

Written evidence submitted by the National Lottery Community Fund

The National Lottery Community Fund: How COVID-19 is having an immediate impact on the charity sector

Introduction

We know that many charities and community organisations across the UK are facing unprecedented challenges as a result of COVID-19.

People and communities are responding to this crisis in inspiring and humbling ways. At The National Lottery Community Fund we are privileged to work with so many charities and voluntary organisations who are stepping up to support people in this crisis, and playing a vital role in helping others through a very challenging time.

Whether through volunteering, addressing loneliness and isolation, helping the shielded and elderly or maintaining support for the most vulnerable in society, it is vital that these services are supported to continue.

These charities are facing unprecedented pressures and demand - at a time when the challenges to delivery are multiple, complex and in some cases expose staff to additional risk as they support vulnerable people across the UK

Like most other sectors, the charity and community sector is in unknown territory. However, it is clear that COVID-19 will disrupt usual patterns of community resilience for months and years to come. We have heard a clear and consistent set of pressing issues that need to be addressed immediately. Some of these speak to differences in the demand organisations are trying to meet, others to challenges being faced within the organisations themselves.

We are determined to support the sector we serve and ensure that organisations can continue to provide the care needed by people and communities across the nation in this time of crisis.

The National Lottery Community Fund

- The National Lottery Community Fund is the largest funder of community activity in the UK, awarding over £600 million a year. 27,000 projects we funded were active in 2019.
- All funding decisions we make for the next six months will prioritise getting funding to groups best placed to support their communities at this vital time focusing initially on existing grant-holders and applicants. In addition, we will accelerate the cash part of this funding as much as we can, so that we can get money to where it needs to be.
- On 8th April the Chancellor announced that £370m would be allocated for smaller charities - with £310m to be distributed across England by us, The National Lottery Community Fund, and the remainder to be distributed in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales using the Barnett formula, working with

Government and others to ensure these new funds have the biggest possible impact in communities.

- We are now urgently discussing with government details of how the funding will be made available and will provide further information as soon as we are able to do so.
- This submission shares what we have learned so far, from a huge range of discussions we have been having, and continue to have, with key stakeholders and organisations across the sector. In response to the questions set by the committee this response will focus on the immediate impact on the voluntary and community sector from COVID-19 and how organisations are beginning to respond to challenges and to the wider crisis.

1. Key Messages

- The National Lottery Community Fund is making a major contribution to the national effort to combat the effects of COVID-19. All National Lottery Distributors are responding at pace to identify needs in the sectors they support, and to respond flexibly and swiftly to meet those needs where they can.
- At The National Lottery Community Fund we have committed to honouring our existing commitments while still getting money to the groups best placed to support their communities at this vital time.
- However, we recognise, that like any funder, requests for funding will always be greater than the resources available. That is a dynamic that is intensified in the current context.
- What is known is that, COVID-19 will disrupt usual patterns of community resilience for months to come.
- The crisis is having an immediate and dramatic impact on charities' ability to deliver services to the community.
- The loss of an active base of volunteers aged over 70 due to self-isolation is causing some organisations, especially food banks, to close their doors when their services are needed the most.
- Large numbers of grant holders are fearful for their organisations' immediate survival, but furloughing staff feels a difficult choice to make when demand for services is high.
- Greater coordination of activity is important, however the capacity of local infrastructure organisations to support this is very variable and there are real fears about the potential collapse of local civic infrastructure.
- Many charities are adapting quickly and creatively to online and remote delivery, others are realigning their energy and resource to support their wider community's response.
- Charities are undergoing digital transformation that would ordinarily take months or years, in a matter of days. Tackling inequality in access to digital technology remains a fundamental concern.
- Whilst triggering unprecedented challenge, this crisis may also result in long term opportunities to rebuild civil society with a renewed national consciousness that is more people centred than ever before.

2. Summary of challenges facing the sector

Demand challenges

- Increasing numbers of people require help with fundamental needs such as food, rent or sudden unsustainable debt. Organisations are struggling to meet demand.
- Social isolation and remote working are presenting significant challenges to delivery of activity, whether pre-existing, increased or introduced due to the current crisis. For instance, it has become more difficult to:
 - provide hot food/food parcels
 - allocate destitution/hardship payments
 - reach and support the most vulnerable and socially isolated people, including homeless people, people facing increased risk of domestic and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol users, people with mental health issues, members of some BAME communities, sex workers, refugees and asylum seekers, and people with long-term or life-limiting conditions
- The strong correlation between economic conditions and life chances are already well known. COVID 19 is already raising demands for charitable services and with long-term economic impact expected to be huge, this demand may not curtail, even once the crisis has passed.

