

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

August 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.



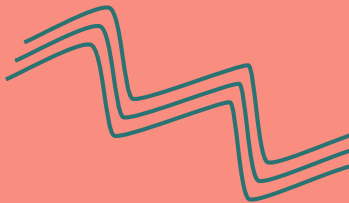
The Voluntary Action Research Group at Sheffield Hallam University

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.



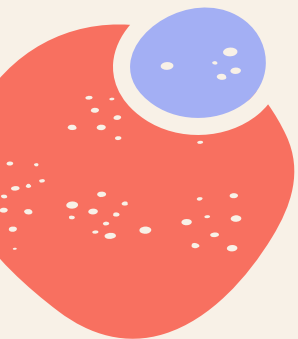
Introduction: Volunteering and digital inclusion

COVID-19, lockdowns, remote working and online activities accelerated the role of digital technology in our daily lives. Many voluntary sector organisations changed how they work and as a result, employees were faced with a need to improve their personal digital skills in order to deliver their work.

Alongside this, a need to move services online, combined with the closure of public IT infrastructure such as community centres and libraries has highlighted how critical the efforts of the VCSE sector have been and continue to be in enabling digital inclusion. Digital poverty has always been an important and complex subject area in the VCSE sector but this became even more important at a time when digital exclusion also meant lost opportunities, such as access to public services, for the UK's most disadvantaged communities.

In this report we look at how organisations in VCSE sector are adapting to the way of working with the use of digital technology and what lessons have been learnt from their experience of digital access in the last year. If you want to get involved, or just find out more please email us at CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk or visit the website bit.ly/3pwF44L.

“ Digital poverty has always been an important and complex subject area in the VCSE sector but this became even more important at a time when digital exclusion also meant lost opportunities. ”



Covid-19 voluntary sector impact barometer, August 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 general theme of digitalisation and learned more about how VCSE organisations have been making use of digital technology, specifically during the pandemic.

This information will also be available online via the [data dashboard](#). The dashboard now includes an analysis of trends across the nine waves of the survey completed so far.

This wave of the survey closed on 26th July. This generated responses from 371 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.

This is the last wave of the barometer survey to use our original questionnaire focusing on operational impacts of Covid-19 and measuring change against a March 2020 baseline. For Wave 10 in August, we will shift the focus of the barometer to the measurement of month-on-month change and adopt a more forward-looking perspective.

The sample

As we saw in the last eight waves of the survey, a wide range of organisation types and a hugely diverse range of activities are represented in our sample. In Wave 9, 68% of the organisations identified as registered charities, 19% indicated that they have limited company status and a total of 5% of participants reported being community interest companies or voluntary associations.

