ”

In some organisations, trustees have been far more involved, doing more of the operational work in ways that they have never done. For some digital meetings on Zoom and Teams calls have meant that people normally excluded from more London centric face to face meetings have been able to participate in ways they have not done before. Some interviewees described COVID-19 as a great leveller, flattening hierarchies, and working more collaboratively than ever before. However, such digital communication means that some have felt more excluded, unable to participate in discussions or informal conversations at work. Working from home has left some individuals feeling isolated without mentors and support.



## Concerns for the future

Funding continues to create real concerns for many organisations, causing uncertainty about their futures. Some organisations are using their reserves and others are making cuts, particularly redundancies or reducing services in order to survive. Some small organisations fear they will be overlooked, and are particularly struggling with the competing demands on them.

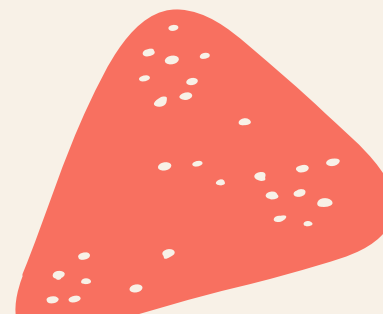
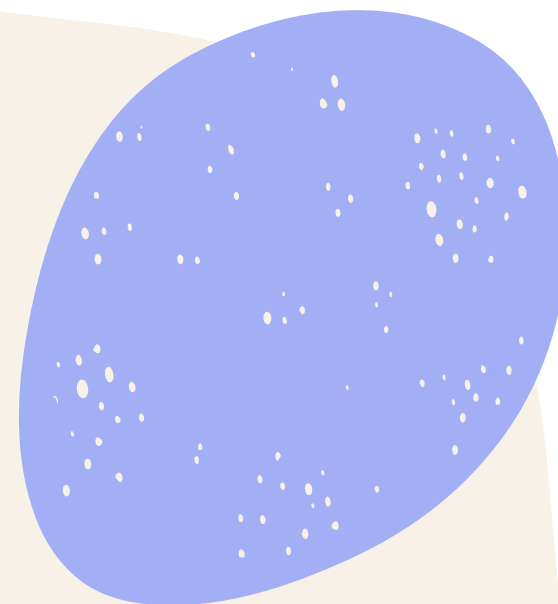
Whilst there have been many new funding streams available to help organisations respond to the pandemic, these have produced some challenges. Some interviewees raised concerns that it favours organisations who have strong existing relationships with funders, others say that some of their existing work (and funding bids they were developing) have had to stop. Many organisations are concerned about their long-term future and are not sure how they will survive the next few months or years.

These challenges, and the pandemic more generally, have led to some organisations to reappraise their mission and purpose.

## Future reports

This report provides just a taster of some of the emerging findings, more of which will be published in the coming months. One of the central aims of the project is to capture the different experiences of different people and organisations within the sector, how they change over time and how people and organisations are responding to these challenges, depending on their different contexts. We are keen to hear from anyone with an interest or involvement in the sector.

**If you want to suggest particular themes for the research or to get involved, please email us at [CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk)**



For further information:  
[CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk)



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