

Befriending Networks

Whilst we acknowledge that funding was made available for the 3rd Sector, in reality the time it took for funds to filter down to the organisations who were delivering services on the ground took far too long. One lesson which could be learnt is that the voluntary sector already had in place the people, the infrastructure and the experience at handling voluntary roles, a fact which took a long time to acknowledge in terms of support and funding from the Government. It is disappointing that from the headline £750 million for the VCSE sector only £5 million was allocated to the DCMS initially to specifically tackle loneliness.

The initial allocation to the DCMS of £5million for the Loneliness fund went to just 8 large organisations, precluding the thousands of small neighbourhood community groups from accessing the funds. The 8 organisations (English Football, SSAFA, Sense, Alzheimer's Society, Red Cross, Home Start, Mind and Carers Trust) do fantastic and worthwhile work, however, how much of the average £500,000 grants were actually making a difference at ground level in local neighbourhoods? Our members report that front line, ground level reach could have been much wider, if a larger number of smaller organisations and charities locally based were awarded smaller grants eg £10,000-£20,000.

Another issue which was brought to our attention as an intermediary organisation is that to access certain grants, groups had to be a registered charity and in order to do this they needed to set up a constitution and bank accounts. We have heard of problems setting up bank accounts due to branches being closed and practical and legal reasons meaning new accounts could not be opened, precluding accessibility to funding.

On 23rd November a further £7.5 million was announced by the DCMS which sounded encouraging for our sector, however enthusiasm was short lived on seeing this funding was split just 3 ways - £5 million to the Arts Council of which £3.5 million to The Reading Agency, £2 million to National Lottery and £500,000 to the Audio Content Fund. Whilst the Lottery funding was specifically for micro grants, this came 8 months after the first lockdown and the short turnaround for applications and spending of the funds, was a barrier to some projects which could have benefited much earlier in the pandemic. The £3.5 million for the Reading Agency seemed disproportionate particularly as the money needed to be spent by 31st March 2021 meaning a very quick expansion, rollout and turnaround of their services. This funding pot could have returned a higher impact had it been spread more fairly. As an intermediary organisation, a fraction of this funding would have enabled us to support over 500 befriending projects through our established infrastructure, however we were not informed of any application process being announced in relation to this money.

The fact that DCMS held back £20 million to distribute over the Winter (source National Audit Office) seems to have resulted in this last minute allocation of funds. From the outside this appears ill thought through distribution of essential funds and an underspend in

the Youth Covid-19 Support Fund and the Loneliness Fund which could/should have been doing valuable work earlier in the year.

Many organisations have diversified their funding over the last few years; including grants, donations and fundraised income all of which are at risk and will become much harder to obtain, placing many smaller charities at risk. Larger charities who rely on legacies, corporate sponsorship and high-profile fundraising activities are unfortunately no less at risk. We have already heard about half a dozen befriending projects which have closed or are under threat of closure, at a time when they are most needed. Many of these have core funding from local authorities which have been severely stretched during the pandemic and will be into the future. The sad truth is that for each befriending service that closes hundreds of people are left with no support and as research has shown, loneliness and social isolation can have a negative impact on an individual's mental, physical and emotional wellbeing. The result will be more people turning to already stretched health and social care services.

The recent findings of the National Audit Office that the Government Coronavirus Support Fund which was supposed to provide £310m of emergency help to voluntary sector organisations, was reduced to less than £200m is disappointing. Additionally, DCMS identified 76 fraudulent applications, 70 of which resulted in funding awards totalling £614,000 and therefore being awarded inappropriately. This money could have made a significant difference to smaller charities and ultimately people at risk of loneliness and isolation during the pandemic.

Additional points relating to the befriending sector in particular with regards to funding:

- Some projects have been able to access welcome short-term funding to support a Covid response but as this money stops (and volunteers return to work) how do they maintain the many matches/connections that have been established? Ending lockdown for many of people these projects support won't end their isolation. They will need ongoing support to build confidence and skills to reconnect, where this may be possible. For many Covid has exacerbated their situation and increased the needs of the communities they support.
- More generally the 3rd sector is key part of civil society and as the pandemic has proved a vital part in maintaining communities, without it many statutory services wouldn't have been able to cope. It is therefore vital that its role is recognised and its funding embedded in Government department spending. Short term pockets of funding are unsustainable and ineffective proper 3 – 5year funding needs to be put in place.
- The role of infrastructure/intermediaries is a key aspect of supporting the 3rd sector and communities to be able to respond and deliver in times of crisis but also as part of the recovery plan. Organisations such as Befriending Networks equally therefore need recognition and funding to ensure we can be/exist to support organisations and communities to reach those most in need.

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