

Evaluation of the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise Covid-19 Emergency Funding Package

Case Studies

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Evaluation report prepared for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport



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1 Introduction

NatCen Social Research, in partnership with RSM UK Consulting LLP, was commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to undertake an evaluation of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) funding package, hereby referred to as 'the funding package'. The purpose of the funding package was to enable VCSE organisations to continue their work to support people and communities in need during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As of 31 March 2021, grants made under the funding package have supported over 14,000 organisations and funded a wide range of projects. The funding package included nine funding streams. Of the nine funding streams, eight were covered by this evaluation. This includes (1) Big Night In (BNI), (2) Community Match Challenge (CMC), (3) Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF), (4) Funding delivered via DCMS and a range of other government departments (OGD), (5) Hospices, (6) Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP), (7) Youth Covid-19 Support Fund (YCSF) and (8) The Winter Loneliness Fund.

The evaluation of these funding streams aimed to examine:

- The impact of the funding package as a whole upon organisations receiving funding as well as people and communities in need; and
- The extent to which the funding package was implemented and delivered as intended.

The full impact and process finding can be found in the final evaluation report¹.

This report provides findings from case studies of funded organisations conducted as part of the evaluation. Case studies were conducted with a sample of 19 grantholder organisations with 82 interviews² conducted in total. These consisted of interviews with 20 senior managers, 20 operational staff, 11 volunteers, and 31 service users. This document provides a summary of each case study conducted, showcasing what each of the organisations were able to achieve with the funding they received and highlighting the key messages that came out of the interviews.

The case studies were designed to provide a holistic view of how the funding had been used, while also providing an in-depth understanding of the impact of the funding on grantholder organisations and service users.

The sampling approach taken was purposive and not representative, with a varied group of grantholder organisations included, with differing organisation size, grant size, target population, and region to allow for an exploration of a wide range of experiences and perspectives. For each case study we aimed to interview at least one senior staff member, one operational staff member, one volunteer, and up to seven service users (on average). However, we recognised that organisations in the VCSE sector present a wide variety of differing characteristics, therefore we worked with the organisations to ensure the case studies reflected this.

There is good representation across all funding streams covered by the evaluation³, as shown below:

¹ [Evaluation of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Covid-19 Emergency Funding Package: final report](#)

² This figure includes some double counting of individuals; four participants were interviewed as both volunteers and either service users or staff members.

³ No additional evidence (including case studies) was gathered for the CCSF as a rigorous evaluation has already been conducted. The Hospices Fund was also excluded from the case studies because it was designed to only provide spare capacity of beds; therefore, the impact of this funding stream may have been

Table 1:1 Distribution of case studies by funding stream

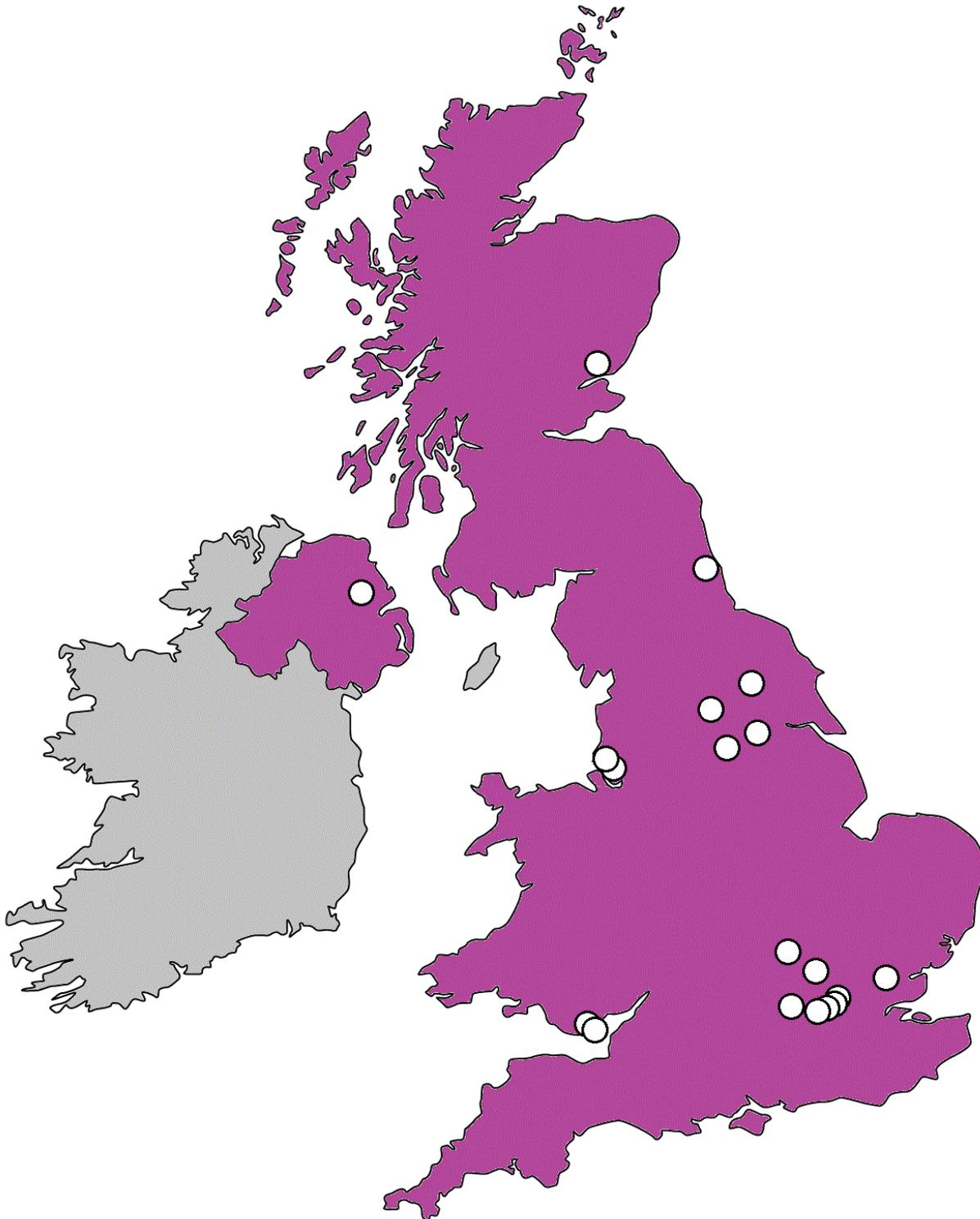
Funding Stream	Grant value	Case studies
Big Night In (BNI)	£37m	3
Community Match Challenge (CMC)	£84.6m	5
Other Government Departments (OGD)	£162.8m	5
Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP)	£4.8m	2
Youth Covid-19 Support Fund (YCSF)	£16.5m	2
Winter Loneliness Fund	£7.5m	2

The interviews were conducted by experienced researchers, and in most cases, each interviewer moderated all the interviews in their assigned case study. Being a single point of contact, helped the interviewer develop a holistic understanding of the organisation and recognise with more ease any potential gaps and patterns. All interviews were conducted using remote communication technologies and lasted on average 60 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant to allow for an accurate account of the discussion. The recordings were only accessible to the research team and are stored on NatCen's secure server from which they will be safely deleted after the end of the project. The analysis of data was conducted using a Framework approach, which facilitated robust qualitative data management and analysis by case and theme within an overall matrix⁴.

less clear to stakeholders. More details on the CCSF and the Hospices Fund can be found in the final evaluation report.

⁴ A more detailed description of the methodology used for sampling, data collection, and data analysis of the case studies is included in Annex 1.

Figure 1:1 Geographical distribution of the case study organisations (white dots)⁵



⁵ This is an approximation of the organisations' geographical distribution based on the location of their headquarters. However, some organisations served wider areas covering one or more regions or provide services / support at a national level.

Case study 1: Dundee Bairns

Dundee Bairns supports children living in areas of high multiple deprivation. Pre-pandemic, the main support was holiday meals and activities, and hot evening meals provided to primary school children during term-time.

A grant of £20,000 was awarded from the Community Match Challenge (CMC) fund, distributed through the Rank Foundation. The CMC fund aimed to support a wide range of people in need, including children and young people and low-income families, with grantholders securing match funding.

How was the funding used?

In addition to ongoing food hunger, in the winter of 2020 *Dundee Bairns* became aware of an **emergency need for warm outdoor and sports clothing for children and young people** from nursery age through to secondary. The need arose from the plan to open Scotland's schools from January 2021 with Covid-secure policies such as open windows, more outdoor play and PE. An urgent response was needed.

“This is an emergency and we're going to make it happen so that kids are not shivering in the playground and indeed shivering in the classrooms” - Volunteer

The Cosy Bairns project began in November 2020 to **provide packs of new winter clothing** for the most deprived children in Dundee. During lockdown, while retail clothes shops were closed, the project was delivered by purchasing, sorting, packing and delivering packs of clothing and shoes.

Dundee Bairns secured matched funding for the project from **the local council (50%)**, from **other national and local charities, local businesses and individuals to complement the CMC grant**. New and existing volunteers were quick to come forward. The grantholder also negotiated the **use of a large vacant space** in the new Michelin Scotland Innovation Parc for sorting and packing; and a local company offered the use of their **delivery van** which was available at the time because of lockdown.

As soon as clothes shops re-opened, Cosy Bairns was delivered through clothes vouchers issued to families. The voucher scheme was much less challenging logistically and gave the children more choice and dignity. *Dundee Bairns* are continuing with the Cosy Bairns clothing project after the funding has ended. The charity is adapting to support other basic needs in the context of recent Government funding to tackle food hunger in Scotland.

Key messages:

- The clear identifiable emergency need brought the community together to respond quickly.
- Dundee Bairns had already secured some funding for the project. The CMC funding enabled them to reach more families and avoid rationing.
- Volunteers and local donations were easily forthcoming.
- A light-touch process and trust by the funder enabled more focus on rapid service delivery.
- Partnerships with local authority, schools, businesses, charities and individuals made this work.
- The funded project has helped *Dundee Bairns* to deepen and broaden their understanding of needs and to attract further funding for new projects.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Cosy Bairns was delivered through schools, using existing relationships with school family development workers (and also the Council) to identify those most in need very accurately. Feedback from teachers and families was positive and even “heartbreakingly happy”. Families reported to *Dundee Bairns* that the clothing was being handed down to younger siblings in the following year, that their children could wear the clothing in the home to keep warm as well as at school, and that it enabled them to play outdoors during a snowfall.

“What a lovely hat we got, what a lovely pink jacket I got for my four-year-old daughter” – as told to a volunteer

Dundee Bairns considered the lack of choice, dignity, and potential stigma from delivering clothes packs rather than vouchers. They protected children’s privacy when labelling the individual packs and chose the items carefully. Despite the concerns, the items were well received by families, as reported above to a volunteer.

