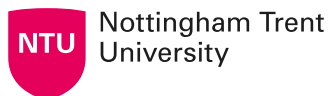# Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19

November 2020

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.
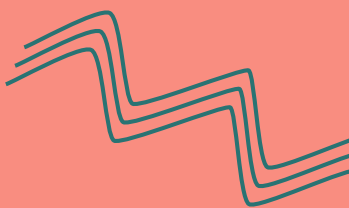
Introduction

COVID-19 is having a major impact on voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE). Whilst there is considerable attention as to what is happening to the sector as a whole, we need to understand how it is impacting different types of organisations and how they are responding.

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.

These series of monthly reports provide this up to date data. Our monthly barometer surveys provide powerful insights into the trends occurring within the sector to help policymakers and practitioners consider how they might best respond. The interviews offer insights into the perspective of those working and volunteering in the sector, and how they are responding to the challenges that they face.

We are keen to connect with policy-makers, trustees and practitioners involved in the sector to understand how COVID-19 is impacting the sector and also how you can make the most of the data that we are producing.

If you want to get involved, or just find out more please email us at CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk or visit the website https://bit.ly/3pwF44L

> " Our monthly barometer surveys provide powerful insights into the trends occurring within the sector to help policymakers and practitioners consider how they might best respond. "

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. This month we included questions about the impact of furlough on the sector. We plan to publish results as soon as possible after each wave closes and will do this via the data dashboard https://bit.ly/38QEcSH.

The wave 2 survey was completed between 24th October and 10th November. This generated responses from 639 organisations. The survey had a good level of response from all of the English regions. Wave 2 saw a small improvement in the level of response from the nations, but we remain keen to extend coverage of the survey in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as this will allow us to better understand any geographic differences in the impacts of the Pandemic on the sector. Note that some charts in this report do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

A diverse sample

As we saw in the wave 1 survey, a wide range of organisation types and a hugely diverse range of activities are represented in this sample. Two thirds identified themselves as registered charities, around a fifth indicated that they have limited company status, smaller numbers reported being community interest companies or voluntary associations.
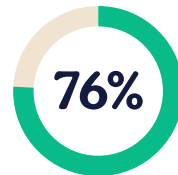
22% of organisations (142) identified themselves as a social enterprise

13% (86) described themselves as a deaf and disabled peoples' organisation
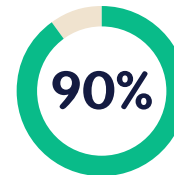
12% (77) described themselves as a BAME organisation

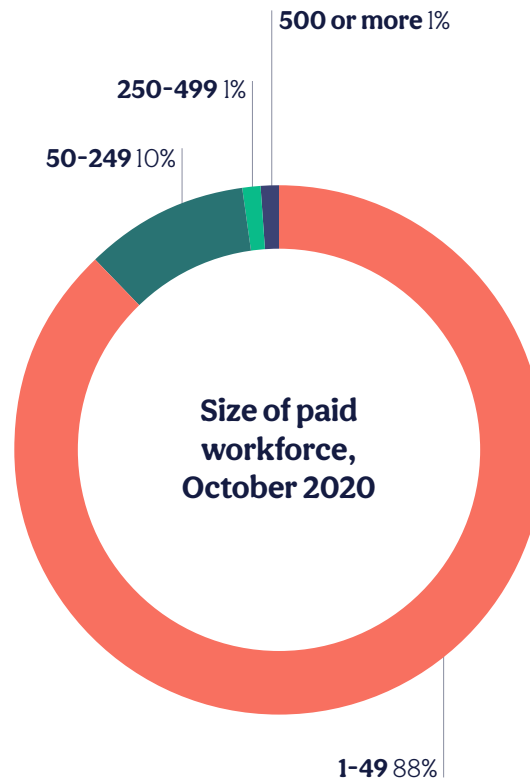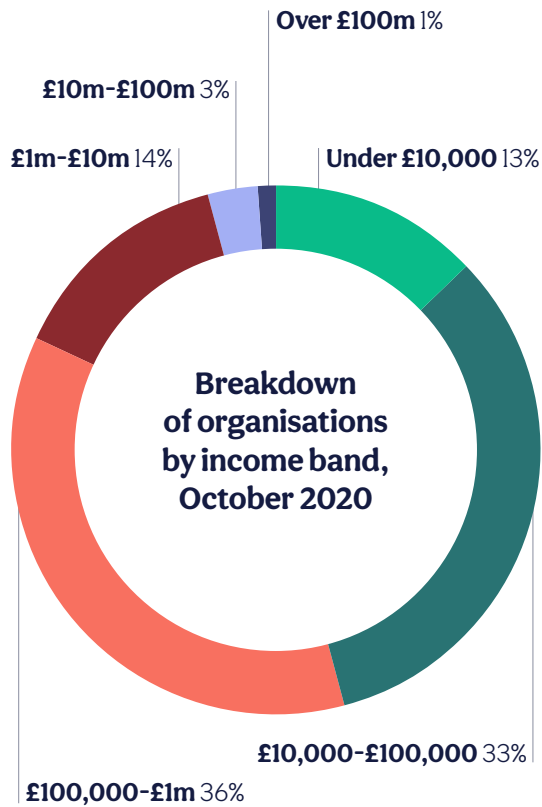**11%** (70) described themselves as a women's organisation