20% of organisations (76) identified themselves as a social enterprise

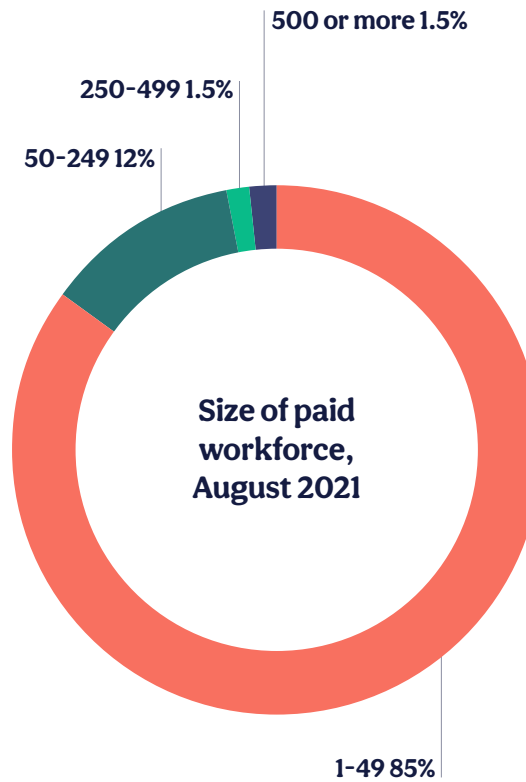
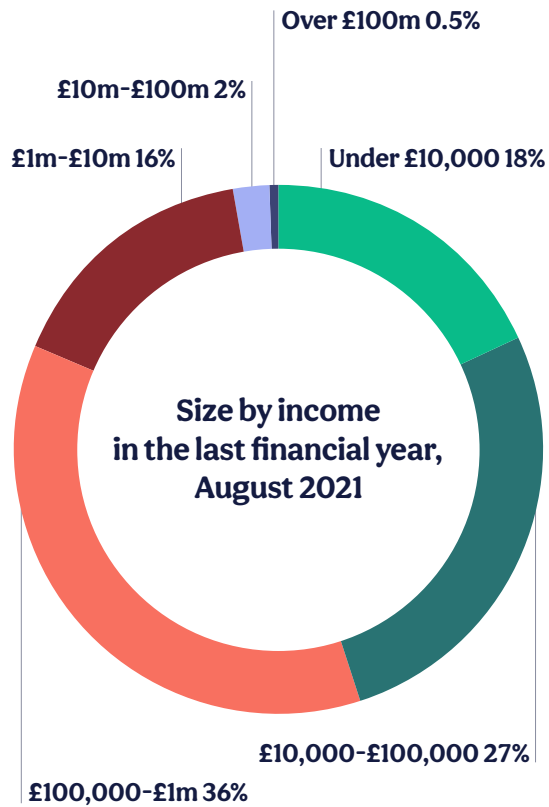
23% (85) describe themselves as age-specific

14% (52) described themselves as a deaf and disabled peoples' organisation

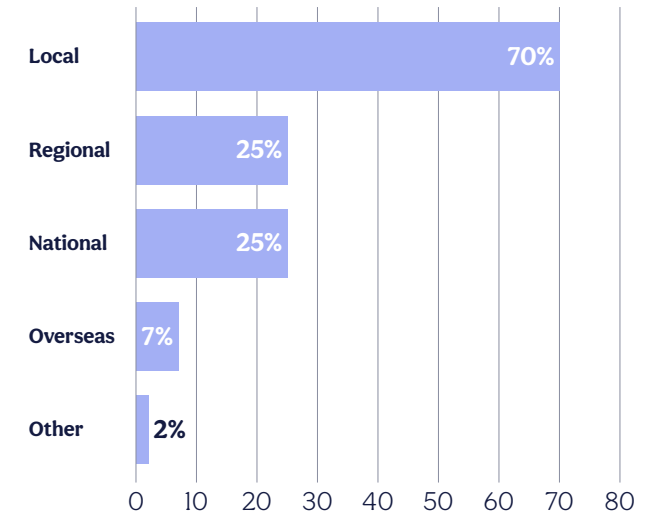
11% (39) described themselves as a BAME organisation

6% (24) described themselves as a women's organisation

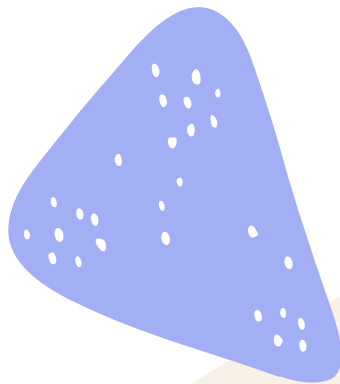
4% (16) described themselves as LGBTIQ+ organisations



At what level does your organisation operate, August 2021



The most common activity types for organisations reported by survey respondents were in health, hospitals and nursing homes (including mental health) (12%), education (9%) and community and economic development (9%).



Headlines

People

371 organisations responded to the survey

74% employ a paid workforce

Finances

27% reported a deteriorating financial position in the last month

26% saw their financial position in the last month improve

45% reported a stable financial position in the last month

59% expect their financial position to remain the same over the next month

17% expect their financial position to deteriorate over the next month

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

Services

27% indicated that their range of services has decreased since March 2020

48% reported an increase in their range of services since the beginning of the pandemic

61% expect an increase in demand for their services over the next month

4% of the respondents are expecting a decrease in demand for their services over the next month

Outlook

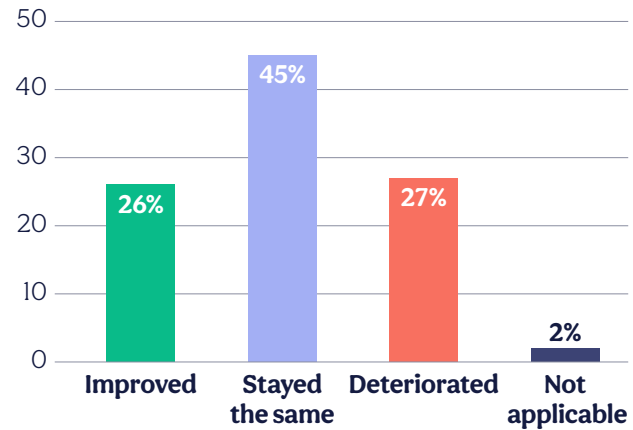
66% of respondents expect Covid-19 to have a moderate or significant negative impact on delivering their objectives next year

9% reported that it was quite likely or very likely that their organisation would no longer be operating next year

Finances and Operations

In Wave 9, 27% of the organisations reported that their financial position has deteriorated in the last month compared to 26% with improved financial position.

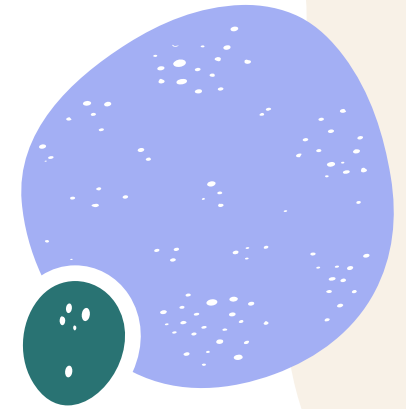
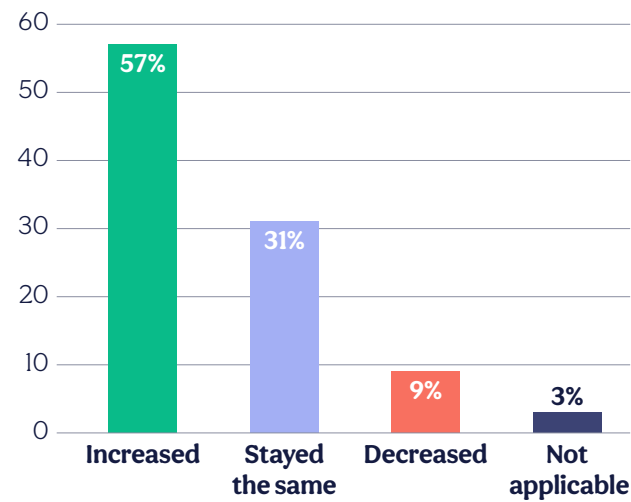
Change of the financial position over the last month, August 2021



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

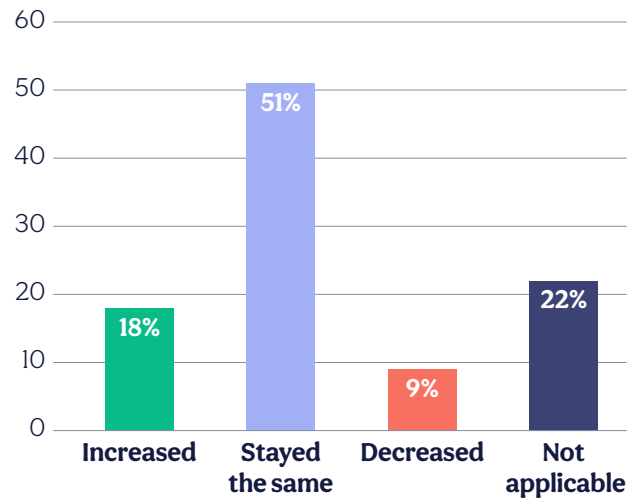
Demand for services over the last month, August 2021



