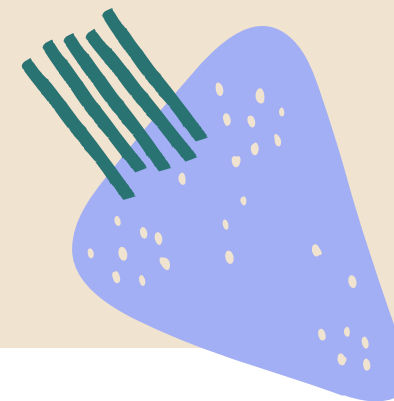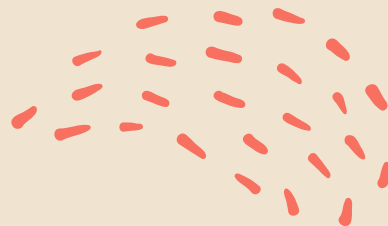# Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19

July 2021

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.
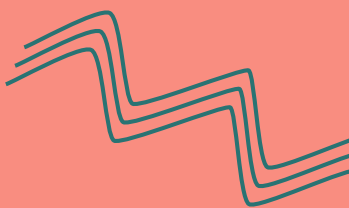
Introduction: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion during the pandemic

Voluntary sector organisations are often at the heart of their communities, serving diverse groups of people. However, they have also been criticised for lacking diversity, and having poor representation of and limited support for marginalised communities – particularly Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), LGBTQIA+ and disabled communities – both within staff and volunteer teams, and in the reach of their services.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated inequality in terms of the social, economic and health impact on minority communities. This coincided with the increased prominence and mobilisation of the global anti-racism movement, particularly following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the United States during May 2020. This contributed to a significant rise in awareness and discussion around issues of racism and equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in society.

There has also been a greater focus on EDI and issues of discrimination and racism within the voluntary sector. This had increased prior to the pandemic through the work of campaigns such as #CharitySoWhite, and through several news stories revealing a range of failings in the sector related to EDI. These included instances of harassment, discrimination, and exclusionary leadership, as well as wider structural problems around behaviours, practices, and processes within voluntary organisations. Many organisations, particularly larger organisations, have also begun to examine their internal cultures and issues of EDI in both their work and governance.

> " The Covid-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated inequality in terms of the social, economic and health impact on minority communities. "

This month's report looks at how voluntary sector organisations have responded to the increased awareness and issues relating to race, discrimination and EDI over the course of the pandemic and what this means for their policies, practices, staff, volunteers and communities they serve. There is no single set of agreed definitions for terms EDI. However, respondents to this round of the survey were presented with these summaries of commonly used definitions, which will also be used in this report:

- **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 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** means ensuring people of different backgrounds, experiences and identities feel welcomed, represented, respected and are fully able to participate.
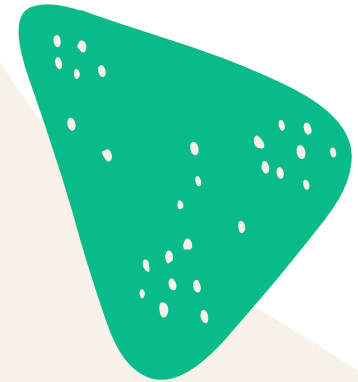
Covid-19 voluntary sector impact barometer, July 2021

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 (VCSE) throughout the life of this project. We have tried to create a survey that is inclusive, quick and easy to complete. In this wave of the barometer, we explored the topic of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the voluntary sector. This information will also be available online via the data dashboard. The dashboard now includes an analysis of trends across the eight waves of the survey completed so far.

The eighth wave of the survey was completed between 11th May and 26th May. This generated responses from 294 organisations across the UK. We remain keen to extend coverage of the survey in each of the UK nations as this will allow us to better understand any geographic differences in the impacts of the pandemic on the sector.

The sample

As we saw in the last seven waves of the survey, a wide range of organisation types and a hugely diverse range of activities are represented in our sample. 69% of the organisations identified as registered charities, 19% indicated that they have limited company status and a total of 8% of participants reported being community interest companies or voluntary associations.