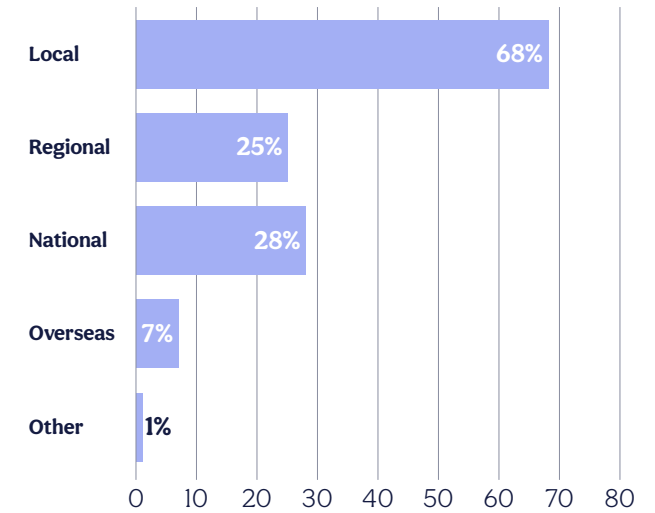**5%** (34) described themselves as LGBTIQ+ organisations

76% of responding organisations report that they employ paid staff

90% have volunteers

Breakdown of organisations by income band, October 2020

- Over £100m 1%
- £10m-£100m 3%
- £1m-£10m 14%
- Under £10,000 13%
- £10,000-£100,000 33%
- £100,000-£1m 36%

Size of paid workforce, October 2020

- 500 or more 1%
- 250-499 1%
- 50-249 10%
- 1-49 88%

At what level does your organisation operate, October 2020

Level	%
Local	68%
Regional	25%
National	28%
Overseas	7%
Other	1%

The most common activity types reported by survey respondents were in health, hospitals and nursing homes (including mental health) (16%), individual and family social services (7%), culture and the arts (6%), education (6%), and community and economic development (6%). In general, wave 2 achieved a broader spread of activity types reported in terms of the categories used in the annual NCVO UK Civil Society Almanac (https://data.ncvo.org.uk) and used in this survey for consistency.
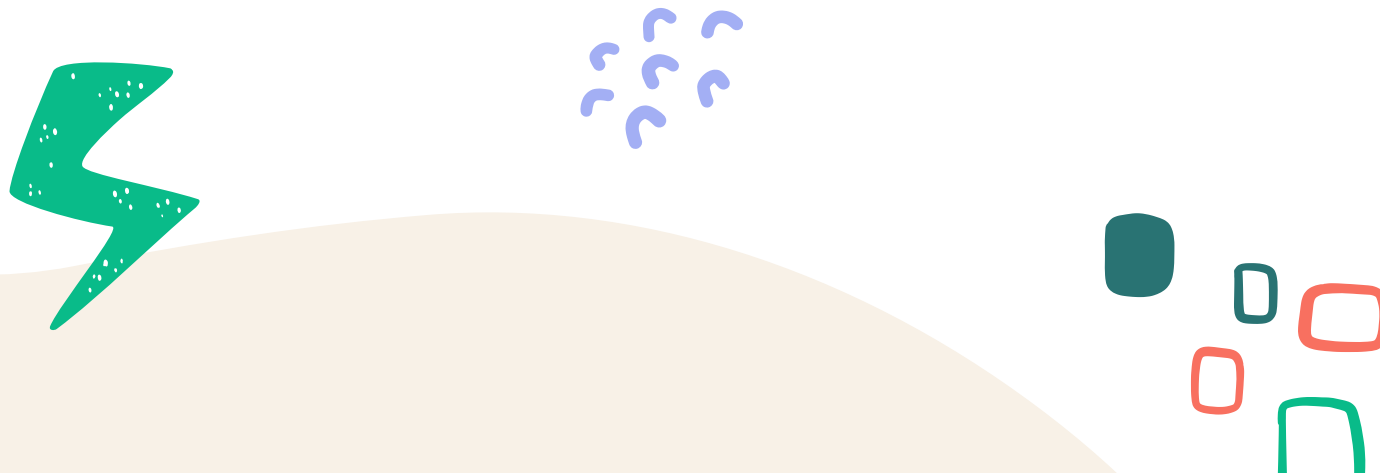
Headlines

People

639 organisations completed the survey

76% employ paid staff

90% have volunteers

Finances

39% reported a deteriorating financial position in the last month

22% saw their financial position in the last month improve

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

38% expect their financial position to deteriorate over the next month

Services

41% indicated that their range of services has increased since March

41% reported a reduction in their range of services since March

57% reported an increase in demand for services over the last month

57% expect demand for services to increase over the next month

Outlook

80% expected COVID-19 to have a moderate or significant negative impact on delivering their objectives next year

14% reported that it was quite likely or very likely that their organisation would no longer be operating next year (up from 10% last month)
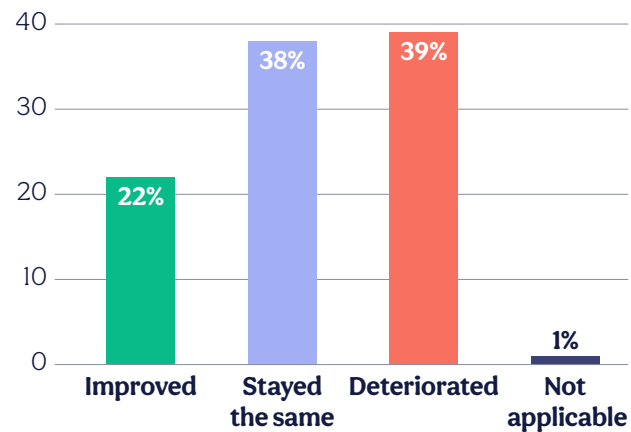
Furlough

39% reported they have used the Job Retention Scheme since March

May & June saw the greatest use of the Job Retention Scheme in the sector

52% reported that the JRS had a moderate positive impact on their finances

22% reported that the JRS had a significant positive impact on their finances

Finances and operations

39% of the organisations reported that their financial position has deteriorated in the last month compared to 22% who reported an improvement in their organisation's financial position over the last month – a negative balance of 17 percentage points. The wave 1 survey reported a negative balance of 19 percentage points.
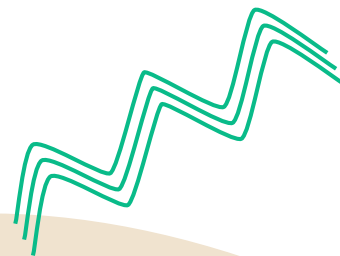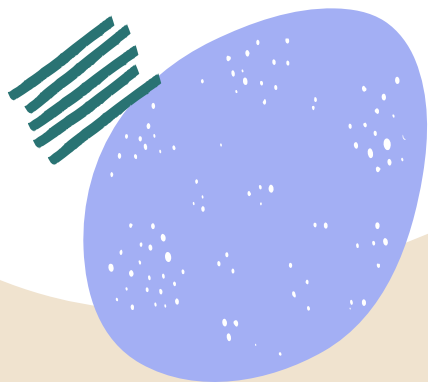
Over the last month demand for services provided by the voluntary and community sector maintained the strong upward trajectory revealed in the wave 1 survey - increasing by one percentage point this month to 57%. This may be related to the rising level of redundancies and unemployment evident in recent official data.
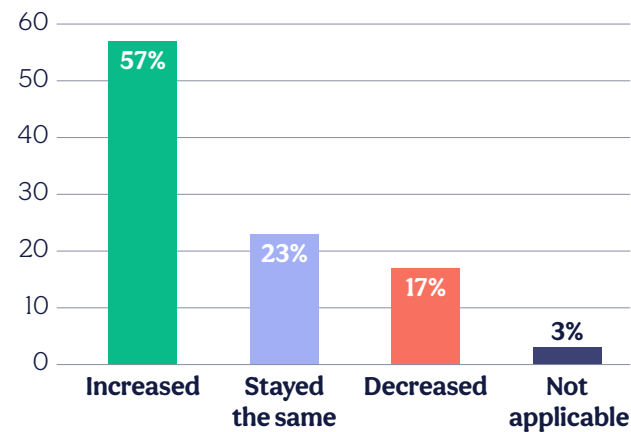
Respondents to this survey continue to use a wide range of measures to maintain COVID-safe environments for employees, volunteers and service users. The proportion of organisations using specific measures are broadly in line with those reported in the wave 1 survey. The most widely used measures are social distancing (79%), hygiene measures (66%) and PPE (59%). 43% (268) report that these measures have increased operating costs a little. 18% (114) report that these measures have substantially increased operating costs.