Workforce and Volunteers

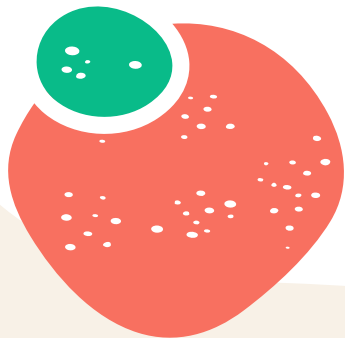
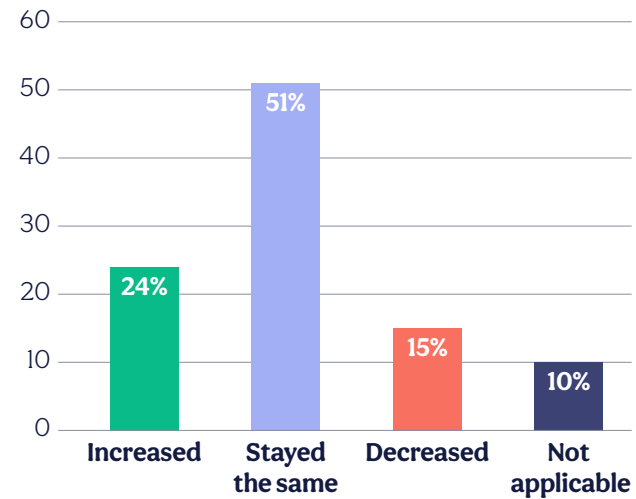
Over the last month, the employment position in the sector is reported as relatively stable, with 51% reporting the same number of paid employees compared to previous months and 18% reporting an increase in the number of their employees which can be linked to the full reopening of the economy.

Paid workforce over the last month, August 2021



In Wave 9, 15% of organisations saw a decrease in number of their volunteers compared to 18% in the previous wave. 24% of the organisations have reported an increase in the number of their volunteers (compared to 23% in the previous month). This increase can also be related to major changes to lockdown rules which have taken effect in England and Scotland.

Volunteers over the last month, August 2021



Digital Technology and COVID-19

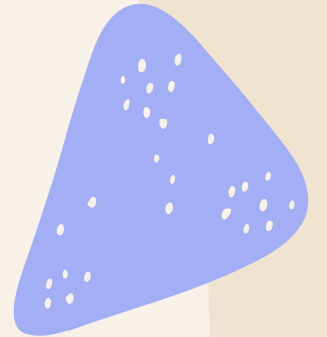
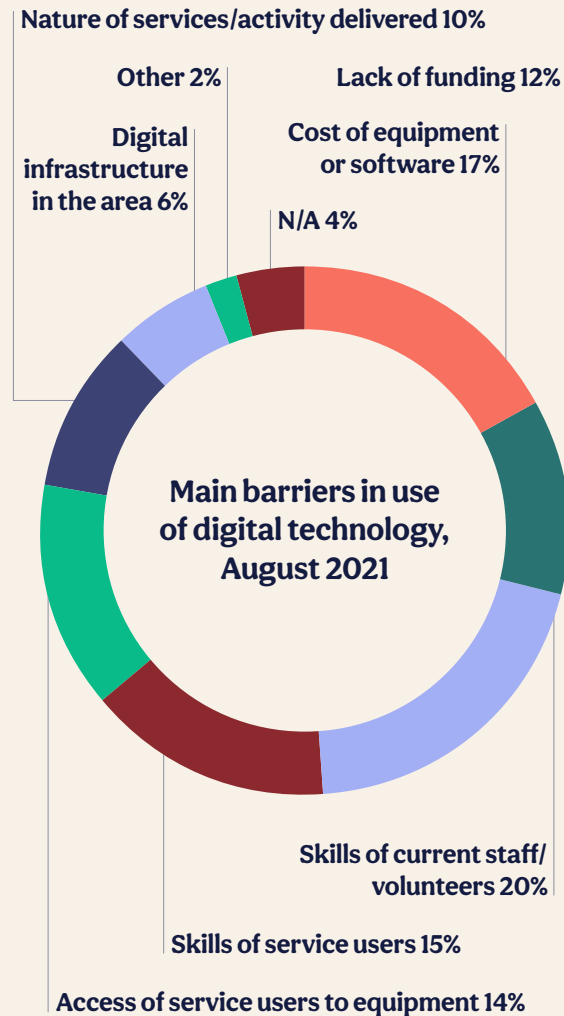
Since March 2020, many organisations have adopted digital approaches to maintain operations, accelerating a transformation that has been underway for years.

The lockdown limitations required many organisations to find new ways for their employees and volunteers to communicate, collaborate, and complete their tasks while working remotely using digital equipment and software. In August 2021, 81% of organisations who participated in our survey mentioned a change in the way that they used digital technology as result of the pandemic. From this group of 349 respondents, 45% reported an improved accessibility of their service as result of their online operation while 17% reported reduced accessibility.

82% of the organisations in our sample have reported using digital technology by their staff members to work or volunteer remotely with only 41% of these organisations using the digital technology before the pandemic.

The level of digital skills required by staff and volunteers has increased in 73% of the organisations including teleconferencing such as Microsoft Teams, Skype or Zoom (17%), email communication (9%), online security (9%) and online transactions (7%).

Despite the considerable increase in use of digital technology, organisations identified the skills of staff, volunteers and service users as well as cost of equipment or software as the main barriers they faced in trying to increase or improve the use of digital technology in organisational operations.



Increasing reach

For some of the organisations we spoke to, the move to digital working and service provision provided a unique opportunity to expand the reach of the services they offered. The way they did this varied between organisations but included: offering a wider geographical reach by opening up provision to new areas; expanding their service opening times often as a result of both demand for services and increased numbers of volunteers; and opening up existing services to new target groups.

“ a lot of the new people who joined livestream channel are not local at all, which is good because it is very good for people to talk to other people from other areas. Because it’s nice to see they all have the same challenges and the same problems, so you know, a problem shared is a problem halved ”

Director, Not for Profit Community Interest Company

Efficiency

Some interviewees discussed how digital working had given their organisation the opportunity to save both time and resources, through cutting costs, improving efficiency, and saving staff travel time and associated costs. Many organisations felt that some level of remote working was likely to stay because of the increased efficiency and decreased costs, but how that might look in the future varied from organisation to organisation. Some plan to fully keep remote working and others plan hybrid working with some time spent in the office. When asked which changes were likely to stay one interviewee told us

“ Zoom meetings rather than getting people together. That’s quite a good thing, I think and for us, that really is quite a major shift in terms of our ability, efficiency and speed. ”

CEO, National Charitable Foundation

A few organisations worked remotely pre-pandemic but even they had made some changes to their working routine, for example one interviewee told us that staff in their organisation always made sure they had their cameras on for video calls whereas before most had joined without video. It was felt that as a result of the isolation many people felt throughout lockdowns, calling with video gave the opportunity for some form of connection. Other organisations talked about their work teams being spread out either across the country or across a region. While they had driven or taken the train to meet regularly pre pandemic, they felt they would use video calls more frequently in the future.

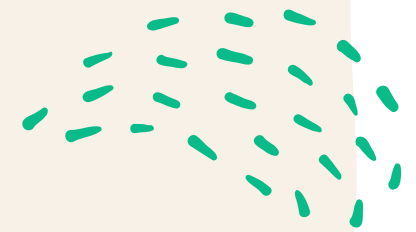
Accessibility

A number of organisations found that moving their services online and working remotely was well received by both service users and staff because they were more accessible, particularly to those with certain disabilities or to those with caring responsibilities. One survey respondent told us

“ Some of the changes we’ve made to our training courses that are now delivered online will be permanent because of the increased accessibility. ”

Barometer Respondent

And this was reflected in interview responses. Therefore, while some organisations may not have previously considered any form of online delivery, they were likely to use some of what they had learnt to make the delivery of their services more accessible in the future.