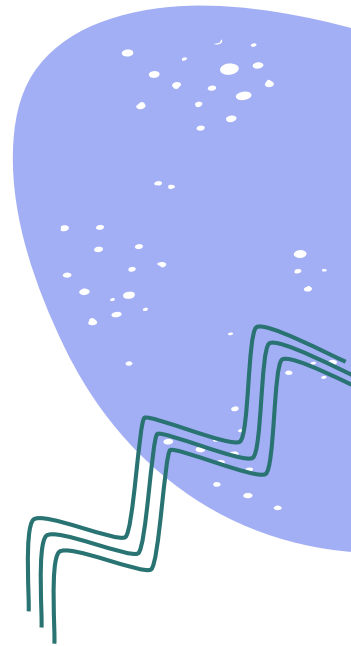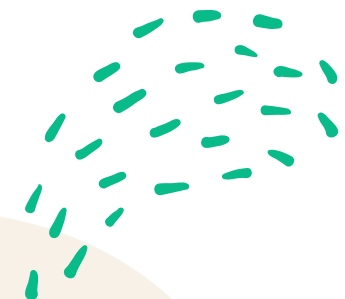**23%** of organisations (68) identified themselves as a social enterprise
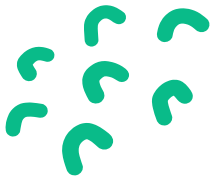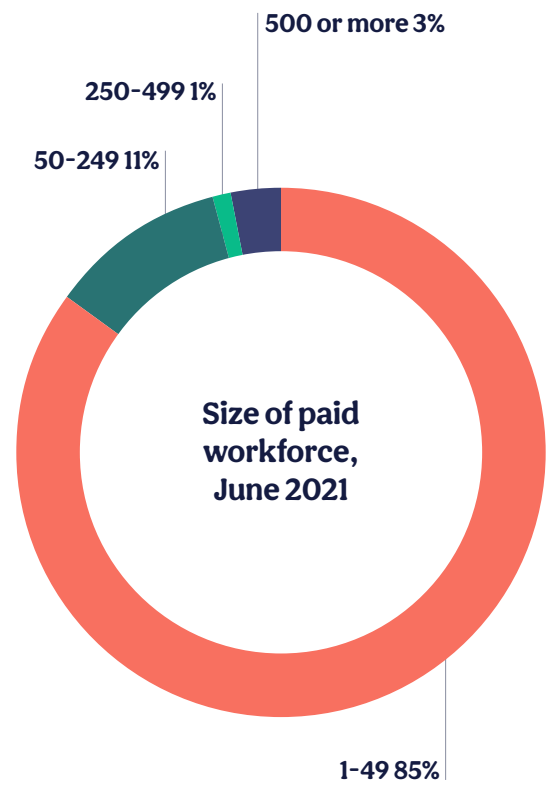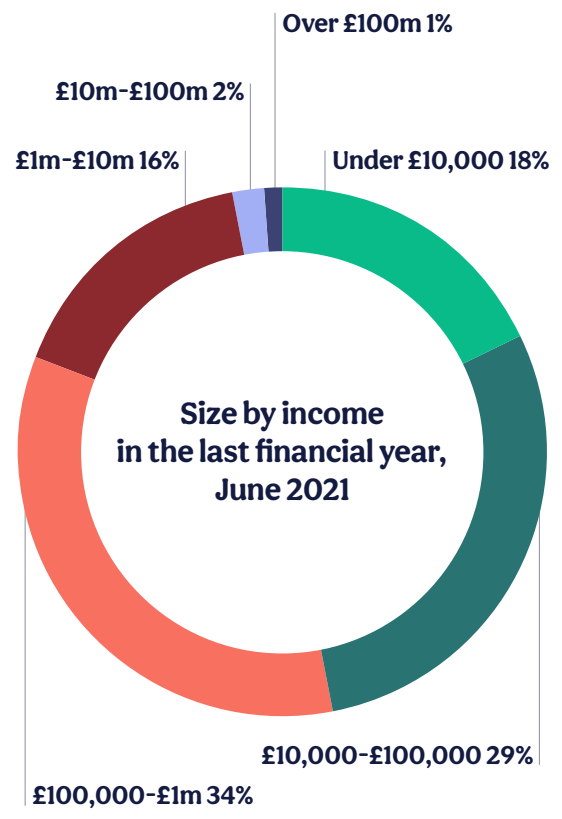
22% (65) describe themselves as age-specific

15% (43) described themselves as a deaf and disabled peoples' organisation

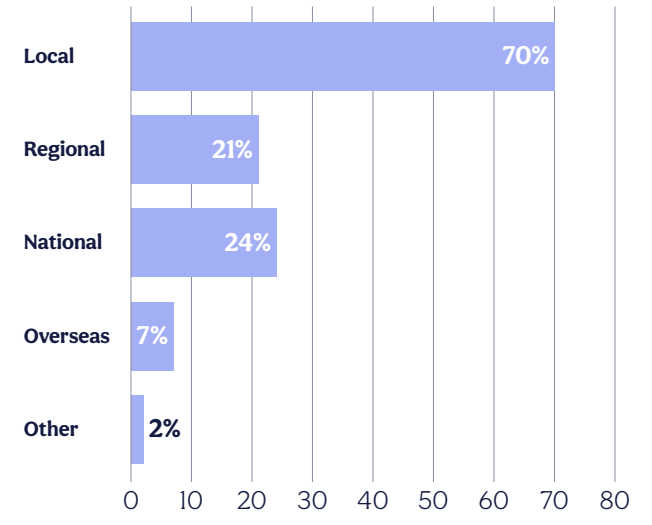**8%** (24) described themselves as a BAME organisation

7% (21) described themselves as a women's organisation

3% (10) described themselves as LGBTQIA+ organisations

Size by income in the last financial year, June 2021

- Under £10,000 18%
- £10,000-£100,000 29%
- £100,000-£1m 34%
- £1m-£10m 16%
- £10m-£100m 2%
- Over £100m 1%

Size of paid workforce, June 2021

- 1-49 85%
- 50-249 11%
- 250-499 1%
- 500 or more 3%

At what level does your organisation operate, June 2021

Level	Percentage
Local	70%
Regional	21%
National	24%
Overseas	7%
Other	2%

The most common activity types for organisations reported by survey respondents were in health, hospitals and nursing homes (including mental health) (13%), community and economic development (9%) and individual and family social services (6%).

