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DESIGNING
A NEW SOCIAL REALITY

The Future Of The Bristol Voluntary, Community
& Social Enterprise Sector Beyond Covid-19

power to change

Quartet Community Foundation

BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

Voscur

locality
the power of community

Black South West Network

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INTRODUCTION

This research project has been jointly funded by Bristol City Council, Power to Change Trust and Quartet Community Foundation, and was undertaken by Black South West Network in partnership with VOSCUR and Locality.

The research aims to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector in Bristol in order to assess how to foster and embed greater community resilience in the new operating environment, and ultimately provide evidence for planning a thoroughly informed and strengthening VCSE Sector recovery strategy that looks beyond COVID-19 and to the long-term future.

The research is overseen by the VCSE Strategy group; a strategic partnership of infrastructure organisations working to develop the above-mentioned recovery and strengthening plan for the VCSE Sector on the basis of the evidence provided by this research. Chaired by Deputy Mayor Asher Craig, the VCSE Strategy group includes the following organisations: Bristol City Council, VOSCUR, Locality, Disability Equality Adviser, City Office and City Funds, Quartet Community Foundation, Power to Change Trust, Clinical Commissioning, and Police and Crime Commissioner.

This research evidence-collection applied an equalities framework to synthesise findings. Results from this synthesis present evidence for 'what worked' in the VCSE Sector's response to the global pandemic and the formulation of a collective vision for the future of the Sector. An equalities framework was deemed critical to address instances of under-representation, differential needs and systemic disadvantage. This research recognises that meeting the responsibility to promote equity requires examining disparities in outcomes. Therefore, the disaggregation of data was deemed a necessary component of the research process and, in order to inform policy, factors that contribute to these disparate outcomes were identified.

We therefore implemented an equity perspective across the research process - i.e. the study's design, data collection, and analysis. This was done by engaging various stakeholders in order to understand the context in which the research was to be conducted. These stakeholders included organisations that are led by women, single parents, older people, young people, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, Black and Asian heritage people and various faith groups.

In this sense, community stakeholder engagement shaped the research process and many of the questions within the research, aimed at advancing knowledge and ideas around equity. Furthermore, in the analysis data was disaggregated to allow for the exploration of ulterior intersectional aspects - such as the environmental dimension, housing, mental health, immigration status and more - and community stakeholders were involved throughout the process of data interpretation to avoid issues of bias and ensure an understanding of context.

1.1 CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about radical change in how society works at a dramatic and, in some cases, catastrophic rate. The world and society that everybody knew less than a year ago has changed beyond recognition. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost, disproportionately so amongst Black and Asian heritage communities, disabled people, older people and those living in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. For almost a year, the majority of the UK population has been living under lockdown measures never before seen in this country.

It is undeniable that COVID-19 and the lockdown have thrown into stark relief the inequalities that have existed in our society for many hundreds of years. Inequalities that, despite innumerable initiatives and campaigns to address them, persist to this day at a deeply structural level. In reflecting on this reality, we are seeking to explore and understand how we build new ways of working that focus on the root causes of inequality and not just the symptoms, and on how do we build equitable inclusion into our social infrastructure's modus operandi from the outset.

In undertaking this work, our focus has been on the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Sector in Bristol, but we do not see this sector as operating in isolation from the rest of the city. The VCSE Sector intersects with the city at social, economic, democratic, geographic, and environmental levels, and operates in all other sectors and all areas of the city. Fundamental to this, is the nature of the relationships between stakeholders involved, and the perceptions that those stakeholders hold of each other. Thus, this research is not simply a process of finding out *what* but also a process of

finding out *how* we might build a new future together. This should a future in which we have learned, built upon, and embedded the new knowledge into our ways of being, particularly learning from the Sector and the city's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes should then extend the gains in knowledge and approach beyond just now and into the future.

1.2   OBJECTIVES

The survival, recovery and renewal of the VCSE in this changed environment is vital. In this context, the over-arching research objectives are:

- Understanding the role and potential of the VCSE Sector in the city going forward.
- Creating the foundations from which to build new ways of working in the city which address inequality at the outset.
- Developing a One City approach to recovery which recognises the value and importance of the VCSE in building resilient communities.

1.3   METHODOLOGY

This 9-month research project brings together an eclectic methodology, matching appropriate tools and techniques at each stage to draw out the appropriate data.

Firstly, a quantitative sample was collected through a survey. The sample selected for this report analysis includes data from 133 respondents; 54% of which are general voluntary and community organisations, 29% are either community businesses or social enterprises, and the remaining 17% is made up of self-organising mutual aid groups.

In addition, this report includes the analysis of primary qualitative data from:

emergency frontline response to the pandemic.

5 Piggy-Back Sessions

Through facilitation from the key partners in the project delivery, BSWN's research team joined existing virtual meetings to collect data on the most immediate and highest priority needs and areas of investment for an effective VCSE Sector recovery.

- Facilitated by Locality, the first session was undertaken on 07/07/2020 with 20 anchor organisations in the city.
- The second session was hosted virtually by VOSCUR on 16/07/2020 with 7 participants representing infrastructure support organisations.
- For the third piggy-back session, the research team joined the 'Mayor's conversation with community workers' on 24/07/2020.
- The fourth was held with 14 representatives from organisations within the adult social care sector on 27/07/2020.
- The fifth and final session was once again facilitated by VOSCUR on 30/07/2020 with a different cohort of anchor organisations predominantly involved in the

4 Focus Group Sessions

Two hours per session allowed for an in-depth discussion on; what community needs are emerging and/or intensifying due to the pandemic, on the impact that the virus and the lockdown have had on the organisations themselves, and on the key assets that were instrumental for the organisations' responses to the crisis. Moreover, the participants were asked to provide key areas of investment and priority needs for the next 12 months recovery.

- Session 1 and 3 engaged organisations delivering universal provision, whilst sessions 2 and 4 included representatives across all equalities' groups-led organisations and equalities' groups-targeted provision.
- Overall, the focus group sessions engaged 25 organisations amongst voluntary and community organisations, community businesses, social enterprises and self-organising mutual aid groups.

around the future of the Sector.

30 Interviews

These allowed in-depth qualitative data collection through individual discussions held with organisations that delivered frontline emergency response to the crisis. They also created the space for reflection on lessons learned and stimulated forward-looking conversations

4 Visioning Sessions

These sessions included 100 diverse participants from: the VCSE Sector overall, selected equalities groups-led organisations, private and public sectors' representatives, and key strategic stakeholders from the wider city infrastructure.

NOTE ON THE EQUALITIES-LENS APPROACH

Throughout the whole research process a distinction was made between equalities-led organisations and those who focus their services on equalities issues to ensure that the dynamics of power in decision-making were recorded appropriately.

Equalities-led was defined as: an organisation whose Board is made up of over 50% of individuals from the equalities groups that it serves. Where there was no Board, all Directors/Senior management were to be from the equalities groups that it serves.

DISCLAIMER

The researchers note that the use of the government defined group of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) acronym is problematic but do so here only to align with broader policy discourse, or when referring to the target communities of some organisations who themselves defined their organisations and communities as such.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INTERIM REPORT

"In crisis more than ever, the Sector is providing services that are essential to people [...]. And you know, if we're looking at what makes society work, infrastructure isn't just transport, it's actually about the things that we do and how it should be part of the funding that comes in, and there is an opportunity maybe to assert just how important that is for people's wellbeing and their ability to live a productive and meaningful life. If we're talking about designing a new reality, then getting an acceptance of that reality is absolutely important." **[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, women-led and women-targeted provision]**

The interim report for this project was published on the BSWN's website after the completion of the first phase of the research. It focused on two key areas namely;

- Newly emerged and intensified community needs as result of the pandemic impact.
- Priority needs and/or areas of investment for the VCSE Sector's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

2.1 NEWLY EMERGED & INTENSIFIED COMMUNITY NEEDS

As discussed in the interim report, most organisations have recorded an increase in service demand and complexity of needs. The three key community needs that have been found to have intensified due to the pandemic are as follows:

Mental Health

According to all organisational sectors and across all recipient communities, the most urgent emerging community challenge is by far mental health. It was mentioned more than 40 times in the qualitative sample, alongside 'isolation' (21 times) and 'loneliness' (12 times).

"We have what could effectively be called a mental health crisis emergency."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, people with complex needs-targeted provision]

Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion and tech poverty were discussed in great detail in the interim report. This has always been a hugely significant but underestimated issue in Bristol, and COVID-19 created the circumstances to capture exactly how big the challenge is by creating a world where digital exclusion can equal a complete lack of access to vital information, and in some cases can result in complete isolation.

"What came up increasingly through lockdown was a lack of information about the local picture, the really super local picture of digital exclusion; a lack of information about exactly who wasn't being reached, and what impact not being able to go out and use public hotspots like the library and WI-FI was having on people. Particularly with people maybe having one device in a home where six or seven people were sharing it as opposed to being able to go out into schools and other spaces."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, universal provision]

Financial Insecurity

Financial insecurity and the inaccessibility of the labour market were found to be significantly affecting our samples' communities both in terms of overall mental health and more specifically in terms of the ability to plan for recovery. This was found to be particularly impacting community groups and individuals who face additional systemic barriers. Therefore, economic inclusion and inclusive growth - in terms of designing initiatives and policies that allow systemically disadvantaged groups to re-enter the labour market - should be at the top of priorities when planning for the recovery phase.

"There's been a labour crash in terms of some of those coming from an ex-offender background or just coming out from prison who aren't able to find any work. They could end up being homeless, we have seen the related impact in terms of mental health and lack of ability to talk out."

[Social Enterprise from the focus groups, young Black men-targeted provision]

2.2   PRIORITY NEEDS & AREAS OF INVESTMENT FOR RECOVERY

The interim report for this project also assessed a list of priority needs and areas of investment for the VCSE Sector recovery from the current crisis. The vast majority of our survey sample saw applying for grant funding (71%), building partnerships (69%), and reviewing policies to adapt to services (63%) as the highest priorities for the coming months, alongside improving budgeting and planning capacity (50%), providing mental wellbeing support for staff (40%), and building digital infrastructure (34%). Applying for investment and loans above or below £50,000 was ranked lower on the priority list for most organisations as shown in figure 1. To read about the context and analysis of the areas for investment in further depth, please see the interim report on BSWN's website.

- ■ Applying for grant funding
- ■ Building partnerships/collaborations
- ■ Reviewing policies to adapt services to post-COVID measures
- ■ Building budgeting/planning capacity
- ■ Providing support to monitor and improve staff's mental wellbeing
- ■ Building digital infrastructure
- ■ Applying for investment and loans above £50, 000
- ■ Applying for investment and miro-loans (under £50, 000)
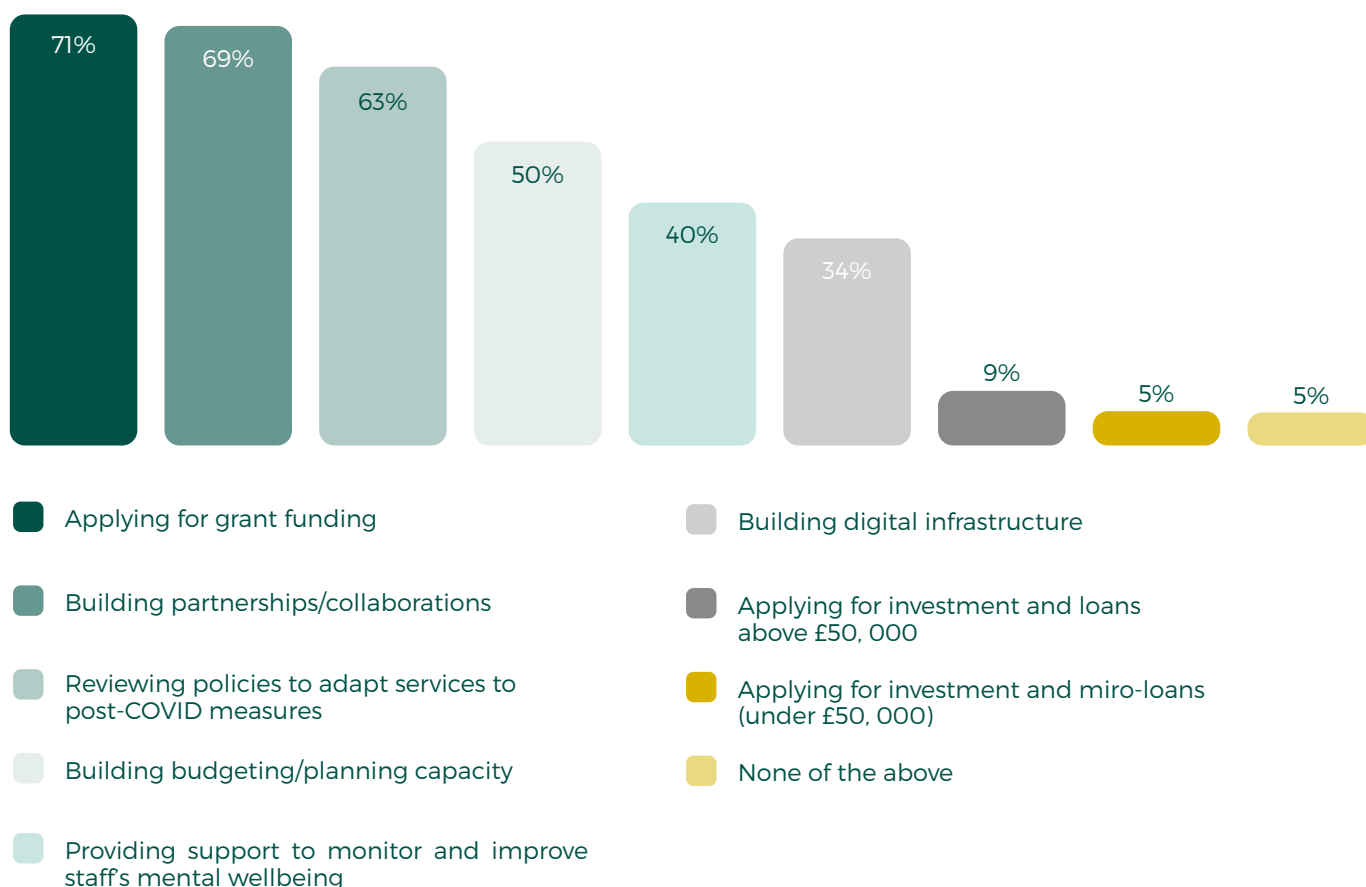- ■ None of the above

Fig 1: *Priority needs/areas of investment for the next 12 months*

ABOUT THE SECTOR & ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The Bristol VCSE Sector has seen an increase in demand for its services and greater complexity of needs, whilst simultaneously facing financial challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Social distancing measures have made the delivery of services often more difficult and costlier with many micro and small organisations at risk of closure. For many organisations, a lack of cash reserves and a reliance on fundraising events and public donations to balance the books makes the situation particularly precarious. Despite these challenges, the VCSE Sector with its roots in the community has played a pivotal role in keeping people connected and responding to the crisis, as will be explored in this and the following sections of the report.

Whilst the study aimed to get a representative sample, it must be noted that out of the 2500+ VCSE organisations in Bristol, 133 responded to the survey on which the following graphs are based. This provides limitations in the generalisability of some of this data but the survey is supplemented by the robust qualitative data collected through our piggy-back sessions, focus groups and visioning sessions (as outlined above) where considerably more organisations were engaged. Moreover, this report is also supplemented by the desk-based mapping research which provides quantitative data on 2500+ VCSE Sector organisations operating in Bristol more broadly.

3.1   DATA FROM THE SURVEY

As illustrated by figure 2, around a third (35%) of the organisations surveyed deliver local community development programmes or services as their main area of work; which includes a vast range of initiatives to improve the quality of life of their local communities, such as collective sports activities, projects for children and young people, social events for strengthening community bonds and so on.

- Community Development
- Disabled People
- Heritage/Conservation
- Social Inclusion
- Social Care
- Mental Health
- Women
- Education
- Arts & Culture
- Refugee & Asylum Seekers
- Homelessness & Housing
- BAME
- Lobbying/Influencing
- Employment Support
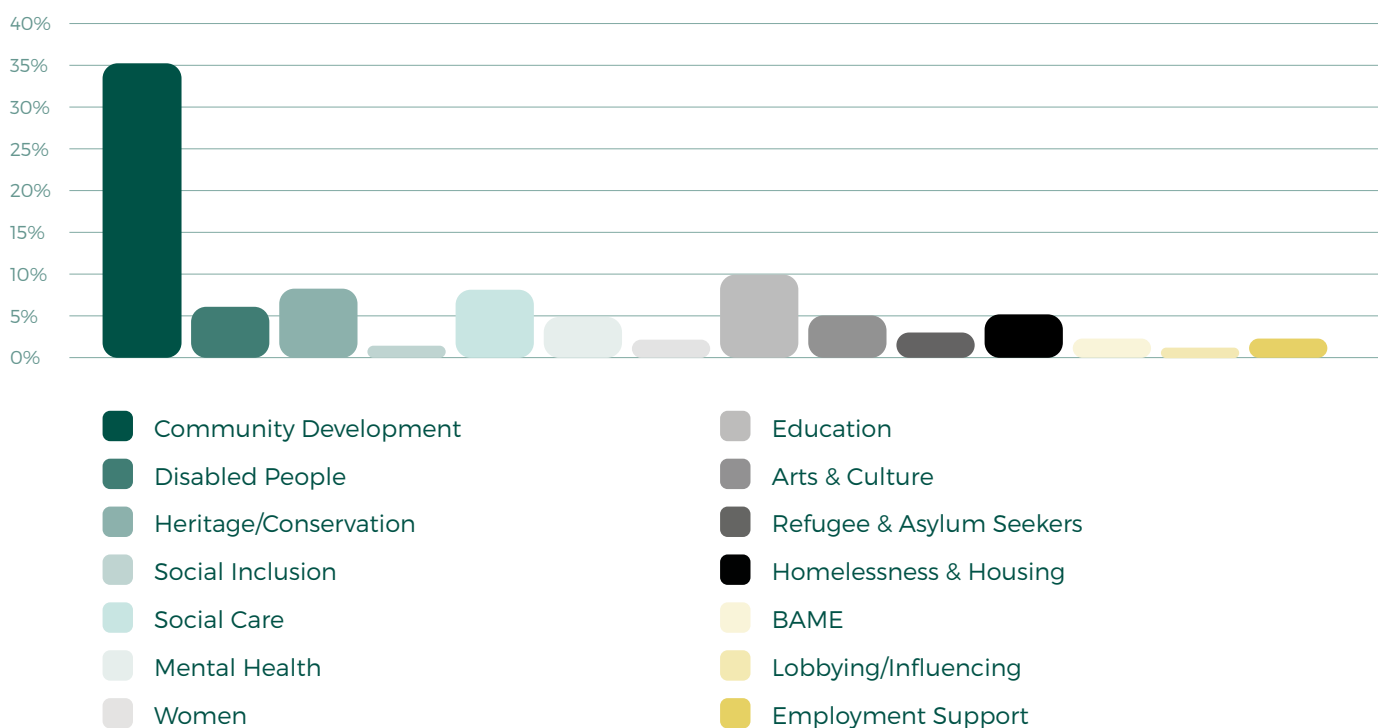
Figure 2: Main area of work

The remaining two-thirds primarily focus on education (10%); arts, culture and heritage (13%); health and social care (13%); delivery of specific services for equalities groups (16%); and housing and homelessness (5%).
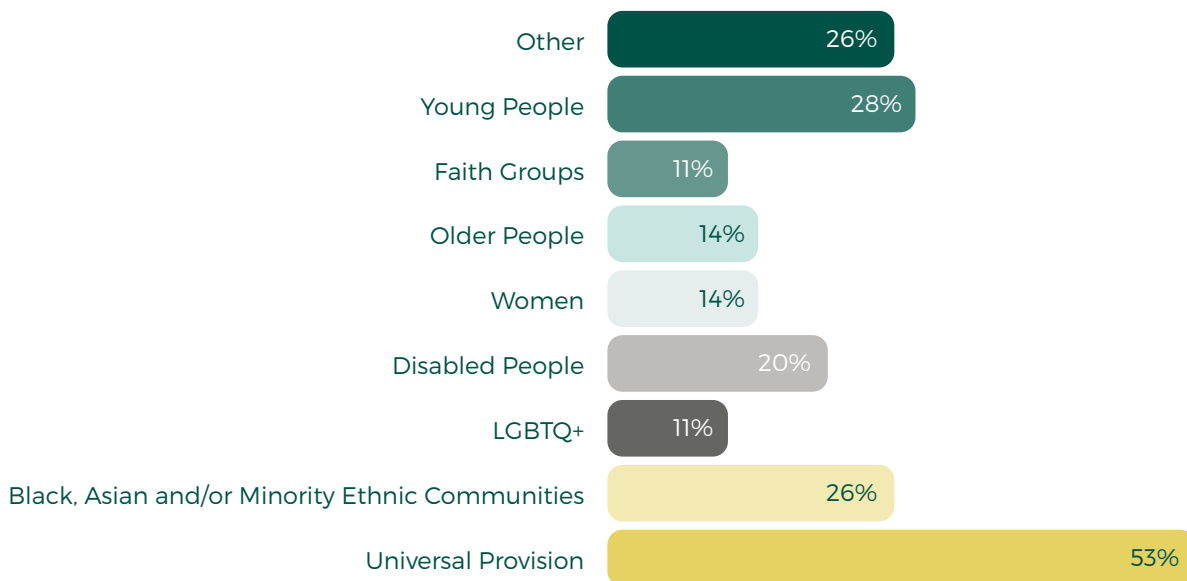
Figure 3: *Target communities*

When interrogated more specifically about their targeted communities, the majority (53%) stated that their provision is universal as shown in figure 3 with the remaining 47% stating they purposely target equalities groups such as women, the LGBTQ+ community or faith groups.
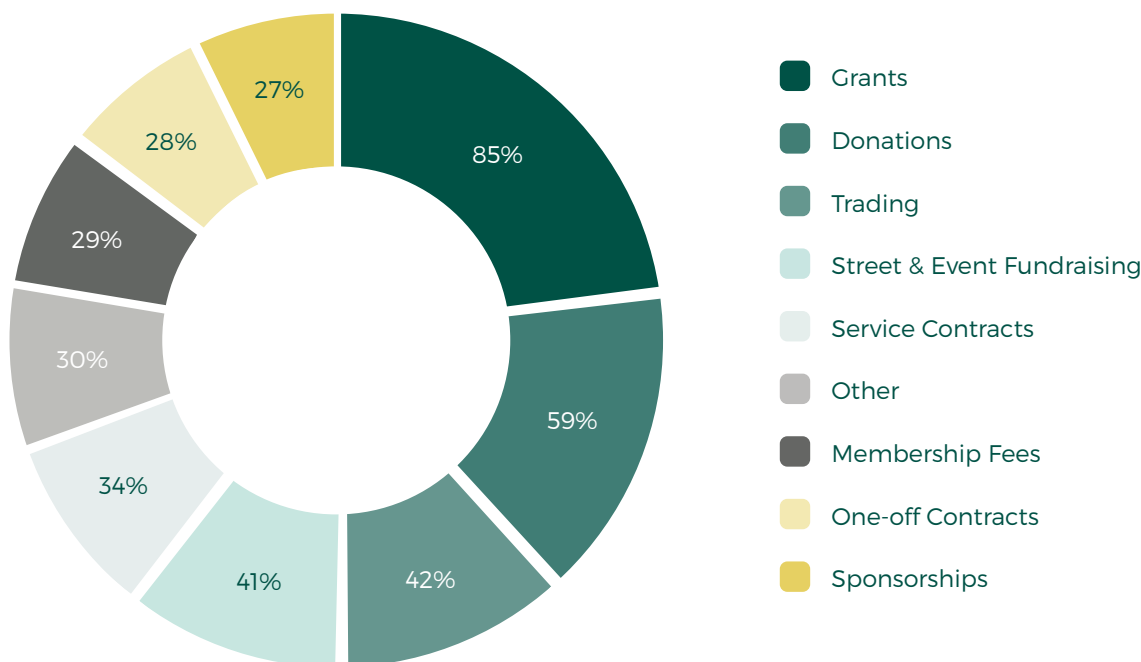
Figure 4: *Funding sources as a percentage of total income (averaged across respondents)*

As figure 4 illustrates, grants and donations are by far the main sources of funding for most VCSE organisations in the survey - on average, 85% and 59% percent respectively are from these sources. Trading and street/event fundraising make up on average 42% and 41% of total income whilst service contracts (34%), membership fees (29%), one-off contracts (28%) and sponsorship (27%) make up smaller proportions of overall income. Other sources of funding include: tithes, lettings, local government, and corporate partnerships. One organisation noted that they receive 90% of their funding from the European Union, which is an area of VCSE funding that will need reviewing in the wake of Brexit.

The sample's workforce saw an average decrease of 0.6% during the lockdown but there are broad variations within this. Whilst some saw an increase in employed staff and volunteers, others saw a reduction in their 0-hour contract and freelance staff. One organisation saw a reduction in seven employees, noting that this was mainly due to resignations. Organisations that saw an increase in staffing were generally those whose services focused on equalities groups such as youth services, women services, disabled people services. In saying that, those who saw a decrease in staffing levels were more often organisations in similar fields as well as those focused on health and social care, the arts, and local community development. It must however be noted that this is not an exact science as there was great variation in those who saw a decrease in staffing levels.

Alongside this reduction in workforce, organisations saw a 76% average increase in service user needs. However, many noted that this area was difficult to quantify due to the nuanced complexity of needs, and the social distancing measures making the delivery of services more difficult.

"This is hard to calculate at the moment. Referrals and incidents went down to start with but have now nearly doubled since pre-COVID, from 57 referrals a month to 100 per month. We also have a huge increase in demand from local agencies for support due to the BLM movement".

[Survey respondent, racial justice organisation]

"Percentage not appropriate. Presenting different needs".

[Survey respondent, universal provision]

"Yes, [the pandemic] has exacerbated needs that already existed rather than creating any new ones and we are limited by our capacity and social distancing so we are reaching less people than last year. e.g. in the summer holiday we reached over 2000 people in 2019, but due to needing to manage social distancing and small groups this year it will be 144".

[Survey respondent, young people provision]

A few were in the dark as they were unable to adapt their services at all, and therefore were unable to provide any figure. This inability to adapt to the lockdown has left part of the Sector's organisations in a precarious financial position. This of course applies to various organisations and businesses across the ecosystem but for many community businesses and social enterprises the inability to adapt - particularly to online services – has resulted in the inability to trade or fundraise. This paired with closing grant programmes and changing criteria has left part of the Sector without anything to fall back on. While most organisations predicted a loss in income for 2021, particularly those who received a large proportion of income from trading, relatively few have seen an increase in income and predicted this would continue in the coming year.

Only 4% of organisations responding to the survey are struggling to pay financial liabilities such as a mortgage or social investment loan which may be due to the low number of organisations with assets (as shown in figure 5) alongside the 66% of organisations who stated that they had financial reserves.