Organisational challenges

- Most organisations told us about the utmost importance of meeting immediate needs – the safety of people, saving lives, maintaining vital services and being able to reassure about organisational continuity plans.
- **Financial liquidity** is a major issue.
 - Income has been lost from most sources at once: cancelled or postponed fundraising events; regular revenue from things like venue hire, training and events; charity shop income.
 - Many organisations are facing increased demand and need to scale up their activity but are struggling to pay staff to do so. The furlough scheme offered by the government may not be an appropriate option where service provision is deemed critical.
 - Although we can't yet quantify it, a significant number of our grant holders have had to stand down staff and close or scale back essential services. Many organisations have closed their premises altogether.
- Most organisations are **doing what they can**: approaching their response on a day-to-day basis, and in dealing with the crisis at hand, finding it hard to engage in longer term thinking and planning as the need is so present and urgent.
 - Even larger charities have told us they feel they have no choice but to 'make it up as they go along' and worry about usual processes later, whilst recognising that some must remain rigorous, particularly safeguarding, data protection and GDPR compliance, and cash management.
- **Loss of large numbers of volunteers** is having a negative effect on

organisations' ability to deliver services. Many new volunteers are signing up directly to schemes such as those launched by the NHS or by community groups, but this brings its own challenges with the need to make sure they are inducted, trained, managed and supported through this very difficult and uncertain time.

- Having to undergo **rapid digital transformation**, in a matter of days and weeks rather than months and years, due to the immediate need to work remotely. This is raising organisations' expenditure, presenting further new challenges, and is traumatic both for organisations themselves and their beneficiaries
- Almost all the organisations we spoke to have reported concerns about the wellbeing of staff and volunteers and the ability to ensure working practices are safe in the current context.

3. The National Lottery Community Fund's response

Charities, community organisations and volunteers are finding themselves at the heart of emergency responses to COVID-19 and we are heartened to see the energy and support being deployed across the UK.

We have been listening to our network of grant holders, partners and stakeholders to understand how they are already responding to COVID-19 and what more we can do to support them in the short and longer term.

Our offices in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all provided insight into the specific problems charities and volunteer organisations are finding in those regions.

The majority of our grant holders are worried about financial liquidity. The National Lottery Community Fund's top priority is to keep money flowing to support people, communities and organisations. Following government guidance, we have asked our staff to work from home and they are all equipped to do so. Our plan remains to continue to deliver our services to applicants, grant holders and communities across the UK as normally as we can. So far we have been able to do this and continue to make payments to grant holders on schedule.

Many of the organisations we fund are facing increasing challenges as a result of COVID-19. We will support them as far as is possible at this difficult time, but we - alongside our fellow National Lottery distributors recognise, requests for funding will always be greater than the resources available. That is a dynamic that is intensified in the current context.

Our initial support work

We are offering flexibility to our current grant holders to enable them to focus on what is right for their communities, and additional funding to support communities through this crisis. All funding decisions we make for the next six months will prioritise getting funding to groups best placed to support their communities at this vital time, focusing initially on existing grant-holders and applicants.

To find out more about the support needed, in the week beginning 16th March we completed over 60 interviews with existing grant holders, other organisations and individuals from across the voluntary and community sector, as well as colleagues within The National Lottery Community Fund. These interviews tried to capture expertise and intelligence from organisations of different sizes and geographical locations. For a list of interviewees, please see Annex A. Cassie Robinson, Senior

Head of our UK Portfolio, shared findings as we went: <https://medium.com/the-national-lottery-community-fund>.

We also held a special meeting of our [Advisory Group](#) on 31st March with 21 individuals from charities and voluntary sector organisations, some of whom we had also interviewed.

We think we have identified some of the activity and organisations most in need of immediate resource. We recognise, that as well as those we have already identified, there will be others will also need immediate resource, and we are committed to reviewing and sharing insights on this as often as we can. We have, started to target organisations where we can channel emergency funds to organisations already well-placed to respond to the immediate needs caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our response has been a result of our decisions and investment over the past few years: in making our funding more responsive so it focuses on what matters to communities rather than top-down inflexible programmes which take longer to shift; and in supporting parts of the sector which are closest to communities.

There is a clear set of beneficiaries who are at high risk in this crisis, especially older people and those in poor physical and mental health. There is also an emerging set of ‘vulnerable’ groups too. These include: people facing domestic and sexual abuse; homeless people; those who have no recourse to public funds or who need asylum support; those at risk of serious debt and destitution; sex workers; gypsy, Roma and traveller people. Specific risks include destitution and poverty, social isolation, racially motivated hate crime, susceptibility to misinformation, fear and panic.

Based on the information we have gathered, our current funding approach prioritises:

- **Organisations supporting people who are at high risk from COVID-19**
- **Organisations supporting communities most likely to face increased demand and challenges as a direct result of COVID-19**
- **Organisations with high potential to support communities with the direct and indirect impact of COVID-19**

Our continuing engagement with the sector

After our initial support work, we began a longer-term process of engagement and gathering learning from our grant holders.

We made a decision to share this share learning in real-time, being responsive, agile, and operating at the pace of the situation. Using [our website as a platform](#) for this information we are asking others to comment, challenge and input on what we are publishing to keep the information source practical and useful.

The following details how we will approach each of the specific content areas:

Learning, insight and stories

- This content will focus on telling stories that will inspire, give hope and inform others. This will include sharing stories about what grant holders are doing to respond and adapt to the crisis; assessing and making sense of what is working for organisations in how they are responding and adapting; spotting emerging

patterns in people's needs, behaviours and attitudes; identifying gaps so as to direct new and different resources. It is clear from initial research that whilst organisations know that they could be learning from each other about different ways to adapt and respond to the crisis, they currently have limited capacity to do this.

- We will publish and share data and blogs around specific themes and patterns our research identifies, curate and signpost information for others and create resources that share tips and information with grant holders on priority topics.

Horizon scanning and foresight

- Building an ongoing, collective, plural, high quality forward view. UK Portfolio staff from each office across the National Lottery Community Fund will act as a 'network of scanners' building up an account of what is happening in communities across the UK using the Three Horizons Framework. They will gather local observations and insights through interviews with colleagues and the wider sector, and then feed those insights into a central team. We will apply future scan practices to address the question, 'what can we learn in terms of change?' and 'what is Covid-19 revealing?' This will require a combination of scanning for and sense-making of underlying trends; an ability to think critically; and an ability to develop coherent narratives.
- Proposed outputs of this include: Visual narrative posts, maps of trends and short foresight blogs for people to access. We will also be sharing long form documents that will show patterns as they emerge.
- We will also offer small grants to a range of organisations for up to £15,000 who can collaborate with us to do this work - there will be organisations better placed geographically or capability-wise to take on aspects of this work alongside us. We have a total of £200,000 to spend on this.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

We are strongly committed to this agenda. We have long funded and operated in a way that seeks to level the playing field. For example, our funding responds to levels of deprivation in communities, our funding products allow people as well as large charities to access support to address the issues they know count and we have more recently explored how we can support those with lived experience and bring youth voice into our organisation. These are just some of the practical ways that we are operationalising our commitments every day.

Funding in crisis

We are committed to equity and want to ensure we keep this at the forefront of our minds as we make difficult decisions about how best to target resources.

We want to ensure that our Covid-19 response funding is accessible to people from all communities, and those who work, in particular, to support groups who experience disproportionate challenge and difficulty as a result of the crisis. We also want to ensure that our funding is used to reduce inequality and where possible contribute to a more equitable post-viral world.

What we have done so far to incorporate equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into our Covid-19 funding response

- EDI has been a key part of developing our plans to support organisations. This has informed a taxonomy that we are using as we operationalise our response.
- We intend to support communities experiencing health inequalities, based on what we are hearing from the sector, our own existing insight intelligence and analysis from researchers about how Covid-19 is particularly affecting certain communities.
- We have used that taxonomy to analyse our existing list of grant holders and understand which kinds of organisations would be key to support from an EDI perspective - ensuring we aren't just responding to the organisations which are well connected and shout loudest.
- We've tested the funding mechanisms, materials and information that we use in order to ensure they are accessible to all communities and tested our funding response against some of the specific proposals we are receiving from BAME community organisations to sense check that what we are planning is relevant to what they need.
- We've analysed the recommendations of the CharitySoWhite report against our proposed funding response and developed some draft guidance for staff based on those recommendations.

Next steps

- We will draw on the strengths and insights amongst our staff networks and external stakeholders in order to develop and implement our Covid-19 response funding.

4. How charities and community groups are responding to the crisis

4.1 Crisis Response

Priorities have changed; getting food and money to people in need has taken precedence. To some organisations, activity beyond that feels like a luxury. One organisation described receiving 300 emails per hour which was making it impossible to do anything other than respond to immediate needs.

Organisations that can provide essentials to households during this period of crisis are facing huge demand and pressure.

There are three parts to this work:

- Staff and volunteers to connect with people and households that can't access vital and essential services.
- Logistics and infrastructure to be able to reach those households.
- Creating connections with suppliers.

Getting money and food directly to individuals facing sudden, extreme poverty is on many people's minds. Turn2Us told us that any other work feels in some ways a

luxury. A self-employed cab driver facing a 90-day waiting period to access financial support will find him or herself in crippling debt very quickly. There are practical issues around money for people who don't use online banking; charities are asking how to get money in their pockets. And how can a new breed of local volunteers through [mutual aid groups](#) be reimbursed for collecting shopping or prescriptions for people in self-isolation? The reality is many are paying from their own pocket and worrying about it later, but can this last and how do we avoid anyone being exploited?

[Welcome to Our Woods](#) is a community partnership in Rhondda, which has worked closely with community youth service partners, including local councillors and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), to provide a coordinated, whole community response. This group has named three individuals to contact if a community member needs urgent support. They've distributed the list in the community, with the result of people contacting the named individuals for emergency support, such as fresh food and topping up electricity and gas cards. They've also worked with local businesses who've had surplus food to distribute via the local food bank. They've encouraged other organisations to use their building as needed. They've worked with others to identify people who don't have a phone and are in the process of buying new handsets to lend to people, to be returned and used by the partnership after the pandemic.

In Northern Ireland we heard from the projects funded through one of our large programmes: [People and Communities](#) who are at project delivery stage about the issues they are facing.

- With many staff members currently either self-isolating or working from home, many services are working at a reduced capacity or have had to terminate their services entirely.
- Just two projects are delivering as planned, with one other maintaining its activities (phone counselling) as planned, but with significant changes to back office support with the closure of their offices. Many have closed their premises altogether.
- Some organisations have moved to online-only delivery whilst others have begun to join with wider collective and community wide responses. These include: food and medical distribution networks, 'good morning' telephone services, proactive use of membership networks in virtual chatrooms using digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.
- Some projects are working with government to repurpose their resources, for example a project that provides crisis support to vulnerable people on the streets at weekends has suspended these activities but is in discussion with the Department for Communities about using their minibuses and volunteers to help in the community more generally.

4.1.1 Advice and Support

Organisations that focus on offering people advice and support on a myriad of existing issues, from homelessness to underlying health conditions, to the wellbeing of workers and workers rights are in huge demand from worried, vulnerable and isolated users.

For example we are hearing from charities that they are inundated with calls, emails, letters and social media posts - while at the same time struggling with volunteers and staff.

[MS Society](#) provides emotional support and information to anyone living with MS. Their helpline has been inundated with calls and they've received a record number of emails, letters, and messages on social media. They've received 400% more contacts compared to the same period last year. Their web pages are experiencing 90% higher than usual traffic, directed primarily at [Covid information pages](#).

To cope with the demand, they've redeployed staff to take on additional roles within the helpline team. They're piloting a peer support/ befriending network, initially co-led by staff and a small number of volunteers, to help reduce isolation, loneliness and to provide the information and support needed. They're looking into ways to provide specialist financial, health, treatment and physical activity support through their helpline. Their self-management sessions and information events have been postponed or moved on to virtual sessions, and they're working on a suite of online digital self-management tools in the short term, to help people become more informed and resilient.

4.1.2 Finances

Financial liquidity is a major issue.

- Income has been lost from most sources at once: cancelled or postponed fundraising events; regular revenue from things like venue hire, training and events; charity shop income.
- Many organisations are facing increased demand and need to scale up their activity but are struggling to pay staff to do so. The furlough scheme offered by the government may not be an appropriate option where service provision is deemed critical.
- Although we can't yet quantify it, a significant number of our grant holders have had to stand down staff and close or scale back essential services. Many organisations have closed their premises altogether.

The two main issues being identified are fears over funding, specifically the need for organisations to secure funding quickly, as well as the lack of capacity to undertake more complicated application processes.

- Some groups say they need a considerable uplift in budgets to provide kit, equipment and expertise to establish more coordinated local projects to identify and meet need among vulnerable and isolated individuals.
- Others have said that establishing effective new services, or simply covering staff sickness/self-isolation absence, would require an uplift of between £15-50k on current budget.
- Others, especially social enterprises, have reported a drop in their income of a minimum of 70%.
- Sector support organisations have been inundated with individual requests from over 1,200 members, all about money.

In Scotland one of the most common challenges grant holders are encountering is the cessation of their face-to-face services due to the implementation of social distancing measures resulting in the closure of hubs/centres. Consequently, groups are losing core income and face immediate concerns about being able to pay staff costs and other overheads.

- Some organisations have confirmed that they have halted all activity indefinitely; others are working at reduced capacity due to staff members self-isolating or working from home.
- Some groups report large increases in referrals and demand for their services, particularly those that operate foodbanks, community fridges or provide family/welfare support services. Where groups have had to cancel activities, they are looking to use grants towards supporting their ongoing running costs, purchasing laptops in order to allow staff to work remotely, purchasing phones with internet capability for isolated older people or giving small grants to smaller local organisations that support communities.

4.1.3 Benefits

A surge in demand has been caused by people losing jobs, or those in the gig economy losing hours and wages, and benefits agencies are supporting urgent claims for benefits. Advice agencies are providing increased services and have moved to delivering services online and via phone.

We've heard that people with disabilities are particularly struggling to access benefits. Some people with learning difficulties need someone to manage their account for them as they cannot remember logins or passwords but registering for benefits now requires everything to be done online.

In Yorkshire and the Humber, a community hub that provided a drop-in and advice sessions for the Roma community and refugee and asylum seekers is now telephoning the older members of these communities and providing interpretation over the telephone for those who do not understand new government guidance.

4.1.4 Food

Access to food is a particular issue that we are hearing mentioned a lot, especially in relation to food banks, food parcels and holiday hunger. Food banks are struggling, we hear that many are closing their services due to both supplies and volunteer numbers.

There is creative thinking occurring across the sector, for example we heard of a pub in Clydebank in Scotland adapting to the challenging circumstances by offering free breakfasts for schools, whilst [Food Citizenship](#) are exploring food resilience for times of crisis by looking across the country to see how creative responses are, "supporting existing food poverty alleviation initiatives or creating new ones to combat empty supermarket shelves and overburdened food banks."

[Gypsies and Travellers Wales](#), a small charity, use their connections as a way of delivering food to vulnerable people on traveller sites. Supermarkets won't deliver to these locations so many people rely on help from the charity. They have stopped their regular activities and are working flexibly responding to calls of help.

[Feeding Britain](#)'s Social Supermarket project in Coventry has adapted its services in line with government recommendations. The supermarket is open on Saturdays and Sundays 10-12pm with a one-way system of access and staff wearing PPE. The registration process has been simplified, with beneficiaries needing only to provide names and addresses and applying hand sanitiser before using stationary. Food is now pre-packed, with a small element of choice as recipients are able to pick from a photo card their choice of goods (increasing the accessibility of the project for those where English is not their first language). The project benefited from the closure of local cafes and restaurants, receiving 'a glut' of fresh produce, however this has increased their need for more cold storage to house it. In the medium and long term, they have a volunteer connected to the wholesale food industry and are looking to capitalise on the zero waste policies of major suppliers such as Bookers. With the closure of the local foodbank in Foleshill, they anticipate an increase in local need. They have created a pre-order voucher system, where referrers such as schools can supplement free schools. They have already had 60 orders from schools and anticipate using this voucher model beyond the current crisis.

In Wales we are also hearing of a lack of food and volunteers to run food banks across the country. A grantee in Wrexham stated on a local food bank: *"They are having huge staffing issues, most of the volunteers are older people, who are now self-isolating or staying at home. On top of not having the normal volunteer resources, they don't have any of the normal venues open to distribute food parcels from. They are currently doing it from the back of a van around Wrexham."*

4.2 Rapid Digital Transformation

Organisations are having to undergo digital transformation that would ordinarily take months or years in a matter of days. Many are moving their services online and working towards a range of remote working methods which they may be trialling for the first time.

This increased reliance on technology necessitates finding creative ways to tackle the digital divide. Some of the most vulnerable in the community do not have Wi-Fi, access to computers and tech, or the skills to use digital support. This includes those experiencing homelessness who are already facing acute social challenge and are among the most digitally-excluded. Organisations report the need for more tech resource and human resource too, if the most vulnerable are to be reached.

It also means making adaptations for both staff and beneficiaries. The [Cheetham Hill Advice Centre](#) in Manchester employs disabled people and refugees who have needed extra support to transition to new ways of working: *"these were the staff who needed the most equipment and connectivity provided as they do not have it at home. This has had an impact on how much we have needed to spend to get home working happening and I know that other charities and community groups will be experiencing the same thing. I would go so far as to predict that the more the work is delivered and informed by experts by experience, the greater cost they will have had to incur to keep their work going. So, some of the most richly informed work will be the most financially hit."*

In some places there are indications that the move to online is working well for younger users. However, we're also hearing that children and young people may be

disadvantaged by not having their own computers, tablets or phones to enable them to take part in school activities and lessons delivered remotely. The Children's Society said that in one area in the North East of the country, "*One of the main challenges we've faced in adapting, is that many of the families we work with are digitally excluded, they do not have access to internet, and Wi-Fi hotspots are now inaccessible e.g. (McDonalds, library). Some others don't have the right equipment to engage with other options available, e.g. Zoom, Google Hangouts etc.*" They are advocating with housing providers to supply wi-fi, as most social housing doesn't have this as standard.

We hear that many local groups are purchasing phones and tablets for isolated older people in the communities - although their efforts are hampered by shortages in less expensive models as well as lack of opportunities to train people to use them. A charity in Cornwall told us they were buying phones and dongles to enable young people with mental health issues to stay connected. For them, this means accepting they'll need to sort out the contracts further down the line.

Other charities are working to encourage older people to make best use of the tech they already have, like mobile phones and tablets. This chimes with what [we've learned from our Ageing Better](#) programme where we've seen that "older people don't necessarily want or need computer or digital literacy courses but do value sessions to make the most of their smartphone or tablet." Others are taking a nuanced approach, that blends both digital and telephone delivery.

Others are taking a nuanced approach, that blends both digital and telephone delivery. [b:friend](#) works in South Yorkshire, and has rapidly moved its befriending service online. Volunteers sign up as telephone befrienders or to drop-off essentials to vulnerable older neighbours. All are DBS checked and have committed their support throughout the crisis. Volunteers have signed up from outside the immediate area, including Glasgow, London, Manchester and Leeds. In just ten days they paired new 48 volunteers with an older person, with more ready to go as their DBS checks are completed. 240 existing volunteers have also switched to phone befriending and dropping off essentials.

Digital solutions also present new challenges for organisations. We've heard of:

- **Insufficient digital infrastructure**, including mobile phone infrastructure, case management systems, tools for supporting and allocating tasks to staff and volunteers, the ability to remotely connect to networks and shared drives.
- Some organisations are saying that people **can't access online resources** due to limitations on server space and the sheer volume of demand.
- **Technology and hardware**, for example, staff laptops and computers not being fit for purpose for extensive and long-term remote working. Many staff having to use their own personal mobiles and computers instead.
- **Data sharing**: ensuring GDPR compliance; working with external agencies like housing associations to gather and pass contact details.
- **Safeguarding**: a heightened chance of disclosure of safeguarding concerns which charities and volunteers need to be equipped to handle.
- **Training, support and encouragement** to beneficiaries who are not tech savvy.

- Budget for and access to quality interpreting and translation services.

An important point is that we are seeing the demand for newly online services rapidly outstripping capacity in some areas. In Northern Ireland, demand for digitally delivered counselling and one-to-one support exceeds capacity, even where all staff are still working.

The same is being seen in Wales, where we have heard that demand for some digitally delivered services like counselling and one-to-one support is outstripping capacity, even where all staff are still working. Charities are also anticipating ongoing increased demand for their services as people struggle with the enormity of what is happening and the aftermath.

Digital solutions may not work for everyone, and raise potential new challenges for organisations to tackle, for example:

- Data sharing: ensuring GDPR compliance; working with external agencies like housing associations to gather and pass contact details.
- Safeguarding: a heightened chance of disclosure of safeguarding concerns which charities and volunteers need to be equipped to handle.
- Training, support and encouragement to beneficiaries who are not tech savvy.

In Leeds, [English4All](#) have moved all their ESOL teaching online, the sessions have been fully booked and they anticipate reaching more people than they would have through classes. We've heard that grant holders working with NHS counselling services are seeing rises in frightened callers, and those with concerns about mental health, increases in domestic abuse, increased poverty and its impact on families/children, and disabled organisations will lose earned income. Groups working on the issue of sexual exploitation are also raising concern about a possible rise in online abuse and grooming.

[Sahara Advice Centre](#) in Preston works predominantly for the benefit of BME women, dealing with domestic abuse, unemployment and training. Due to demand it has extended its opening hours from Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm, to a seven-day helpline open 9am-5pm. This has increased their staff cost by an additional 145.5 hours per week and telephone costs, estimated at £8,400, which we have been able to vary their grant to cover.

Other organisations are looking to use volunteers to explain how to use equipment through online sessions, and we are hearing that there's a need to support further digital implementation across the sector through funding and expert advice.

4.3 Mental Health and Wellbeing

We can't underestimate the impact that the crisis will have, and is having, on people's mental health. We anticipate significant impact both immediately and in the aftermath. People's worlds are becoming smaller and relationships are coming under pressure, and this brings friction as well as reduced options to 'self-manage' through activities and contacts outside the home.

A particular worry in Northern Ireland is that the country's baseline for mental ill health and anxiety was high in comparison to other parts of the UK before the onset of the pandemic. Increases in loneliness and isolation will have a further detrimental impact on people and communities.

[Mind](#) have flagged two groups they are concerned about in particular: those who will lose their protective factors - things like access to food or simple human contact like hugs from their grandchildren; and people who face elevated risk, like loss of employment.

There are also issues specific to those already suffering from mental health issues. [HeadStart](#) grant holders are sharing that a 'trusted place' and 'trusted person' are very difficult to establish whilst many places and people are on lockdown. Home is not a trusted or safe place for many, which makes it more difficult to continue discussions with a trusted person.

One aspect of responding to this is to raise public awareness of the importance of taking care of our mental health. Another will be adapting services to respond to the loss of recreational activities and physical exercise in person – these have a significant impact on people's mental health and wellbeing, so alternative ways to deliver these services are needed. Services will also need to be ready to shift focus from not only supporting people to achieve and sustain a balance in their mental health, but to navigate loss too.

Organisations are responding in a number of ways:

- **Early intervention** through proactive and scheduled check-in calls and signposting where beneficiaries need additional support.
- **Befriending and peer support** utilising online tools, social media such as WhatsApp and telephone calls. Much of this work is delivered by volunteers, placing extra responsibility on charities in training, safeguarding and volunteer expenses.
- Offering **proactive reassurance** to beneficiaries who are anxious and hyper-aware of the situation and latest news.
- **Online counselling**, though many early reports suggest that this is only driving demand as clients find themselves 'trapped' and worried, especially around aspects of isolation and health fears.
- With limited access to GP services, the commissioner is seeking to manage this by **linking the voluntary and community sector directly into statutory provision (IAPT)**.

A number of organisations suggest that in a few months' time, additional funding will be required to address the longer-term mental health and economic impacts of the crisis. Funding should be an ongoing conversation as needs are likely to change.

4.4 Supporting the most vulnerable

We see that COVID-19 is fundamentally changing society. The question of who is vulnerable is not necessarily the same as who it was before the crisis. People already known to be vulnerable may be in touch with services who understand their needs and what they want. But those who have never needed support may now need help too.

The challenges of COVID-19, such as the length of time people will be self-isolating

and the anxiety the virus brings means that we all will need to adapt, but for some groups such as the elderly, those living alone without support networks and others this will be a very difficult time. There are other region-specific challenges too, one example is that in some parts of Wales, families are still unable to return to their homes or are living in unsafe homes after the flooding earlier in the year.

These newly vulnerable groups may be split in two categories (with some overlap):

- 1. People already receiving support but who now need it in a different or enhanced way:**
 - a. Known victims of domestic abuse
 - b. Some elderly people
 - c. Pregnant women
 - d. Those with existing health conditions
 - e. Some young people for whom the home environment is not safe
 - f. Families affected by flooding earlier in the year
 - g. People with existing mental health conditions, or who are experiencing issues with alcohol or drugs

- 2. People who may have never required charitable support before:**
 - a. New victims of domestic abuse
 - b. Families who have lost jobs (especially sole traders)
 - c. People who live alone
 - d. LGBT+ young people who live at home
 - e. Young people online (especially if parents are working at home)
 - f. Older people, previously active in the community with good networks
 - g. Those who live rurally
 - h. People struggling with their mental health who have not before needed support. Including key workers working at this difficult time.
 - i. Gypsy, Roma and Travellers communities who are traditionally self-reliant but live in close proximity and may have difficulty accessing food and other services.

At this stage identifying need is somewhat easier than sharing solutions, however we have seen attempts to reach whole communities, for example by deploying additional volunteers on awareness-raising work. Some areas are using their key workers differently - for example in **Gloucester**, police are handing out care packages to sex workers that charity workers can no longer reach. Charities are using their staff and volunteers more creatively. [Little Lounge](#) have given one older member of staff who is self-isolating the role of call handler, using her existing skills, supporting the service and keeping her active. [Riverside Local Community](#) are using software to map areas that are receiving help and those which will need more support. Information is relayed to the council so communities that need support can get it.

We have learnt that for certain people, especially men, it is the activity that is the attraction or the incentive to “join” and connect with something. So, it is important to maintain a variety of different ways for people to connect including through telephone, video calls, Skype etc., or even through writing letters. We have also learnt the importance of inter-generational activities and connections and we would stress the need to factor these possibilities in.

4.4.1 Older People

[Action for Elders](#), a charity that works to end older people's loneliness with physical, mental and social programmes, are building a "phone communication tree" to ensure people stay in touch and don't get isolated. [Standing Together Cymru](#) are contacting current and past participants to offer them 15-minute wellbeing slots per week, and are collecting and sharing phone numbers, with permissions, and organising pairings to create a peer support network amongst the participants.

We've learned from [Ageing Better](#), our investment into tackling social isolation among older people, that people aren't able engage in phone or digital wellbeing activities until their basic needs are met. The needs will be different for each individual and will change during the evolving nature of the crisis. [Ageing Better](#) has also taught us that you often need to push the connection even when it is initially rebuffed and that it can take some time for trust to be built. We also know how important it is to keep the door open and to encourage people to stay connected and not to isolate themselves mentally; as well as encouraging staff and volunteers to continue to make the effort to connect with people even if initially rebuffed.

4.4.2 Homelessness

In Wales [Cymorth Cymru](#) has suggested that the homelessness sector is facing a huge threat across the UK in terms of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on staffing, organisational sustainability and the people that the sector exists to support. Many chief officers and senior managers are working very long hours to try to simultaneously support clients and keep organisations afloat.

- Staff shortages are expected to escalate (they estimate that the sector is currently about 10% down due to illness/self-isolation with the expectation that this will get worse)
- New and unforeseen costs associated with the COVID-19 Crisis for things like personal protective equipment (PPE) and additional personal hygiene products (not to mention the challenge of accessing those products)
- The stress of delivering trauma-informed services while encouraging people to comply with the social distancing rules and operating under massive organisational pressure
- The UK Government has announced an additional £3.2 million to address this issue, on top of the £492 million committed in 2020 to 2021 to support the government's ambition to end rough sleeping in this Parliament.
- The Welsh Government has been quick to respond, announcing an additional £10 million for local authorities to enable them to secure the accommodation needed to house rough sleepers so they can be protected, supported, and isolated if necessary. The Scottish Government has made part of a £50 million Wellbeing Fund and a £40 million supporting communities fund available to address the issue, while in Northern Ireland £15.3 million has been identified to support initiatives for the most vulnerable in society.

4.5 Volunteers

We're hearing of the "massive impact" of the loss of volunteers, many of whom are drawn from a cohort of "energetic, committed over-70s" who are now having to self-isolate.

At the same time, we're seeing huge numbers of people volunteering through mutual aid groups, NHS and Red Cross schemes, and through targeted local call-outs.

Grant holders are mobilising to work collaboratively with others to be part of city- or district-wide initiatives to recruit volunteers to support isolated and vulnerable people. Some have talked to us about redirecting their staff resources to supporting these kind of initiatives as they can't deliver what they are specifically funded to provide at this time.

Greater numbers of new volunteers, notably younger people, are bringing a diverse range of professional and personal skills, creating new options and opportunities. As many organisations are seeking to move from face-to-face to online forms of support for their service users, volunteers with digital skills become increasingly useful. For example, befriending services working with older people may need support setting up video calling, online shopping, or accessing online forums, support and resources. For example, the [Warm and Toasty Club](#) have transferred their 'memory afternoon' to Facebook and require volunteers to help people access the live streams.

However, coping with a large influx of new volunteers also raises challenges in inducting, training, supporting and managing them well. Many new volunteers are passionate and committed but may not have the skills, experience or local knowledge to work as effectively as needed. Some Age UK branches have had a massive volunteer response and cannot currently take on new volunteers while they work through the backlog.

Another issue we have been hearing from NCVO is that many volunteers are having to use their own money to purchase food and medicines required by those they are helping, yet there is no systems in place for this to be reimbursed.

[Yopey](#), a dementia befriending charity, provide one example of an intergenerational initiative involving young volunteers. As a response to COVID-19 they have set up a new Facebook group inviting young people to write letters, draw pictures or email photos to isolated residents in care homes.

Coordination and support are an essential part of harnessing this new energy effectively, without these in place problems emerge.

In **Bath**, a local infrastructure group put out a call and received 900 volunteer offers in four days. But their only paid member of staff is struggling to cope with managing this sudden volume.

Data protection and safeguarding issues are complicated for newly formed groups. Some, like [Your Scholes](#) are linking up with more established organisations like [Voluntary Action Leeds \(VAL\)](#) to provide DBS checks and support training needs.

Also important is induction for new volunteers, and training in new or unfamiliar skills - for those switching to working in different ways and providing services which are very different from what they are used to. National umbrella organisations like [NCVO](#) and [SCVO](#) have provided guidance on their websites on how to manage volunteers during the crisis.

Other areas of need that we've heard are around increasing supervision and support for volunteers, particularly when they are themselves isolated or have lived experience of the issues they are supporting others with. There is an increasing need for clinical supervision.

Charities also need to find money to cover simple but unbudgeted volunteer expenses for things like phone calls, shopping and other practical support tasks that might otherwise leave them out of pocket.

4.6 Local Infrastructure

Our Advisory Group made a strong call to **use existing local infrastructure and networks** to identify and support those most in need, rather than setting up new, competing mechanisms. We've heard dozens of stories of existing grassroots organisations quickly adapting to the crisis, and many examples of local authorities and VCS infrastructure organisations stepping up to help better coordinate action.

[One Walsall](#) is proactively recruiting volunteers to work with local community groups and registering organisations as part a wider support network for the area.

[Droitwich Spa CVS](#) have ceased normal activities and are co-ordinating volunteers to get basic needs to vulnerable people. They have set up an emergency phone line and website, working with local pharmacists and foodbanks.

[Bromsgrove and Redditch Network](#) have set up [Support Redditch](#), a community-organised network of groups and volunteers and are working with a local Facebook group called [Bromsgrove Community Support](#) to offer help.

In Stoke, [VAST](#) is partnering with the local authority on driving the city's response. They have implemented a web-based registration system to coordination new volunteers (500 and growing), alongside a network of hundreds of VCS organisations).

[Rushcliffe CVS](#) have stopped their community transport schemes and launched a large volunteer recruitment drive to ensure they can still provide support to vulnerable community members, with food deliveries, and prescriptions.

[Newark and Sherwood CVS](#) have created new web content providing information and support along with a section for recruiting new volunteers, including good practice guidance. They have also collated information on local groups and services e.g. shops making deliveries. Supported new groups, like Parish Councils to set up services with information and guidance around volunteering etc.

In Derby a partnership has formed between [Community Action Derby](#), Public Health, City Council and several other organisations including the Covid-19 mutual aid group. It is coordinating local volunteer response to basic needs and voluntary sector support and have established a local helpline.

In order for coordination to be effective, geographical anchor organisations need to have an active membership; be well connected; have expert knowledge of the local area; be enablers not gatekeepers; and align with our values as an organisation.

These are often small and specialised organisations with the trust of the community. For example, [Canolfan Pentre](#), a volunteer led community centre in the Rhondda, Wales, have become an emergency contact point for the community, especially those who've been displaced due to floods. They've started to deliver food on behalf of the Rhondda Food bank, they print homework for families who have no access to printers, and loan ICT equipment, especially for displaced families with children.

The [Twyn Action Group](#), a community hub in Twyn, have used their contacts and knowledge of the community to identify people who need support and worked with the council and food banks to ensure they get emergency food provision. They've also mobilised expertise in the community to provide advice (mortgages, debt etc) for people in the community.

The [Monkstown Boxing Club](#) in Newtownabbey, Northern Ireland, changed from a sports and education venue to a community soup kitchen in just 5 days, preparing and distributing up to 90 portions of soup and food packages daily for people who are self-isolating or otherwise vulnerable. Local businesses from coffee shops to chip shops have donated ingredients and containers, enabling the club to increase the number of deliveries.

Annex A: Interviewees

The issues described above were highlighted to us during interviews with the following existing grant holders, and organisations and individuals from across the sector:

Active Communities	Facebook	Association for Voluntary and Community Action
Age UK	FutureGov	Nesta
Derek Bardowell	Grapevine	Open Food Network
Cares Family	Ruth Ibegbuna	Refugee Action
CAST	Imandeep Kaur, Impact Hub	Refugee Council
Catalyst	Little Village	David Robinson
Citizens Advice	Mayday Trust	Shift
Citizens UK	Mental Health Foundation	Trussell Trust
Connect Hackney	Migration Exchange	Volunteering Matters
Hilary Cottam	NAVCA, National	With You

We'd also like to acknowledge the dozens of colleagues across The National Lottery Community Fund who continue to share their insights and observations with us.