Headlines

People

294 organisations responded to the survey

71% employ a paid workforce

Finances

28% reported a deteriorating financial position in the last month

27% saw their financial position in the last month improve

45% reported a stable financial position in the last month

55% expect their financial position to remain the same over the next month

20% expect their financial position to deteriorate over the next month

23% expect their financial position to improve over the next month

Services

**32%** indicated that their range of services has decreased since March 2020

47% reported an increase in their range of services since the beginning of the pandemic

68% expect an increase in demand for their services over the next month

Outlook

64% of respondents expect Covid-19 to have a moderate or significant negative impact on delivering their objectives next year

9% reported that it was quite likely or very likely that their organisation would no longer be operating next year (compared to 6% last month)
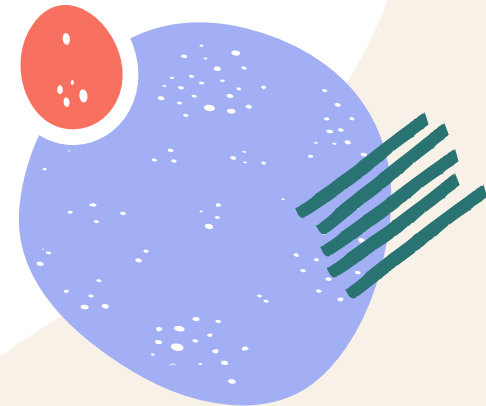
Finances and Operations

In June 2021, 28% of the organisations reported that their financial position has deteriorated in the last month compared to 27% with improved financial position.

Change of the financial position over the last month, June 2021

Improved	Stayed the same	Deteriorated	Not applicable
27%	45%	28%	1%
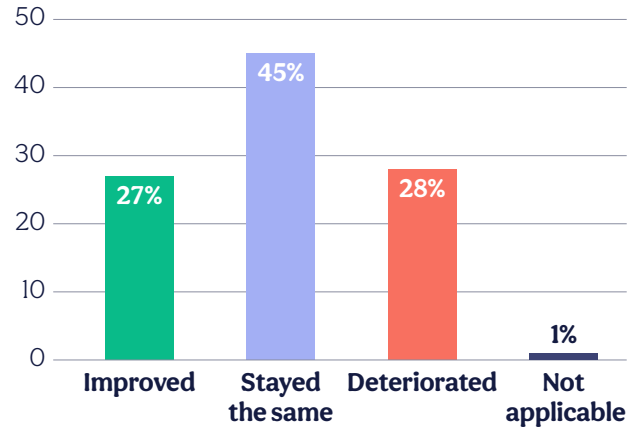
Financial change within the sector remains a major theme in our research and different aspects of it will be explored in some depth over the coming months – through this barometer survey, the panel survey and in-depth interviews that are being conducted as part of this project.

In June 2021, the demand for services provided by the voluntary and community sector maintained the upward trajectory revealed in the previous waves – with 57% of organisations reporting an increase in demand for their services.

Demand for services over the last month, June 2021

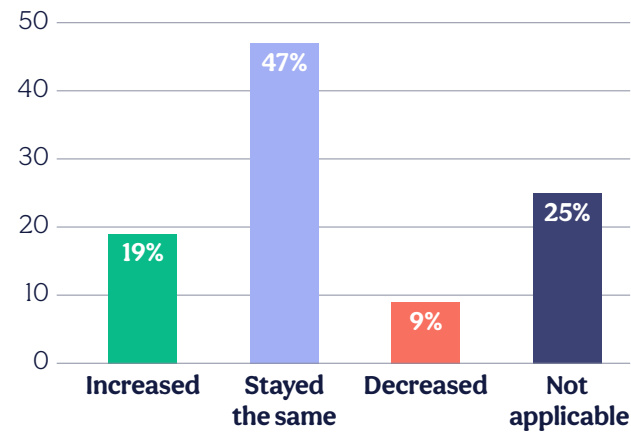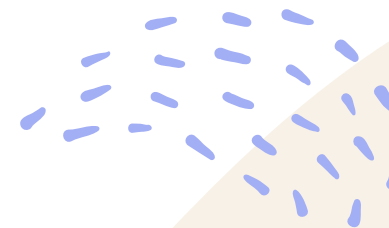| Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased	Not applicable
57%	29%	9%	5%
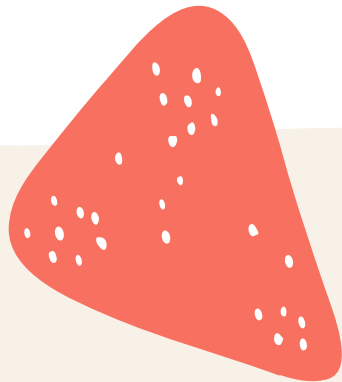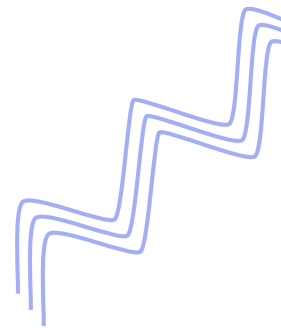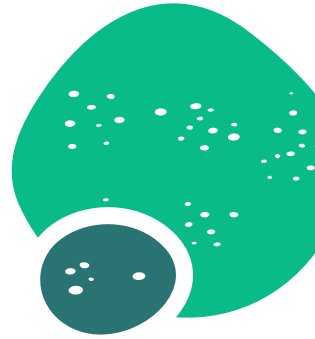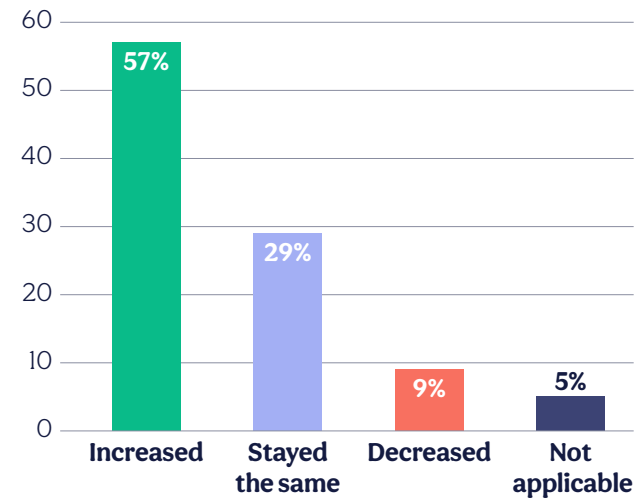
Workforce and Volunteers

Over the last month, the employment position in the sector is reported as relatively stable, with 47% reporting the same number of paid employees compared to previous months.

In June 2021, 18% of organisations saw a decrease in number of their volunteers compared to 19% in the previous wave. 23% of the organisations have reported an increase in the number of their volunteers (compared to 20% in the previous month).

Paid workforce over the last month, June 2021

Category	Percentage
Increased	19%
Stayed the same	47%
Decreased	9%
Not applicable	25%

Volunteers over the last month, June 2021

Category	Percentage
Increased	23%
Stayed the same	50%
Decreased	18%
Not applicable	9%
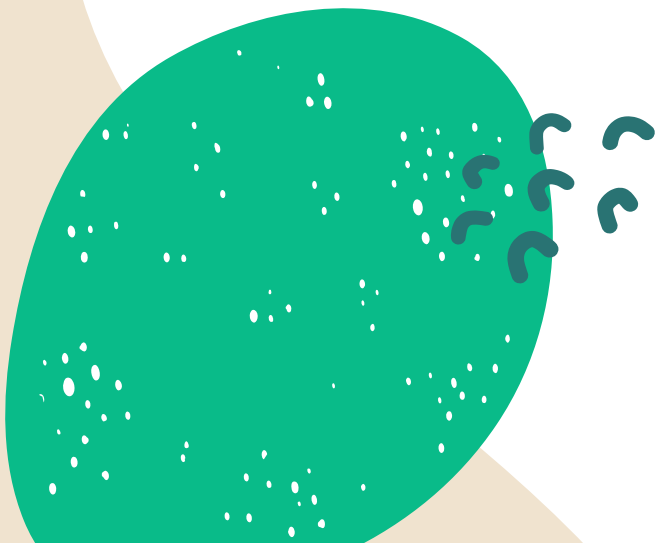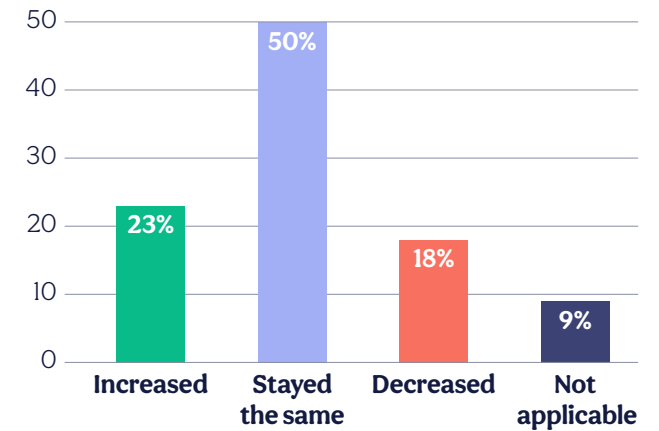
The summer of diversity and inclusion awareness

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Voluntary Sector

It is undeniable that Covid-19 has had a disproportionately adverse impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities (BAME) as well as frontline workers and social care staff who are more likely to be in temporary and lower paid roles. Apart from the pandemic risks, the restrictions placed on our normal day to day lives were also likely to have a different and disproportionate impact on older people, disabled people, young people and the LGBTQIA+ community. In this wave, we explored the actionable insights and strategies that VCSE organisations are adapting to target and reduce these inequalities both in their organisational operations and their community services.

74% of the organisations who responded to our survey mentioned that they have plans in place to address equality, diversity, and inclusion to target the under-representation and negative experiences faced by some groups in their organisation. 59% of these organisations have revised their equality, diversity and inclusion plans since March 2020.

When they were asked about the impacts of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions on the diversity of their service users, 17% of the respondents reported experiencing a more diverse range of service users, 15% reported an increase in diversity of their volunteers and only 9% reported an increase on the diversity of their workforce (through staffing changes such as hiring, redundancies, or resignations) during the pandemic. In general, the VCSE organisations with an annual income of less than £10,000 reported the lowest increase in their diversity and medium-sized organisations (£100,000 to £1m) were the ones with the highest level of increase in diversity of their workforce, volunteers and service users.

The barriers that organisations reported in relation to their efforts to be more inclusive were limitation of financial resources (20%), limited staffing capacity (15%), lack of human resources skills, knowledge and capacity (12%), and lack of equality, diversity and inclusion knowledge or skills (11%).

The most predominant changes in procedures performed by organisations in order to promote greater equality, inclusion and diversity as a result of their experience since March 2020 have been staff training (16%), safeguarding (12%) and staff recruitment (13%).

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, LGBTQIA+ and Women's Organisations during the Covid-19 Crisis

In terms of total income, 40% of women's organisations have reported a decrease in their total income compared to last financial year before Covid-19 (2019-2020) while 32% of organisations have reported an increase in their total income.

The negative impact of Covid-19 on organisations' ability to deliver their annual objectives is still very dominant with 67% of women's organisations reporting significant or moderate negative impacts on their organisations. This negative impact has been reported by 50% of the ethnic minority organisations.
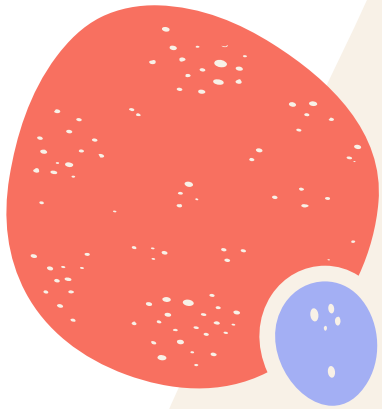
The last year has seen a significant rise in awareness of issues of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) through a collision of the pandemic, global events (particularly the campaigns around racial justice) and the increased attention on EDI within the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. We recognise that EDI encompasses a broad range of areas, identities and intersectionality, including age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and education. Many of the conversations we have had, however, have reflected organisation's particular interest and focus on ethnicity and racial justice as a result of recent global anti-racist movements.

As has been well documented, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on different demographic groups, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, older people, disabled people, young people and LGBTQIA+ communities, raising a spotlight on inequalities within society and how the pandemic has 'amplified inequalities that already exist'. For people working within many VCSE organisations their personal, work or volunteering experiences meant that the realities of these inequalities were directly felt. As one leader of a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) organisation put it:

> ❝ I go back to last summer, I started talking to people whose family members had died, who were running organisations where their members of staff were dying … suddenly it became very, the urgency of this thing, the realness of it was very much front and centre ❞

Senior Manager, National Charitable Foundation
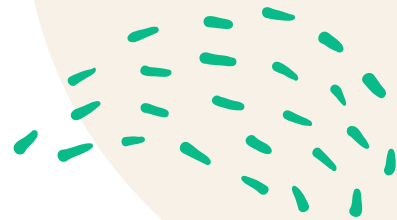
Awareness of these inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, for many interviewees were intensified through the murder of George Floyd and the increased prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement. As has been evident across society conversations about racism and inclusion have intensified, in ways that many had not previously experienced. For many within the VCSE sector there was a feeling they needed to respond:

> ❝ 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 ❞

EDI Lead, national charity supporting young people

For the VCSE sector these wider societal discussions about racism had particular sector resonance, as accounts of racism within the sector were already a live conversation, rising in prominence through the #CharitySoWhite campaign. 2020 was therefore, as one interviewee put it: "the summer of diversity and inclusion" awareness, a time which led many to ask some fundamental questions:

> ❝ The interaction of lockdown and Black Lives Matters and for our sector, Trans Black Lives Matters as well was actually a really enlightening moment actually because it was an opportunity to force yourself to take a step back at how you're doing things and start questioning more ❞

CEO, National Infrastructure organisation

The need for urgent action

The disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on many groups has meant that many organisations have been involved in a wide ranging activities to their service users and members throughout the crisis. This has involved numerous actions from engaging in practical responses such as providing food parcels, enabling access to the internet or setting up new befriending services, through to advocacy and campaigning, highlighting the overlooked needs of certain groups to local authorities and government. Organisations highlighted the important role of the VCSE sector in supporting groups who felt forgotten about or ignored during the crisis. Commenting on the impact of COVID on people with learning disabilities, one interviewee said:

> " the feedback was they felt disabled people had been forgotten about in the crisis. … a lot of them don't understand about social distancing, they don't understand why they've got to stay at home. They don't understand the dangers of things "
>
> **CEO, user led, disabled people charity**

Interviewees stated that the Black Lives Matter movement brought EDI 'front and centre' of their attention, as 'shaking things up', creating 'a sense of urgency', being 'challenged', having to 'step up' and 'respond to the public pressure'. Some interviewees said previously EDI seemed important, but never urgent enough to act upon. As the barometer has indicated many organisations saw the past year as a stimulus to begin to address these long-standing issues.

However, for another group of people working, volunteering or participating within VCSE organisations, this heightened concern about racial justice and awareness of inequalities is far from new, but part of their lived reality. Some interviewees described facing 'racial attacks and racial abuse' on a regular basis. They therefore see racism and issues of racial justice in a wider and more directly experienced way:

> " Whilst the pandemic happened, so did George Floyd's murder. As an organisation that's led by people of colour and 70% odd of our beneficiaries are people of colour, we can't really just talk about the pandemic over the last 12 months, we have to talk about racism and the impact of that on our population. "
>
> **CEO, Youth Charity, South East England**

Taking action on EDI during COVID was described by many as intensive both personally and organisationally, raising uncomfortable truths in a challenging time. Some smaller organisations have been unable to respond to EDI issues due their own growing needs, changing priorities and the struggle to cope with the challenges of COVID-19.

> " The dynamics of COVID have put a lot of pressure on people, both emotionally and practically. Trying to improve on EDI (specifically anti-racism) while all of the COVID issues were also going on has been challenging, but necessary "
>
> **Barometer respondent**

Reactions: Changing policies and practices

The consequences of the 'summer of diversity and inclusion' has led to a range of responses by our interviewees and barometer respondents. One approach our interviewees discussed was to examine how diverse and representative their organisation is, particularly the extent to which it represents the local community. Many interviewees recognised that this is a key issue across the sector:

> The whole reaction to the Black Lives Matters about how we are representative of a more diverse population. One of our trustees has actually spurred us on to doing a big piece of work around looking at our diversity, how we can improve. ... [it's] right across the charity sector in that most people who engage with charities or use our services are going to be white, middle class, educated... Whereas perhaps people from more socially deprived areas or where English isn't their first language or they look at us, they look at our magazine, our website and they may not identify with us

CEO, National Health Charity

One response to this has been to examine or develop EDI policies or strategies. As the barometer highlights, 59% of respondent have revised their equality, diversity and inclusion plans since March 2020. For instance, organisations have explored how they respond to racial abuse, sexist language, homophobia or policies around staff and volunteer recruitment and selection.

A key focus has been thinking about the composition of trustees, recognising that having a non-diverse group of trustees can limit the range of perspectives that the organisation holds or listens to. At a basic level this involves a recognition that there is a need to diversify the organisation, particularly trustees:

> I think we probably should be trying harder to find you know, people from BAME communities or...or disabled or...some other groups to be trustees, partly because there's a risk that an able-bodied or a White group of trustees just doesn't see what the issues are

Trustee, Charitable Trust, North East England

A number of organisations have been thinking more about the processes and practices that they use for the recruitment of staff and the structures which shape the selection processes:

> [We have used a] youth advisory panel [to] interview people. I think that we've simply carried on these conversations because actually COVID has happened at the same time as Black Lives Matter

Senior Manager, Youth Charity, South East England

However other interviewees described their ongoing barriers they face within the sector, particularly when trying to volunteer or work within the sector. One disabled respondent told us about their difficulties securing a voluntary position because the organisation would not introduce the adjustments they required. In this case they were able to eventually persuade the organisation to make the adjustments, but with considerable persistence and at substantial delay.
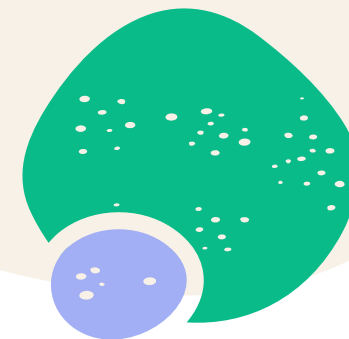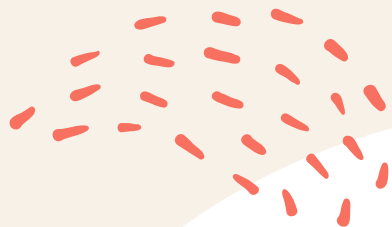
Education, Reflection, and Challenge

Many of our interviewees described how the last year has acted as a stimulus to reflect, personally, professionally and organisationally about their attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and practices and how these impact the lived reality of staff, volunteers and beneficiaries:

> ❝ [We need to] make sure that reflectively we are as inclusive ... we did put in place some unconscious bias training over the period and we explored the whole subject at our inclusion team meeting and really began to try and unpick how we are as an organisation and what we perhaps do or even don't do that may be contributing to this problem of people feeling very, very marginalised and people feeling under-privileged because of their race, cultural background ❞

CEO, Individual and family social services charity, South East England

Some of our interviewees described these experiences as challenging. At the centre of this process has been working on changing attitudes, which involves having 'honest' and 'difficult' conversations, confronting their own and other people's assumptions, prejudices and privileges. Some interviewees said it was essential to be humble, reflective, involve listening and learning to bring about these changes, but this could be painful and challenging and not everyone is ready or prepared to engage in these difficult conversations. Some organisations described their efforts to shift the internal culture of their organisations:

> ❝ [Black Lives Matter] created a huge reverberation in the company, so we immediately went into a Black Lives Matter workshop period with a really good woman who knows how to do this stuff, and we're still doing it. It's changed the social fabric of our organisation ❞

CEO, Community development charity, London

Another approach that some organisations have been engaged in has included training to rethink the way that they organise themselves. Further practices that encourage change have involved having an Inclusion Advisory Group – bringing in people with expertise around racial justice, disability, LGBTQIA+ etc, to inform policies and practices, or undertaking continual professional development:

> ❝ [we have got] more involved in educating ourselves on the topics and done bits of CPD courses – all things like that. And then it was like – let's write a policy, let's not copy and paste a policy – let's write it ❞

Senior Manager, Individual and Family Services Charity, North West England

However, some interviewees were concerned that there is a tendency within VCSE organisations, and society more widely, to treat issues relating to EDI more superficially, with a more tick-box approach, than really engaging in more substantial change. Some interviewees used the metaphor of a journey, where working on EDI was not a one-off quick fix but a continual and collective effort to transform how they were doing things.
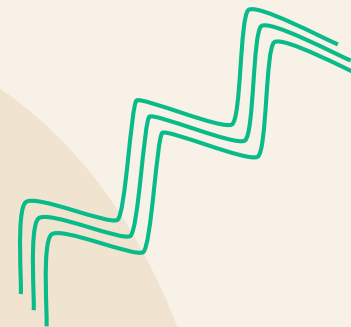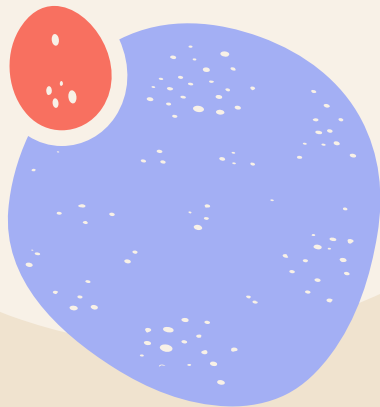
Impact of representing diversity in communities

Another key issue that has grown in prominence has been the diversity of the VCSE sector. A number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic organisational leaders we have spoken to have described experiences of being the only person of colour in meetings, and that they have seen a growing recognition amongst key decision-makers that this does not represent the purpose and mission of many of these organisations or networks. For organisations whose core purpose is around equality, diversity and inclusion, the past year has opened up new opportunities and challenges. The events of the last 15 months have been welcomed to the extent that they have shone a spotlight on areas and issues that they have long campaigned on. For leaders or other central representatives of these organisations this has resulted in increased exposure and prominence in decision-making, but this has come at the cost of time:

> It's changed for me significantly in the sense of, I've become the focus of attention in terms of issues around the impact of the pandemic on minority ethnic groups and also after the George Floyd episode, that whole thing about systemic discrimination, inequality and white privilege.
>
> I think what's happened for me, it's put an added pressure on me because of the need to be out there, talking about the issues … [meaning] my role as chief exec… has had to take a bit of a back seat

CEO, Housing Charity, North West

Some organisational leaders of grassroots community organisations or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic organisations are concerned that there is a tendency towards tokenism or tick-box representation, designed for the 'optical look' rather than deeper engagement.

> Don't just like wheel out, you know, don't just wheel out someone like me and like so you've sorted your ground problems, it doesn't work like that, it needs to be like a genuine seat at the table, doesn't it?

Senior Manager, National Infrastructure Organisation

In particular some interviewees were concerned that they were seen as speaking on behalf of all members of their communities. One respondent commented that they should not be thought of as 'representing all Muslims in the world'. They recognise that representation is a complex issue and needs continual consideration and reflection.

Other organisations who are working or campaigning on a single issue, for instance around disability, have said during the interviews that they have become more aware of the wider diversity issues and intersectionality (people have multiple identities and do not view themselves as belonging solely to one identity) and therefore the need to consider other wider forms of diversity. As a chief executive of a Disability Rights charity put it:

> [I] often find myself round the table with chief execs from other, predominantly the national organisations and I don't see a diversity there. I don't see diversity in almost any aspect whether it's gender or race, or whatever aspect you look at
>
> …
>
> we've got to look at ourselves and say, well, do we match ourselves to our messaging? And if we don't, then we have got to do something about it because at some point we will get called out on it.

CEO, Disability Rights Organisation, England

Hidden forms of exclusion and inequality

The pandemic, particularly the early stages, required quick decisions, so therefore actors, such as funders, government or local authorities, sometimes funded organisations and individuals they already knew, meaning that other, more diverse groups were overlooked. The pandemic, and previous crises like Grenfell, have revealed the lack of connection in some areas between key decision-makers and some areas of the VCSE sector, and the need to build stronger connections.

A few interviewees also pointed to the way that some practices within the sector exclude many organisations. For example, some grassroots projects led by, for instance Gypsy organisations are categorised as 'high risk' whereas a similar project, by another group, are not seen as a risk.

> 66 Why was some new organisations regarded as safe, and yeah, we'll trust them. And others, perhaps representing stigmatised groups, were not trusted the same? 99
>
> **Senior Executive, National Funding Organisation**

A range of biases, from having connections, the right set of trustees, organisational formalisation or capacity to articulate ideas into a standardised format, mean that potential viable projects get squeezed out:

> 66 If you don't provide the support what happens is this person eventually gets worn out, tired and an 8 month decision making process when he's got a four week plan ahead of him. He's not thinking in those terms. So what inevitably happens is that he can't produce, the hurdle you set him he falls over and now he's a failure 99
>
> **Senior Manager, National Charitable Foundation**

A number of funders are addressing these issues by putting their funding strategies through an anti-racist lens and increasing grants to BAME-led organisations. Funders like Friends Provident Foundation in partnership with Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Barrow Cadbury Trust and other trusts and foundations have developed the transparency, accountability and diversity project, an initiative designed to create a system for rating themselves and other funders to address structural issues of power, equity, control of capital and transparency.
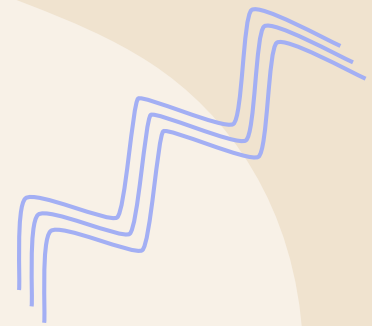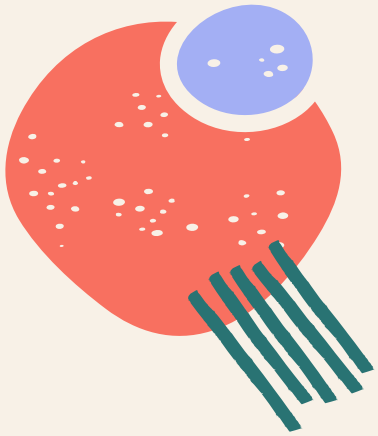
Some signposting and guidance

NCVO Knowhow: Equity, diversity and inclusion resources: https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/organisation/equity-diversity-and-inclusion

NCVO: Equity, diversity and inclusion in volunteering: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/information/equity-diversity-inclusion

NCVO (2020) Time Well Spent: Diversity and Volunteering Research Report, time_well_spent_diversity_and_volunteering_final.pdf (https://publications.ncvo.org.uk/time-well-spent-diversity-and-volunteering/)

ACEVO (2021) Hidden Leaders: Disability leadership in civil society: https://www.acevo.org.uk/reports/hidden-leaders/hidden-leaders-disability-leadership-in-civil-society/

ACEVO (2020) Home Truths: Undoing racism and delivering real diversity in the charity sector, https://www.acevo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACEVO_Voice4Change_home_truths_report_v1.pdf

https://www.acf.org.uk/downloads/ACF_DEI_Thepillarsofstrongerfoundationpractice_final.pdf

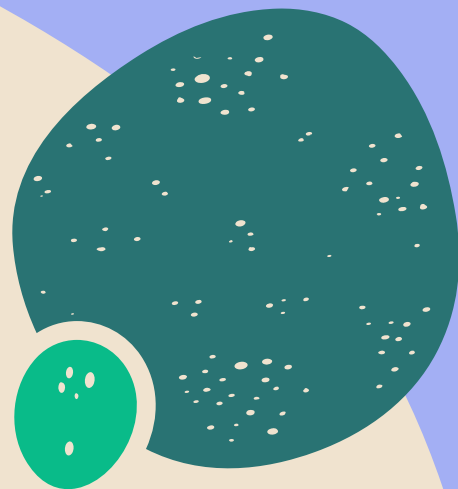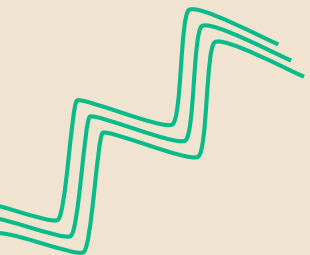https://www.friendsprovidentfoundation.org/collaboration-and-events/accountability-transparency-equality-rating-system/

https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/two-thirds-of-bame-charity-staff-report-experiencing-witnessing-or-hearing-stories-of-racism-in-the-sector.html

The next report

Our next report looks at the use of digital in the VCSE sector, during the pandemic. We are very interested in hearing from your thoughts and experiences around digitalisation and the lessons learned for the future. If you have something to say on this please contact us on CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk
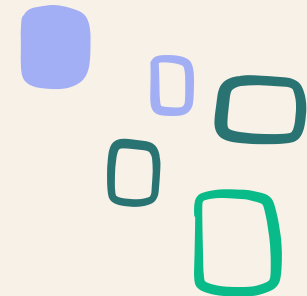
For further information: