

The impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

Voluntary organisations working in the criminal justice system (CJS) are essential to supporting the government's response to Covid-19 but they face unprecedented challenges in supporting their service users and their staff during this time and ensuring their long-term sustainability.

As the situation developed rapidly, to track the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the voluntary sector in criminal justice Clinks conducted bi-weekly surveys of organisations. The surveys explored three key areas; service delivery; staff and volunteers; and funding.

This briefing provides a summary of the key findings from our fourth survey which had 77 useable responses.¹ Where possible we have drawn out specific quotes from organisations provided arts based provision. While arts organisations are being impacted by Covid-19 in similar ways to the wider criminal justice sector, the criminal justice arts sector also face unique challenges.²

Organisations continue to work tirelessly at adapting their services for remote delivery but can only do so to some extent, with the majority of services that cannot be provided remotely having to stop and with concern amongst organisations about the quality of support they are able to provide reducing. But as the sector turns to remote delivery, reduces service provision and runs at reduced capacity with less volunteers available, the needs of the people that organisations work to support are becoming greater during the pandemic.

There is still much uncertainty amongst the sector about the financial impact of the pandemic but significant about the long term sustainability of organisations and future funding opportunities.

Uptake of financial support provided by the government remains low, as we find for the third time in a row that ineligibility is the greatest barrier preventing organisations from applying for it. We are also concerned that this low use is exacerbated by a lack of clarity about the available support, with organisations reporting that they lack confidence in their understanding of the support being provided by the government.

When looking at furlough in particular, we continue to find that most organisations have only furloughed a few staff or have not used the government job retention scheme at all. This is consistent with the findings of the previous surveys. We will continue to explore this issue with our membership in more depth through our regional network meetings and other engagement forums.

Service delivery

- **Most organisations are able to continue delivering their services to at least some extent remotely.** 55% say they can provide some of their services remotely and 31% say they can provide most of our services remotely.
- **Most services that cannot be delivered remotely have had to stop**, with only 14% are continuing with face-to-face delivery.
- **The majority of organisations are supporting less people during the Covid-19 pandemic.** 61% say that because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of people their organisation supports has decreased slightly or a lot. However 18% say numbers have increased, potentially indicating more pressure on organisations at a time when remote



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delivery is challenging.

- **Organisations feel the needs of the people they work to support have become greater during the Covid-19 pandemic.** 59% agree or strongly agree this is the case. The responses in particular highlight significant concern about the impact of the lockdown on families of people in contact with the criminal justice system, the mental health of those isolated, and the impact of increased difficulties in accessing essential services exacerbated by a lack of technology to access them virtually. The responses also highlight concern about the effectiveness of virtual or remote support for people who are particularly vulnerable at this time.

“Increased vulnerability and a virtual support mechanism can only offer so much support and reassurance to people.” – survey respondent

“Service users are needing more frequent contact with support workers. Focus of work has shifted to crisis work rather than long term goals.” – survey respondent

“Several service users have reported deterioration in mental health, increased anxiety and this has led to more self-harm with some individuals” – survey respondent

“the impact of existing poverty have been harder for people to manage” – survey respondent

Staff and volunteers

Volunteers

- **Organisations continue to report a decrease in the vital support provided by volunteers.** Of the organisations that have volunteers, 50% report that the number of volunteers supporting their organisation had decreased a lot since the Covid-19 pandemic and 17% say the number of volunteers had decreased slightly.

Staff and furlough

- **We continue to find that use of the government job retention scheme remains fairly low.** 32% have not furloughed any of their staff and 40% have furloughed less than half. This finding is consistent with the results of our previous surveys.
- **Of the organisations that are eligible for the government job retention scheme, most do not plan to use it.** 61% say they do not plan to furlough staff or furlough any additional staff if they have already done so for some. However 26% are still not sure whether to use the scheme or furlough more staff and 12% plan to.
- The open responses suggest a number of issues preventing organisations from making more use of the government job retention scheme;
 - the **uncertainty over lockdown** and how long organisations will be prevented from delivering their services;

- **uncertainty over additional financial support** of emergency relief funding for the sector;
- the **source and type of funding** for staff posts is restricting eligibility; and
- the scheme is an all or nothing option. There **must be no work** to be eligible but where services have adapted to an extent for remote delivery, they are able to work but at a reduced capacity.

“We have furloughed staff who cannot work and for whom we receive no external funding (e.g. where we use our reserves to fund services, some apprentices). We are awaiting further information about Covid relief from MOJ post June to decide about furloughing other staff.” – survey respondent

“We are only eligible to furlough staff in a very limited number of areas. To date we have only furloughed some support staff and are taking advice about other services that are not grant funded” - survey respondent

“We’re offering some remote telephony support as part of the contract so believe that furlough isn’t an option” - survey respondent

“Most of our contracts can be delivered however commercial delivery contracts are proving difficult so we may need to furlough more should the lockdown continue.” - survey respondent

As this quote demonstrates, organisations are keeping their position on the government job retention scheme under review and may decide to use it in the future if they cannot deliver core services in the coming months;

“We only have 2 paid staff qualifying for the furlough scheme. They are still working running the organisation day to day so are still being paid. This is being kept under regular review and may need to change in the future if it becomes clear that we will not be able to start delivering services directly until sometime after July” – organisation providing arts-based provision

Funding and financial stability³

- Of the 20 organisations that indicated their organisation has a trading arm or social enterprise element, just over half (11) say this element is no longer able to operate creating a shortfall in funding.

“We anticipate income from trading (30% of our funding) to drop at least 50% and donation (20% of our funding) to drop by 50% as we are unable to host fundraising events” - survey respondent

- **Organisations are using their reserves during this time.** 43% say they have had to use their reserves due to the Covid-19 pandemic and a further 18% were not sure if their organisation had done so. Our state of the sector research has consistently shown specialist criminal justice organisations to have far lower levels of reserves on average – just 1.4 months – than the wider UK voluntary sector which has an average of 6.3 months of reserves.⁴



"We have used up reserves to maintain position. With no ability to earn income, we can only maintain a holding position for so long." – organisation providing arts-based provision

"All funding into the business has stopped. We have no idea when prisons will reopen and we've had to use all our reserves." – survey respondent

- The responses highlight concern amongst organisations that are using their reserves now (and possibly depleting them) to maintain themselves through this crisis point of the pandemic and the long term impact this will have on their ability to remobilise, respond to new opportunities, expand and deliver on their business strategies.

"We are spending much more on staying in touch with people in prison through other means. Drawing down on reserves that were intended to provide for growth means that our strategic plans are on hold whilst we maintain services." – survey respondent

"Our reserves will be greatly depleted by the end of this meaning we will be more conservative in our outlook and less able to be creative in our responses." – organisation providing arts-based provision

"Mainly through having to use some of our reserves to keep any kind of staff/delivery going. Over time it's likely to lead to great instability as its unlikely there will be the funding available that there once was." – organisation providing arts-based provision

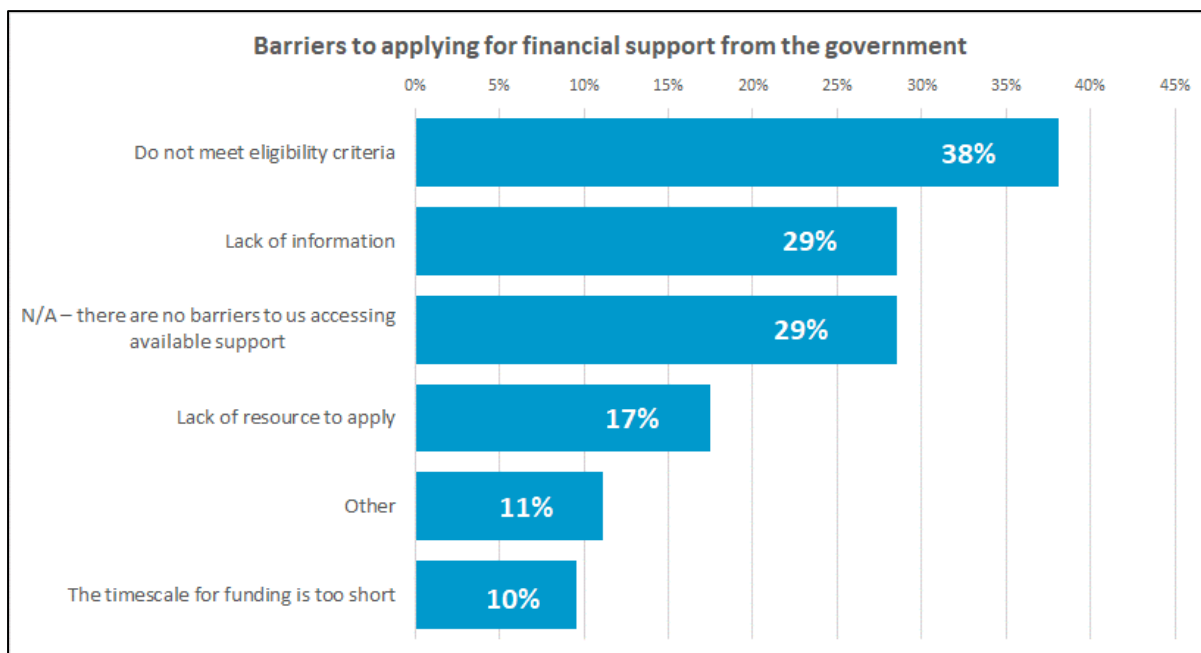
Financial support

- **The majority of respondents have not applied for financial support from the government.** Excluding furlough (see above), when asked if organisations had applied for any other government support, 68% say they had not.
- **Of those who have not applied for financial support from the government, most are not planning to.** 60% do not plan to apply for financial support from the government and 26% are unsure whether to. Only 14% plan to apply for support within the next month.
- **This could be due to a lack of understanding about the financial support available from the government.** 48% say they are only slightly confident in their understanding of the financial support available from government; a further 21% are not very confident in their understanding of the support; and 8% are not confident at all.
- **Eligibility criteria continues to be the largest barrier facing organisations in accessing financial support from the government,** with 38% saying they do not meet the eligibility criteria for support. This is a consistent finding across the past three surveys.

"Don't believe there are other options that would apply to us - we don't trade" – survey respondent



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- **Organisations are applying for emergency funding**, with just over half (51%) saying this is the case and 14% not sure.⁵

“we have been successful with some small funds such as from community foundations, no large funds as of yet. we have also been unsuccessful with some applications”

– survey respondent

Long term sustainability and adaptability

Respondents were given the opportunity to expand on the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on the financial sustainability of organisations.

The responses suggest that there is significant concern amongst organisations about the long term financial implications and the impact of the pandemic on organisation’s sustainability being felt later into the financial year. Organisations in particular cited concern about;

- A **lack of clarity about contracts** in the longer term if organisations are still not able to deliver on them due to social distancing and lockdown measures.
- A **lack of long-term funding opportunities currently available**, with existing opportunities and decisions about grants being put on hold and funds being redirected to emergency funding and front-line services responding to Covid-19.

“many new funding pots now unavailable for application (with the exception of covid relief) there is a great panic. But we know the need for our service will be just as, if not more, required following this pandemic.” – survey respondent



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- Being **unable to deliver on commitments** for example for grants or contracts for longer than originally anticipated and the impact on organisation's ability to remobilise to deliver future projects and services;
- The corresponding impact that will have on long-term **job security for staff**.

"we will not be able to meet the requirements of grants from funders this financial year, so whilst core staff are funded by the charity, many other frontline staff are funded by grants. Their job security is at risk, and yet will be most needed to manage the clients as we begin to return" – survey respondent

As well as their financial position, organisations may face having to **reconsider the their long term business plan** and what this means in the long term for the organisations' objectives and work;

"It leaves us having to trim back plans for development over this year - delayed recruitment (including of key staff) so that we can ensure we have budget to get us to the end of the financial year." – survey respondent

- Engagement by the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance indicates that this is an issue which could particularly be impacting arts organisations. There has been an increased demand for creative resources for prison cells during lockdown, but arts organisations have expressed concern about the effectiveness of adapting provision for in-cell activity where services are designed to be interactive and collaborative, and the potentially long term implications of relying on arts to be delivered in this way. The following survey response reinforces this concern;

"We are concerned about the longer term impact on organisations providing group arts activities in prisons ... Yes, we can all continue to provide activity packs, CDs, correspond, etc keeping contact and visibility with service users and prison staff but it is not why we exist and not what we think really makes the difference. ... So as well as thinking about money we are also being forced to rethink what the organisation might be doing in a few months time ..."
– organisation providing arts-based provision

¹ The response rate is lower than the previous three surveys. Therefore we would recommend more caution in interpreting these findings and generalising them to the criminal justice voluntary sector as a whole.

² We had 10 responses from organisations providing arts-based provision. Due to the low response rate, for this survey we are unable to draw out specific trends for the criminal justice arts sector. However engagement by the National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance with over 100 members in its network has highlighted that arts organisations delivering in prisons face unique barriers to their services.

³ Response rate to funding questions fell to 65.

⁴ Clinks (2019) *State of the sector*. Available at: <https://www.clinks.org/publication/state-sector-2019> [accessed 4th May 2020].

⁵ Of those only 18 tell us they have been successful in their application. Five confirm they have not been successful and nine are not sure or awaiting outcome of the application still.