Accessing new skills

Some organisations greatly benefitted from digital volunteering, and this was especially the case for skills-based volunteering where organisations were able to access volunteers with specific skills that the organisation needed. This was also closely tied to organisations expanding their reach with some smaller organisations widening services much further than they had previously anticipated doing. One organisation who worked to bring together volunteers and organisations told us:

“What that’s meant is sort of a fascinating scenario really, where a small, local charity working with domestic abuse in a valley in Wales, somewhere really remote, can now access a fantastic digital designer from anywhere in the UK, to work on their site.”

CEO, Skills-based Volunteering Charity

The pandemic forced a shift in digital and online volunteering and this was of huge benefit to some organisation who were able to access volunteers across the country rather than needing to recruit locally.



Challenges

Digital exclusion among beneficiaries and volunteers

Digital exclusion had a huge impact on the sector during the pandemic. A [recent report by the Centre for Ageing Better](#) on the pandemic and the digital divide argues that for older people digital exclusion “is not just about being online, it’s also about building skills and confidence” (p3). Some organisations faced wide-ranging challenges engaging online within their communities. For some, this was about the difficulties some groups experienced with accessing their services online either through lack of technology or digital skills, for others it was that their communities did not want to engage online or their services didn’t work with some of the groups who accessed them. For example, one organisation who worked with children and young people where the services they provided for younger children didn’t translate well into a digital format. Other organisations discussed the challenges faced for service users who did not have access to technology and had no internet connection.

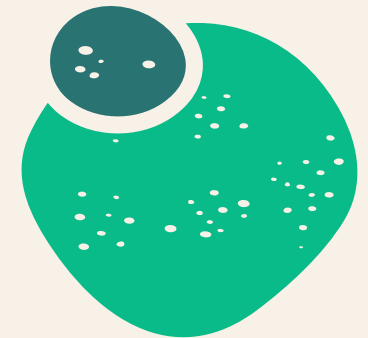
“I think the other thing is it exposed the social gap. So, the haves and have nots. So, the fact that we’ve been providing 170 laptops for young people who haven’t got them, nearly all of them are from minority ethnic backgrounds. So, we’re trying to bridge that divide which has become exposed, and I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

**Director Of Fundraising,
National Charity supporting young people**

“I was explaining to somebody the other day, a lot of our participants don’t even have, they might have phones but they don’t have internet access, they don’t have laptops and so on.”

CEO, Community Regeneration Charity

This gave organisations a range of different challenges around access. For instance, some organisations were forced to stop or significantly reduce their services if they were not able to provide the access or support their service users to develop the skills.



Financial cost of digitalisation

For most organisations, the move to digital working and service provision incurred some financial costs. Those organisations which had been building the infrastructure for digital working in the years or months leading up to the start of the pandemic were in a better position to move to remote working and online provision. Others were able to access emergency funding in order to upgrade systems. But for some organisations it was about doing the best they could with what was available to them under the circumstances.

Need for face-to-face services

While most organisations faced challenges with moving services online, for some organisations this was just not possible or came with significant challenges that essentially altered the nature of the work they were able to do

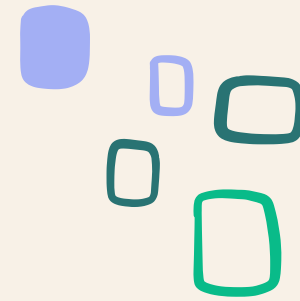
“ To state the obvious, it’s so important because in a situation like that, you need to have a relationship with the person who you’re being an advocate for. No amount of emailing or texting or telephone conversation are quite the same as actually seeing someone face to face and sizing up their reactions as they’re talking to you. Similarly for them, if they can actually see you and they’ve got an idea what you’re like, what you’re doing is far more likely to be effective. ”

Volunteer Advocate, South West England

For other organisations, the nature of their work means that remote working is unlikely to stay. One organisation who offered services in an emotionally challenging area of the sector discussed the challenges of supporting staff, this particular organisation feel that they need to be in the office not only to do their job effectively but to provide each other with the support to do this.

“ It’s how best do you emotionally support your staff in that situation because in normal times, whatever the normal was, they would come back from a visit and come into my office and sit down and maybe cry or talk it through but I have an open door policy and so does my operations manager. So they would walk in the door and there would always be a listening ear and that’s been hard...The boundaries are all clouded because you’ve got this at home with you, whereas I would encourage my staff to dump it before they get in the car and go home. Dump it on me and then go home, but what do you do with all of that when you’re surrounded by it. ”


CEO, Local Independent Charity, East of England





How are organisations addressing these challenges

Access to digital services



The varied ways in which beneficiaries and service users were digitally excluded resulted in individual organisations attempting to address this in different ways. For some beneficiaries this was about reluctance to engage or simply not having the skills to engage digitally, for others it was about limited or lack of access to technology and internet provision. And for some beneficiaries there was a crossover of these challenges. Organisations reported offering devices and in some case training on how to use this to their beneficiaries. While some organisations had spare devices for beneficiaries to use, many needed to buy new technology and funded this in a variety of ways either renegotiating or repurposing grants, using their own cash reserves, or gaining donated equipment.

Some beneficiaries had access to phones and internet but didn't have tablets or laptops, so organisations used social media and free messaging services such as Facebook and WhatsApp to promote services and connect with service users. In addition to this, they were low cost to the organisation and meant that they could share useful information quickly. One interviewee talked about using Facebook live to run an event:

“ We switched very quickly to doing that and they were incredibly successful. If we were having a face-to-face event, we might be lucky to get 100 people in a room whereas using the technology to reach more people we were getting 12,000 and 13,000 views of these discussions with experts. ”

Fundraising Lead, A National Museum in England

However, some organisations found that they were not able to provide their beneficiaries with the skills or the technology they needed to access services. In these instances, they reverted to regular phone calls to check in with service users and to let them know which of their services was running, and if they were able to access them.

Working practices

The pandemic created a dramatic change in working practices in a short space of time. For organisations that already had the digital infrastructure in place there were initial challenges, but these were often overcome once staff and learnt how to use software and developed a remote working routine. Other, often smaller organisations with limited budgets, who did not have the digital infrastructure had to make decisions, in many cases very quickly, about how their organisation would survive and continue to provide services for beneficiaries. Some organisations sought emergency funding to upgrade their technology whereas others made the best use they could of free software. Organisations frequently talked about holding meetings via Zoom and using free messaging services such as WhatsApp to connect with their colleagues.

“ everybody's got very adept at using Zoom. In some ways it has been useful really because it saves a lot of time in travel because we operate across the county so we're a small local charity, but to get from one end to the other takes quite a long time, so you're talking 45, 50 minutes so for people not to have that time of going forwards and backwards, in a way that is beneficial really. ”

Senior Manager, Children's Charity

For many organisations some form of digital working is likely to stay even if this was not part of the organisation previously and free software and platforms has provided an opportunity for them to do this at little or no extra cost to the organisation.

Conclusions

The pandemic created enormous challenges for organisations in the sector in moving to remote working and ensuring beneficiaries could access the services they offered. For some organisations this was done without the technology in place initially and with limited time, resources, and finances to develop this. However, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns also provided some organisations with a unique opportunity to work differently, to try new ideas, and to develop or change their services.