As the prevalence of local lockdowns has increased, so too has the proportion of organisations reporting that they had been affected in some way by a local lockdown. Half of all respondents to the survey now report that they have been affected by local lockdowns.

Change of the financial position over the last month, October 2020

Category	Value
Improved	22%
Stayed the same	38%
Deteriorated	39%
Not applicable	1%

Demand for services over the last month, October 2020

Category	Value
Increased	57%
Stayed the same	23%
Decreased	17%
Not applicable	3%

Organisations affected by local lockdowns, October 2020

Yes 50%
No 50%

Workforce and volunteers

Over the last month, the employment position in the sector is reported as relatively stable. A similar proportion of respondents report increased employment compared to those who report decreased employment.

Paid workforce over the last month, October 2020

Increased	15%
Stayed the same	47%
Decreased	16%
Not applicable	21%
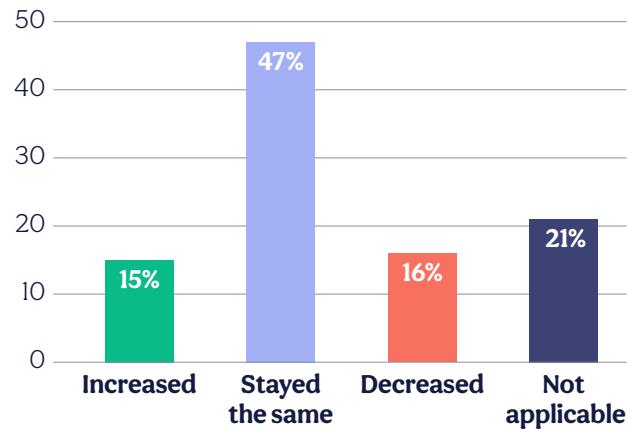
The situation for volunteers is different. Here we see decreases outweighing increases by a margin of around 6 percentage points. The changing patterns of volunteering within the sector is a major theme that this research project will be exploring in some depth over the next months – both through this barometer survey, the panel survey and in-depth interviews that are being conducted as part of this project.

Volunteers over the last month, October 2020

|	
Increased	19%
Stayed the same	46%
Decreased	25%
Not applicable	10%
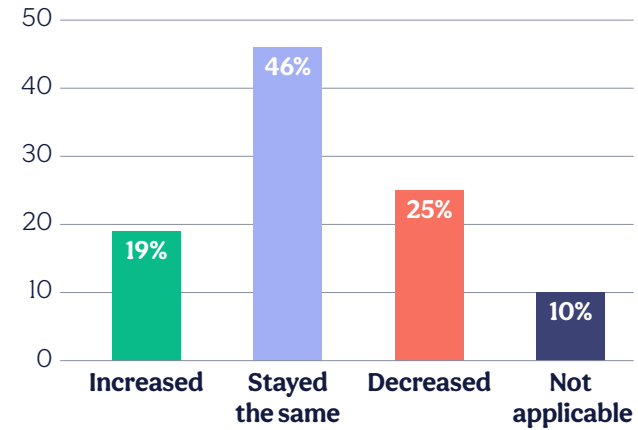
Furlough

In anticipation of the Government's planned cessation of the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) at the end of October, the wave 2 barometer survey included a number of topical questions about the impact of and usage of the JRS within the sector. We now know that the JRS scheme has been extended to the end of March 2021. But the wave 2 survey has produced interesting data on the usage and impact of furlough between April and October 2020.
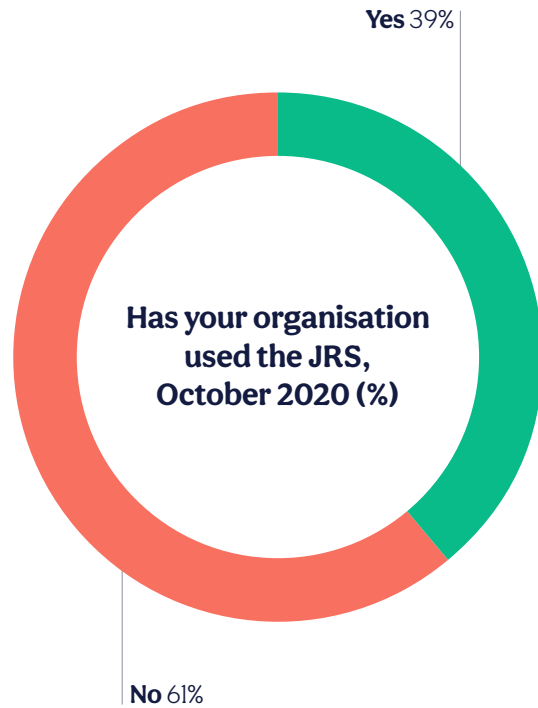
Usage of furlough by respondents peaked in May and June – when around 37% of respondents indicated that they used the JRS. Around 21% of respondents were still using the scheme in October.
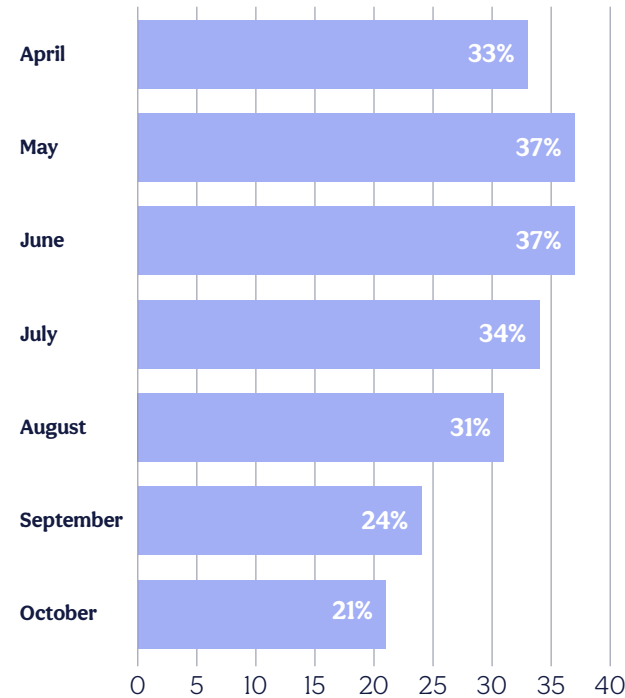
When asked how the JRS had impacted on organisations' finances, 52% of JRS users reported a moderate positive impact and 22% reported a significant positive impact.

When asked about the impact of using the JRS on services – 39% of JRS users reported a moderate negative impact. This is likely to reflect the impact of furlough on the capacity to deliver services.

Has your organisation used the JRS, October 2020 (%)

Yes 39%

No 61%

When has your organisation used the JRS, October 2020

Month	%
April	33%
May	37%
June	37%
July	34%
August	31%
September	24%
October	21%

Impact of JRS on services, October 2020

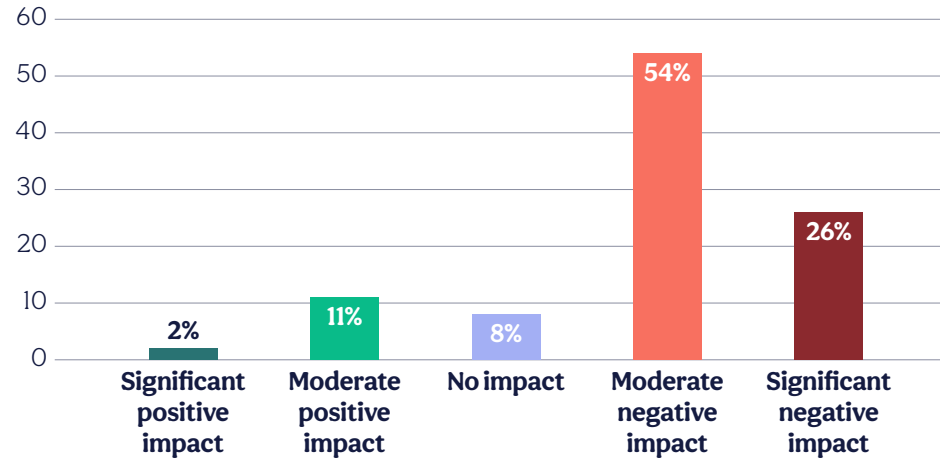| Category	%
Significant positive impact	2%
Moderate positive impact	13%
No impact	38%
Moderate negative impact	39%
Significant negative impact	8%
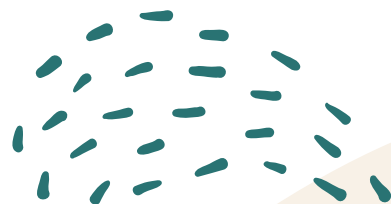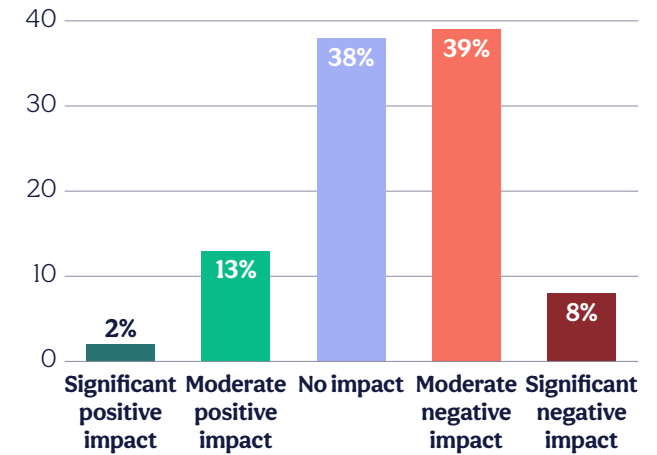
Long term outlook

In broad terms, the long term outlook reported by respondents to wave 2 is similar to that reported a month ago. 80% of respondents report that they expect COVID-19 to have a moderate or significant negative impact on their ability to deliver on their objectives this time next year. It will be interesting to see whether this perspective will change over the next month as a consequence of the re-imposition of national restrictions on activity in November (a downside risk). Or indeed recent positive news on prospects for a vaccine (an upside risk).

Impact on long-term ability to deliver objectives, October 2020

Category	Value
Significant positive impact	2%
Moderate positive impact	11%
No impact	8%
Moderate negative impact	54%
Significant negative impact	26%

When asked about the likelihood of closure, 14% (87) reported that it was quite likely or very likely that their organisation would no longer be operating next year (up from 10% last month).

Behind the headlines: Well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

This project is about drawing out insights on what life has been like in the sector working through the Pandemic. This month we are focusing on the issues of well-being and how organisations are responding.

> " I work from my house all the time, I suddenly can't go out anywhere. So where I live is where I work and where I work is where I live "

The impacts of the Pandemic on those working in the sector

COVID-19 has dramatically changed most people's lives, restricting freedoms, social interaction and working practices. For many voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations these challenges have been particularly difficult. Rapid transformations of delivery models and working practices, away from face-to-face services and meetings toward digitalisation, remote working, and ending some services meant profound changes at a speed and intensity that few had experienced before.

For many organisations demand for services has increased, uncertainty of income resulted in concerns about redundancy and also a shift to new working practices, placing large burdens on those working in the voluntary sector. For individual staff these changes in working practices, often working digitally and from home has brought additional burdens, including juggling work and childcare or other caring responsibilities which at times have been hard to cope with.

> " This is the worst time of my professional career! I'm stressed, I'm tired, I cannot work with children surrounding me! I am the grumpiest I've ever been! "

Specific challenges for the voluntary sector

For those working and volunteering in the sector these challenges can be particularly challenging because of the type of work they are involved in. Often working with vulnerable, marginalised or isolated communities, many interviewees described the personal commitment and responsibility for the groups they worked with.

> **"** I felt it was appalling the idea that anyone would consider it more important to help their six year old with their Math homework than it would be to try and support a survivor in crisis at home **"**

For many organisations balancing the pressing needs for their services with the personal needs of their paid staff and volunteers was challenging, particularly when both the demand for services and the needs of staff felt vital.

> **"** I think it's difficult to stomach when you know that your manager is very concerned about young people losing out on opportunities but doesn't seem to care about the staff who are supposed to be providing the support **"**

Increased importance of well-being

Given the intensity of the work, the challenges of transforming services and the emotional burden that many within voluntary organisations experienced well-being has become key issue. Some interviewees described feeling stressed and anxious, feeling highly emotional whilst at work, particularly when juggling other commitments.

A number of senior leaders stated that supporting volunteers and paid staff during the Pandemic has been vital. Many of the senior leaders we interviewed stated staff well-being was a central issue. They were particularly conscious that supporting staff and volunteers was critical for a sector that is concerned with supporting people.

> **"** So I think the hardest thing for us to do was manage the emotional and the well-being of all the staff and make sure everybody's needs, because they are really individual in this kind of circumstance, nobody's needs are the same so you have to make sure you have an individual approach. I think that was the biggest kind of concern for us. **"**

Working remotely made this particularly challenging. Zoom fatigue, feelings of isolation and constant working from home has been challenging for many people. Not seeing people face to face has produced challenges such as difficulty picking up on body language, or awareness of somebody's emotional well-being when they do not regularly see them.

> **"** If something was going wrong or someone was deeply unhappy how would we know. So I have been encouraging all of my managers to make sure they're regularly checking in with staff, even if they don't have a work reason, ... just giving them a call, checking in, are they okay, ... because I think what lockdown has shown us is that everyone is having a different lockdown **"**

Practices to support staff and volunteers

Many voluntary organisations are placing more focus on well-being. Some are using initiatives like mindfulness, encouraging staff to take a break from computer screens and making sure they use their annual leave as a way of trying to prioritise well-being. Using technology like Skype, or Google Meet-Up to stay connected and reduce isolation.

> **"** we set up a group chat on Skype so that we could chat throughout the day and it was just a really simple thing that made a massive difference to us **"**

Many organisations focused on improving communications, particularly to keep staff and volunteers updated on the changes that were occurring. Improving communications was seen as key way of reducing anxiety with senior leaders putting in place initiatives such as weekly video blogs to keep everyone updated.

> **"** So, one of the things we did was we launched this communications campaign where basically every morning staff got an email and so Monday was Motivational Monday and there was a video from a senior member of staff **"**

Some organisations have also sought to encourage more genuine engagement and understanding of each other, shifting conversations to encourage well-being as a core part of the conversation.

> **"** we've all got to know each other at a different level and we've all genuinely asked about their well-being. Every call we go on we say, "how are you?" and we're not just saying it to pass the time of day, we're actually meaning it. "How are you? How's it been? I see your kids are running around still or are they off at school now?" **"**
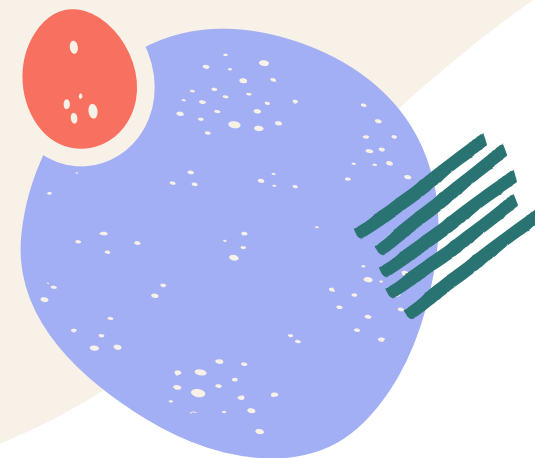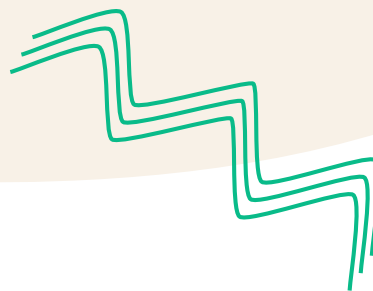
Lessons learned

Each organisation had their own strategy for how to improve well-being within their organisation but here are a few of the key lessons interviewees said they had learnt:
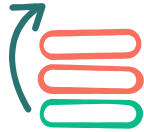
Prioritising

Understanding what is important and choosing to say no to things that were not a priority. Not being wedded to things because they were in a business-plan or obsessed with getting everything right.

Focusing on well-being

Encouraging line managers to take well being seriously to support staff.

Learning to take time off

Actively encouraging staff to take a break and recharge so they do not burnout and feel overwhelmed.

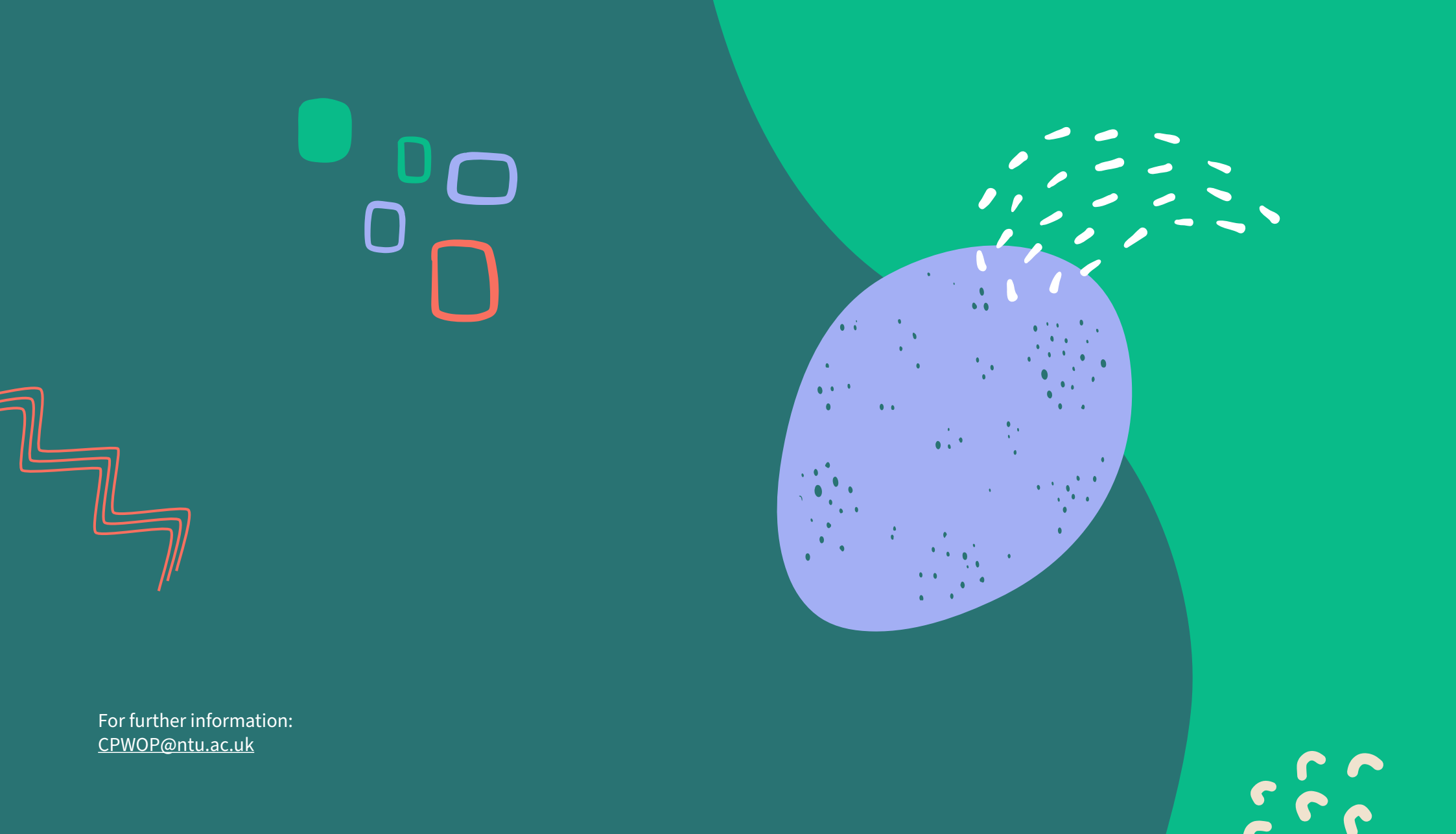### Maintaining contact with volunteers

Contacting volunteers so feel they are connected to the organisation.

Recognising tensions

Between the increased demand for services and the needs of staff and volunteers. Also recognise the fear and doubt staff and volunteers can experience.

For further information:
CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk