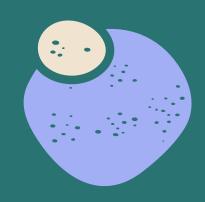


# Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19



December 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

During the pandemic, communities have been supported by a wide range of organisations, groups and volunteers. Voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) infrastructure – the structures and systems for supporting the VCSE sector – has played a key role in the response to Covid-19.

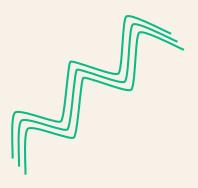
Across the UK, infrastructure organisations have contributed to and helped to co-ordinate the crisis response, mobilised and supported volunteers and provided advice and guidance to VCSE organisations and other agencies. Amongst those responding to our survey, 54% of frontline organisations reported using the services or support provided by infrastructure bodies since March 2020.

This report explores the response of VCSE infrastructure organisations to the pandemic, the roles they have played and the challenges and opportunities they have experienced. Our research is informed by the experiences of organisations across the UK. We recognise that the UK nations use different terminology, have different structures and have varying systems of support for infrastructure organisations. For the purposes of this report VCSE infrastructure organisations are understood as "organisations, networks or hubs that exist to support the VCSE sector, or parts of it, or organisations within it". They may function at a national, regional or local level and can work across the sector or in specific fields (for example, homelessness) or with specific groups or organisations (for example, LGBTIQ+ groups or small organisations) (Macmillan 2020).

Alongside the most recent findings from the monthly barometer survey, this report draws on qualitative interviews with 43 infrastructure organisations including national, regional and local organisations and a wide range of other VCSE organisations from across the UK.

54% of frontline organisations reported using the services or support provided by infrastructure bodies since March 2020.









#### 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, we will be focusing on the role of VCSE infrastructure organisations during the pandemic.

This information will also be available online via the <u>data</u> <u>dashboard</u>. The dashboard now includes an analysis of trends across the 13 waves of the survey completed so far.

Wave 13 of the barometer survey was completed between 8th and 22nd November. This generated responses from 343 organisations across the UK.

#### The sample

As we saw in the previous waves of the survey, a wide range of organisation types and a hugely diverse range of activities are represented in our sample. In Wave 13, 77% of the organisations identified as registered charities, 28% indicated that they have limited company status and a total of 11% of participants reported being community interest companies or voluntary associations.

14% (41) of the respondents describe themselves as infrastructure bodies

24% of organisations (83) identified themselves as a social enterprise

18% (60) describe themselves as age-specific

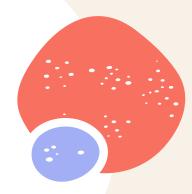
13% (43) described themselves as a deaf and disabled peoples' organisation

11% (38) described themselves as a BAME organisation

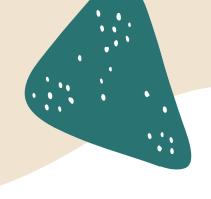
6% (20) described themselves as a women's organisation

5% (16) described themselves as LGBTIQ+ organisations

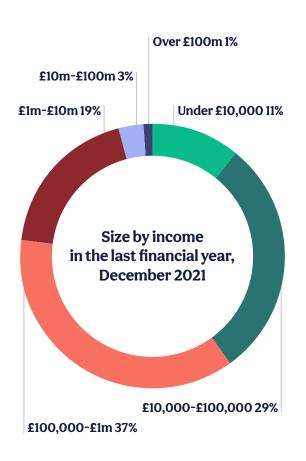


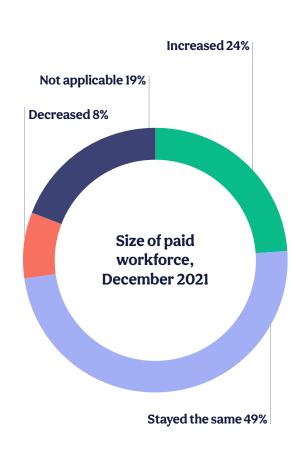




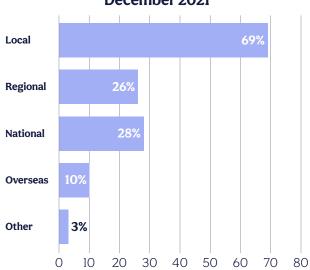








## At what level does your organisation operate? December 2021



The most common activity types for organisations reported by survey respondents were in health, hospitals and nursing homes (including mental health) (14%), community and economic development (9%), umbrella bodies, philanthropic intermediaries and voluntarism promotion (7%), civic, advocacy and political activities (7%) and individual and family (6%).



#### **Headlines**

#### People

343 organisations responded to the survey

255 of these organisations employ paid workforce

#### Finances

23% reported a deteriorating financial position over the last month

26% saw their financial position in the last month improve

**50%** reported a stable financial position in the last month

64% expect their financial position to remain the same over the next month

expect their financial position to deteriorate over the next month

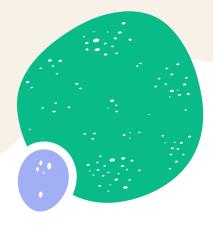
expect their financial position to improve over the next month

#### Services

of the organisations experienced increased demand for their services over the last month

expect increased demand for their services over the next month

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



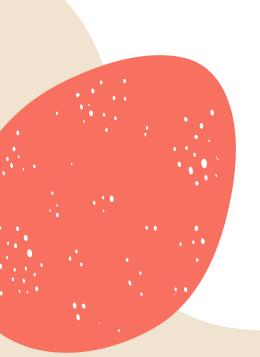








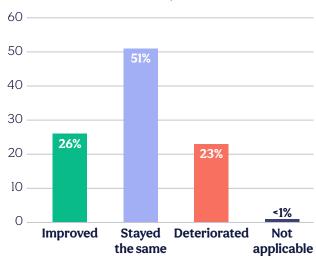




#### **Finances and Operations**

In Wave 13, 23% of the organisations reported that their financial position has deteriorated in the last month compared to 21% in the previous wave. 26% of the organisations reported an improvement in their financial position which is the same as the previous wave.

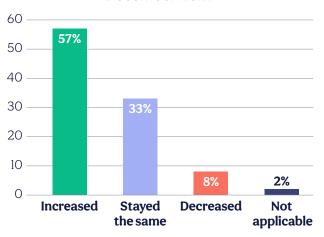
### Change in the financial position over the last month, December 2021



Financial change within the sector was a major theme in our research and different aspects of this were explored in-depth since October 2020 – through this barometer survey, the panel survey and in-depth interviews that were conducted as part of this project.

In November 2021, the experience of 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. Expectations of future demand for services provided by the sector remain extremely strong (56%) – as indeed has been consistently the case through every survey wave over the past year.

#### Demand for services over the last month, December 2021







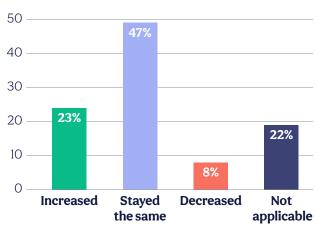


#### **Workforce and Volunteers**

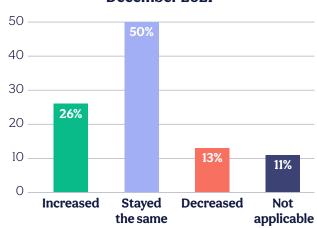
Over the last month, the employment position in the sector is reported as relatively stable, with 47% reporting the same number of paid employees compared to previous months and 23% reporting an increase in the number of their employees.

In Wave 13, 26% of organisations saw an increase in the number of their volunteers and 30% are expecting an increase over the next month.

#### Paid workforce over the last month, December 2021



#### Volunteers over the last month, December 2021







## The Role of Infrastructure Organisations During the Pandemic

In this wave, we explored the relationship between frontline service providing organisations and infrastructure bodies (local, regional, national or sectoral) over the course of the pandemic.

58% of the respondents reported being a member of (or affiliated to) a local, regional, national or sectoral infrastructure body, whereas 29% had no affiliation.

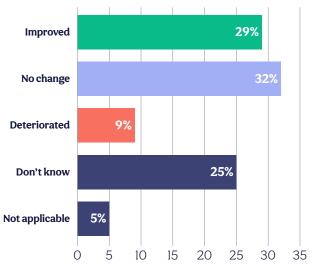
54% of frontline organisations and 5% of infrastructure organisations reported using the services or support provided by infrastructure bodies since March 2020.

Overall, 50% of the frontline organisations and 85% of infrastructure bodies in our sample thought that level of demand for services and support from infrastructure organisations has increased as a result of the pandemic in the areas such as digital technology, developing and promoting new services, new funding and mobilising volunteers.

Over the last month, 66% of the infrastructure organisations who participated in our survey have experienced an increased demand for their services and only 7% have reported a decrease in demand.

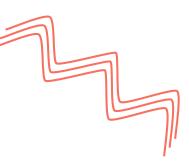
In terms of the relationship between frontline organisations and infrastructure bodies, 29% of the frontline organisations have experienced an improved relationship with infrastructure bodies since March 2020, while 9% have reported a deterioration.

## Relationship between frontline organisations and infrastructure bodies over the course of the pandemic, December 2021



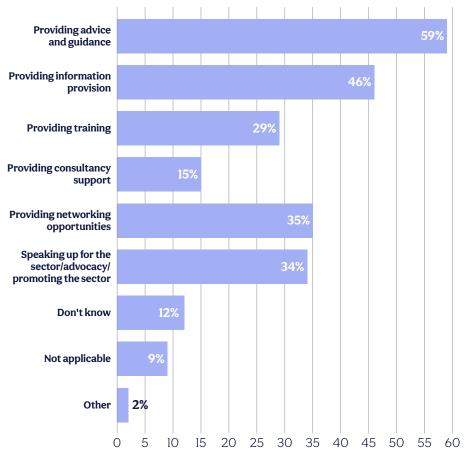






When asked about the most important kinds of support provided by infrastructure bodies during the pandemic, the most common forms cited by frontline organisations were advice and guidance (59%) information provision (46%) and networking opportunities (35%).

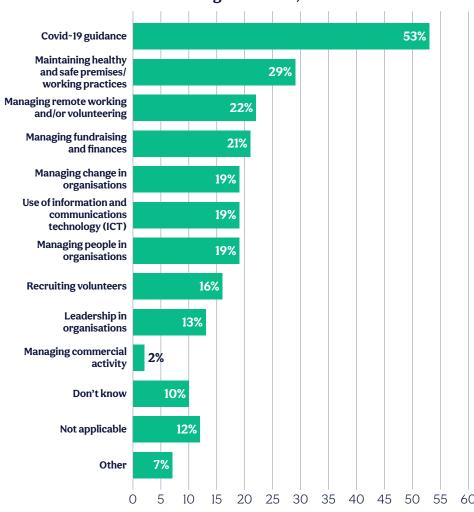
The most important kinds of support provided by infrastructure bodies to frontline organisations, December 2021



(53%), health and safety (29%), remote working and/ or volunteering (22%) and managing fundraising and finances (21%) were among the most important areas that infrastructure bodies have provided to support them.

Frontline organisations reported that Covid-19 guidance

#### The most important areas of support provided by infrastructure bodies to frontline organisations, December 2021



# Infrastructure organisations and their response during the pandemic



During the pandemic, organisations across the VCSE sector have seen a substantial rise in demand for their services, including VCSE infrastructure organisations. Our research suggests that the demands on infrastructure organisations, from their members, wider organisations and communities, grew substantially because of Covid-19.



The demand that our members were experiencing was going through the roof and the research that we did, the very quick surveying of our membership highlighted that. So inevitably the support that was being asked of us was increasing massively and rapidly

CEO, Diversity Advocacy and Support National Infrastructure Organisation, England

The most recent barometer survey suggests that this trend continues with two in three responding infrastructure organisations reporting an increase in demand for services over the last month. In response, many infrastructure organisations during 2020/21 scaled up, pivoted, adapted their services and collaborated to try and meet the needs of the sector, their members and communities.

## The role of infrastructure organisations during the pandemic

Infrastructure organisations responded to the crisis in <u>multiple</u> ways. This reflected in a large part the levels of need in their communities, the type of organisations that they were, and the relationships already established pre-Covid, in particular with local authorities and statutory agencies. The importance of these factors in shaping the response have similarly been identified in other research (<u>McMullan and Macmillan, 2021</u>).

Some infrastructure organisations took the lead in co-ordinating community responses to the pandemic or were heavily involved in strategic decision-making forums and networks, representing the sector and sharing intelligence with government, local authorities and other agencies. Wider research points to how infrastructure organisations "enabled a fast and coordinated response, often providing a vital bridge between local authority staff and services and community organisations and volunteers" (Burchell et al, 2020).



Co-ordinating and mobilising large numbers of volunteers was a key role for some, including recruiting, supporting and deploying volunteers in the emergency response, mass testing and vaccination centres, as well as developing new services involving volunteers such as befriending.

Many infrastructure organisations scaled up their direct support, guidance and advice to members, VCSE organisations and other agencies during the pandemic. Key forms of support included 'translating' government Covid-19 guidance, providing Covid-specific information to the sector, giving advice and support across a wide range of areas and, in some cases, distributing emergency funding to local organisations and groups.

services in [our area], and they have been very visible. I've sought some help from them in terms of trying to negotiate a contract, legal stuff. But they've been great in terms of just I guess representing the sector, being engaged as much as they can in decision making forums

CEO, VCSE Organisation, England

A wide range of networks and forums were facilitated by infrastructure organisations during Covid-19, providing opportunities for VCSE organisations and other agencies to share practice, learning and build relationships and partnerships during the pandemic. VCSE organisations highlighted the benefits of bringing people together through these networks:

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

**Executive Manager, VCSE Organisation, England** 

For some infrastructure organisations, the pandemic created a substantial change in what they did in response to the crisis. For example, some organisations responded by focusing on individual needs rather than organisations or pivoted to new areas of work such as food poverty, recruiting and managing volunteers for vaccination centres or coordinating community responses.

While for some organisations these were temporary shifts to respond to the crisis, others felt this led to more fundamental changes for their organisation or how they were perceived externally:

it also pushed the focus of our work in a slightly different direction and the consequence of doing that is that some of the partners that we worked with pre-Covid, now see our work in a different way, they see it in a different light... We support the organisations that manage volunteers, that's what we view infrastructure to be. But the County's view is that it's all about volunteering, it's all about having a proper passport and a volunteering portal

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

VCSE organisations were predominately positive about the role of infrastructure organisations during Covid; some said their organisation would not have survived the pandemic without them. However, this was not shared by all, and some were critical of infrastructure organisations' response. They cited the need for greater understanding of the needs and pressures on the sector in their area, including for micro and small organisations. There was a call for a stronger voice for the sector to government.

66 Charity sector bodies are simply too soft and not hard hitting enough especially when dealing with UK Government ••

Frontline VCSE Organisation, England







Infrastructure organisations reflected that the pandemic and the way they responded elevated their visibility within their communities and amongst VCSE organisations. Some felt that they had a raised profile amongst policy-makers, although this was not universal.

Many infrastructure organisations said they felt that they were viewed as key partners, "sharing the steering wheel" in the response to the pandemic. In some areas, organisations reported they were given a "seat at the table" in emergency response groups and key decision-making forums for the first time and felt their views and those of the sector were more likely to be listened to and taken on board. Examples were given of local authorities and agencies promoting the sector and infrastructure organisations in ways they never had before:

we're way more recognised than we were before. I think we're recognised for our flexibility, for being adaptable, for moving quickly, for innovating, for being solutions focused. Whereas perhaps before we were the sector that was always moaning that we never have enough money

**Director, Local Infrastructure Organisation, Wales** 

The raised profile also presents challenges for VCSE infrastructure organisations, particularly in terms of having capacity to meet the demands and expectations of members and partners:

We're probably much more influential than we were before, much broader reach. As I say, we're now suddenly expected to be everywhere, which isn't particularly great in a sense because you have a finite capacity... Our capacity to engage with the breadth is quite challenging but it's really positive

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, Scotland

There were also concerns that the influence and voice of infrastructure has started to ebb away. Infrastructure bodies questioned whether the raised profile of their organisations and their work during the pandemic would lead to long term change in support and funding for their own organisations and VCSE infrastructure more widely.









#### **Collaboration and co-ordination**

Collaboration has been an important factor in the sector's wider response to the pandemic. Local infrastructure organisations talked extensively about their closer connections and relationships with local government, health bodies and other statutory agencies. Again, this was not universal and there were examples of poor relationships in some areas and collaboration being too late to emerge.

Infrastructure organisations felt that closer collaboration during Covid-19 enabled a more joined up response, allowed the sector to influence decision-making and helped raise the profile of VCSE infrastructure and the value of the sector more widely. The urgency of the pandemic helped reduce barriers to collaboration which existed prior the pandemic:

we ended up with council staff seconded to us to answer calls... Now, again, that's the sort of partnership working which in a different world would have taken 18 months. It would have been ambitious for us to get their staff and instead they literally offered them and had them on the call within 10 days so kudos to them

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, Scotland

Organisations spoke of the value of new and strengthened relationships between infrastructure organisations and VCSE organisations and groups, including in helping national and local government understand the needs of the sector and those they work with.

More widely, there were examples of infrastructure organisations at the national level coming together to support the sector during the pandemic. They spoke of the "incredibly powerful" role of collaboration to support one another and the sector. Collaborations included the campaigns for more support for the sector #NeverMoreNeeded and #RightNow. Wider research, however, points to the "evident challenges of reaching agreement across different interests, positions and approaches" (Macmillan, 2021).

Many infrastructure organisations we interviewed said they were actively working to further strengthen and maintain partnerships, relationships, and networks they had built up over the pandemic. However, for those who worked more closely with government, there was a feeling that this collaboration was vulnerable and could be easily fractured:

I would say we're probably more visible and I think we were certainly more visible in the likes of the Department of Health, than we would have been. Whether that has any long lasting impact is difficult to tell because the staff in those departments move so quickly

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, Northern Ireland



#### **Income and funding**

The impact of the pandemic on the perceived financial stability of infrastructure organisations has been highly variable. As experienced by the wider sector, many infrastructure organisations saw key income sources dry up with the onset of Covid-19, including income from training, room hire and commissioned services. Some had to make difficult financial decisions including restructures and redundancies.

Organisations commented on the continuing repercussions of the pandemic on their financial positions:

It feels like we've gone back to pre-pandemic but yet really financially we're still in the pandemic. My training income hasn't built up at all. My room hire still hasn't started. Some of our members had financial issues so we lost income. Not anything that hit the bottom line massively but we still lost income from our paid membership. We haven't replaced that money so, for us, we started this year with a deficit position

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

Many infrastructure organisations, however, reported that the pandemic brought fresh funding and support, including from local authorities and grant funders. As highlighted by wider research, this pointed to a "change in the direction of travel" following a decade of disinvestment in VCSE infrastructure (Macmillan 2021), although funding and support for the sector has historically varied between the home nations.

Funders have seen the need for infrastructure. The work that funders have done to make available emergency funds, and support infrastructure bodies, has been invaluable, and it has meant that actually some organisations, including some of the infrastructure organisations, have, in financial terms, done very well, coming out of the period. So, that, I think, is welcome, because it reverses some years of neglect

CEO, UK wide Infrastructure Organisation

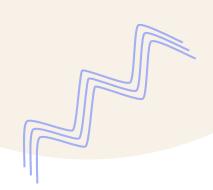
Organisations, however, highlighted that much of the additional funding was short term and there were many concerns about the uncertainty of future funding, in particular long-term funding and support for core costs:

we rely on a pipeline of activity which we have to put in place a year in advance usually because it takes that long to get stuff in place. Covid, then all the funding was about Covid recovery. None of the prevention work we do, none of the outreach work was possible

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England







#### **Innovation**

Infrastructure organisations developed new ways of working and tested new ideas during Covid-19. Organisations talked about the need to come up with solutions quickly to meet the needs of their members and community. In some cases, Covid-19 accelerated plans or forced innovation which prior to Covid-19 was too challenging. This included the development of digital volunteer platforms and different ways of supporting members such as online training:

I would say it's probably made us innovate in a way that we probably wanted to for a while, particularly around the online training. We had thought there was scope to do more with that

CEO, Infrastructure Organisation, Northern Ireland

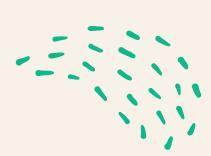
Organisations spoke of how innovation, in particular a shift to digital, widened the reach of their organisation and services, enabling them to support new geographical areas, communities and organisations. However, the challenges of digital were widely recognised, in particular issues of digital exclusion, with some infrastructure organisations focusing efforts on reducing digital inequality through providing community members with equipment and data.

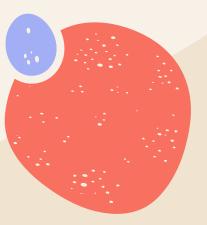
#### **Enablers to the infrastructure response**

There were a wide range of factors that organisations identified as enablers in their response to the pandemic:

- Pre-existing relationships and partnerships helped infrastructure organisations join with others more effectively and more quickly in the response.
- Infrastructure organisations who already had digital infrastructure in place, including remote working or delivery of activities online pre pandemic were better placed to support their members in a move to digital (see more about digital volunteering and inclusion in our previous report).
- Covid 19-support grants, the government's furlough scheme, and one-off funding opportunities for infrastructure were seen as key in enabling organisations to respond to the pandemic and collaborate with others.
- Staff commitment and dedication were cited as key factors in their success over the pandemic.
- Previous experience of dealing with emergency situations, including the Grenfell Fire and the lessons learnt from the response helped to shape infrastructure organisations' approach to Covid-19.







## Barriers for infrastructure organisations

Wider research points to how the sector and VCSE infrastructure was in a challenging position in March 2020. The withdrawal of funding and disinvestment in infrastructure over the last decade has meant that the landscape of support for the sector was fragmented and in some areas partnerships have been eroded away (Brewis et al, 2020 and Macmillan 2020). This meant that some organisations and areas started on the back foot in the response to the pandemic and some infrastructure organisations did not have the capacity to lead the crisis response in their area (see also Burchell et al, 2020)

Alongside this wider backdrop, infrastructure organisations also highlighted other key challenges in their response:

- Staff wellbeing and mental health infrastructure organisations were facing unprecedented levels of need and demand. As reported across the sector, this had consequences for the wellbeing of leaders, staff and volunteers.
- A lack of joined up working poor co-ordination between agencies and organisations at the local level, disconnection between national responses and local response activities, as well as a slow response from government or local agencies was seen to hamper the response in some areas.
- Staff recruitment infrastructure organisations found that recruiting new staff was difficult, making it challenging to meet the demands on their services during the pandemic.

found that I became too accessible for everyone to contact me. So I was actually busier than ever attending meetings online. And that work overload actually impacted negatively on my physical and mental wellbeing

Executive Manager, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

#### Implications for the future

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on the value of VCSE and its key role in the crisis response. There is concern within the sector, however, as to whether the raised profile and resourcing for infrastructure will continue beyond the pandemic. As argued elsewhere, Covid-19 may represent a 'temporary re-enchantment' for infrastructure rather than a fundamental shift in support and investment (Macmillan, 2021).

There is considerable uncertainty about the funding environment. Local infrastructure organisations voiced how vulnerable they felt, and reliant on their local authority, particularly within the current context of looming council budget cuts:

66 I think we're much more conscious that the funding will fold. I'm alright this year. I think my problem will start next year and I think a lot of others will start next year too because the pipeline just isn't there

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

We're massively vulnerable because we are by the nature of the sort of CVS that we are, we have made a conscious decision that we will not compete to deliver services that our members deliver. So we simply do the core CVS functions and therefore, we are massively reliant on local government grants and contracts

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England







Organisations shared their thinking on how they looked to move forward. They spoke of the need to maintain the momentum created by the pandemic and the importance of adapting and innovating to "better meet our mission in new ways". This included "embracing" the opportunities created by technology and the shift to digital ways of working:

Online isn't going to go away whatever happens to the pandemic, and therefore we need to work out how that sits with face to face and what does that mean for staff working and for the delivery of training and events... is there a way of getting the best of both worlds? I think there is but there's a cost to getting the best of both worlds and therefore, do we need to invest in that?

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

Working with others and building on strengthened **collaboration** through the pandemic was identified as a key priority. Infrastructure organisations shared their plans for joint bids and projects with other infrastructure organisations and VCSE organisations, ideas to develop shared web platforms with groups of local infrastructure organisations and plans to work more closely to develop a unified voice to policy makers on key issues.

For some, their success during Covid-19 and the uncertain funding environment has highlighted the importance of assessing and **demonstrating the impact of their organisation** and work. This was seen as a priority to enable their organisation to learn from their activities during Covid-19 and to secure funding:

I think that the opportunities are to use the evidence that we've gathered over the last year to show where we have been effective. So we have some good data ourselves, in terms of demonstrating how we've met the need and developed new partnerships

Senior Manager, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England

There were also examples of infrastructure organisations planning fundamental shifts in direction, moving towards **service delivery** to help them to generate more income and be less reliant on government funding. However, the tensions involved in this approach were widely acknowledged with concerns that this could pull them away from advocacy work and towards more competition with members and users:

Our ethos has always been,
'We're not the provider of services, we're
infrastructure.' Theirs has always been, 'You
have to be a provider of services to be able to
do all the other stuff, so we will go after every
contract despite the fact we're supposed to
be supporting the people that we're taking
the money away from.' But we've been tarred
with the same brush, you know, infrastructure
is bad because it competes. Well, it competes
because it has to

CEO, Local Infrastructure Organisation, England





VCSE organisations reflected on the future of infrastructure and how the pandemic has highlighted the importance of local responses to future crises and infrastructure's role in supporting local organisations going forwards, particularly with the levelling up agenda:

**66** So, actually the role of infrastructure organisations is even more important if we are moving to a recovery model that works for much more local organisations, much more ground up... Because [smaller VCSE organisations often] don't have an HR department, they don't have a marketing department, they don't have a policy team. So, the only way for those small local organisations to really get a voice is to be part of something else that gives them a voice. The only way that they can get advice about something is to find somebody else who can offer them that advice, and often at not a lot of cost, because they don't have a lot of money. So, I think for me, the more we push towards communitybased local solutions, the more important infrastructure organisations become 99

CEO, VCSE Organisation, Scotland

More widely, organisations noted the role that infrastructure needs to play in representing the sector as we move into recovery:

there are influential charities, they are influential charity leaders, people who have played a really helpful and significant role in and around policy, volunteering policy, for example, being one of the ones that's given added prominence by the pandemic. But overall, I am convinced we need to work hard to improve that voice to government

CEO, Infrastructure Organisation, Northern Ireland

#### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Rob Macmillan from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research for his input and feedback on this report.

## Thank you to everyone who has engaged with this project

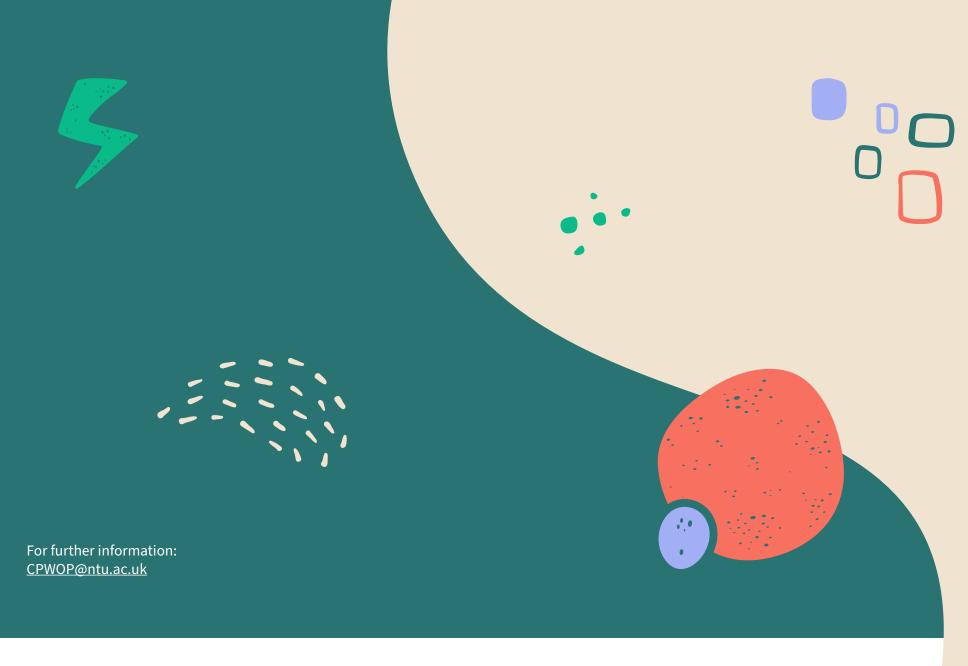
This will be the last of our monthly reports. We would like to thank all of you who responded to the surveys and got involved in the interviews during 2020 and 2021. Your responses and insights have helped us to understand the sector's journey throughout the pandemic. We now have survey findings from thousands of individuals across the sector and in-depth insights from nearly 300 interviews on the impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.

We will be bringing the findings from the research together with a final report launched on the 23rd March 2022, available from <u>The Centre of People, Work, and</u> <u>Organisational Practice | CPWOP</u>

We would love to know your thoughts on these reports – please email us at <u>CPWOP@ntu.ac.uk</u> or if you would like to connect with us in any way.













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