On the organisation’s staff and volunteers

Dundee Bairns’s sole member of staff coordinated the delivery of the Cosy Bairns project, working from home. She valued the experience of managing a larger team of volunteers and the chance for camaraderie and teamwork as they sorted clothes at the distribution centre. Trustees reported their satisfaction at the large-scale rapid mobilisation in a short space of time for delivery of clothing packs while these were necessary.

The volunteers delivering the project were a mix of existing volunteers from the food programme, and new volunteers, some of whom were on furlough from work or were studying. Cosy Bairns was a different type of project, working in teams in a large Covid-secure airy space for longer intensive periods, to sort, select and pack the clothes, or delivering to schools by van. A few long-term volunteers who were not able to take part, owing to health conditions or shielding, continued volunteering from home, which alleviated some isolation.

On the organisation itself

The Cosy Bairns project would have been delivered without the funding, but at a lower level reaching fewer children. *Dundee Bairns* were grateful for the funding and that it was made available in Scotland. The funding was delivered in a timely and efficient way with light-touch administration. This allowed them to focus on service delivery. The funding came at exactly the right time for the project. The success of the initial funded project allowed them to go out to funders again with proof of need and evidence that the scheme worked.

“Because of the lack of time there had to be a much greater level of trust and that was really helpful” – Strategic lead

Dundee Bairns reported that the funding and the experience of the Cosy Bairns project had changed them and their strategic plan. The funded project deepened their links with schools, the council, and others in the community. It also widened their understanding of the needs of children and their families in Dundee.

“The project has opened up to other basic needs for the children. We were fun and food, we’re now fun, food, clothing, activity, and is there anything else that the children might need?” – Staff member

Case study 2: Action Station

Action Station operates a community centre in South Tyneside, based in a former coalmining area with high levels of multiple deprivation, an older population and a high number of asylum seekers. It provides support to individuals who are unemployed, have learning disabilities or mental health issues, and to asylum seekers. The centre offers a library service, digital skills training, IT facilities, space for community groups, a volunteer programme, and a café.

A grant of £9,550 was awarded from the Community Match Challenge (CMC) fund, through the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. The CMC fund aimed to support a wide range of service users, including older people, disabled people, low income families, and people with learning disabilities, with grantholders securing match funding.

How was the funding used?

Demand for **food bank services** increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, as individuals lost work or income. Local residents experienced **isolation, anxiety and mental health issues** during lockdown. As the world went online, service users were left without access to IT equipment or digital skills while *Action Station* was closed during the national lockdowns. Part of the premises were used as a food bank throughout the period.

“To run ourselves as a Centre and to make it a safe environment where people could engage with us whether face to face or remotely” – Staff member

The strategic and operational staff were committed to **developing community engagement, the overall programme, the library, and the volunteer programme**. A key challenge was to encourage service users, staff, and volunteers back into the centre once it re-opened in November 2020.

The CMC funding was able to be used flexibly on **communicating with the local community** that *Action Station* was re-opening, **and to collaborate with the food bank charity** on food boxes and recipe cards for home preparation of meals. These

were sent to very deprived and vulnerable households. **The funding extended *Action Station's* reach in the community.**

The funding was also put towards: running costs which also benefitted the food bank; a laptop which enabled remote delivery of training sessions; and room dividers to provide flexibility and increased use by opening up the library space to more groups.

Key messages:

- *Action Station* was preparing to re-open following the first national lockdown when the grant was awarded in October 2020.
- The funding helped to re-engage the community, and to encourage people back to access services in a Covid-secure space.
- Service users accessed digital skills training and IT facilities at the centre again, reducing a widening digital exclusion.
- The volunteer programme supported local residents to develop skills / experience and move into employment or study.
- *Action Station* is focusing on IT, employability and socialisation and the funding received continues to provide benefits to the centre.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

The funding enabled *Action Station* to open again safely and to get the word out to the local community about services on offer. The impact on digitally excluded local residents was that they were able to access IT facilities for job searching (a requirement that had been relaxed somewhat during lockdown for Universal Credit claimants), and to interact with other local services which had moved online during the pandemic, such as housing. Digital skills courses were available again, with some online. *Action Station* engaged with service users by providing social fun courses alongside more traditional or accredited digital skills training.

“I just felt that it was open for anything that I needed, anything I needed to do” – Service user

The funding was partially used for partitions which enhanced the use of the space and meant that many more groups were able to use the centre, for example the WEA (Workers' Educational Association), health and wellbeing groups, some local church groups, a credit union established by *Action Station*, and so on, while also keeping the library open for anyone in the catchment area.

On the organisation's staff and volunteers

The funding enabled staff and volunteers to feel safe about returning, through Covid-secure measures such as providing masks, sanitiser, social distancing signs, room partitions, and keyboard covers for the computers. Some volunteers with learning disabilities live at home with vulnerable parents, while others experienced isolation and loss of friendships and activity during lockdown. The purchase of a laptop enabled a clinically vulnerable IT trainer to move to online teaching rather than face-to-face, which supported them to retain their job.

Volunteers reported how much they valued the friendships and how all being “on the same page” helped them to deliver as a team. *Action Station's* volunteer development programme re-started, enabling service users to progress to volunteering, and volunteers to move forward towards employment or study if they wanted.

On the organisation itself

The grant enabled *Action Station* to start building up and re-engaging with their service user base, through communications and promotion of the centre. They note that they could perhaps have emphasised the safety measures even more in their marketing, to encourage people to return to the centre as they discovered some hesitancy. They were proud of and are maintaining the safe environment. The partitions and IT equipment continue to enable *Action Station* to offer the space for use by additional groups in a safe way and enable remote online training where needed. The small amount of funding received went a long way.

“The impact for the amount of money we received was quite high; also, it's supporting us now, so it has some longevity”
– Staff member

Staff reported a rise in footfall after each re-opening. Awareness and take-up of different services such as digital skills courses increased, but it felt like starting a new centre from scratch. Collaborations with other VCSE groups and networks have also helped *Action Station* to promote the centre and share information.

“It's like moving from the ground up again and putting things in order” – Staff member

Case study 3: Ruils (Independent Living)

Ruils is a user-led organisation supporting disabled children and adults and people with long term health conditions to live independently. The charity provides information, advice, practical support, community activities and befriending services, mostly in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames.

The charity received £7,594 from Comic Relief as part of the Big Night In (BNI) fund. The Comic Relief sub-fund focussed on supporting families and communities to meet the needs of young children, women and girls, those requiring mental health support and those facing insecure housing.

How was the funding used?

At the start of the pandemic, ***Ruils* identified a number of new needs in their local community**. Vulnerable groups who were shielding needed **access to shopping and prescriptions**, many were not able to afford **food** and there was an increase in **social isolation and loneliness**. *Ruils* set up several new services to address these needs, including a **shopping and prescription collection service**, a **food bank**, and an extended **befriending service**. The food bank also offered home delivery which was a service not offered by other local food banks.

The BNI funding helped to **co-ordinate these projects**. It allowed a staff member to increase their hours which **increased administrative capacity** to manage the projects and volunteers.

“At that time we were delivering services which we knew were needed, but we didn’t necessarily have the full funding for them”
– **Staff member**

The services were delivered to both existing and new service users. Many new services users were referred to *Ruils* through social prescribers linked to local GP surgeries.

Delivery was adjusted to **ensure Covid-19 safety for staff, volunteers and service users**. Volunteers delivering shopping and prescriptions received training about Covid-19 security measures.

The befriending service moved online from previous in-person delivery and some volunteers felt it was more difficult to build rapport. However, once Covid-19 restrictions eased, service users and volunteers were given the option to continue befriending in-person.

Key messages:

- The funding was used by *Ruils* to increase staff time to support the logistics of new Covid-19 support services.
- A number of new services were set up, including a shopping and prescription service, a food bank and an extended befriending service.
- Service users saw the services as essential and many felt that without *Ruils* they wouldn’t have been able to receive shopping.
- A large number of volunteers were recruited during the pandemic and the funding supported volunteer management. Going forward, the charity now has a larger volunteer pool than prior to the pandemic, which will help future service delivery.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Service users who were shielding spoke of the support they'd received from *Ruils* during the pandemic as essential. Many service users did not have a strong local support network and felt they wouldn't have been able to get their shopping without *Ruils*. Many service users, in particular those who lived alone, felt isolated and lonely during the pandemic. However, service users enjoyed having regular social contact through the befriending service. The shopping service also had a social benefit as volunteers would speak to service users when asking for their shopping list and on the doorstep when dropping food off.

“My family... they are not nearby, they can't just pop in, so having a support with *Ruils* has been absolutely incredible”
– Service user

Service users felt they could get in touch with *Ruils* at any time if they needed anything, even if unrelated to the core services which are offered. One individual described the way *Ruils* had helped them get to a hospital appointment during the petrol crisis when no taxis were available.

On the organisation's staff and volunteers

Ruils recruited a large number of volunteers at the start of the pandemic to support new service delivery. VCSE funding supported staff costs to help manage volunteers, for example reimbursing volunteers for shopping costs. Although volunteer numbers reduced at the end of furlough, the charity now has a larger volunteer pool than prior to the pandemic.

Volunteers felt that volunteering benefited them through keeping them busy during the pandemic. One volunteer who found furlough socially isolating enjoyed the social contact they gained through their volunteer role.

“Being able to get out and help people and have that face-to-face interaction... it helped me a lot to get through lockdown to be honest” – Volunteer

The funding allowed a part-time member of staff to increase their hours. This staff member has stayed with the organisation and has continued to support additional *Ruils* services.

On the organisation itself

Ruils increased their organisational network through delivery of their Covid-19 support services. The charity collaborated with the local authority and other voluntary and community sector organisations to deliver services such as the food bank. Many of these organisations were new collaborations for *Ruils*. Staff also felt that the direct outreach work undertaken as part of the organisation's Covid-19 response services had cemented their relationship with the local community.

“Doing this kind of... direct outreach work has cemented our relationship with our local community” – Staff member

The large increase in volunteers has also led to a streamlined volunteer process which will benefit *Ruils* longer term by making it easier to recruit new volunteers.

Case study 4: On Course Foundation

The *On Course Foundation* aims to support the recovery of wounded, sick and injured service personnel and veterans through golf related activities and events across the UK. Their programmes focus on supporting service personnel to transition into civilian life, including supporting service users to build skills and find employment in the golf industry.

The foundation received £40,000 from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Cabinet Office (CO), delivered through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, as part of the Other Government Departments (OGD) fund. The MOD/CO funding aimed to ensure that Armed Forces communities could continue to access important services where resources had been impacted by the pandemic.

How was the funding used?

The *On Course Foundation* had **restricted ability to fundraise** at golf clubs at the start of the pandemic due to the closure of golf courses and Covid-19 restrictions. **The OGD funding helped to fill this funding gap.** It was used to cover **staff costs** and run an **online programme of events** for service users while in person events and programmes were unable to take place.

“It was just trying to deliver a little bit of continuity as best we could” – Staff member

Many service users who had been previously involved in the organisation’s programmes struggled during this time without the outlet of golf. This was especially challenging for those with pre-existing mental ill-health.

The *On Course Foundation* designed an online programme for its service users during the pandemic which aimed to **keep service users engaged and give them something to focus on** at home until delivery could return to normal. The programme included twice weekly zoom calls to allow service users to catch up with each other, online sessions with professional golfers and other sport stars, interactive coaching sessions and social events such as quizzes.

The foundation also delivered an online programme of taster sessions which aimed to **recruit new service users** and introduced them to the organisation. When Covid-19 restrictions eased, 15

in-person golf events were also delivered. These events had over 200 attendees, including some new service users who had not been involved prior to the pandemic.

Key messages:

- The *On Course Foundation* had restricted ability to fundraise at golf clubs at the start of the pandemic due to Covid-19 restrictions.
- The OGD funding helped to fill this funding gap and supported the delivery of an online programme of events as well as in-person events once Covid-19 restrictions eased.
- Service users reported that events gave them something to focus on and look forward to during lockdown and were an important source of support.
- Due to the success of online delivery, the foundation will be continuing to run their online programme in the future. This will allow them to continue delivery and support service users in the winter months when golf events are usually paused.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

The online programme of events allowed service users to maintain both their links to the organisation and social links to other beneficiaries. These social links were especially important as many service users rely on each other for support. The events kept attendees active and gave them something to focus on and look forward to during the lockdown.

Despite social distancing protocols, the *On Course Foundation* also successfully delivered 15 in-person events. These events allowed service users to meet new people and enjoy golf activities with others. The attendees appreciated the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere of the golf events and felt that these were safe environments with no judgment. Service users described the community that formed through the programme as supportive, with some describing this as being part of a family.

“I hadn’t seen anyone outside of me in my house for 6 months, so I was very socially anxious but all of that went away the second I turned up, it was like being part of a family” – Service user

Service users also highlighted the importance of the programme for their recovery from ill health. An individual recovering from mental ill-health described the organisation as a lifeline which gave them something positive to focus on.

On the organisation’s staff

The OGD funding was used to cover staff costs during the period. The funding ensured that staff were able to plan and deliver both the online and in-person programme of events, ensuring continuity for existing service users and allowing recruitment of new service users.

On the organisation itself

Prior to the funding, the *On Course Foundation* was experiencing a 40% reduction in income compared to the previous year, due to their limited ability to fundraise at golf clubs during Covid-19 restrictions. The OGD funding replaced this gap in funding and allowed programme delivery to continue, both online and in-person.

“It was vital funding at a time we really needed it” – Staff member

The *On Course Foundation* perceived their online programme to be successful and decided to continue online delivery for service users longer term. Online events will take place during the winter months when weather limits the ability to hold in-person golf events. Going forward, this means the foundation will be able to offer a 12-month programme to its service users compared to an 8-month programme prior to the funding.

Although staff reported that future funding remains hard to predict, one strategic staff member felt that the diversification of the organisation during the funding period (through expansion to online delivery) has made the *On Course Foundation* a more attractive candidate to other funders.

Case study 5: Primetime at the Vine

Primetime at the Vine runs a community centre in Bradford and provides different services to the local community such as family support, afterschool programmes for children, activities to prevent social isolation in adults, training programmes, and a project to support small and grassroots organisations in the local area.

A grant of £67,100 was awarded from The Henry Smith Charity, as part of the Community Match Challenge (CMC) fund. The aim of the CMC fund was to support a range of service users based on their needs, including older people, disabled people, children and young people, carers, low income families, the homeless, victims of domestic abuse and people with learning disabilities, with grantholders securing match funding.

How was the funding used?

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened the condition of several individuals in the community served by *Primetime at the Vine*. It made it more difficult for some to buy **food**, increased their **social isolation**, made some **less independent**, affected **young people's learning**, and made it more difficult to find **jobs**.

“People have been fed. Some people, particularly children and young people, would have just gone without food because their families did not have savings to dip into when all the schools were closed” – Staff member

The funding was partially used to **adapt existing services to the new circumstances and make them safer**, for example moving some activities online and renewing the community centre. The funding was also partially used to **bridge the income gap** derived from the pause in fundraising activity caused by the pandemic.

The funding received contributed to several activities such as **building repairs** and Covid-related adjustments, **purchasing of food and delivery of food parcels**, purchasing of **equipment**, **recruitment** of volunteers and apprentices, activities

to reduce **social isolation** and to support the **independence of elderly people**, and organisation of **online sessions**. The organisation identified the community's needs with a combination of approaches which included surveys, questionnaires, and direct conversations with service users, staff and volunteers. The monitoring was ongoing and allowed them to adapt and make changes to find the appropriate solutions.

Key messages:

- Before being awarded the CMC funding, the organisation needed new funding due to the interruption of other income streams (community café and fundraising initiatives).
- The funding allowed them to avoid redundancies and to respond to an increased demand from their community.
- The funding made it possible for the organisation to organise their activities in the most effective way and to support service users and the whole community.
- The organisation is now in a position similar to the pre-pandemic one. They are now planning for the future more strategically and developing their income streams further.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Primetime at the Vine's activities had a positive impact on both individual service users and their local community at large. The distribution of food parcels was designed to be “stigma-free” which informed the distribution of parcels as part of an initiative to learn cooking with recipe cards and online sessions. This solution had the intended result of distributing food to those in need, but also some unintended benefits: it created the conditions for family activities where family members could spend some quality time together and further build their relationship, it gave the chance to parents and children to eat better because they would receive only fresh produce that needed to be cooked from scratch, and it helped children acquire new skills.

“They did a good service. As far as we are concerned, they did a good job with the organisation of things.” – Service user

Other activities also had an important impact on reducing isolation and improving physical and mental wellbeing of service users. For example, the sessions and activities organised for children and young people gave them a reassuring routine and a structure to their days. According to a member of staff, this was especially important for children with some special needs who require structure and a defined timetable more than others. Other activities involved the elderly and were designed to reduce social isolation and help them maintain or regain their independence which was affected by the long time spent at home without being able to exercise. Staff and service users reported in their interviews the feeling of a stronger sense of community since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their opinion was that the activities offered by *Primetime at the Vine* and the staff's and volunteers' work had contributed to strengthening it.

On the organisation's staff and volunteers

Members of staff reported that being awarded the funding was a relief for them since there was some initial uncertainty about the future of the organisation. They explained that the funding was essential to better organise their activities, expand the offer to respond to a growing demand, and appropriately support the volunteer base. From the interviews, the role of the community and the organisation's relationship with the local area also emerged as an essential element for the success of their efforts. The funding allowed them to provide better support, which as a consequence improved the experience of staff and volunteers. This created a knock-on effect ensuring staff and volunteers were better equipped to support their service users, and in turn service users were more able to support their peers, families and children.

“It was fantastic. We reached numbers further and wider than we ever thought we would. And people engaged with it so well.” – Staff member

On the organisation itself

At the beginning of the pandemic they feared they would need to make redundancies and reduce services. The funding helped them sustain the services they provide to their service users, and it also allowed them to reach out to other organisations, to help them, and to build and consolidate relationships. They were able to invest in training and improve capacity and operational management. The funding meant that no area was neglected, and they could provide all the services they intended to offer to support their community.

“We were able to think strategically so we could plan for the next stage.” – Staff member



Case study 6: Kinship

Kinship works across England and Wales to provide practical and emotional support, information and advice to kinship carers: any family member or friend who takes on full-time care of a child whose parents cannot look after them. Kinship carers are often grandparents, but can be aunts, uncles, older siblings, or family friends.

Kinship received £255,313 from the Department for Education (DfE) through the Other Government Departments (OGD) fund. This was allocated by DfE through funding partners, some of which had an existing relationship with the central government department. The aims of the fund were to provide emergency relief to meet additional needs, to adapt delivery during the pandemic, and to offset lost revenue.

How was the funding used?

Kinship's own early research found that the Covid-19 pandemic had **exacerbated chronic issues such as financial, housing, health concerns, and digital exclusion**. Children being home schooled needed laptops, while some children with issues relating to past trauma were presenting behavioural issues while in lockdown without access to usual specialist services.

The public health message “Don’t kill granny” was felt to be unhelpful for grandparent carers already worried about the children bringing the virus home. A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) might require contact with a parent, but Covid-19 rules limited contact to the household. Kinship carers needed extra support and advice to navigate the legal situation.

“This was a very vulnerable group and if they weren’t supported it was very likely that these children would be taken into care” – Staff member

This funding enabled *Kinship* to support all kinship carers regardless of legal status, including informal kinship carers and their children who are often the most vulnerable, invisible to local authority services, and less likely to access other services. *Kinship* also provides commissioned support (through local authorities – funded separately by DfE during the pandemic), to kinship carers who have a Special Guardianship Order.

During the funding period, *Kinship* provided advice and information either by phone or online, one-to-one remote support from a project worker for complex cases, peer support groups which moved online early in the pandemic, and the phone-based Someone Like Me service (peer support from an experienced kinship carer volunteer).

Key messages:

- *Kinship's* surveys from March-June 2020 highlighted increased and changing needs. The findings informed their grant application.
- The funding enabled *Kinship* to support all kinship carers regardless of legal order, reaching new and more vulnerable families.
- The funding enabled *Kinship* to increase capacity to support more carers rapidly, building on the online and phone delivery models which were already in place.
- Isolated kinship carers valued the specialist, independent advice and peer support highly – *Kinship* staff and volunteers understood their specific needs.
- *Kinship* has raised the profile of kinship care with central and local government and the voluntary and community sector, and the grant has helped the organisation to attract further funding.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Kinship carers noted how isolated they were during the pandemic, and their relief when speaking with *Kinship* staff or volunteers who had personal experience of kinship care. Kinship carers said that *Kinship* understood them, believed and valued them, and reassured them that they were doing the right thing for the child.

“As soon as they were talking to me, they knew exactly what I was on about” – Service user

Kinship carers appreciated both the availability and the deep expertise of *Kinship* staff and volunteers. Kinship carers accessed legal and employment advice, were referred for benefits, grants, and other services that they had not been aware of, received support for dealing with social services, employment or housing issues, and more. *Kinship* “seemed to be there and on the ball.”

Some missed the local in-person peer support groups. For others, the online groups worked well: they saved travel time, were more accessible for carers with disabilities, health concerns or anxiety about going out, and for those with small children. Kinship carers liked the timing of the online peer groups, the opportunity to provide support as well as receive it, and the chance to include the children on some calls.

On the organisation’s staff and volunteers

Additional advice staff, project workers, and grants volunteers were recruited with the funding and supported more kinship carers, provided a quicker service and took more live calls. Without this, the advice service would have been “totally overwhelmed”. The grants volunteers helped particularly with the increased requests for laptops for home schooling. Staff and volunteers were already equipped to provide services remotely online or by phone. With the new team, they avoided overload and met their targets as the demand was there.

“The funding was absolutely fantastic and it came at the right time. It was needed.” - Volunteer

Part of the funding covered recruitment and training of more volunteers to the peer support service Someone Like Me. Experienced kinship carers who volunteered received a good training programme, with plenty of support from *Kinship* such as protection of their workloads and debriefs after calls. One volunteer observed that the number of calls increased but the conversations also changed, with more kinship carers struggling and in need of support, as well as additional needs for advice arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions.

On the organisation itself

The additional OGD funding allowed support for all kinship carers regardless of legal order and *Kinship* aims to ensure they continue to reach these vulnerable families which are still in need. The learning from the project has informed *Kinship*’s contribution to the current [independent review of children’s social care](#) and helped shape their strategic priorities. Closer contact with DfE and the success of the project has established trust and led to further funding for peer support. Links with more local authorities (as a result of the separate commissioned funds), and with the voluntary and community sector have raised awareness of kinship care and *Kinship*’s service.

“It’s definitely helped to stimulate partnerships” – Staff member

Online and phone advice and support will remain an important delivery model, but some face-to-face provision will return, such as the one-to-one project worker support. The peer support network is being expanded with a large new grant and the website is being developed to provide an online support hub.

Case study 7: Network Church Sheffield

Network Church Sheffield supports economically disadvantaged individuals and families in the Sheffield city region through their food banks and debt and employment advice services.

The organisation received £54,000 from the Community Match Challenge (CMC) fund, delivered through the Church Revitalisation Trust. The CMC funding aimed to ensure that individuals in need could continue to access important services during the pandemic, with grantholders securing match funding.

How was the funding used?

The support that *Network Church Sheffield* offer is targeted at **disadvantaged groups**, many of whom experienced **increased need during the Covid-19 pandemic**. The **CMC funding** helped *Network Church Sheffield* **expand their existing services** to meet this increased need. They were also able to **fill in gaps in support** where other organisations had to stop service delivery as a result of the pandemic.

“We didn’t have to focus on resources as much. We could focus on getting the job done” – Staff member

The funding was used to take on **new food bank locations**, open a larger **fulfilment centre**, secure **food supply**, cover **daily costs**, take on **more debt advice clients**, recruit **new staff** members, and **adapt service delivery** methods, for instance providing debt and employment advice over the phone. A **phonenumber** was set up to make food bank processes more streamlined, with service users no longer needing to go through a referral agency, and **food parcels** being given to people at the door of the site rather than inside the building.

Additional needs were identified through the phonenumber – for instance, someone would call about the food bank, but it would become clear that they had debt issues – which *Network Church Sheffield* could then offer support for. This holistic approach meant that the issues that led to individuals needing to use a foodbank could begin to be addressed. Phonenumber staff worked with staff on site at the foodbanks in order to deliver this wraparound support, with face-to-face delivery resuming as soon as it was safe to do so.

The funding increased organisational capacity and, combined with the previous experience and strong leadership the organisation already had, allowed *Network Church Sheffield* to address the needs of their community more efficiently.

Key messages:

- The funding enabled an expansion of food bank services, acquiring new sites as they closed or became at risk of closure, meeting increased need as well as filling in the gaps in support left when other organisations reduced their services.
- Service delivery was rapidly adapted. A phonenumber was set up for remote delivery and to streamline foodbank processes, with additional needs of service users identified and supported through this process.
- The volunteer base expanded during this time, and the funding allowed more paid staff to be hired. The work of the organisation also became increasingly collaborative.
- The successful expansion of *Network Church Sheffield* and its services as a result of the funding was in part due to their experience and reputation, which helped with partnership work and volunteer recruitment.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

The expansion of food bank services meant that needs for essential items could be met to a high level, with more people being fed by the organisation than they thought possible. Without the funding, the food bank services would not have been expanded to the same extent, meaning that the pre-existing foodbanks that were overwhelmed might not have been acquired and a smaller number of sites would have had to service a larger area of the city. Without *Network Church Sheffield*, some service users' circumstances would have deteriorated, especially due to other organisations stopping or slowing their support provision during this time, and there would likely be greater deprivation in the city.

“Everything they’ve done has worked well. I’ve got the food bank so I’ve got access to food, they’ve dealt with my debts so that’s taken a lot of pressure off that. All that they’ve done for me has been top class” – Service user

As a result of the holistic support offered, service users have been able to make progress on the issues that led to them needing to use a foodbank, such as debt, to the extent that some individuals have become debt free and no longer need to rely on a foodbank. Service users reported that the support they have received has been helpful and accessible, taking pressure off them and ultimately improving their wellbeing.

On the organisation’s staff and volunteers

The CMC funding was partially used to cover staff costs during the period and allowed *Network Church Sheffield* to hire new staff. 200 volunteers were recruited during this time, with requests coming in every day from individuals wanting to volunteer. At the onset of the pandemic, the workloads of staff and volunteers increased as processes needed to be rapidly adapted, for instance in setting up the phonenumber. Volunteers and staff members reported a sense of urgency during the funding period, working increased hours and feeling under pressure to respond quickly to the needs of service users. However, they felt well supported during this time and measures were put in place to reduce strain, with adaptations to streamline service delivery making the workload more manageable.

On the organisation itself

The funding allowed *Network Church Sheffield* to focus on the quality of their services and expanding their offering, and it has contributed to the organisation currently being in a strong financial position. Without the funding there would likely have been issues with cashflow, and resourcing would have become a primary focus during the pandemic.

“It really opened my eyes to what you can do if you’re well-resourced and willing to think outside the box...with the right resources we can have a huge impact because we’re already embedded in the community” – Staff member

Network Church Sheffield did a lot of partnership work during the funding period and subsequently they now have relationships with organisations across the sector. Many of these relationships were pre-existing, but they were strengthened by the collaborative work undertaken which was partly due to the funding and partly due to the pandemic necessitating new ways of working. As a result of these relationships, further funding has now been secured to sustain what has been achieved.

Case study 8: Doncaster Housing for Young People (DHYP)

Doncaster Housing for Young People (DHYP) is a charity that supports young people at risk of homelessness, predominantly around Doncaster. The charity helps around 350 young people a year. DHYP offers a range of services including supported lodgings, counselling, employment skills, budgeting support and advocacy.

DHYP received £9,475 from the Charities Aid Foundation as part of the Community Match Challenge (CMC) fund. The CMC funding aimed to support a range of service users based on their needs, including older people, disabled people, children and young people, the homeless, carers and low-income families, with grantholders securing match funding.

How was the funding was used?

Young people supported by DHYP have been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in a variety of ways. Many were impacted by **social isolation** and had increased **mental health and wellbeing needs**. The pandemic also impacted the number of young people going into **education** or **employment** due to **reduced confidence**, gaps in their skills and the impact of mental ill-health.

DHYP used the **CMC funding** to support the continued delivery of two existing services which addressed these needs: an **employment skills project** and a **wellbeing and counselling service**. DHYP's income was impacted during the pandemic so in addition to responding to increased need, **the funding helped to bridge a gap when DHYP had a reduced ability to fundraise**.

“It’s enabled very very important services to continue in a seamless fashion... it also bought us time to look at longer term funding for these services” – Staff member

The employment skills project is tailored to individual needs and aims to build young people's confidence and help them plan for the future. For some, this may include sessions such as CV writing or interview preparation.

One-to-one counselling sessions are offered to young people on an unlimited basis in addition to group wellbeing sessions. Both the wellbeing and counselling service received more referrals during the pandemic.

The wellbeing sessions involve small groups of young people going for walks or coffee with their counsellor (known as 'wellbeing walks'). The counselling sessions took place remotely until Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed and young people were given the choice of continuing over the phone, meeting at DHYP's office or meeting at the young person's home/local area.

Key messages:

- The funding was used by DHYP to support the continued delivery of an employment skills project and a wellbeing and counselling service.
- These services focused on service user needs that DHYP identified during the pandemic, including increased mental-ill health and a lack of confidence around employment and education.
- Service users were positively impacted by the services, reporting increased wellbeing, increased confidence, and progression to education or employment.
- The funding helped DHYP to bridge a gap when there were concerns about fundraising, giving the organisation time to plan longer term funding for the two projects.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Young people felt very comfortable during counselling sessions and reported that the sessions had improved their mental health and taught them coping techniques. Young people also spoke positively about the group wellbeing sessions, emphasising that the sessions gave them confidence to go out on their own and increased their motivation in other parts of their life. Staff expressed the importance of the sessions as something reliable and constant that young people can look forward to.

Young people enjoyed meeting new people through the group wellbeing sessions and felt that friendships formed through the group had extended their support network. This was particularly important for young people who did not have strong existing support networks.

“After I have a session, every single time, I leave and I feel better, I feel I can conquer the world and my motivation is there” – Service user

Staff reported that outcomes had been achieved for every young person involved in the employment project, with some young people going into full time training or employment. Some young people were not yet ready to enter training or employment, but the programme gave them purpose and increased their confidence and wellbeing.

On the organisation’s staff

The CMC funding allowed staff to focus on programme delivery during the pandemic. They were able to adjust their delivery to ensure Covid-19 security measures were implemented and respond to increased needs, for example increased wellbeing needs among young people.

“The funding for these services... lifted a huge weight from our shoulders... I think we would have struggled with these services during this period” – Staff member

Staff reported that the wellbeing service impacted staff more broadly at DHYP, increasing their knowledge and awareness of wellbeing needs in the young people they support.

On the organisation itself

DHYP's income was impacted by the pandemic due to reduced opportunities to fundraise and the CMC funding helped to bridge a gap during the pandemic. Although the funding amount was relatively modest, staff felt that it bought the organisation time to secure longer term funding for the services.

“For the sector as a whole, when income was so threatened, this fund was a real life-saver” – Staff member

The two projects funded by the grant were relatively new in the organisation (between two and four years old) and staff felt that the funding helped to cement the services within the organisation which will aid their long-term sustainability.



Case study 9: Windsor Horse Rangers

Windsor Horse Rangers is a charity that aims to educate children and young people about horse riding and equine care. The charity offers a structured programme which involves children aged 8-18 attending weekly sessions where they learn to ride and look after horses as well as study theory. The rangers work towards achievement badges which are presented at an annual awards day.

Windsor Horse Rangers received £18,220 from the Youth Covid-19 Support Fund. The fund aimed to enable youth organisations to continue operating during the pandemic, with a particular focus on organisations with a high impact which were at risk of closing or had to temporarily close due to loss of income.

How was the funding used?

At the start of the pandemic, *Windsor Horse Rangers* sessions had to stop due to Covid-19 restrictions. This had a number of financial impacts on the charity, including a **reduction in income from monthly subs payments for children**, a **reduced ability to fundraise** and a **reduced income from the canteen** which runs alongside the Horse Rangers sessions. Financial projections suggested that the charity would run out of money and be forced to close without intervention.

The **Youth Covid-19 funding** was used to **cover core running costs**, including **staff costs** and running the **horse yard**. Once Covid-19 restrictions eased, the funding was also used to **re-start Horse Rangers sessions** with Covid-19 security measures in place.

“Government money made a huge huge difference, it gave us enough money to cover our running costs” – Staff member

While *Windsor Horse Rangers* was closed, staff kept the Rangers engaged online through **quizzes and updates about the horses on Instagram and Facebook groups**. Once sessions could start again, the Rangers were split into groups and attended once every fortnight instead of weekly. This reduced the number of children and young people in each session and allowed for social distancing.

Key messages:

- *Windsor Horse Rangers* had to close at the start of the pandemic due to Covid-19 restrictions. They were at risk of closing permanently due to reduced subs payments from Rangers and an inability to fundraise.
- The funding was used to cover core costs and allowed the Rangers sessions to continue once Covid-19 restrictions eased.
- Young people discussed the challenges of the pandemic, including mental ill-health and the challenges of remote education. They felt that returning to Horse Rangers sessions benefitted their wellbeing.
- Going forward, *Windsor Horse Rangers* staff and trustees are focused on ensuring sufficient funds as well as finding suitable horses for the sessions to continue.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Staff and service users discussed the impact of the pandemic on children and young people, emphasising increased mental ill-health, and challenges with remote education and exams. However, they felt that *Windsor Horse Rangers* had a positive impact on wellbeing once the Horse Rangers sessions re-started. Young people felt that spending time with friends and horses during the sessions had a positive impact on their wellbeing. One young person described the sessions as a way to “de-stress” and highlighted the benefits of focussing on something which isn’t school or work.

Staff and young people also discussed the skills that Rangers gain at *Windsor Horse Rangers*, including learning to work with others and teaching younger children. For some young people, their experience has led to them applying to, or starting, college or university courses related to horses or animals.

“It has had such a massive impact on me, in a good way, if it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing at college now” – Service user

Young people also felt the sessions allowed them to access a sport which is expensive to participate in elsewhere.

On the organisation’s staff and volunteers

The funding allowed staff and volunteers to maintain the horse yard while Horse Rangers sessions had to stop, as well as plan and deliver sessions with Covid-19 adaptations once they could re-start. This required staff and volunteers to adjust quickly to changing circumstances. Staff felt that they had learned from the experience and are now better prepared to adapt quickly again to any future challenges.

“It’s been a learning curve for us, if it did happen again we’re fairly well equipped to deal with it” – Staff member

Staff reported that despite some volunteers not being able to continue their role during the pandemic, they were able to conduct an appeal on social media during the funding period to recruit new volunteers. However, staff expressed concerns about sustaining volunteers longer-term, highlighting that for some volunteers their enthusiasm to volunteer decreased with time.

On the organisation itself

The funding allowed *Windsor Horse Rangers* to cover their running costs at a time when they were at risk of closing due to loss of income from subs payments and fundraising. Staff felt that the funding gave the organisation time to plan for re-starting delivery and fundraising activities once Covid-19 restrictions allowed.

“If we hadn’t had that money, I’m not one hundred per cent convinced we’d be here today” – Staff member



Case study 10: All About Us

All About Us provides support for young people (aged 8 to 18) with autism or going through the diagnosis process, their siblings, and their families. They organise recreational and educational activities to help their service users learn new skills, make friends, and take care of their own wellbeing.

A grant of £26,000 was awarded from Children in Need (CiN), as part of the Big Night In (BNI fund). The aim of the CiN sub-fund was to support vulnerable and marginalised children (0-18), with funding focussed on children and young people disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

How was the funding used?

The Covid-19 pandemic had a **negative impact on children and young people with autism** and their emotional and mental wellbeing. *All About Us* noticed that their service users were becoming **more isolated**, were **scared**, and were **less able to socialise**. As explained by a member of staff, *“It was terrible. I was receiving calls from parents. Morning, day and night. Even from parents who were not part of our group.”*

The funding was used to **expand and adapt existing services to the new circumstances and to find ways to keep supporting the children and their families**. Before receiving the funding, *All About Us* had a basic support programme but thanks to the funding they were able to **improve the programme and make it more structured**. This included the delivery of **activity packages** every two weeks and the organisation of **workshops** once meeting in-person was possible.

“The way we work with our kids is we find out what their interests are and what they would like to do, and the majority of our activities are based on what they ask for” – Staff member

The activity packages contained toys and other sensory equipment to keep the children active and to support their emotional and mental wellbeing. The in-person meetups and workshops focused on different

subjects, such as physical exercises, dancing, clay play, mental health awareness, food and cooking, self-regulation, and breathing lessons. They also tried to move some of the sessions online, but their service users engaged via videoconference less actively than face-to-face.

The funding received also contributed to the **expansion of the volunteer base**, allowing *All About Us* to more easily cover their expenses, and it was also partially used to support the organisation’s finances to **pay for rent and utilities**.

Key messages:

- At the time of the funding *All About Us* had stopped all face-to-face activities and fundraising initiatives due to Covid-19.
- The funding supported the organisation’s finances and allowed them to keep delivering their services (activity packages, workshops and meetups) and sustain the volunteer base.
- The funded activities reduced the sense of isolation of service users and improved their wellbeing and skills. Part of the grant also went towards paying rent and utilities and volunteers’ expenses.
- The organisation is now resuming fundraising activities and is moving into a new, more central location.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Service users and their families appreciated receiving activity packs which helped them fight boredom and feel less isolated. Children were looking forward to receiving the activity packs and this contributed positively to their wellbeing. Similarly, the workshops and meet-ups supported the service users' mental and physical wellbeing allowing them to socialise in person.

“There was always something new in this package and it helped with boredom.” – Service user

The organisation made every possible effort to make their in-person activities Covid-secure: they reduced the number of participants and increased the offer of activities (which was made possible thanks to a larger volunteer base), kept the service users as distanced as possible, provided hand sanitiser and individual activity boxes, performed temperature checks, and required all volunteers to wear masks. The participation of service users in these activities allowed some of them to overcome their fear of Covid-19, reduce their anxiety, and regain the confidence to socialise with their peers.

Activity packages, workshops and meet-ups also had a comparable impact on the families of service users, who felt less isolated and more able to share experiences and support with other families in similar situations. As explained by a parent, *“when your child has special needs and high anxiety levels, knowing that the others can accept those and nobody bats an eyelid if your child has a meltdown, it's comfortable for you and it's comfortable for your child. It's just nice to go where they are going to accept us.”*

On the organisation's volunteers

All About Us is a volunteer-led organisation and the funding was essential in supporting the volunteer base through the coverage of their expenses, especially in a period when some of them were unemployed or earning less than they did before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The increased number of volunteers facilitated the implementation of some preventative measures against Covid-19 (meetups and workshops with less people but taking place more frequently), and also avoided an excessive workload.

On the organisation itself

The funding allowed *All About Us* to keep providing necessary services to their service users. Without the funding they would have had to drastically reduce their activities and the number of people they were able to help because they would have had less available volunteers and they would have not been able to deliver enough activity packages. The funding was essential to fill the funding gap derived from the stop to fundraising activities.

In the same period, they also strengthened their collaboration with other organisations in their area. This was also due to the BNI funding, which allowed for more resources to be used to discuss new ideas, plan new projects, and to ultimately fulfil their full potential.

All About Us is now slowly resuming all the fundraising activities and is moving into a more central and spacious location which will make it possible to support more children and their families.

Case study 11: Family Fund

Family Fund is a UK-wide grant-making charity providing one-off grants to low-income families raising a child with disability or long-term illness. Families can apply annually for a range of items such as sensory toys, outdoor play, short breaks, household appliances, or other high-cost items that they cannot afford to access.

Family Fund received £10 million from the Department for Education (DfE) through the Other Government Departments (OGD) fund. This was allocated through funding partners, some of which had an existing relationship with the central government department. The aims of the fund were to provide emergency relief to meet additional needs, to adapt delivery during the pandemic, and to offset lost revenue.

How was the funding used?

Family Fund used the funding to meet increased demand for services from low-income families. They provided support to 20,000 families on top of the normal support they provide through annual DfE funding. As a trusted partner, DfE awarded the funding as a variation to their grant, on the basis of research by *Family Fund* into the impact of the pandemic on their service users.

“Families know what they want and what their problems are and listening to them will tell you how to support them” – Staff member

Traditionally, *Family Fund* makes grants for a range of items including clothing, bedding, short breaks for the family and for high-cost household appliances. During the pandemic this shifted with a greater focus on requests for digital devices and for outdoor play / exercise, as families were locked-down, home schooling their children and needing laptops or tablets, and without access to usual services such as physiotherapy. As lockdown lifted, applications for short breaks increased, though these were sometimes cancelled or postponed by families, either because the nature of their child’s condition meant they were continuing to isolate, or because rising prices meant they could not afford to pay the balance of the cost. Requests for household appliances also continued to increase, sometimes as a result of changed circumstances in the pandemic or continued lockdown.

Family Fund adapted their mode of service delivery from initial face-to-face family assessments in the home for new family applications, to completely online or by phone. The grant application process was also largely transferred to online, though a number of staff returned to the office during the first national lockdown to ensure the organisation could continue to process paper applications from families where needed. The majority of the staff moved to remote working from home.

Key messages:

- *Family Fund* already received regular funding from DfE, so a trusted relationship was in place for this additional grant.
- The organisation’s early research with service users in 2020 indicated a likely increased demand and new needs for digital devices, outdoor play and exercise equipment.
- The funding enabled *Family Fund* to support 20,000 additional families and to maintain excellent service levels overall.
- The organisation moved most operations online while continuing to support digitally excluded families.
- Financial hardship is still affecting families and there remains a shortfall in funding.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, parents were having to cope with isolation, working from home, educating and entertaining their children while schools were closed, or their children were too vulnerable to attend. Usual specialist services for the children were paused. The prompt approval of grants for, and rapid delivery of, household appliances was appreciated. One mother reported massive relief from stress and worry when a new fridge freezer arrived that would help her provide special dietary requirements for her son, while another commented “they’ve never let us down.” Families who took up the short breaks reported that these gave them and their children some relief from the restrictions and created “incredible” happy family memories.

“Having a charity there that can help you with bigger items is such a relief when things are tough anyway” – Service user

Family Fund's offer of digital devices to help with home schooling and entertainment was welcomed. A parent found the online training sessions helpful and convenient. She had confidence that her child who had autism would be able to use the tablet safely. Parents felt that *Family Fund* knows exactly what they need, that the services are well-researched and efficiently delivered. They appreciated the ease of the online application process, annual reminders of eligibility to apply, and the availability of staff for phone or email support.

On the organisation's staff

Staff felt that without the grant they “would have been in real trouble”. Not only would the families not have received the support they needed, but it would have been very challenging for staff to manage the additional demand. They would potentially have had to close the programme early or move the eligibility threshold which would have been very difficult. There would have been very negative effects for the families financially and for their mental health, “which doesn't bear thinking about”. The grant enabled staff to keep going, knowing that they were “able to continue to make a difference” because of the additional funding.

On the organisation itself

The funding enabled *Family Fund* to meet the needs of 20,000 additional applications, many from families being supported by *Family Fund* for the first time. The organisation worked with their regular suppliers to ensure timely and Covid-secure delivery of all grant items including household appliances. The commitment of the existing staff meant the service kept going, alongside the online recruitment and training of new staff.

The OGD funding has ended but three-quarters of *Family Fund* families said their financial position had worsened during the pandemic. There is a funding shortfall. Collaboration with the voluntary and community sector increased: signposting other organisations to the additional funding; sharing information about who was still able to deliver support; and learning as to how to transition office-based call centres to home working.

“The sector really came together to be able to share and provide that support to families” – Staff member

Family Fund changed more of the grant-making processes to online and remote delivery, including their traditional initial family assessments which had been conducted by home visit. The organisation has retained paper-based applications for those who need it, to ensure families are supported equitably. Operationally, *Family Fund* largely moved to home working with a small office based team throughout the pandemic.

“Making a change now which seems impossible because of other priorities – you have to try and do it.” – Staff member

Case study 12: Communities 1st

Communities 1st is a Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) and Volunteer Centre, providing support to the local voluntary and community sector in the districts of St. Albans, Hertsmere, Broxbourne and East Herts. They support organisations by providing guidance and advice, recruiting and training volunteers, and organising networking events. They also run three community centres and provide services to the general public.

A grant of £7,800 was awarded from the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) fund, in collaboration with the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA). The aim of this funding was to match the response from volunteers and volunteer involving organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic to large-scale requests for support, and to gather intelligence on unmet needs at a local level county-wide to help facilitate a more collaborative and coordinated response across the voluntary and community sector locally, regionally, and nationally.

How was the funding used?

Communities 1st directly liaised with approximately 160 primary organisations **to identify their main needs and how they could be supported**. The primary organisations were contacted **over the phone on a weekly basis**. This solution was preferred to conducting periodical surveys because it allowed them to have a more open conversation and to create and consolidate their relationship with these organisations.

“Part of the actual funding was used to identify the VCSE sector needs” – Staff member

The needs identified depended on the organisations' main features, but these were mainly related to **sourcing food and other goods, struggling with recruiting volunteers, technical issues** due to moving services online, and **difficulties with navigating Covid-19 rules and guidelines**. Part of the funding was used **to establish and maintain communications** with the voluntary and community sector organisations they supported. This allowed *Communities 1st* to effectively support them in expanding and improving their ability to respond to the growing demand for services, and in overcoming the difficulties caused by lockdowns and additional pressures on staff and volunteers. As explained by a staff member, the activities were *“basically designed through co-production to find out what would work for primary organisations and what we could manage.”*

The funding also contributed to the **recruitment and training** of volunteers, to **support liquidity**, and to **implement new services**, such as supporting churches in the organisation of food banks. Most of the activities are still ongoing after the end of the funding, and the organisation has expanded their volunteer base and the area they cover, which now includes Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Luton, Milton Keynes and West Essex.

Key messages:

- At the time of the funding the organisation was in a strong financial position.
- The funding allowed them to increase their volunteer base and to support other organisations in the voluntary and community sector, for example through recruitment of volunteers, weekly checking calls, support in moving to digital, provision of guidance, and organisation of networking events.
- The activities carried out as a result of the funding promoted better communications within the voluntary and community sector, and made possible a more effective response to the growing demand for services.
- The organisation has now expanded their volunteer base and covers a larger geographical area.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On supported organisations and their service users

The impact on the organisations supported thanks to the funding package and their service users was described as both direct and indirect. In terms of direct support, this took the shape of sourcing essential items, recruiting and training volunteers, providing guidance to navigate changes caused by Covid-19, listening to their concerns about the wellbeing of their service users, staff and volunteers, and sharing experiences and knowledge during networking events. The recruitment and training of volunteers allowed these organisations to keep providing their services to service users in the best way possible; while having the chance to share their concerns with *Communities 1st*, receiving guidance on changes and sharing their experience with other VCSE organisations was essential in ensuring that all organisations were well equipped to face the uncertainties caused by Covid-19 and were able to find the appropriate support when necessary.

“The organisations felt supported. They felt that there was someone they could turn to with questions who had the time and capacity to answer. They also felt supported because we gave them the opportunity to come together and share their experience” – Staff member

The indirect impact on organisations consisted of alleviating some pressure from them thanks to the support they received, which reduced the organisations' workload, improved the wellbeing of staff and volunteers, and made them more able to provide support to their service users.

On the organisation's staff and volunteers

The main impact of the funding on staff and volunteers was to allow the recruitment of more volunteers who were essential in managing the increased demand coming from voluntary and community organisations and from *Communities 1st*'s own service users. A member of staff, for example, explained that in the period before the funding was awarded, everyone in the organisation was helping with different tasks that were outside their main roles. This changed with the recruitment of more volunteers to support the work of the core members of staff.

“There was a period where pretty much everyone in the organisation had to deal with some telephone support for the general public and take shopping lists, until we had enough volunteers to be able to carry out that work”
– Staff member

On the organisation itself

The grant did not have a major impact on the organisation's resilience because they were in a good financial situation, however it contributed to the consolidation of the organisation's relationship with other voluntary and community sector organisations. This also let them gain a better understanding of the needs of these organisations and fostered changes in the approach of *Communities 1st* to addressing issues in their sector. They are now more inclined to periodically check how the organisations that work with them are doing and offer them a range of options and how to pre-empt issues instead of looking for solutions after a problem has arisen.

Case study 13: New Meaning Centre Bucks LTD

The *New Meaning Centre Bucks LTD* supports young people aged 16-18 who have had a difficult time at mainstream schools, with centres across Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Berkshire, Warwickshire, South Bedfordshire and Cambridge. They offer three training programmes focused on construction, independent living skills and work-study, all of which include English and Maths classes. These programmes aim to provide students with skills that are transferable to future employment in order to help them secure employment after one year or move into an apprenticeship.

The centre received £10,000 from the National Emergencies Trust (NET) as part of the Big Night In (BNI) funding stream. This funding was broadly focused on responding to the needs of vulnerable people in local communities and awarded funding through community funds which had pre-existing relationships with local organisations.

How was the funding used?

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the *New Meaning Centre Bucks LTD* primarily delivered their programmes face-to-face through classroom teaching, printed paper resources and practical sessions. When schools were forced to close at the start of the pandemic, this highlighted the **digital exclusion** experienced by some of their pupils who did not have technology available to them at home to facilitate their continued learning.

“Covid-19 impacted us because we had to work a different way, but the funding then gave us the technology to enable that way of working to happen”
– **Staff member**

The BNI funding was used to **purchase 50 laptops** which were distributed across their centres. This allowed students to have the option to **receive online resources and attend virtual lessons** with their teachers and peers. For example, students relied on online platforms like Teams or Google Classroom in order to continue learning whilst at home.

Key messages:

- The *New Meaning Centre Bucks LTD* had to transition their teaching from in-person to online at the start of the pandemic.
- The funding helped provide a number of students experiencing digital exclusion and social isolation with laptops in order to continue their learning at home.
- The organisation was able to quickly identify this need and adapt, allowing it to continue to benefit from a hybrid model of learning which monitors progress through online tools.
- Service users could use the laptops as a means to engage with staff and peers through online platforms.
- Going forward, they look to make laptops more readily available to all the students that need access to one and continue to look for ways in which online tools can support in-person learning.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

The laptops were a useful tool for learning and communication for digitally excluded students during the pandemic. Having the laptops has allowed for the option of a hybrid model of teaching and learning, particularly among those students with heightened anxiety as a result of the pandemic. Aside from students' educational needs, the laptops also allowed students without technology at home to stay connected with their peers as a means to combat social isolation.

“Without the laptops things would be more difficult” – Service user

Despite in person teaching resuming, the new cohort of students have also benefitted from having the laptops available at the centres, as they can borrow the laptops as and when needed to support in-person learning. Students have highlighted that they prefer using the laptops over pen and paper activities as they find it easier to use, and they hope to be able to use them to complete their exams in the future.

On the organisation's staff and volunteers

Staff quickly adapted their method of teaching at the start of the pandemic and identified students who would benefit from borrowing a laptop. Using this technology, rather than providing in-person services, made it easier for teachers to share resources with students and take advantage of tools and software that helped track the students' progress using AI. Staff have worked hard to move some learning and resources online, realising along the way the importance of being open to change when it comes to finding solutions to problems. They now find it easy to utilise both online and in-person resources.

“It's been great having the laptops, it's added a whole new dimension to our offer in terms of the quality and the experience for the young people” – Staff member

On the organisation itself

For the organisation, the funding has created a new option that they can now offer to prospective students with severe anxiety, in order to continue to deliver effective learning for the young people and to help them discover how to earn their own living. New students are now asked if they have technology available to them at home to use for their studies, which is data that was not previously monitored. The strong position that the organisation is in now has also been attributed to the BNI funding, given that they are more aware of the different needs their students have and know what they can do to meet them.

“If we didn't have the funding the young people would have gotten less benefit from their education” – Staff member

Looking ahead, the organisation hopes to budget for more laptops as the funding was not able to stretch far enough to provide laptops for everyone who needed one at the time. A portion of this budget will cover the costs of replacing the laptops to ensure that their resources remain updated and high-quality. The organisation is also exploring new ways in which online tools can support and become more integrated into in-person learning.

Case study 14: Litherland Youth & Community Centre

The *Litherland Youth & Community Centre (LYCC)* provide a variety of activities and services for members of the community from all ages and backgrounds. Their services include youth provisions, childcare, senior members club, food bank distributions, advice services and sports facilities hire.

The centre received £54,000 from the Youth Covid-19 Support Fund, a fund specifically designed to support the youth sector in England. The fund aimed to enable youth organisations that were impactful but struggling, to continue operating.

How was the funding used?

The LYCC experienced a **reduction in their revenue** given the inability to hire out their sports facilities, in line with Covid-19 restrictions. The Youth Covid-19 Support funding helped to **cover staff costs, building costs, introduce childcare** for frontline staff and produce **food parcels** for low income families.

“Our goal was to play our part and help vulnerable people, including those who had never been vulnerable before” – Staff member

At the start of the pandemic, schools were closed and working parents were struggling with childcare. The funding meant that the centre was able to **keep its doors open and offer free childcare to frontline staff**. Staff also organised **online quizzes** for families unable to physically attend the centre.