Reflection questions and signposting

Use of digital services

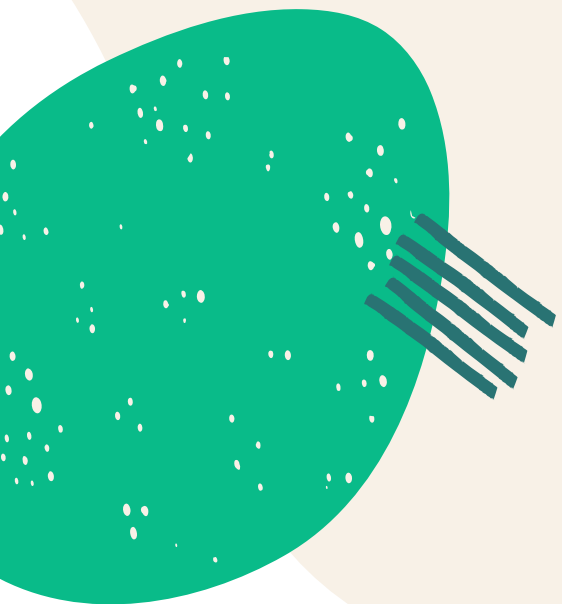
The organisations we spoke to didn't necessarily succeed because they had the digital infrastructure in place to support them. The success of digital relied on both organisations and beneficiaries having some sort of digital access but many organisations used free software and platforms to connect and engage with beneficiaries. Engagement here was as much creativity, knowing and understanding their audience and what would work with them, and using what was available to get their message out there. Some questions to consider:

- What are your aims? What are you trying to achieve? Are they realistic?
- Who are you trying to reach?
- What is the best way to get your message out there – will free software work just as well as paid-for software?
- Will digital services work with your service users – do they have the skills and technology available to access this? If not, can you support your service users to get them?

Skills-based volunteering

A number of organisations found that digital volunteering helped them to find people with specific skills that could help them. Below is a list of resources on skills based and digital volunteering.

- Find a Volunteer Centre on NCVO's directory: <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering/find-a-volunteer-centre>
- NCVO resources on volunteer management and digital/technology: <https://beta.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/>
- Reach Volunteering links volunteers with particular skills with organisations who need them: <https://reachvolunteering.org.uk>
- Do-it: the national volunteering database: <https://do-it.org>
- Pro Bono Economics: volunteer economists who can support with impact evaluation
- NCVO guidance on accessing volunteer legal support: <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/information/legal-advice>
- Media Trust – skills-based volunteering in the media and creative sector: <https://mediatrust.org>
- Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) allows organisations to advertise voluntary roles for accountants: <https://www.icaewvolunteers.com>
- There are a number of organisations which can support with specialist trustee recruitment. See the Charity Excellence Framework for more information: https://www.charityexcellence.co.uk/Home/BlogDetail?Link=Charity_Trustee_Recruitment
- See NCVO's report The Road Ahead 2021 about the sector's operating environment, which can help your organisation plan for the future



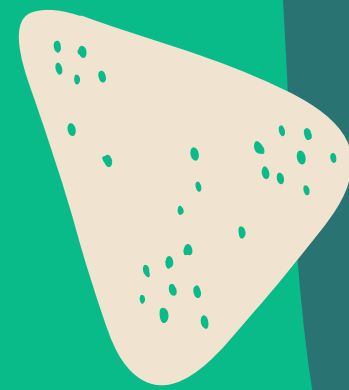
In person working vs remote working

There were a wide range of experiences of remote working for the organisations we spoke to. For most some form of remote or digital working will stay but that doesn't mean that it has to be all remote or all office based. Many organisations are moving towards hybrid working, a mixture of the two, although how this looks in real life varies very much from organisation to organisation

- What do your staff want? Would they prefer to work remotely or be a physical presence in the office?
- What do your beneficiaries need?
- Do specific people need to be in the office at specific times?
- What are the benefits to your organisation of remote working, office working, or hybrid working?
- What are the downside of remote, office, or hybrid working?
- Are there any savings related to changes in working practices?
- Are there costs associated with any changes to working practices?

The next report

Our next report is a reflection on the organisational experience of the pandemic and its associated learning. If you have something to say on this please contact us on CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk



For further information:
CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk



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