

**Written evidence submitted by Dr Jordan Vieira, Mr Connor Watt, Ms Nikita Simpson and Professor Laura Bear, LSE Covid and Care Research Group**

### **Background**

This research was conducted by the Covid and Care Research Group, hosted by the London School of Economics (LSE) Department of Anthropology and funded through a grant from the LSE. Our research group employs ethnographic methods in order to better understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on disadvantaged households and communities across the UK. Understanding the multiple and intersecting forms of existing and new disadvantages that groups face is critical to the development of policy that is inclusive and meets the density and variety of needs of people who live at the intersection of different forms of vulnerability. Our research group has conducted interviews since March 2020 with community leaders, community groups, and new associations of vulnerable people across different locations to gain insights into these issues and to generate policy solutions and support local community initiatives. Insights for this call for evidence are drawn from case studies in Hackney and Ealing that examine the relationships between Local Authority and voluntary community organisations since the start of the pandemic.

### **Key Findings**

- There is **substantial demand** from Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) organisations to **receive core funding for the long-term sustainability** of operations.
- Currently, common **stipulations** that funding be used for quantifiable ‘high-impact’ short-term projects **are creating sporadic income flows that result in severe precarity and closures**.
- **Funding is generally granted to well-established organisations at the expense of newer, smaller, and less formal groups** – particularly grassroots and organisations composed of minorities and underserved groups – as there is a lack of governance structures or networking capabilities to access funding schemes.
- **Tensions often exist** between the more established organisations and the smaller and newer organisations that can better reach people who are reluctant to actively seek support. This environment can create **unhealthy competition and decreased cooperation** as the pandemic continues, as **groups vie for the same limited funding pools**.
- **Structural bias is created by the specific requirements and Monitoring and Evaluation (M+Es)** of funding bodies, in addition to **unconscious bias within the Local Authority (LA)** funding panels as a result of pre-existing relationships with the larger, more established VCS organisations.

- There is a widespread sense that such **M+E frameworks fail to capture the affective and social value** that VCS organisations provide over private provision.
- **Embedded umbrella groups** such as the Southall Community Alliance and Hackney Council for Voluntary Service (HCVS) **have been instrumental in channelling funds to small grassroots organisations**. This is due to their willingness and ability to do the relational work of advocating for these ecosystems of support and ensuring even provision across groups.
- **Organisations have had to diversify their funding streams** beyond LA grant schemes to seek funding from a variety of sources: corporations with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) components, wealthy individuals, solicitations for community support through residential leaflet distribution, London Community Response, East London Foundation, and the Thames North Trust.
- **Black and Asian minority groups in particular are struggling to receive funds**. Even in instances when a relationship with a LA officer has been established and they have received modest funding, there are still **issues around building capacity and infrastructure in order to meet demand and sustain operations**.
- **Different groups contest funding panel assumptions about what constitutes ‘frontline’ and ‘urgent’ need**. They argue, for example, that services which address acute mental health concerns should in some cases be prioritized over food provision.
- There are concerns amongst VCS groups that **funding is not ‘anchored’** within a systematic scheme of support, but rather **sporadic and ‘ad hoc’**.
- Particular **language/vocabulary is missing** from some small organisations in order **to better engage the funding process** and write according to what funders are looking for.

## Context and Case Studies

### *Pre-pandemic context and aggravating factors*

- **Frequent changes** to central government funding and bureaucratic organisation, especially around public health, **has been disruptive to local social infrastructures** in the past decade.
- The varying constellations of NHS, LA and VCS provision of public health care have seen people cycle through different roles, **without being able to institute lasting change**.
- **The starvation of this infrastructure of funds** since 2010 has **damaged relationships** and partnerships, leaving **organisations feeling antipathy toward each other and particularly toward the LA**; and hollowing out service provision.
- The increased oversight of procurement processes and complex tendering meant **only organisations with the governance capacity and existing networks were able to access funds from the LA**.
- The result of the above is a very **fragile network of relationships** that entered into the Covid-19 response.

- There is a sense that **some communities** are 'hard to reach' because they **lack sufficient social infrastructure already in place**.
- Interlocutors have described a 'chicken-and-egg' situation – i.e., the **older, more established, and larger organisations are more likely to receive more funding** and sustain themselves at the expense of newer small to medium organisations.
- There is substantial frustration among the newer, **smaller organisations** that although they **operate on 'fresher' models** that include diverse forms of reaching 'hard-to-reach' people (e.g. face-to-face contact, WhatsApp messaging), they nevertheless **experience the brunt of funding shortfalls**.

#### *Ealing case study*

In Ealing, the LA response to the pandemic in 'Ealing Together' was a watershed moment for community and voluntary organisations. **The provision of unrestricted funds and the suspension of procurement processes left organisations feeling 'liberated'**, able to 'get the job done' to 'form new collaborations and partnerships' and to successfully layer care. The alignment around a common set of objectives and strong communication networks, such as Connect Against Covid: Help Everyone (CACHE) Network, and other forums have been instrumental. A multitude of such partnerships emerged in this moment that would not have been possible before, bringing together statutory care providers and community organisations.

**Organisations that address the needs of minority groups**, such as South Asian and Somali communities, are **often perceived as 'informalised' and lacking in the 'knowledge'** to be able to access funds and support from key VCS and LA organisations. There is a sense that **if they were given support and capacity training** – for instance in launching websites, establishing governance structures and audited accounts – **they would be better equipped to access funding**.

#### *Hackney case study*

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, **Hackney was already well served by a dense network** of voluntary and community groups that had grown in response to need arising from significant cutbacks to statutory services since 2010. In the early stages of the pandemic, Hackney Council, in collaboration with various umbrella organisations, repurposed a **borough-wide programme called 'Neighbourhood Conversations' to foster connectivity between these community/voluntary groups and statutory service providers** with the aim of increasing assessment and provision capabilities generally.

The aforementioned **tensions between well-established organisations and smaller groups in relation to funding bids is prevalent in Hackney**. In order to address this, the Council trialled a **'consortia funding'** approach with the Food Network (an alliance of food provision bodies). A number of organisations were **encouraged to collaborate on funding applications, thereby sharing the capacity and expertise of the larger groups with the smaller**, and allowing the larger organisations to achieve greater reach through the more fine-scale networks of the smaller organisations. Although beneficial in terms of allowing the smaller organisations access to administrative infrastructures and extensive knowledge which in turn increased the likelihood of winning funding bids, there was **little incentive for the larger organisations who found the process a drain on resources**, and who were also **reluctant to share best practices**.

Another prominent issue in Hackney was the **prioritisation of emergency provision activity**, namely food provision programmes, **at the expense of support which targeted longer-term and structural issues** – e.g. mental health support charities, or programmes aimed at alleviating exclusion of young BAME people. Although there was an appreciation that greater support for those organisations providing basic provisions was necessary at the onset of the pandemic, **the emergence of various additional crises becomes a major risk without ongoing support for a much wider range of community support services.**

### Policy Recommendations

- Funders and authorities need to **shift the norm of impact evaluation** from predominantly quantitative M+E frameworks **to flexible measures and participatory methods.**
- Such M+Es should **trust the qualitative narratives of lived experience** from those receiving care and the grassroots organisations who provide important support but find it difficult to measure impact in the ways that are demanded at present.
- The above **frameworks should be flexible and allow organisations to innovate**, especially within the rapidly evolving situation, so that more funding can be made available to grassroots and less formal organisations.
- Following from the above, **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) need to be modified to ensure that they are actually serving the most vulnerable communities** rather than setting arbitrary targets.
- LAs should **create enhanced support structures** that help grassroots and less formal organisations obtain funding.
- **Provision of ‘core funding’ with less stipulations is essential**, rather than project-based grants. Such funding would greatly increase the capacity and durability of many voluntary and community organisations.
- Central government and LAs should **recognise the vital work that new and small- to medium-sized organisations are doing** and appreciate the fact that they are reaching the ‘hardest to reach people’. Funding allocation from central government to LAs should accordingly be **restructured to provide long-term sustainability** beyond a few years.
- The **consortia bidding model**, exemplified in the Hackney case study, has obvious benefits in alleviating discrepancies in allocation of funding. However, it would require rethinking in order to achieve better uptake by those organisations with more resources – either by **developing incentives to attract larger groups** or **developing mechanisms** whereby they are compelled **to engage in resource-sharing and capacity support** as part of funding allocation.
- **Feedback is vital for funding applications.** A simple **standard evaluation checklist**, provided by LA funding panels, of what requirements had been met and what needed improvement, would take only one minute to complete and would be valuable for the organisation for future applications.

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