The centre also started providing their own **food parcels** to over 240 vulnerable families a month experiencing redundancy or furlough for the first time. The funding meant that they could seek out food from local businesses and pack the food parcels in-house, all the while strengthening relationships with local businesses. This service was not limited to food; vulnerable families also received Easter hampers and Christmas presents.

The funding meant that the centre was able to **remain open throughout the entire pandemic**, even opening on a Sunday for the first time to meet

increased demand from the local community. As a result of being one of the few places to remain open, smaller organisations sought out help and advice from the centre which encouraged **new relationships to form within the voluntary and community sector**.

Key messages:

- *Litherland Youth & Community Centre* experienced a loss of income from their sports facilities at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The VCSE funding allowed the centre to stay open throughout the pandemic, covering staff costs, building costs and contributing towards new services for vulnerable families.
- With the funding, LYCC were able to provide hundreds of food packages to vulnerable families, which also had mental health benefits for service users.
- The centre maintained service delivery throughout the pandemic and quickly adapted its services to ensure that new community needs were met, leading to strengthened community support networks and trust in its capabilities.
- LYCC looks to expand its services to provide support and increase awareness for mental health and wellbeing.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Prior to receiving the funding, a small number of young people infrequently received targeted workshops and activities which tackled difficult topics like drugs and crime. Thanks to the funding, young people were regularly able to benefit from these workshops, which saw individuals openly discuss difficult topics, build meaningful connections with their peers and get to know staff better. For the families receiving food parcels, their physical needs were met by being able to discreetly pick up a food parcel or have it delivered. Without the funding, these families would not have had this service available to them and might have relied on borrowing money from friends or family to make ends meet. Mental wellbeing was also positively impacted, with individuals reporting that they felt less stressed about where their next meal was going to come from.

“This support took a big weight off your shoulders, at that time there was a lot of things to worry about and this was one less thing to worry about, knowing there was something there that we could make a meal with” – Service user

Staff also provided support to older members of the senior club in the form of phone calls, checking in to see if there was anything they needed. This helped combat loneliness at a time when individuals were shielding.

On the organisation’s staff and volunteers

While some full-time staff were furloughed, the centre was able to take on more volunteers. The funding meant that staff and volunteers could quickly adapt to new Covid-19 rules and were supplied with PPE as well as new training. Some of the new volunteers had been recently furloughed, and the centre gave these individuals purpose and provided them with vital work experience that could aid them in gaining future employment.

“It all comes down to the funding, the types of services that can be provided, but we know with the people we’ve got, we can achieve any goal” - Volunteer

On the organisation itself

The pandemic and the funding enhanced the centre’s reputation within their local community as a place that people could reach out to and has shown other funders what they are capable of offering in times of crisis. Without the funding, the centre would not have been able to offer as many services. They’re looking to continue to offer more services with a focus on mental health and wellbeing awareness and support.

“The majority of the work day-to-day would not be possible without the passion, skills, experience of our staff and volunteers especially during Covid because it was such an unprecedented thing” – Staff member

Going forward, the centre suggested that having a specific point of contact for organisations in the voluntary and community sector which they can reach out to and direct their questions towards in times of crisis like the pandemic may be beneficial.

Case study 15: Place2Be

Place2Be provides school-based, early intervention therapeutic support to pupils and their families, teachers and other staff. Their aim is to prevent mental health problems from developing before they escalate. This is achieved through *Place2Be* teams of qualified Counsellors, Mental Health Practitioners, together with Counsellors on clinical placements, supported within a clinical supervision structure. They provide intensive one-to-one support for referred pupils, and lunchtime self-referral sessions for pupils called *Place2Talk*, and for staff called *Place2Think*. *Place2Be* also runs a range of accredited qualifications for counselling.

The charity received £500,000 from Department for Health and Social Care, as was part of the Other Government Departments (OGD) fund. The aims of the fund included providing emergency relief to meet additional needs, adapting service delivery during the pandemic, and offsetting lost revenue.

How was the funding used?

The majority of *Place2Be*'s funding came through **providing their school-based services and training**, neither of which were possible to deliver face-to-face during stay at home or work at home instructions during the pandemic. The funding allowed **service continuity** and to **avoid furloughing School Projects Managers**.

“The funding allowed continuity and security of service” – Staff member

School Project Managers phoned primary age pupils via their parents, and secondary pupils directly. The money was used to **provide staff with smart phones and laptops** so that service provision could be continued remotely. It was also used to provide training via online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and other resources such as Art@Home, and Back to School.

Greater contact via parents identified new needs for guidance for them. In particular, dealing with difficult issues arising during the pandemic (e.g., anxiety, bereavement, and battles at mealtime, etc.). This led to the **development of online resources for parents** called *Parenting Smart*, and better signposting to existing online resources for children and young people and their parents (e.g., *Kooth Plc*, *Healios*, and the *Think Ninja App*).

The funding was also used to help **prepare children to return to school**, and for the project managers to **adapt therapeutic spaces** to be social distanced and Covid-safe.

The Mental Health Champions Foundation programme for teachers was **moved online** using Zoom. This reached over 50,000 teachers and staff from 13,800 schools.

Key messages:

- In-school mental health care support for pupils, school staff and the school community may have ceased if it was not for the funding.
- It allowed core activities to continue in remote and online forms, and allowed adaption of therapeutic spaces to be social distanced when pupils returned to schools. Training on mental health for teachers was also made easier by moving to online delivery.
- The charity's staff reported that the funding helped make their delivery more efficient and effective, especially when working with busy parents and for keeping in touch with pupils outside school.
- A Head Teacher whose school worked with *Place2Be*, reported that continuity of the charity's services had been instrumental in supporting her, her pupils and the wider school community psychologically, especially in preparing them for lock down, and managing the effects of ever-changing restrictions.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Avoiding furloughing School Project Managers as far as possible, and adaption of provision to remote and online working, meant *Place2Be* was able to sustain its core activities of supporting the mental health of pupils and school staff. A Head Teacher told us how the charity had been vital in supporting her, her teaching staff, pupils, parents and the school community in adapting to the ever-changing restrictions and circumstances arising from the pandemic.

“I honestly don't think I would have come out of the pandemic as sane as I have without the support of Place2Be... When I reached out to them I was in a pretty desperate place” – Service user

She highlighted that, not only had they provided continuity of care, but they had helped her with new ideas about how to prepare pupils for going into lockdown. This was through the idea of a *Network Hand*, which involved pupils identifying four people they could turn to during the lockdown restrictions (the four fingers of the hand), with the thumb being the part that made pupils aware of *Childline* and how they could contact them.

She highlighted how the charity had helped her develop a “recovery curriculum” as pupils returned to schools. Learning developed at the school was also pushed out to other schools through *Place2Be*, thereby supporting schools better. Greater work via parents during the pandemic had also identified new needs, and led to the development of online resources for them. In particular, the Head Teacher thought these changes had led to a general offer open to everyone, rather than service targeted towards pupils with the most severe needs.

On the organisation's staff

While School Project Managers told us they would not want to keep deeper aspects of one-to-one or therapeutic work remote or online, they noted that use of smart phones had made initial mental assessments of pupils much easier for busy and working parents. One School Project Manager told us that maintaining contact with pupils when they were out of school was now much easier, whereas previously vital contact with pupils may not have been sustained.

“[Place2Be] now use online sessions to make sure they [pupils] still get support... Let them know you are still thinking of them no matter what. The use of technology and remote communications really helps with busy parents” – Staff member

Staff working for *Place2Be* also told us that they thought that adoption of new technology had been accelerated using the funding, making their service more effective and efficient. Strategic staff observed that their provision was now more resilient and able to adapt to change in other similar circumstances in future.

On the organisation itself

76% of *Place2Be*'s funding comes from delivering mental health services in schools, with the remaining 24% coming from fundraising. The funding meant fewer staff had to be furloughed, and income generating activities could continue. Not only were core activities maintained, but new, more efficient ways of working with pupils and parents were developed. By training teachers online they were also able to reach more teachers than they had planned. The offer of the organisation was enhanced and expanded, where it might otherwise have contracted or ceased all together in some schools. This also enabled *Place2Be* in a stronger, more resilient position as it emerged from the pandemic.

Case study 16: Sefton CVS

Sefton Council for Voluntary Service is an infrastructure and coordination charity that assists and supports approximately 1000 voluntary and community organisations operating in Sefton, Merseyside. Their member organisations deliver a range of programmes across criminal justice, children and young people, older people, health and wellbeing, as well as conducting policy and partnership work.

The organisation initially received £9,000, and then a further £4,500 once the funded activities were extended, from the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) fund. The VCSEP funding sought to foster connections between a range of local and national organisations, enabling a more effective and coordinated response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

How was the funding used?

The VCSEP, in partnership with NAVCA and British Red Cross, set up multi-agency cells across the country to establish a channel of communication between national and local organisations and to facilitate information sharing. In each area a local infrastructure or coordination organisation was given funding to **support their participation** in these cells. Funding was awarded to *Sefton CVS* as a result of their CEO being **successful in their application to undertake the role of Regional Liaison Lead for Merseyside**, as part of the Northern multi-agency cell.

“It’s built that golden thread, so to speak, from the national emergency response into the local” – Staff member

The cell met weekly to discuss the emerging issues and needs of the regions across the North of England, as well as what was happening at the national level, providing an opportunity to make **requests for resource** and to share **best practice**. Many of the individuals and organisations in the cell had not previously worked together, or not in such close collaboration.

Each of the regional leads had a weekly pulse check survey to complete where they were able to feed back on the main issues of the local population and of the organisations operating in the local area. Although not a requirement of the funding, the regional lead for Merseyside filled this in collectively

via Zoom with colleagues from other CVS organisations across the region, allowing them to have a full picture of what was happening in each of the boroughs, making their feedback into the cell more informed. Solutions-focussed discussions took place which helped identify what could be raised at the partnership cell meetings for local organisations to gain assistance with. This was felt to be highly beneficial to **understand what was happening across the region** and **explore how to respond collectively**.

Key messages:

- *Sefton CVS* received funding from the VCSEP as result of the CEO being successful in their application to be the Regional Liaison Lead for Merseyside. The funding enabled the CEO to dedicate one day a week to meet the responsibilities of this role.
- Weekly meetings were held between national organisations and local organisations across the North as part of a multi-agency cell that the VCSEP facilitated.
- Smaller organisations were able to highlight issues in their areas and make requests for resource.
- A greater level of understanding of what was happening in different areas and what each organisation was doing allowed for a more coordinated response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Some of this partnership work is continuing even though the funding has now ended.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

Organisations have benefitted from sharing best practice through the networks that have been established during the funding period, thereby better meeting the needs of the communities that they service. For example, Community Action Bradford produced resources that were successful in combatting vaccine hesitancy in hard to reach groups and shared these resources with other organisations so that they were better equipped to deal with vaccine hesitancy in their local areas.