Moreover, another 5% noted that whilst they are not yet struggling, these repayments are a burden "due to reduced trading income" and "there are a lot of unknowns" which may in short term prove to be an issue. Others also noted that they were struggling to pay salaries and general overheads. One respondent for example noted that, "Our income relies totally on the revenue from hire. We had no hire therefore we had no income to pay the outgoings for running/repairs to the building".
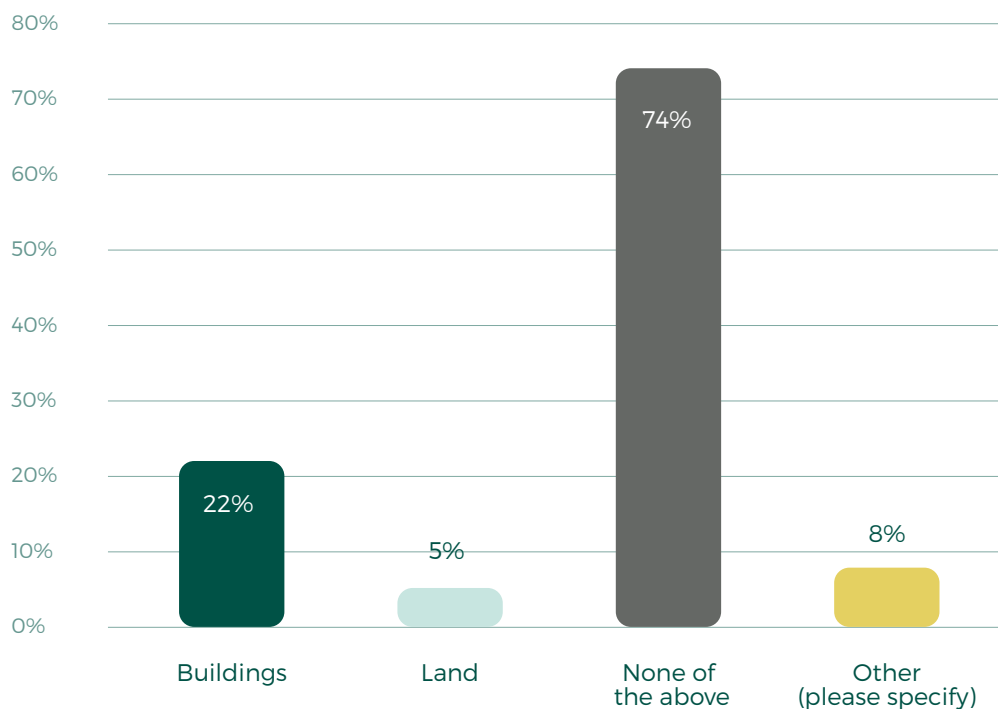
Figure 5: Assets owned

Half of the survey's respondents did not apply to any of the government support schemes because, "We needed additional staff to respond to service user needs so furloughing wasn't the solution. We were also successful in applying for COVID-19 Emergency grants". Others found themselves in the opposite situation, failing on grant applications but utilising the furlough scheme which "saved the organisation otherwise we would have gone bust. But now we are understaffed". Some were not eligible due to the nature of their service or because they had not been trading for long enough and could not demonstrate a drop in income, whilst others stated that they did not have the capacity to complete the application forms.

Out of those who did apply, 40% were successful in applying for the job retention scheme and statutory sick pay and another 35% gained support from various business support schemes. In addition to the government support schemes, 51% of the respondents received support from non-governmental sources such as VOSCUR and Big Lottery. Reasons cited for not applying included issues around eligibility, a lack of awareness of funding available, a lack of capacity, funding available inappropriate for organisation, and for a few, no immediate need. Moreover, many support organisations do not have charity status and so struggled to gain access to funding.
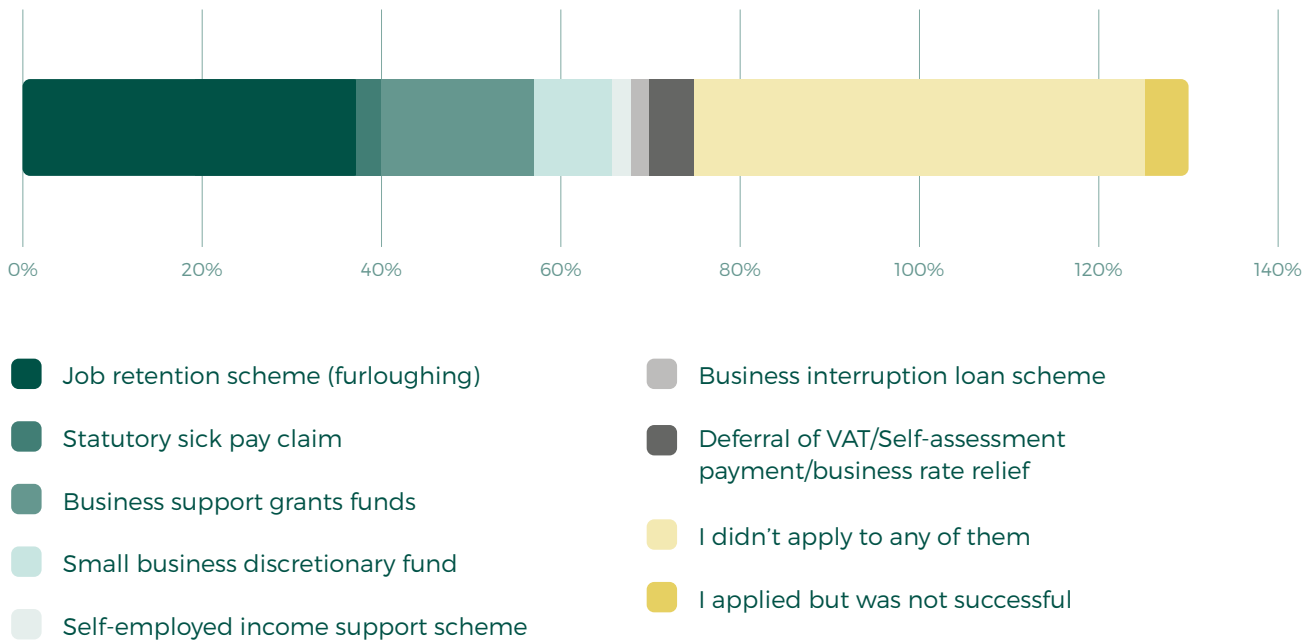
Figure 7: *COVID-19 Government financial relief programmes received*

VCSE organisations face many challenges that hinder sustainability and development including the lack of access to information on funding options, particularly smaller organisations who often struggle to secure the resources needed. Throughout all qualitative sessions, participants discussed the 'inappropriateness' of much of the funding throughout the pandemic thus far. The focus for many is to think strategically, attract investment, and diversify income, but as much of the grant funding has been repurposed to tackle immediate COVID-19 response, long-term strategies have been left on the back-burner. The impact of this on income and growth is a limitation of planning abilities and ultimately a limitation of the organisation's operations and ability to achieve its objectives.

In all aspects of this research, there were concerns over long-term core funding, which is both historic and ongoing, with many stating that much of the current funding is Covid-specific and therefore inappropriate for those whose services do not specifically respond to the COVID crisis. Core funding provides the capacity for organisations to think, plan, test new models or ideas and improve their goods and services. Having core funding security provides organisations with the capacity to apply for project funding and respond to specific needs. Participants therefore requested, 'trust and empowerment around deciding how best to spend the funds'. Responding in this way addresses the local needs identified by the organisations rather than those outlined in funders' criteria, as organisations 'have a better understanding of [their] context and local needs than funders' and therefore freedom and flexibility in allocation of funds is likely to improve outputs and impact.

KEY ASSETS IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

This section focuses on how the pandemic has impacted on VCSE organisations working practices and operations, their learning from the response, and the proven elements making up their resilience. This qualitative analysis will provide us with a deeper understanding of the dynamic assets that aided the VCSE Sector in its response to the Covid-19 crisis.

The most cited assets seen as useful in overcoming the lockdown were those that can be characterised as dynamic assets, such as: internal flexibility (62%), resilient leadership (56%), and creativity and innovation (54%). Collaborations and partnerships (40%), social networks (41%), digital infrastructure (38%) were also seen as important whilst financial reserves (26%) was the least cited asset. Other assets identified included: grants and donations, council support, roots in the community, and the flexibility of grant funders. The report will now provide qualitative data to explain and support the information illustrated in figure 8.
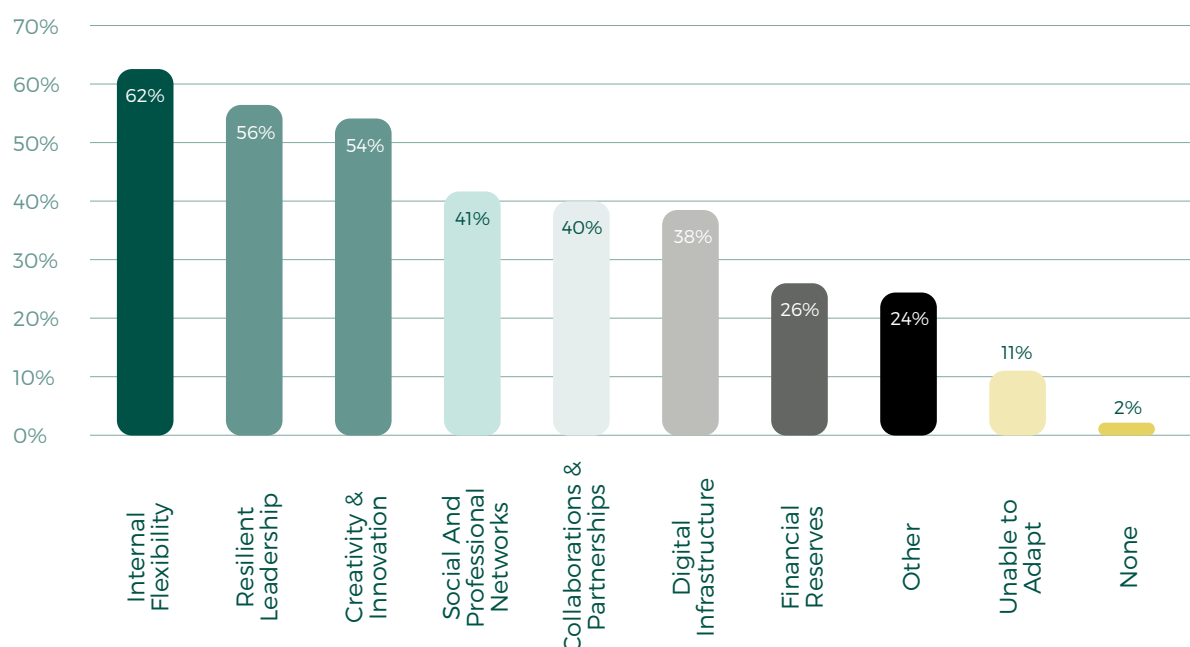
Figure 8: Most useful assets in being able to overcome the lockdown

4.1   INTERNAL FLEXIBILITY

As shown in figure 8, 62% of survey respondents indicated internal flexibility as a key asset in being able to respond to the lockdown. An organisation's 'internal flexibility' can take many shapes or forms to provide adaptability, a trait that the Bristol's VCSE Sector has vastly demonstrated during this crisis. In fact, 84% of the organisations responding to the survey were able to adapt their services to lockdown at least to some extent.

Amongst the different elements that provide 'internal flexibility', the most cited in the qualitative sessions was an adaptable and versatile team. Flexibility was necessary in adapting to new ways of working particularly in complying to the national Government's constantly changing guidance. This asset was also mentioned several times particularly in relation to the size of the organisation. Overall, most saw the flexibility in their staff and volunteers as the key to their success in overcoming the lockdown.

"The only reason we have been able to do that quickly and often, several times, as guidelines keep changing, is because we have really good people who understand their area of work and are willing to just go absolutely flat out to make sure that we can deliver whatever service we can deliver to our communities. So, people have been key."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, environmental focus]

"In terms of new challenges what was great was that the staff were able to adapt a lot of the services, being able to deliver it remotely was absolutely perfect, I was thrilled to bits."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, mental health services provision]

"Our key assets were our staff and volunteers, they were the ones who were risking their lives, working extra hours, those were the key assets."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, Black and Asian heritage communities-led and targeted provision]

Whilst some simply adapted their working hours by moving from full-time to part-time, others completely changed how they worked by adapting their delivery to online platforms and working from home. For many individuals, it proved to be a positive experience as it made them more productive, whilst others found it more challenging.

"The fact that some staff find it hard working from home but other staff have actually found it easier and feel like they are more productive at home, I think probably a lot of organisations have found out that."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, physical health focus]

"When I came into this organisation, we only had full-time staff. Everyone was full-time. Now almost half the staff team is part time. Half of our team is part time and that's great. I think more flexibility [is the key]. It gives you more hands when you need them. If you have a crisis you can get people to work more hours if they agree to. And that's the kind of thing you need to have for a crisis, and I say we're lucky we have that because crises happen, they just do. So, lessons learnt is look at your organisation's resilience and make sure that you are delivering at your capacity all the time".

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, young people and arts targeted provision]

Volunteers stood out as a crucial aspect of resilience and capacity. Overall, there was a steep rise in people volunteering their time and services due to the furloughing scheme. These furloughed volunteers were the foundation of Bristol's emergency frontline response and grassroots self-organised groups. Most were highly skilled which was crucial to the resilience of VCSEs, others were trained by the VCSE organisations themselves to meet the specific demands of the pandemic. This created a quick and agile mechanism for shared capacity and upskilling of volunteers who came from a wide variety of professional backgrounds, age and cultural groups.

"So, we trained some more driving volunteers and some phone line volunteers. Then we trained the phone line coordinators and driver coordinators, and now months in, the phone line coordinators and driver coordinators recruit and train new members that I may not even have met."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, food response focus]

"Having people in post with those skills was a lifesaver for us. If we hadn't had that it would have been a different picture."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, universal provision]

"Because we have quite a big reputation for volunteering opportunities, we had a range of individuals already interested in working with us whom we trained quickly. And yes, we always have quite a long list of people interested in volunteering with us."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, young people-targeted provision]

However, due to the constraints of the furlough scheme, the organisations that were unable to access support from volunteers had a spike in service demand whilst still being severely under-staffed.

"So, we made use of the government furlough scheme, which actually saved us, we would have actually gone bust in July without it but that now means we are massively under-staffed, so we're trying to deliver the same or a similar amount but with much fewer staff so that's a huge issue for us."

[Community business from the focus groups, environmental conservation focus]

Despite increased workload and new ways of working, staff were dedicated and open to learn new skills. Concerning our sample, the challenge of changing delivery methods was generally overcome with creativity and innovation as well as resilient leadership. Both elements will be explored in the dedicated sections of this report below, but flexibility and adaptability remained key. Flexibility was mentioned multiple times specifically in relation to small and grassroots organisations and the way that their simple and linear structure allows them to quickly adapt.

"It shone a light on what the tiny, small organisations can do in Bristol in responding to this new crisis, I know the councils and the big organisations took a longer time to respond because of their structure, but those grassroots organisations were able to transform their services and respond overnight."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, refugees and asylum seekers-targeted provision]

At the same time, larger organisations such as community anchors played a key role in organising the response and strategically distributing efforts and capacity of smaller groups through initiatives such as We Are Bristol and previously established infrastructure support.

For each and every organisation, independently of their size, the crisis brought challenges as well as opportunities to re-evaluate and re-assess internal strengths and weaknesses, which resulted in lessons learned and useful reflections for the future.

"We were much more resilient and much more flexible than everyone ever realised."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, people with complex needs-targeted provision]

"

"We learned that we could do a lot outside of our centre."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, refugees and asylum seekers-targeted provision]

"There have been some unexpected positives, although we have struggled with our capacity, we as a digital organisation were well established for digital engagement and the fact that a lot of things have moved online quite quickly... We were well placed to work in that space, so we've been able to offer online sessions and work experience for young people, talks, making workshops, even a design course."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, universal provision]

"I think it has clarified to a certain extent what we can or can't do as an organisation in its current form and what we could potentially do if we change."

[Community partnership, universal provision]

Organisations and groups were able to prioritise their services and determine which were most valuable in directly responding to the communities needs. To some extent, this brought a process of review and refocussing on communities that was deemed extremely beneficial. In some cases, with the support of funders and commissioners, it was possible to temporarily vary contracts and agreements, from the original focus of their services to meet the needs of the pandemic. Overall, the asset of flexibility was utilised for creating opportunities for improvement rather than simple adaptation.

"I think it has made us more community-focused and thinking about how we can be much more responsive to the community and our community need. You know for our artistic programme not just, it used to be quite a divider; like there was an artistic programme and a participation programme, now there is an artistic and participatory programme as well just working on being very community focused through that."

[Voluntary organisation from the focus groups, people with complex needs-targeted provision]

Case example: Karshare

Karshare has proven flexibility and strategic adaptation, and provides a good example of how the wider socio-economic infrastructure of the city supported the VCSE Sector in the delivery of the emergency response. It is a commercial enterprise providing a platform for individuals to rent out a car from members of their community and used their service to provide free cars to charities and other voluntary organisations.

"We are not a VCSE company as such, we are not an enterprise, but we have launched something to help voluntary enterprises. So that's the slight difference in terms of what we are. So, we are a commercial enterprise but what we've been doing since the beginning of the pandemic is supporting the voluntary sector with a specific service which is vehicles basically – free cars to help the voluntary sector deal with the challenges they have had to face."

4.2   RESILIENT LEADERSHIP

VCSE leadership has faced and continues to face significant challenges in a context of prolonged uncertainty. Supporting leadership has been discussed in the qualitative sample as a key priority in this crisis, particularly in the context of sustainability. With this knowledge, VCSE leaders have worked collaboratively with others in the public, private and third sectors to forge new relationships. It is unsurprising then to see 'resilient leadership' identified by the survey sample as one of the key assets in successfully responding to the pandemic. According to the qualitative data discussion, this resilience comes from adaptability and flexibility – as mentioned above - and most importantly from knowledge and experience; more specifically first-hand experience in managing crises.

"

"We asked our members immediately, who needs our help and who has support? Having that kind of experience in working in emergency and response, we have been a key asset in organising the response to the difficulty of the trauma and fear of dying, that has been embedded in our emergency response."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, refugees and asylum seekers-led and targeted provision]

Related to this idea of experience is the fact that various participants to the focus groups mentioned how responding to crisis is to some extent, embedded into the voluntary and community sectoral identity and therefore it is a natural – or at least a very common - characteristic amongst the Sector's leaders.

In the COVID-19 crisis, we have also witnessed a significant rise of informal leadership particularly in leading volunteering, self-organised groups to emergency response and unlocking communities' potential to 'take care of themselves'. One fitting example is the Bristol Somali Task Force, which was joined by over 200 people offering money from their own pockets and undertaking genuine volunteering efforts to help the neighbourhoods.

"Sometimes it's not about the resources, it's about being resourceful. No doubt that we need some form of money to function, but it showed that we can do a lot if we come together. The task force was including some people who run small charities who were providing food and collecting prescriptions for people who were self-isolating. So, it is not all about a needy community, it is the people from the community contributing and mobilising when the crisis strikes. We need leadership in the city, when people see some form of leadership and support and encouragement, then it makes you think: actually, we are not alone, we can do this in our own capacity and organisationally."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, Somali communities-led and targeted provision]

Although all the qualitative sample's answers to questions about leadership were positive, there was also a common theme throughout the discussion about future challenges and potential threats to leaders' resilience. The first of which is the high level of uncertainty that makes good and well-planned decision-making extremely hard if not impossible in this climate.

"The issue is that we have no idea how this is going to play out and the timescales, so every time we plan something changes, we can't plan anything more than a month ahead."

[Community business from the focus groups, heritage and conservation services]

During two focus groups and one piggy-back session it was agreed that it would be impossible to sustain this in the long-term. Reacting to new challenges weekly and planning in complete uncertainty as well as the increase in communities' needs, has often translated into overloaded individuals and teams across the board. In this sense, mental health concerns became the centre of the conversation.

"For community leaders, it's quite a fatiguing place to be because the pace is relentless and I think as leaders we are being looked to show that community leadership in that community in which we work. And I think it's hard work for us as leaders to actually keep that going, and we are going to have to keep that going for at least possibly until spring next year, you know it's quite a daunting prospect, and I am worried about how we individually manage that."

[VCSE organisation from the piggy-back sessions, infrastructure organisation]

"I'm worried about burnout. If this rate of work continues for the next six months, I'm worried. We too are looking at the mental health of our staff because we had some wobbles. Look at the time when lockdown happened, a lot of holidays were booked and cancelled, so people have worked since March and are still working and haven't taken a break. The burnout of leadership is a serious concern."

[Voluntary organisation from the piggy-back sessions, anchor organisation]

Moreover, leaders had to focus on supporting the emotional wellbeing of their teams who are dealing with higher and/or more complex levels of needs for prolonged periods of time, whilst addressing their own needs, balancing childcare, working remotely and managing the IT issues that were exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. This led to a discussion of the responsibility of leaders to support their team's physical and mental health.

"So, for me that has been one of my key focuses because if I do not have a work-force, we cannot do anything anyways. They are the most important thing for me to take care of and I would like to think I am doing an ok job."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, young people-targeted provision]

"Sure. I think we have responded very well but then I am reflecting on my own personal actions. We, I suppose, we went into a state of adrenaline because we carried the weight of employing 36 people. So, we moved in and out of their lives and the people in their lives who rely on their salary [...] So, you know, the safety of our staff, the safety of our beneficiaries was paramount."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, community anchor with universal provision]

"We had to very much protect our crew from stress, protecting our staff and putting stuff around them to try and protect them from different demands and keep them focused on the basics of patient care."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, transport emergency response]

In the light of everything mentioned above, VCSE leadership also faced challenges in terms of their own mental health and resilience. Some admitted that they needed support in managing their mental health in difficult times. For VCSE leadership, the service demands and pace required led to them feeling overwhelmed and burned-out. They also admitted to putting staff welfare first and shouldering the organisation's burdens, even at the expense of their own health and wellbeing, noting that it's often a 'lonely' and 'exhausting' road.

"

"Yes, sometimes it's overwhelming. I mean, we encourage each other if we are recognising some of the signs and say, maybe you need to take some time off or even maybe just go home a couple of hours early today. So, yes, that is the great advantage of working for a mental health charity. It's lovely because everybody understands and there is no shame in needing support."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, mental health provision].

"And some of the things I was hearing I couldn't tell anyone because I didn't want anyone else to have to hear what I was hearing. So, I guess that was just tough to try and internalise. Normally I would share and talk about things, but you know one thing about leadership is, you are the one that must carry that on your shoulders."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, transport emergency response]

Despite issues of uncertainty of the future running through all the participants' responses around leadership, all confirmed the central role of their teams in helping them deliver effective leadership. Communication with the core team and Board meetings were often more regular than previous to the pandemic, and leadership involved staff in decision-making. This democratic approach allowed for the weight of responsibility to be distributed and resulted in more support for CEOs and Founders to plan and think strategically. What a lot of these points appear to have in common is the importance of diversity of thought, collaboration in decision-making and the need to support and build capacity within VCSE leadership.

"The Board has been most certainly helpful and supportive to me, helping me think about the finances and how that is likely to be impacted."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, universal provision]

"I think our Board are generally quite good at attending and engaging… Our Board meets every month which is very frequent compared to some Boards. In terms of leadership, I think our Board are very quick to offer. I mean some of them work in very large corporations. The benefit of that being that their teams may have already tried Microsoft Team and Zoom and something else and they have worked out which one is best for them and they can feed that information to us so that we can shortcut our process of working out what would work technically. So that was useful, and I think they are generally just supportive in whatever."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, mental health services provision]

Case example: The Green House

The Green House, a resilient, flexible, and trusting leadership team was key.

"That's the usual way that we work. It's great, but its slow. But the nature of having all that collaboration in consultation. What we learnt is that when the chips are down and we absolutely must act, we can and the systems that we put in place work very well. So, beyond the individual lessons learnt, for me what's most important is that I trust my leadership team and I trust my Board to know that they can survive, and they can flourish in whatsoever challenge."

4.3   CREATIVITY & INNOVATION

Many organisations not only adapted but completely transformed their operation, and digital transformation was central to this. Change that often takes months if not years, took days in some instances. The Sector's response to key challenges, such as finding alternative ways to communicate with the digitally excluded, or the adaptation of traditional face-to-face services to online platforms, or even the strategic planning to maintain a sustainable model during crisis, has required a significant amount of creativity and innovation.

One example is given by a voluntary organisation delivering services for older people included in our focus groups. After realising that 1/3 of their membership was unable to receive emails and other online communications, the organisation team designed a paper newsletter to be sent via post to all the digitally excluded individuals. Another case was that of a self-organising group serving faith groups whose first language is not always English. The group partnered with the NHS to prepare the content and record short videos in multiple languages with clear and updated information about social distancing rules and how to keep safe. Having roots in the communities they serve helped their innovation and creativity in terms of understanding particular barriers and delivering appropriately sensitive cultural responses.

> "One of the key things that we have done that other organisations have not been able to do is having interpreters available for all our calls. So, we have been able to have much more detailed conversations with people."
>
> *[VCSE organisation from the interviews, refugees and asylum seekers-targeted provision]*

> "We had a project for people who are at risk in the community so they could come, meet and say I'm worried about this and that. And we were providing that support. When COVID kicked in, that became a phone-line, so that anyone, not just the people who have been attending, but any of our members or anyone who went on our website could actually have a phone call and talk to a human being and sometimes it's just about talking to a human being and realising hang on I'm not on my own, that there are other people out there."
>
> *[VCSE organisation from the interviews, disabled people-led and targeted provision]*

> "Our community has very strong taboos and it stops them coming forward to get help in ways that traditional British people aren't stopped [...] We are learning, that there is a lot of pockets of need in the community that people are embarrassed to talk about, and it is embarrassing because of how we are. We are a very proud people and we don't like to say it, but that's who we are."
>
> *[VCSE organisation from the interviews, Black heritage communities-led and targeted provision]*

In many instances, events were adapted to online formats, such as dance lessons through Zoom, playful and creative content for children, and even two of the biggest events of the year, Pride and St Paul Carnival, were successfully organised through online video platforms. Another example is given by the Travelling Light Theatre Company, who sought innovative and inclusive ways of engaging with and maintaining contact with their primary service users who are young audiences and families who were isolating.

Case example: TLTC

Travelling Light Theatre Company is a charity specialising in theatre for young audiences.

"So, because we kind of completely changed our programme, we thought, ok what can we do to help? So, we worked with 30 young disabled people and they particularly struggle with changes in routine and isolation, so we really wanted to have an offer for them [...] So, we started off with recorded videos that we had made for them from songs or activities they could do at home and then moved onto Zoom sessions [...] We created activity boxes and we worked with one of our artists who normally does the designs for our shows [...] So that was something that we were able to kind of like respond to really quickly and kind of using a little bit of these skills that we had in terms of working artists to be able to do something to help the community."

However, since digital outputs have clear limitations, the majority of organisations chose a blended delivery model to ensure their outreach would not be impacted by digital exclusion.

"We've been looking at making packs and craft packs to deliver to people at homes and they can either follow along with a YouTube video or access a workshop online or not go online at all. This is really doing more on what we called blended delivery."

[Community business from the focus groups, young LGBTQ+ people-targeted provision]

This type of innovative thinking was also crucial in keeping various organisations sustainable throughout lockdown. Rethinking core delivery and income diversification, identifying the organisation's key strengths and utilising opportunities such as working flexibly with understanding and supportive funders, created the conditions for an innovative approach to sustainability and resilience in times of crisis.

"

"We have a cohort of 10 young people and they were meant to do placements in within organisations over the summer and obviously lots of those organisations are closed or they don't have the financial capacity to support someone at the moment. So, we pivoted the programme to offer commissions so that the young people would still get the same amount of money they were expecting to get from those placements and also covered some of our core funding, like our staff's wages, every single member of staff was involved in those commissions and then we could redistribute some of the funding to cover that, so that was a massive help and meant that we didn't have to apply to emergency stuff so we felt like we were extremely lucky."

[Social enterprise from the focus groups, young creatives-targeted provision]

4.4   SOCIAL & PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

Social and professional networks were indicated as a key asset in responding to the pandemic by 41% of survey respondents. The qualitative sample supported this data and offered additional nuances. Once again, COVID-19 provided the circumstances for the realisation of the crucial importance of existing assets, such as a well-established membership network.

"In terms of the key assets, obviously staff but also contacts that we have across the piece, not necessarily collaborations but just those contacts and relationships that's been built up in the past, you know that we were able to draw on and people were able to draw on us. I suppose a sort of trust that existed with people that we worked with over time, we were able to draw on that and be drawn on in the same way. We were able to feed in where there were particular needs that we found were not being addressed, because we had established those connections before."

." [VCSE organisation from the focus groups, women-led and targeted provision]

In other cases, new relationships which came about as a result of the pandemic saw them through the crisis and were a key asset in their response.

"We had lots of companies calling up and saying we would like to give you this. We had shops giving us masks. Not a huge amount of money but it just kept coming and from people I had no previous contact at all. The positive side of this is that people have come together and gone that extra miles for us. Relationships. Small shops. Not big businesses. We didn't have a collaboration as such, but we had this."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, supporting services for people who experienced domestic violence]

This sense of generosity – or 'fraternity' as it was named by a few participants - was also at the core of the informal volunteering wave, as shown by the case example here illustrated.

Case example: The Somali Task Force

The Somali Task Force mentioned above capitalised on existing neighbourhood networks to expand its outreach and naturally organise around these communities' relationships and connections.

"We organised ourselves, and then we had to think within the city who can be responsible in each area, like Southmead or Bedminster or St Paul's or Barton Hill, Easton. So, we have to organise ourselves and identify who needs our support. Not everybody will know the task force or come seeking for help, but if you know your neighbour is struggling then you can come to the group and say I have a neighbour who can't go out, so I need to help them."

4.5   COLLABORATIONS & PARTNERSHIPS

"So, in terms of key assets and the other one I want to add is our partnerships, having relationships with other organisations and being able to join and do things together obviously makes us much stronger as organisations in order to serve those."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, universal provision]

As discussed above, most of the study's participants cited improvements in partnerships and collaboration during the lockdown. Responding to the pandemic required strategic distribution of resources and skills through collaboration, and these partnerships emerged far quicker than they otherwise would have done. This non-competitive response was central for many respondents in their vision for the future of the Sector.

"We kind of have this list of incoming support from businesses and groups saying 'do you want our kitchens', 'do you want our furloughed staff as volunteers', do you want… 'we're a food production facility, we can put some ready meals together for you', so what we were doing was facilitating those offers and plugging them into the community-level areas of support, if appropriate."

[VCSE from the interviews, frontline emergency food response]

In time of crisis, the Sector's natural response has been collaborative, supportive and understanding not only to communities but also to partner organisations and their staff. Many examples were given of organisations reaching out to partners to simply 'check in' or offer support in many forms; such as sharing knowledge of opportunities, expertise or resources. Food banks, for example, trained other organisations on how to tackle food insecurity. Within the interviews sample, focusing specifically on frontline emergency response organisations, competition was mentioned only in relation to future concerns around funding cuts, economic recession and austerity. This approach has set out the conditions for the incredible impact delivered collaboratively by various organisations and also at cross-sectoral level.

> "So, we provided volunteers to help with National Food Service deliveries as they were doing a good work. We were involved with smaller community groups in responding to kind of their capacity needs around deliveries. You know, you had central hubs around the city. So, yes it was a combined effort about allocating resources at the grassroot level and at the community level or where it was needed most."
>
> *[VCSE organisation from the interviews, housing services provision]*

This sort of collaboration was seen across the sector. Alongside supporting local mutual aid initiatives, more than half (54%) of the survey's organisations were involved in a Covid-19 response initiative with for example;

- Malcolm X Food Consortium
- Bridging the Gap helpline service
- National Food Service Bristol
- Bristol Food Union
- Feeding Bristol
- Can Do Bristol

- Bristol Food Helpline
- CCG Mental Health Cell
- Bristol Support Hub
- Building Healthier Communities Delivery Group/VOSCUR
- Age UK Bristol

"

Community anchor organisations and the NHS Locality Partners have been highlighted as absolutely key in the delivery of emergency responses to the virus, particularly in areas such as social care, housing, disabled people services, older people services and supporting people with complex needs, delivering targeted provision partnerships with local authorities and other public bodies. It has also been stated by various organisations and community businesses in the qualitative sample that there is intention to build on those partnerships in the future.

"For us, one of the main positives has been about this collaborative work because we have worked together with partners more closely, probably than ever before [...] We have always had a relationship with social services, but we have never had a relationship with housing and home services; it's just not been there at all. I would now say that we have got a good relationship with them. Not just 'a' relationship but a good one! So, about turn in 6 months from nothing! So, yes, I think those are good things to keep hold of."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, refugees and asylum seekers-targeted provision]

"We loaned our specialist paramedics and some of our specialist equipment like ventilators and monitors to the ambulance service and the ambulance service used our team and our team's expertise. We were supporting the NHS, so we were offering our support to the ambulance service and hospitals."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, frontline emergency transport response]

"We worked really closely with lots of our other partner organisations in the city. We changed the funding that we offered to other organisations, so I'd say collaboration has been really good during lockdown and the pandemic. We've been able to support smaller organisations."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, young LGBT+ and creative people-targeted provision]

"I think that we have really learnt the importance of collaboration. We need to be supporting each other and in fact without supporting each other we are all going to fail. It has really taught me how valuable that is, something I am trying to instil in others."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, frontline emergency food response]

Case example: Bristol Refugee Forum

The refugee sector collaboration saw organisations in this area coming together through the Bristol Refugee Forum to ensure people seeking sanctuary are supported.

"Also, one of the key asset was the refugee sector collaboration, we set up an emergency meeting and then met weekly, this is when we identified who is doing what and came up with one of our partners changing their shop into a food bank, so all refugees sector could access food and refer to them, another organisation was helping mothers to access milk and diapers, so identifying who is doing what has been extremely helpful in order to share resources, share the numbers of people who had difficulties. [...] I don't know how we would have emerged without that collaboration in Bristol and there have been other collaborations outside the refugee sector, we worked with minority ethnic consortiums in London, in Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle, there has been a huge effort to share resources."

4.6 DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

"Key asset in responding is technology to be able to run a mobile and home working team."

[Social enterprise from the focus groups, young Black men-targeted delivery]

"I'll put it this way, I've never even noticed Zoom four months ago and now I use it every day."

[VCSE organisation from the focus groups, older people-led and targeted provision]

Digital infrastructure and technology in general have been key assets in responding to the virus according to 38% of survey respondents and the vast majority of participants to the qualitative sessions. Although the transition from office to home-working has not been smooth for everyone and some organisations are still trying out new methods of delivery, the majority agree that adding new digital tools and IT learning has enabled them to successfully adapt most of their services and, in some cases, reach new people who they otherwise would not have engaged.

"

"We certainly see a number of people engaging digitally and certainly a number of young people engage with us who might not have engaged otherwise, so for example looking at young people who may not attend because it's really far away if they live across Bristol, transport issues, and also young disabled people with additional access needs, so being able to do that digitally has been really helpful."

[Community business from the focus groups, young LGBTQ+ people-targeted provision]

"We've been doing some music programmes online and that's actually been better for some young people who are less confident and maybe more comfortable to stay home and log onto their tablet and do a session."

[Community business from the focus groups, universal provision]

Case example: The National Food Service

For the National Food Service, digital infrastructure played a large role in their response.

"Digital infrastructure played a huge role. All the coordinating is basically online. I mean, apart from them in the kitchen because they are cooking, everything else is an online role. Most of the coordinators are amazing with their volunteers online. And the software we are using is all free software. So, we've been using Google Docs, at first to manage everything, to manage all the data. Recently we moved to Air Table. They gave us a free professional trial because we were doing such charitable work which is good because we kind of reached the limit for what Google Docs could process. I mean the number of orders we had, so we had to move over to Air Table. That has been going well. It means things are a bit more automated, which is nice, it's making peoples' jobs easier. So, yes absolutely, everything is done online, like 80%, with free software".

There are however limitations to digital infrastructure which were discussed extensively in all focus groups sessions, particularly in relation to the issue of digital exclusion and poverty, and captured in the interim report for this project. For obvious reasons, organisations that rely on footfall have generally faced bigger challenges in adapting services to online platforms. Whilst many infrastructure organisations are considering to maintain the new delivery models through digital means that are cheaper, faster and more effective and therefore might be changed for good. For anchor organisations and community hubs, the adaptation approach is meant to be temporary and the main question remains: 'When can we go back to normal again?'

"For other people, it hasn't worked at all. In some things, it has given us the scope to work with people we wouldn't have engaged before with the physical space, but there's really not any replacement for that."

[Community business and anchor from the focus groups, universal provision]

4.7   FINANCIAL RESERVES

While 41% of organisations reported to have not experienced a drop in income to the extent that the organisation would stop operating as shown in figure 9, for a third of all respondents, their reserves will allow for them to remain operational for a year at most - 18% for less than a year, 12% for less than 6 months, 4% for less than 3 months; illustrating the precarity of the financial situation for many organisations.
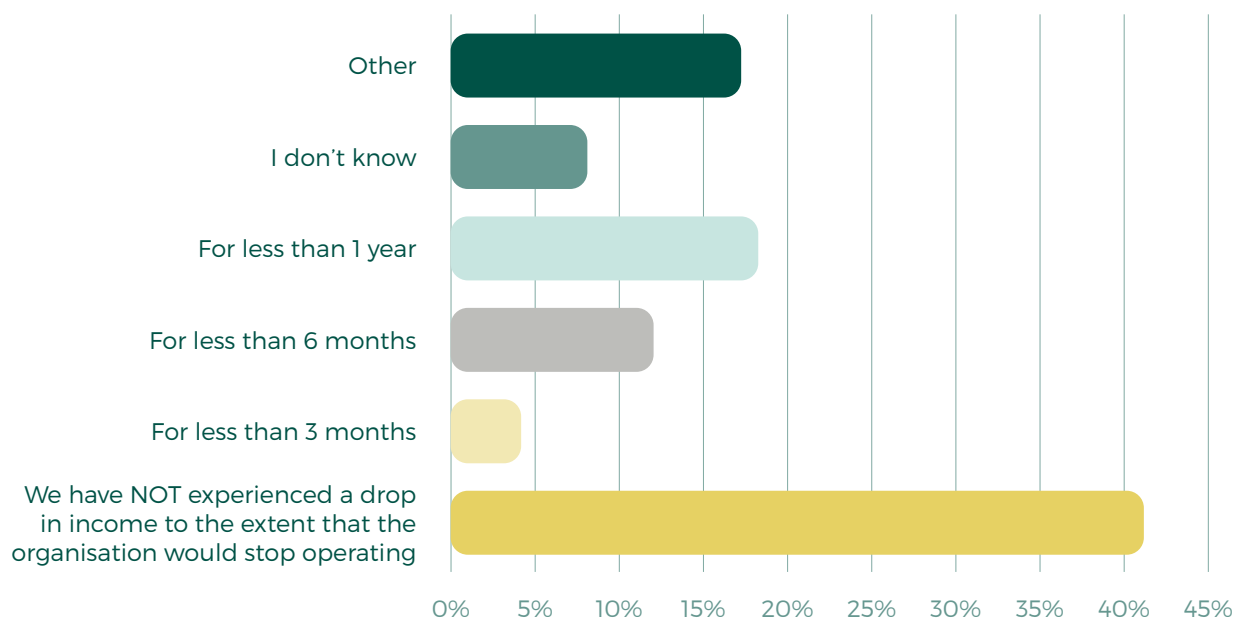

Figure 9: How long can your organisation remain operational on your reserves?

The vast majority of organisations responding to the survey (66%) stated to have financial reserves or savings. However, only 26% of survey respondents identified financial reserves as key assets in their response. Amongst these, the most commonly represented organisations were community businesses and community hubs, generally owning or managing a building, social enterprises, and exempt charities led by religious authorities. Whilst two-thirds stated to have financial reserves and most organisations were able to access emergency funding from government and organisations such as Quartet and the National Lottery, many felt uncertain about the future of their organisation. Some were unsure of how long the emergency funding would last, whilst a few others had no access to emergency funds at all.

"For us personally, we're ok, but I can see us needing financial support for our services to continue."

[VCSE organisation from the interviews, universal provision]

 "In terms of financial stability, we are actually in a really good financial position this year. We were worried as a charity, our donations would decrease but because big funders like the Quartet Foundation were able to come up with money quickly, we were able to access that and cover our costs for this year. Next year is a different story, we don't know what the picture will be… Right now, we are in a good financial position."

[VCSE organisation from the interview, women-led and targeted provision]

Funders were identified as the ones who have provided critical 'bridging resources' to VCSE organisations. Most agreed that long-term organisational planning is not possible because of the uncertainty of the pandemic. The uncertain times were also affecting funders as they could only provide short-term funds. This does not help planning as short-term funding means continued uncertainty for VCSE organisations. However, those funders who were identified as flexible and understanding in the way organisations needed to manage their resources helped the VCSE Sector to deploy funds to meeting urgent needs without having to go through bureaucratic channels.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE VCSE SECTOR

With the ultimate goal of exploring the role and potential of the VCSE Sector in the city going forward, the third phase of the research directed its focus towards the future.

The first step was to code answers about a desirable – or even ideal - future for the Sector from the first and second research phases. These answers were processed to create ideal guidelines and formulate key questions for the subsequent visioning exercise. This process allowed the initial draft of a Vision for the Future of the VCSE Sector, that according to the research evidence collected until then, was deemed to be desirable by all parts of the VCSE Sector.

The next step was to ensure that this vision could be aligned with the strategic intent of the remaining parts of the city social infrastructure and the other key strategic stakeholders in Bristol. The vision's framework was further explored during the four visioning sessions of phase 3, which created the space for an extremely advanced conversation; including representatives from the public sector, the private sector and the voluntary sector itself. The visioning sessions brought us to the final iteration of the Vision, its seven principles, and the formulation of actionable recommendations to achieve it.

> The Vision for the Future sees a VCSE Sector that is: equitable, appropriately funded, enabled to plan long-term, meaningfully included in decision-making, rooted in community, resilient and strongly connected city-wide.

To some extent, these principles are already present within the Sector and its modus operandi. However, the current infrastructure both within and beyond the Sector can be improved to achieve greater consistency and inclusiveness overall, as will be examined in the recommendations.

The circular template was selected to visually represent the interconnectivity and dependency of each element to the other. For instance, for the Sector to be able to feed into the city decision-making, which is generally planned across a span of years, it will be necessary to achieve financial stability first, through an appropriate funding ecosystem – and other revenue streams – that will enable the Sector to plan for the long-term and offer a meaningful contribution. Similarly, the Sector's resilience is inherently interdependent on its roots within community and its wider connections across the city, as was highlighted in the previous section on assets. Following this logic, the overall Vision cannot be achieved unless all principles are effectively and successfully acted on simultaneously.

5.1   EQUITY

The objective of uncovering the equalities issues affecting and shaping the VCSE Sector was embedded throughout the entire research process and enabled us to draw out the diverse experiences within the Sector's response to COVID-19 and the related crisis. This has allowed us to scope the significant impact the VCSE Sector has made, in terms of identifying systemically hindered communities and reaching them with appropriately sensitive and agile emergency support tailored to their needs. This came with the longer-term ambition of retaining those links to support their efforts to overcome structural and personal barriers. In other words, we were able to see first-hand how the VCSE Sector tackles systemic inequalities in a time of crisis as well as being able to see the limitations of its impact.

In this context, it is not surprising to see the word 'equity' as one of the most commonly mentioned principles in the participants' visualisation of an ideal future for the VCSE Sector. More specifically, equity here takes different nuances of meaning, ranging from:

•   An equitable VCSE Sector that does not discriminate in the first place;

•   A VCSE Sector that works in an equitable environment that enables it to tackle systemic inequalities;

•   A VCSE Sector that is part of an equitable relationship within the wider socio-economic infrastructure of the city and therefore is seen as an equal partner next to the public and private sectors, and just as fundamental.

5.2   APPROPRIATE FUNDING

The second most commonly mentioned principle when designing an ideal future for the VCSE Sector was unsurprisingly the notion of a 'well-funded' Sector. Historically, it is well known how austerity policies have significantly impacted the VCSE sector for decades, decimating sub-categories of organisations, fuelling the long-held concern of financial instability and weakening the Sector's capacity to operate and plan for the future. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated these difficulties, prompting parts of the Sector to make excellent use of its dynamic assets to respond to the emergency when in lack of financial assets. Once again, the discussion led to the concept of equity and the need to implement equitable and nuanced funding approaches that will take into consideration the different barriers that micro and small organisations, and particularly equalities-led organisations, face when bidding against larger organisations delivering universal services.

The discussion also led to how various business models have clearly been impacted differently by the crisis. Whilst frontline organisations in long-term relationships with funders were generally able to access some short-term funding pots as bridging financial support to survive the crisis, trading organisations, such as community businesses or social enterprises, saw their main source of income plummet overnight at the start of the first lockdown. Community businesses and social enterprises have had to re-organise their financial reserves and adapt their services whenever possible to stay afloat for the time necessary for the market to start moving again. A similar and sometimes overlapping situation is that of community hubs' owning or managing buildings. These have faced extremely difficult financial challenges as a result of not being able to rely on footfall services, and many decided to offer their asset for free to be used as part of the emergency response. Appropriate funding will have to consider all these different realities.

5.3 LONG-TERM PLANNING

Another concern frequently raised by respondents when asked to look forward to determine what the future of the Sector should look like was the difficulty in finding the capacity to 'think long-term' in the first place. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis that forced most of the Sector's leadership into constant challenges – i.e. planning reviews to abide by the ever-changing guidelines; the need to quickly respond to increasing community needs; and the recurrent applications to short-term smaller pots of emergency funding – the Sector's ability and capacity to plan at all was severely diminished, leaving no space or time to think ahead into the future.

With the positive news of vaccines being distributed and the Brexit deal being agreed, the external conditions for longer-term planning are, to some extent, set in place again. It is now responsibility of the city to create an environment that enables the VCSE Sector to truly plan long-term and be an effective partner and contributor to the decision-making in the city.

5.4 INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING

Logically, the next step to create our Vision is to look into what the current city infrastructure is lacking to ensure that the VCSE Sector, once it is enabled to plan long-term, can take a seat at all the right tables to feed into the city decision-making. This discussion has then been expanded from simply looking at participation into the notion of fair representation and equal dialogue; i.e. truly 'inclusive decision-making'. In other words, it has been highlighted how having one person from the VCSE Sector into the room is not truly representative of the diverse perspectives that all the different segments of the Sector could and should bring. In addition to be an unreasonable expectation of these individuals. Particularly from the equalities-lens perspective, it is crucially important to bring a complete range of voices to discussions that lead to decisions on key aspects of the city's social, economic, political and environmental future.

5.5 ROOTED IN COMMUNITY

As shown in the mid-section of this paper, the Bristol VCSE Sector is truly and firmly 'rooted in community'. This element has been identified as one of the key factors making up the VCSE Sector's incredible resilience and a main asset in responding to the pandemic emergency. The COVID-19 crisis has possibly even tightened relationships at grassroots level, strengthening and expanding original networks out of necessity and willingness to help and support individuals and neighbourhoods. It is not surprising to see organisations recognising how impactful this asset is and selecting it as a priority element to be included in the Vision for the Future of the Sector. A lot of opportunities are present in terms of strengthening, enabling and re-organising these connections to ensure everyone is reached with adequate support and the Sector is enabled to thrive by capitalising on its strengths and expertise.

5.6 RESILIENT

Whilst the Sector's overall 'resilience' has been proven after years of funding cuts, we now have a deeper understanding of each factor making up said resilience thanks to the Sector's response to the crisis and its high levels of adaptability, creativity and innovation, which allowed the quick revision of services to meet simultaneously both government guidelines and community needs.

Starting from such a positive place, it is also important to identify what the limitations are and respond accordingly; whether that means further building digital infrastructure and internal systems or providing mental health support for the Sector's staff, or more.

In addition to this, the themes of community agency, informal readership and mutual aid groups were explored at various stages of the research in relation to resilience. The informal part of the VCSE Sector has proven to be pivotal in the voluntary sector and the city's wider social ecosystem. Bristol's COVID-19 emergency response would not have been possible without the robust ties found at grassroots level and the driving force of informal community leadership. The challenge now is that of providing appropriate support to enable the diverse self-organising groups to continue making invaluable impact in the long-term.
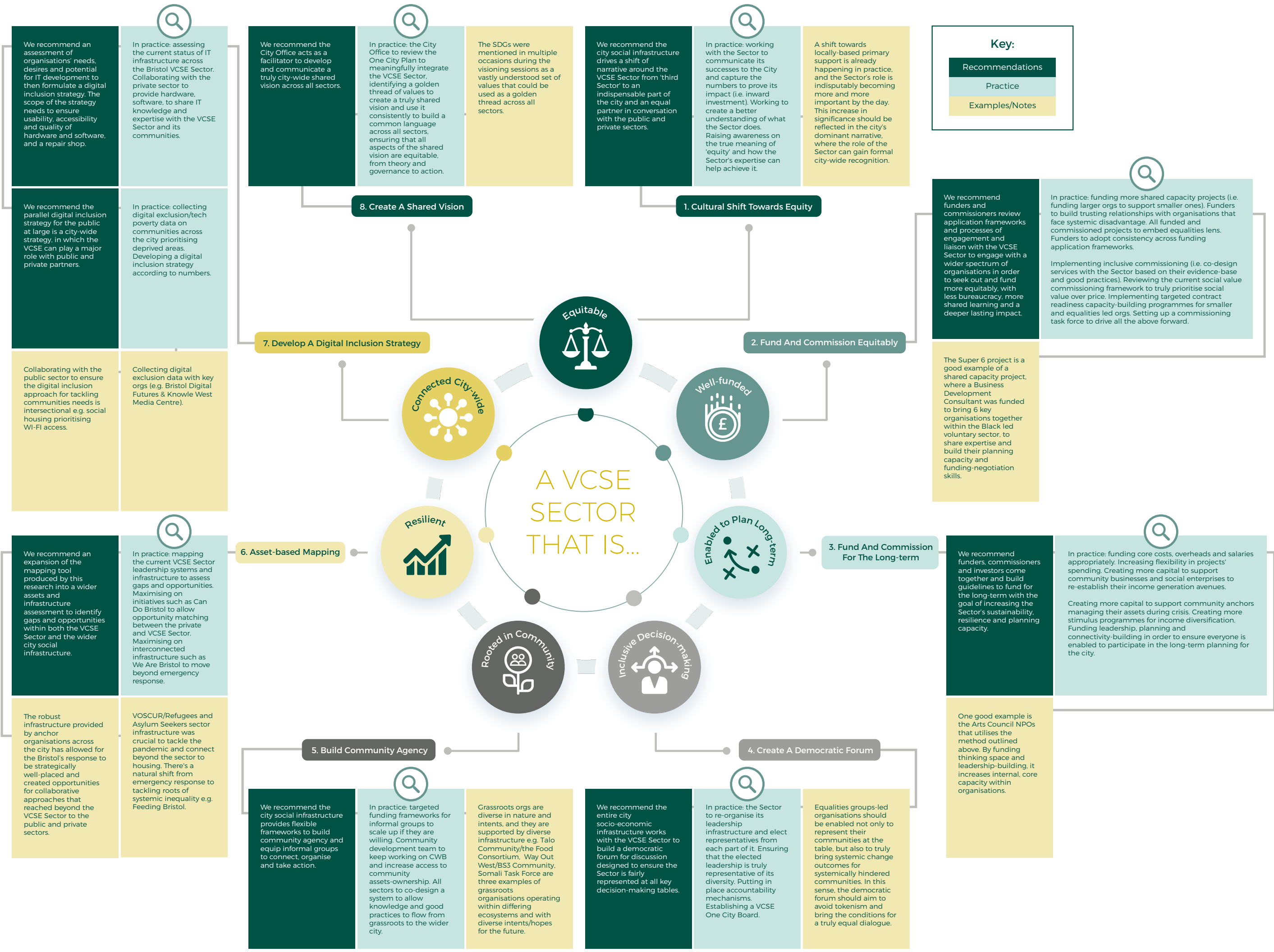
5.7   CONNECTED CITY-WIDE

Finally, the seventh principle of the Vision is the concept of 'city-wide interconnectivity'. COVID-19 has not only provided the opportunity for communities to strengthen their bonds, but also for the Sector to build new connections beyond its remit. Throughout the initial lockdown and up until now, support in the form of capital, goods and expertise has been provided from the private and public sectors to the voluntary organisations delivering the frontline response. Joint efforts brought initiatives of invaluable impact to tackle essential needs such as food insecurity, tech poverty and mental health support. All this was possible also thanks to the VCSE Sector infrastructure and the connections developed around its community anchors, that were built steadily over many years and therefore were already in place previous to the pandemic. This experience has proven once and for all that the city of Bristol will come together in times of crisis. The challenge now is to remain together in the long-run.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Once the Vision had been agreed, the final stage of the research led us to the practical question of how to achieve it. Due to its wide-range nature, this conversation was extended to the rest of the city socio-economic infrastructure to ensure feasibility and combined efforts and intent in the formulation of the recommendations.

As shown in the circular infographic in the following page, an outer circle was added to include the recommendations, grouped under key headings, and linked to the seven visionary principles for the Sector. All recommendations have the potential to have an integrated impact across the piece. For instance, 'funding and commissioning equitably', if implemented, will embody the principle of equity and realise ambitions for a well-funded Sector that is enabled to plan long-term. Similar to what was stated previously for the Vision's principles, the actionable framework will not be effective unless all recommendations are acted on in a timely manner.

A VCSE SECTOR THAT IS...

Equitable · Well-funded · Enabled to Plan Long-term · Inclusive Decision-making · Rooted in Community · Resilient · Connected City-wide

Key:
- Recommendations
- Practice
- Examples/Notes

8. Create A Shared Vision

Recommendation: We recommend the City Office acts as a facilitator to develop and communicate a truly city-wide shared vision across all sectors.

Practice: In practice: the City Office to review the One City Plan to meaningfully integrate the VCSE Sector, identifying a golden thread of values to create a truly shared vision and use it consistently to build a common language across all sectors, ensuring that all aspects of the shared vision are equitable, from theory and governance to action.

Examples/Notes: The SDGs were mentioned in multiple occasions during the visioning sessions as a vastly understood set of values that could be used as a golden thread across all sectors.

1. Cultural Shift Towards Equity

Recommendation: We recommend the city social infrastructure drives a shift of narrative around the VCSE Sector from 'third Sector' to an indispensable part of the city and an equal partner in conversation with the public and private sectors.

Practice: In practice: working with the Sector to communicate its successes to the City and capture the numbers to prove its impact (i.e. inward investment). Working to create a better understanding of what the Sector does. Raising awareness on the true meaning of 'equity' and how the Sector's expertise can help achieve it.

Examples/Notes: A shift towards locally-based primary support is already happening in practice, and the Sector's role is indisputably becoming more and more important by the day. This increase in significance should be reflected in the city's dominant narrative, where the role of the Sector can gain formal city-wide recognition.

7. Develop A Digital Inclusion Strategy

Recommendation: We recommend an assessment of organisations' needs, desires and potential for IT development to then formulate a digital inclusion strategy. The scope of the strategy needs to ensure usability, accessibility and quality of hardware and software, and a repair shop.

Practice: In practice: assessing the current status of IT infrastructure across the Bristol VCSE Sector. Collaborating with the private sector to provide hardware, software, to share IT knowledge and expertise with the VCSE Sector and its communities.

Recommendation: We recommend the parallel digital inclusion strategy for the public at large is a city-wide strategy, in which the VCSE can play a major role with public and private partners.

Practice: In practice: collecting digital exclusion/tech poverty data on communities across the city prioritising deprived areas. Developing a digital inclusion strategy according to numbers.

Examples/Notes: Collaborating with the public sector to ensure the digital inclusion approach for tackling communities needs is intersectional e.g. social housing prioritising WI-FI access.

Examples/Notes: Collecting digital exclusion data with key orgs (e.g. Bristol Digital Futures & Knowle West Media Centre).

2. Fund And Commission Equitably

Recommendation: We recommend funders and commissioners review application frameworks and processes of engagement and liaison with the VCSE Sector to engage with a wider spectrum of organisations in order to seek out and fund more equitably, with less bureaucracy, more shared learning and a deeper lasting impact.

Practice: In practice: funding more shared capacity projects (i.e. funding larger orgs to support smaller ones). Funders to build trusting relationships with organisations that face systemic disadvantage. All funded and commissioned projects to embed equalities lens. Funders to adopt consistency across funding application frameworks.

Implementing inclusive commissioning (i.e. co-design services with the Sector based on their evidence-base and good practices). Reviewing the current social value commissioning framework to truly prioritise social value over price. Implementing targeted contract readiness capacity-building programmes for smaller and equalities led orgs. Setting up a commissioning task force to drive all the above forward.

Examples/Notes: The Super 6 project is a good example of a shared capacity project, where a Business Development Consultant was funded to bring 6 key organisations together within the Black led voluntary sector, to share expertise and build their planning capacity and funding-negotiation skills.

6. Asset-based Mapping

Recommendation: We recommend an expansion of the mapping tool produced by this research into a wider assets and infrastructure assessment to identify gaps and opportunities within both the VCSE Sector and the wider city social infrastructure.

Practice: In practice: mapping the current VCSE Sector leadership systems and infrastructure to assess gaps and opportunities. Maximising on initiatives such as Can Do Bristol to allow opportunity matching between the private and VCSE Sector. Maximising on interconnected infrastructure such as We Are Bristol to move beyond emergency response.

Examples/Notes: The robust infrastructure provided by anchor organisations across the city has allowed for the Bristol's response to be strategically well-placed and created opportunities for collaborative approaches that reached beyond the VCSE Sector to the public and private sectors.

Examples/Notes: VOSCUR/Refugees and Asylum Seekers sector infrastructure was crucial to tackle the pandemic and connect beyond the sector to housing. There's a natural shift from emergency response to tackling roots of systemic inequality e.g. Feeding Bristol.

3. Fund And Commission For The Long-term

Recommendation: We recommend funders, commissioners and investors come together and build guidelines to fund for the long-term with the goal of increasing the Sector's sustainability, resilience and planning capacity.

Practice: In practice: funding core costs, overheads and salaries appropriately. Increasing flexibility in projects' spending. Creating more capital to support community businesses and social enterprises to re-establish their income generation avenues.

Creating more capital to support community anchors managing their assets during crisis. Creating more stimulus programmes for income diversification. Funding leadership, planning and connectivity-building in order to ensure everyone is enabled to participate in the long-term planning for the city.

Examples/Notes: One good example is the Arts Council NPOs that utilises the method outlined above. By funding thinking space and leadership-building, it increases internal, core capacity within organisations.

5. Build Community Agency

Recommendation: We recommend the city social infrastructure provides flexible frameworks to build community agency and equip informal groups to connect, organise and take action.

Practice: In practice: targeted funding frameworks for informal groups to scale up if they are willing. Community development team to keep working on CWB and increase access to community assets-ownership. All sectors to co-design a system to allow knowledge and good practices to flow from grassroots to the wider city.

Examples/Notes: Grassroots orgs are diverse in nature and intents, and they are supported by diverse infrastructure e.g. Talo Community/the Food Consortium, Way Out West/BS3 Community, Somali Task Force are three examples of grassroots organisations operating within differing ecosystems and with diverse intents/hopes for the future.

4. Create A Democratic Forum

Recommendation: We recommend the entire city socio-economic infrastructure works with the VCSE Sector to build a democratic forum for discussion designed to ensure the Sector is fairly represented at all key decision-making tables.

Practice: In practice: the Sector to re-organise its leadership infrastructure and elect representatives from each part of it. Ensuring that the elected leadership is truly representative of its diversity. Putting in place accountability mechanisms. Establishing a VCSE One City Board.

Examples/Notes: Equalities groups-led organisations should be enabled not only to represent their communities at the table, but also to truly bring systemic change outcomes for systemically hindered communities. In this sense, the democratic forum should aim to avoid tokenism and bring the conditions for a truly equal dialogue.

6.1 DRIVE A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARDS EQUITY

"I think, if we were all seen more as change-makers and social entrepreneurs, the civil society sector that funders invest in because we have expertise and are making change and holding things together… A model where there is more trust and belief in what we are all doing. Sometimes, it feels like we are supplicants or children at school as we report. We are not! We're the people who want a different world, and we are filling in the gaps between this one and that, or trying to change it."
[VCSE Sector representative from visioning sessions]

We recommend the city social infrastructure drives a shift of narrative around the VCSE Sector from 'third Sector' to an indispensable part of the city and an equal partner in conversation with the public and private sectors.

The very definition of 'third sector' implies a hierarchy that locates the voluntary sector at the bottom of our socio-economic infrastructure. Despite multiple attempts in the past to challenge this assumption, the word 'charity' is also still often associated with the idea of additional, cost neutral voluntary support; that is to say something that is not fundamentally vital nor truly part of the city's economic functioning since it is assumed to not being producing economic value in society. Both these perceptions have been dismantled with the VCSE Sector's response to COVID-19 and in many historical occasions before. Now more than ever, with the advancing shift towards locally-based primary care support – i.e. social care, mental health and medical care – the VCSE Sector is gaining more and more significance and importance. This role needs city-wide recognition.

IN PRACTICE:

- The VCSE Sector to be enabled to better articulate its impact with the private and public sectors by demonstrating its achievements to the city across social, economic, cultural and environmental indicators. There is a need to elevate recognition of its strategic significance and importance, particularly in relation to its ability to attract investment and find solutions for seemingly intractable issues in the city and within our communities.

- Therefore, we recommend the presence of the VCSE Sector as a key partner, working in partnerships with the private and public sectors to capture the quantum of these impacts in meaningful assessment frameworks that highlight the significant inward investment/ funding the Sector attracts to the city to achieve a wider community benefit.

- The VCSE Sector working in partnership with the private and public sectors to raise awareness on the true meaning of 'equity' and how the Sector's expertise, especially equalities-led organisations, can help achieve this at a city-wide level.

- The VCSE Sector itself to take this opportunity of transformational change to improve its monitoring on equalities groups data and review its structures, operations and approaches to ensure and embed true equity and inclusivity across all equalities dimensions.

6.2   FUND & COMMISSION EQUITABLY

"If the VCSE Sector disappeared overnight, what would Bristol actually look like in the year to come? Desperate. Of course, we need to be accountable. But the relationship does not feel quite as enabling as it could be. Some funders we know already have this great approach, it is good to learn from them."
(VCSE Sector representative from visioning sessions)

We recommend funders and commissioners review application frameworks and processes of engagement and liaison with the VCSE Sector to engage with a wider spectrum of organisations in order to seek out and fund more equitably, with less bureaucracy, more shared learning and a deeper lasting impact.

As already identified in the interim report for this research project, the biggest challenge in terms of delivering truly equitable funding is the creation of mechanisms that will enable smaller organisations to access funding as much as larger, more established ones. At various stages in the research, it has been highlighted how grassroots organisations and smaller charities in general are less likely to be able to afford a professional fundraiser or a highly-qualified impact evaluator. This results in a lower probability of accessing funding, even when the smaller organisation is in practice the 'best candidate for the job'. A similar dynamic has been identified for equalities-led organisations, who have been found to face additional systemic barriers when applying for funding. Another commonly discussed theme was the element of competition across funding mechanisms that once again locates smaller, less resourced organisations in a position of disadvantaged. COVID-19 has proven that the VCSE Sector is able and willing to come together under a common aim and deliver a collaborative response to community needs. Funders and commissioners have the opportunity to capitalise on this collaborative momentum as well as on other timely opportunities - such as the UK exiting the European framework and the Social Value Act - to bring in innovative ways of funding that focus on long-lasting impact through building organised and shared capacity across the VCSE Sector.

IN PRACTICE:

- Funding more shared capacity projects, such as funding larger organisations to actively support smaller ones; e.g. funding well-established organisations to give one day a week to support a smaller organisation and share knowledge with them that will be crucial for them to increase their capacity and stabilise their internal systems.

- Building trusting relationships with smaller and equalities-led organisations with good track-records, which will allow organisations to show their impact on the ground without compiling long written documents, and also allow funders to understand the issues by being directly involved.

- All funded and commissioned projects to embed an equalities-lens perspective on a mandatory basis, which will prompt the VCSE Sector to consistently monitor equalities data – 40% of our survey respondents admitted they do not record this data at all. This will enable funders to stay updated on current and emerging equalities issues.

- Adopting agreed broad guidelines for funding application frameworks to create general consistency, which will allow organisations to prepare proactively and waste less time on each application.

- Implementing inclusive commissioning; i.e. ensure the VCSE Sector is meaningfully engaged in relationships built to facilitate the co-design and co-creation of service specifications in line with evidence-based approaches to respond to communities' needs, in order to achieve better outcomes for individuals and communities.

- Reviewing the current social value commissioning and measurement framework to create a more flexible framework that will truly prioritise best value in the delivery of public services with all its social nuances, rather than simply a focus on price.

- Implementing targeted contract readiness capacity-building programmes for organisations that face systemic challenges; i.e. smaller organisations and equalities-led organisations.

- Setting up a commissioning task force to drive forward all parts of the policy framework identified above.

Case example: The Super 6 Project

An example is the Super 6 project, in which Power to Change Trust funded Black South West Network to employ a highly-skilled Business Development Consultant to bring six key organisations from the Black & Asian led voluntary Sector into a collaborative group, to share expertise and build their planning capacity and funding-negotiation skills. Another example that received positive feedback is the Quartet City Funds Pro-Bono support programme, which should be expanded to a larger cohort of organisations.

6.3   FUND & COMMISSION FOR THE LONG-TERM

"Funders have been great in responding to the short-term crisis needs, but we now need to move into accessing greater resources such as long-term funding, especially whilst preparing ourselves to face the consequences of recession." **(VCSE Sector representative from Visioning Session)**

We recommend funders, commissioners and investors come together and build guidelines to fund for the long-term with the goal of increasing the Sector's sustainability, resilience and planning capacity.

Core long-term funding has been one of the most commonly cited requests by the research participants. Although the COVID-19 emergency funding has enabled most organisations to productively overcome the crisis so far, the concern is for the future. It has been stated how relying solely on project funding can be strongly detrimental to the Sector's organisations' capacity to plan long-term and put robust infrastructure in place for its future scalability.

The diversity of the Sector in terms of business models, diversification of income and how the COVID-19 crisis impacted each sector differently has to be taken into consideration when establishing recovery funding mechanisms.

IN PRACTICE:

- Funding core costs and overheads as much as possible in order to put organisations in the position to build and establish long-term internal systems that will ensure resilience in time of crisis.

- Funding salaries at appropriate levels, especially for highly-skilled key roles; i.e. administration, operations, fundraising, evaluation and data.

- Funders and commissioners to increase flexibility in the project spending both in terms of content and deadlines.

- Creating more capital designed to support community businesses and social enterprises to re-establish their income generation avenues after the crisis.

- Creating more capital designed to support community anchors who own or manage an asset to make the building COVID-secure and re-establish their cash-flow until they will be able to fully rely on footfall again.

- Creating more stimulus programmes for income diversification in order to increase long-term financial security.

- Funding leadership, planning and connectivity-building. Especially for smaller or newly established organisations, creating a robust network of key contacts within the city social infrastructure is crucial. However, attending meetings with no support or compensation is often unsustainable for leaders of these organisations. Once again, if we want to establish an equitable approach that allows for everyone to be part of the conversation, it is important to start investing in the building of leadership and supporting meaningful participation.

Case example: The Arts Council NPOs

One good example are the Arts Council NPOs that utilise the method outlined above. By funding thinking space and leadership building, it increases internal, core capacity within organisations.

6.4 CREATE A DEMOCRATIC FORUM

*"We need to create transformational change in the leadership systems. How to rework the decision-making systems to include the VCSE Sector meaningfully? How can we create a common forum for organisations to feed into the discussion and ensure that the power is not one-sided and the conversation is equitable?" (**VCSE Sector representative from visioning sessions**)*

We recommend the entire city socio-economic infrastructure works with the VCSE Sector to build a democratic forum for discussion designed to ensure the Sector is fairly represented at all key decision-making tables.

The discussion on how to enable the VCSE Sector to be truly participant to decision-making - and furthermore how to ensure that its diversity is represented fairly - was one of the central focuses of all four visioning sessions. Whilst strategic stakeholders from other sectors are looking for an efficient and easy way to engage with and communicate with the Sector, the voluntary sector itself is looking for a platform to utilise its expertise, influence and good practices in the conversation.

IN PRACTICE:

- The VCSE Sector to re-organise its leadership infrastructure and elect representatives from each part of the Sector, ensuring that the elected leadership is truly representative of the diversity of the Sector. This will require all anchor organisations, equalities groups, different business models, as well as frontline delivery organisations and so on to be included in the election process and ultimately fairly represented.

- This will also require accountability mechanisms to be put in place, i.e. elected VCSE Sector representatives to report back to the wider Sector regularly and publicly.

- The city socio-economic infrastructure to invite the elected VCSE Sector representatives to be active part of all key discussions across the city.

- The City Office to raise awareness around the democratic mechanisms already in place to facilitate feeding into the shaping of the city's future.

- Establishing a VCSE One-City Board to integrate meaningfully the Sector into the One City Plan.

Case example: The Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People

The crucial importance of including diverse voices in an equitable conversation, where each and every participant is not simply included but truly owns the power to drive change into the conversation and bring the voices of the communities they represent, is right at the centre of an equalities-lens approach. Many examples of this were provided by our sample of organisations led by equalities groups. One of the most noticeable is The Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People.

The Centre brilliantly responded to the crisis by identifying both an increase of needs and a gap in the market, which resulted in an online shop providing appropriate digital equipment for deaf and hard of hearing people adapting to the post-COVID era of intense digital communication. In addition, the Centre's response included an employment programme for people struggling with various financial insecurity-related challenges created by the pandemic. Finally, the Centre provided consultancy, bringing its expertise onto the table, by ensuring that other organisations delivering emergency response services were making options available that were appropriate for deaf and hard of hearing people.

6.5 BUILD COMMUNITY AGENCY

> *"We couldn't have done any of this without community leadership, partly because of the ones that already existed, but we also came to know throughout the time where the new mutual aid groups popped up. The food response as a whole wouldn't have been able to exist without that level of maturity at grassroots level. If you compare us to other cities around Britain or even Europe, we are perceived as quite advanced in our food response. [...] When we compare to other cities it does all come down to that community leadership. The council could provide this higher level of oversight and support because there's people on the ground already working with the communities, those tight-knit communities."* **(VCSE Representative from the interviews)**

We recommend the city social infrastructure provides flexible frameworks to build community agency and equip informal groups to connect, organise and take action.

The one size fits all approach is known to not be effective on the Bristol VCSE Sector due to its extremely diverse nature. This is even more relevant when it comes to informal leadership and mutual aid groups. Whilst it is safe to assume that most registered organisations with charitable purposes will generally be looking to scale up, access funding and develop income revenues, there is no such assumption to be made for self-organising groups, which are solely social cause-focussed and needs-response driven. We have talked to groups who were born out of the crisis and are not planning to continue operating after COVID-19, as well as to groups whose response to the crisis has made them confident that they should establish for the long-term. A different approach is needed in supporting each organisation in line with their needs and motivations. The crisis has also confirmed that increasing community agency, investing in informal leadership and building community wealth are all key factors for achieving greater resilience at city level by strengthening its social fabric.

IN PRACTICE:

- Recognise the diversity of the Sector and the existence of differing leadership needs and motivations.

- Creating targeted funding frameworks for informal groups who are interested in scaling up and establishing themselves formally.

- The public sector to keep increasing community access to community asset-ownership and facilitate the processes for community-led housing initiatives.

- Prioritising community wealth building strategies, particularly for communities that face socio-economic disadvantage.

- The VCSE Sector working in partnership with the private and public sectors to design a system through which small grassroots organisations and informal groups can easily share good practices and expertise on issues with the wider city and be rewarded for it.

- The VCSE Sector working in partnership with the private and public sectors to design a quick and easy framework for small grassroots organisations and informal groups to capture equalities groups monitoring data.

Case example: The Way Out West/The Somali Task Force/ Talo Community

Here we offer three examples of grassroots organisations and groups that took action during the pandemic and are now looking at the future with different hopes and intents.

The Way Out West action group has been providing local support in West Street Bedminster neighbourhood since 2010 with the aim of improving the quality of life of everybody living in the area. Despite not being originated out of specific COVID-19 needs, the action group promptly took action in response to the pandemic. Firmly supported by the wider and strongly established BS3 social infrastructure, Way Out West can maintain its flexible and mostly informal operational framework whilst at the same time being able to access project funding when needed.

The Somali Task Force was previously mentioned in the report for its incredible response to COVID-19. Born out of necessity in a time of crisis, this group's informal structure is extremely agile and flexible. The group is there when needed and dismantles when the needs have been met. Due to its nature, the Somali Task Force will probably not look into getting established for the long-term unless another time of necessity arises.

Talo Community partnered with the Food Consortium Community Hub in its pandemic response, focusing mostly on operations and frontline delivery. The challenge of responding to the crisis has produced many lessons learned that led Talo Community to the intention of scaling up, building capacity and develop a long-term strategy. Talo Community is already building a productive and impactful future.

6.6 ASSET-BASED MAPPING

> *"Our voluntary sector – particularly the anchor organisations - plays the key role in reaching out to the variety of neighbourhoods in Bristol, respond to all different issues, and at the same time representing a diversity of voices that are often not heard in the right places. There should be a mapping of the social infrastructure in all parts of the city to identify gaps and where the infrastructure is not there or not strong enough to respond to the issues." (Strategic Stakeholder from visioning sessions)*

We recommend an expansion of the mapping tool produced by this research into a wider assets and infrastructure assessment to identify gaps and opportunities within both the VCSE Sector and the wider city social infrastructure.

The organised response of community anchor organisations across the city working in partnership with the local authority within the We Are Bristol community hubs framework and the further various community partnerships across the city – e.g. Action Greater Bedminster, Knowle West Alliance and so on – have played an essential role in ensuring that resources and capacity were distributed strategically during the pandemic response. The Bristol VCSE Sector's ecosystem is already extraordinarily connected, strategic and proactive, and new strong ties have been developed during the pandemic response. However, to ensure that the support is truly reaching everyone in need across the city it is necessary to produce a complete assessment that will identify gaps in the supporting ecosystem within the Sector's infrastructure and beyond.

IN PRACTICE:

- Mapping the current VCSE Sector leadership systems and infrastructure to assess gaps and opportunities.

- Maximising on initiatives such as Can Do Bristol and City Funds Pro-Bono service to allow opportunity-matching between the private and the VCSE Sector.

- Capitalising on interconnected infrastructure such as We Are Bristol to move beyond emergency response and provide long-term robust cross-sectoral infrastructure.

Case example: The Refugee & Asylum Seekers Sector

The Refugees and Asylum Seekers Sector response was one of the quickest and most organised across the whole VCSE Sector. This was possible thanks to the former infrastructure established during the recurrent meetings hosted by VOSCUR in the previous months. The connections expanded even beyond the traditional sector to include organisations working on intersectionality-related issues such as housing.

Case example: Community Anchor Organisations

The robust infrastructure provided by anchor organisations across the city has allowed for the Bristol's response to be strategically well-placed and created opportunities for collaborative approaches that reached beyond the VCSE Sector to the public and private sectors.

One example is Ambition Lawrence Weston who immediately developed a socially-distanced communication strategy at the start of the first lockdown utilising a variety of means to ensure its reach would be inclusive; and then looked into alternate ways to carry on the delivery of services and maintain income generation despite the challenges of not being able to rely on footfall anymore.

BS3 Community Development supported the entire ecosystem in the area by managing and engaging with over ten community response initiatives. These included BS3 Community Covid-19 Mutual Aid Response, BCC Covid-19 responses and systems, CCG/Sirona Care and Health Covid-19 responses and systems, Bridge View Medical Primary Care Network Community Webs Social Prescribing service, VCSE Silver Cell, Mental Health Covid-19 response, and local food clubs/food provision initiatives.

6.7   DEVELOP A DIGITAL INCLUSION STRATEGY

"We raised about 18,000 pounds to help with digital exclusion. We did interviews and collected information from our communication needs assessment to distribute phones, tablets, phone-data and credit to people throughout the last 6 months so that people can stay in touch; have the ability to phone somebody in case they need help with food." **(VCSE Representative from the interviews)**

We recommend an assessment of organisations' needs, desires and potential for IT development to then formulate a digital inclusion strategy. The scope of the strategy needs to ensure usability, accessibility and quality of hardware and software, and a repair shop.

As discussed in the interim report, the themes of digital exclusion and tech poverty have been recurrent from the beginning of our investigation. The VCSE Sector is largely diverse also in its approach to the digital dimension. Whilst some organisations came into the crisis with an already existing robust digital infrastructure in place, others had to quickly build digital means to adapt their services and reach their targeted communities. In some cases, digital expertise was already within the organisations, in other cases the organisations had to seek support from others.

It is interesting to note how the discussion often led to the experiences of digitally-excluded communities more than focusing on the Sector itself and how to build internal IT systems. It can be concluded that the connections between the Sector and its communities are so strong and interdependent that a true digital inclusion strategy would have to consider both the organisational and the wider social realities to be truly effective.

In relation to skills learning and mentoring for VCSE organisations, the Sector includes skills providers, learners and mentors for learners. Whilst previous programmes may have focused on increasing individual learners' skills, here we are referencing the needs of the VCSE's Boards, staff, and volunteers in particular. The digital inclusion of the public at large will need to be a city-wide strategy, in which the VCSE can play a major role with public and private partners.

IN PRACTICE:

- Assessing the current status of IT infrastructure across the Bristol VCSE Sector with particular attention for organisations that need to build their digital infrastructure quickly to deliver their services and reach their communities.

- Collecting digital exclusion/tech poverty data on communities across the city and organising a response according to numbers.

- Collaborating with the private sector to provide hardware, software, digital tools and to share IT knowledge and expertise with the VCSE Sector and its communities.

- Collaborating with the public sector to ensure the digital inclusion approach is intersectional.

- Producing a digital inclusion strategy for the VCSE Sector and its communities with the knowledge acquired from the above points.

Case example: The Knowle West Media Centre & Bristol Digital Futures

The Knowle West Media Centre and the Bristol Digital Futures institute are working in partnership to develop research to understand digital inequality in Knowle West. A similar approach should be taken city-wide, with prioritisation for the most deprived areas of the city.

Case example: Wi-Fi Access

The public sector could include WI-FI access as a priority service to be provided within social housing. Another frequently mentioned example is the possibility of the public sector paying for free WI-FI hot spots in the most deprived areas of the city.

6.8 CREATE A SHARED VISION

"We have a good structure in the One City Plan, but the VCSE doesn't have a strong presence, the City Office needs to meaningfully include the Sector." **(VCSE Representative from the visioning session)**

We recommend the City Office acts as a facilitator to develop and communicate a truly city-wide shared vision across all sectors.

Lastly, the creation of a truly shared cross-sectoral vision leads us to the final principle of the Vision for the Future of the VCSE Sector, which is the element of city-wide interconnectivity. The One City approach has been recognised by participants as a suitable framework with great potential. However, in practice the cross-sectoral connections need to be strengthened and a common language that is fully understood by all needs to be built, communicated and learnt.

IN PRACTICE:

- The City Office to review the One City Plan to integrate the VCSE Sector more comprehensively and consistently into the One City Approach.

- Identifying a golden thread of values to create a truly shared vision among the VCSE, public and private sectors and use it consistently to build a common language across all sectors.

- Ensuring that all aspects of the shared vision are equitable, from theory and governance to action.

Case example: The Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs were mentioned in multiple occasions during the visioning sessions as embodying a set of values that were widely understood and could offer a golden thread across all sectors, including the ones that are traditionally less involved in social impact discussions.

CONCLUSION

This report has captured key findings from a 9-month research project that aimed to explore the Bristol VCSE Sector's response to the pandemic and understand its role and potential in the city going forward.

It actively engaged with qualitative and quantitative data collection with over 300 organisations of all sizes, conducted 13 qualitative group sessions and 30 interviews. Moreover, it reached grassroots community organisations, anchors, frontline organisations and stakeholders from a city-wide range of institutions.

In our findings, the crucial importance of the often lesser-known dynamic assets – such as internal flexibility, resilient leadership, and creativity and innovation - was discussed in the context of organisational resilience in a time of crisis.

As a result of these findings, a Vision for the Future of the VCSE Sector was formulated. The Vision was accompanied by actionable recommendations to develop a One City approach to the Sector's recovery. It is now time to recognise the value and importance of the VCSE Sector in building resilient communities; this is an essential part of creating the solid foundations from which to build new ways of working in the city that address inequality at the outset.

Whilst posing significant challenges, the pandemic has also tapped into a deep narrative of solidarity in the face of adversity. Throughout history, times of crisis have seen the VCSE Sector as a pillar of hope and fundamental support, and the response to COVID-19 provides further confirmation of this. Individually and collectively, the Sector has shown that we are more than a society of profit-maximisers. There is a heightened sense of justice, a commitment to address historic and systemic inequality and this presents an extraordinary opportunity and foundation to build our future on.