“Because the structures are now in place, partners connect into us in a way they probably wouldn't have before” – Staff member at partner organisation

New relationships have been formed across the sector, and existing networks have been strengthened, as a result of the work facilitated by the VCSEP. *Sefton CVS* now have named contacts from the organisations they worked with across the North and an informal network has subsequently been established. This network has allowed for a more collaborative way of working resulting in many practical benefits. For example, distributing PPE to frontline organisations has been coordinated through this network, with the Regional Liaison Lead acting as a link between businesses and community groups. Similar work took place with a number of different services and resources, much of which was made possible by the increased connectivity across the sector that this funding allowed. Work of this nature is contributing to improved organisational and community resilience, for instance by opening-up access to resources that might not have been known about previously.

“Having the formal link into the VCSEP certainly helped us to feed issues in, it certainly helped us influence, it certainly helped us get messages upwards” – Staff member at partner organisation

On the organisation itself

Structures have been put in place so that responses to future emergencies can be more coordinated, benefitting from the strong working relationships that have been developed across the region. Organisations at both the local and national level had a better understanding of the work that each other do as a result of the communications set up by VCSEP, meaning that there was no risk of duplication of work by different organisations. The two-way channel of communication that was created meant that any issues could be raised as and when they emerged, and the increased understanding of other organisations went some way to ensure that the most suitable organisation was able to respond. Without these meetings, organisations may not have known what each other were doing.

“A sizeable number of us continue to engage, which I think says something about the relationships and that they've been worthwhile, because I'm not going to spend time at a meeting that's not fulfilling its objectives” – Staff member

The success of the partnership work is exemplified by the fact that many of the organisations involved continue to meet regularly, despite the fact that they no longer receive funding to do so, with the connections formed as a result of the cell discussions remaining valuable. Whilst this continuity has been difficult to sustain in some instances, for example where individuals have moved on to other roles or organisations, work is ongoing to keep the efficacy of the meetings and collaboration going, maintaining the links that have been established.

Case study 17: EatSleep Media

EatSleep Media are a full-suite media production company, based in South Wales, who create television, radio and digital video content.

EatSleep Media received a £12,650 through the Radio Fund (Audio Content Fund stream) as part of the Winter Loneliness Fund. The Audio Content Fund supported the creation of original audio content, with the aim of alleviating loneliness in listeners and/or empowering listeners to combat loneliness they may be experiencing owing to lockdown restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

How was the funding used?

The funding was used by *EatSleep Media* to **produce an eight-episode radio show** with the *Running Punks*, which aired on Union Jack Radio between March and May 2021. *Running Punks* are a running club with a substantial online community of members from across the world, who promote the message that anyone can be a runner.

The radio show was presented by representatives from the *Running Punks*, who would go for a run with a different guest each episode. The show included music and discussion which was intended to both support and entertain the listener.

“We wanted the series to hit...different issues around the pandemic, around mental health, around social support in the community but also we wanted it to be entertaining as well” – Staff member

The show aimed to **inspire listeners** to join the *Running Punks* community, and **deal with challenges brought about by the pandemic** by running and listening to music.

Whilst the show was intended for everyone, a specific target audience were middle-aged men who may particularly struggle to discuss and seek support for their mental health.

Key messages:

- The funding was used by *EatSleep Media* to produce an eight-episode radio show with the running club and online community *Running Punks*.
- The show raised awareness of the *Running Punks* online community and provided listeners with social connection during the pandemic.
- The show also focused on the mental health benefits of running, encouraging listeners to go out for a run and enjoy the experience.
- The funding gave *EatSleep Media* an opportunity to move into producing radio content, develop their production skills and diversify their business. Due to the success of the show, they have been commissioned to produce further radio content.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

The show gave listeners a way to connect to others during the pandemic. Anecdotal feedback received through social media and the *Running Punks* suggested that the show raised awareness of the community, with *Running Punks* noting a spike in online traffic every time an episode went out alongside an increase in followers. A listener also commented that the show made them feel connected to others at a time when they could not see or go running with those outside their household.

“It felt like they were in the room at a time when you couldn't have people in the room” – Listener

The show aimed to promote health and wellbeing through running. Presenters and guests encouraged listeners to go out running, and not worry about speed, distance or having the right equipment but focus on how it made them feel and mental health benefits. A listener explained that the show encouraged them to get up and go for a run, but also made them feel that it was okay to just enjoy the experience, for example by slowing down and appreciating the scenery rather than pushing themselves to achieve a faster time. The content was also described as “uplifting” and “hilarious”, with a listener commenting that it made them feel more positive.

On the organisation itself

Prior to the funding, *EatSleep Media* focused on producing video and social media content. The fund gave them an opportunity to move into radio - as the costs of the show were covered, radio stations were more able to take a gamble on a new content producer. Due to the success of the show, *EatSleep Media* have since been commissioned to produce further radio content. Therefore, this project has enabled them to develop their production skills and add another workstream to their business.

“It's allowed us to prove that we can do something, opened up a new avenue of work for us and diversified our offering”
– Staff member

Whilst *EatSleep Media* were not experiencing financial struggles prior to the funding, one staff member commented that the *Running Punks* show was a key project which brought in money “during a tricky time”. After the project, the organisation was in a similar position financially. However, they had another service they could offer and another project to showcase their abilities. One staff member also noted that *EatSleep Media* were more aware of different funding streams following the project and had dedicated more resource into exploring this further. This was all considered positive for the growth and resilience of the organisation.

Case study 18: Blesma

Blesma is an association of Members, which supports limbless veterans and their families. They offer a range of practical, emotional and financial support services to help their Members live independent and fulfilling lives.

The organisation received £125,000 from the Other Government Department (OGD) fund, delivered through the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust with the aim of supporting limbless veterans through the Covid-19 pandemic.

How was the funding used?

The support that *Blesma* offer is for those with an active armed service record and their families. As a result of social distancing measures put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, **group face-to-face services had to be stopped**, which made it more difficult for staff to **gauge their Members' wellbeing**. This was compounded by Member's being at **heightened vulnerability** during the pandemic, due to a range of **disabilities**, risk of **social isolation**, and **mental health problems**.

“The last thing we could do was furlough support officers... we needed to keep them employed and we needed to pay for their salaries, so they could do their job and keep our members out of crisis” – Staff member

The funding was used to enable Blesma's support officers to **adjust and sustain their tailored support** to Blesma members. This was particularly important as services had to be adapted so each Member was contacted individually, increasing their workload. The key role of support officers was to **check in on Members** and **assess their wide-ranging and**

varied needs. For example, facilitating a visit to a limbless centre, eligibility for a welfare grant, or need for a new wheelchair. This ensured that each Member was supported on an individual-basis throughout the Covid-19 pandemic through tailored support.

Support officers were working from home prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, so were therefore already equipped with mobile phones and laptops to do so. This meant that support officers were already in place to start providing services remotely. The type of service delivery moved with changing restrictions and *Blesma's* own risk assessment, including telephone, face-to-face, Zoom and a hybrid model.

Key messages:

- *Blesma* were made aware that funding was going to be made available ahead of it being announced, so they knew what they were going to apply for.
- The organisation anticipated that Member's needs were going to increase, and that they needed to work with them on an individual basis.
- Support officers were already equipped to work remotely, so were in a position to start right away.
- The organisation will continue to work on a hybrid model to deliver services.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

The adaptation and continuation of *Blesma*'s services has enabled Member's to keep in touch with the organisation, receive support where needed, and keep informed about other services offered during the Covid-19 pandemic. Members reported receiving little or no support from any other organisations at this time, with some not having a support network in close proximity to their home, and unsure where to find support from elsewhere. However, *Blesma*'s adapted services started soon after restrictions were imposed. Support officers provided a range of support, including assessments of needs that resulted in house adaptations to enable them to move more freely at home and a new scooter for outdoor use.

“I think because I didn't have the leg either, I would have just become a cabbage. I would have just watched television, eaten, gone to bed, and that's it. They've really done me good.” –

Service user

Support officers had also referred Members to another service they delivered, namely group activity-based Zoom calls. This included meeting other Members online to take part in sessions including, but not limited to, yoga, making key rings, a book club, and painting. Taking place a few times a week, these provided Members with the opportunity for social interaction and made them feel like they were part of a team again.

“They really did step on the gas and got it set up quickly.” –

Service user

On the organisation itself

The funding was the first piece of emergency financial support that *Blesma* could apply for. As a military charity, they are part of the Confederation of Services Charities (COBSEO), which has links to the Office for Veteran's Affairs, so *Blesma* were kept updated on what funding was going to be made available. This, along with the straightforward application process, allowed *Blesma* to develop an application based on their Member's developing needs at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding they received from the OGD fund, along with that from other sources, has enabled the organisation to increase their income from last year. Learning from delivering services during the Covid-19 pandemic, the organisation will now continue to work on a hybrid basis, delivering both face-to-face and remote services to their Members.

“The decision making was quick, the application process was simple and then we went and got double the amount of money” – Staff member

Case study 19: Creative Lives

Creative Lives (formerly known as *Voluntary Arts Network*) supports amateur arts and the creative sector throughout the UK by championing community and volunteer-led creative activity. They provide support to local amateur arts groups and actively campaign to promote the sector among the general population.

A grant of £28,928 was awarded from Arts Council England (ACE), as part of the Winter Loneliness fund. The aim of the ACE sub-fund was to encourage social connections through community arts and cultural spaces and to tackle loneliness during the winter.

How was the funding used?

Creative Lives worked with University College, London (UCL) Covid Social Study to identify the demographics that were the most at risk of loneliness and isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Several groups were identified as being at **higher risk of loneliness and isolation**, including the elderly, single mothers, new parents, people with mental health problems, and people with physical disabilities.

“The objectives of the whole programme were to help a significant number of people across the whole Country, at risk of loneliness as a result of the pandemic, to engage in creative activities as a way to connect with other people.” – Staff member

The funding was used to **support amateur arts groups** to move their activities online and to **facilitate the communication** between organisations and service users, as well as with other organisations. These were existing activities that were adapted to the new circumstances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funded activities were specially **designed to address loneliness and to target people at higher risk of isolation**.

The funded activities were divided into three strands. The first involved the **adaptation of an ongoing campaign** (renamed *Get Creative and Make a Difference*) **to address loneliness and isolation** through online group activities. The second strand concerned the **creation of a crowdsourced online database of creative activities**. The database is public and allows people to look for creative activities to do on their own or in a group. The third strand involved the **creation of five micro-commissions** (awards of up to £2,000) that involved local voluntary creative groups and other local organisations in the creation of projects to target groups at risk of loneliness and isolation, and were supported and overseen by regional Creative Lives Development Officers.

Key messages:

- The organisation was in a good financial position at the time of the funding.
- The funding allowed *Creative Lives* to adapt some existing services, to implement some new services, and to create targeted projects for specific types of service users.
- The funding also helped the organisation in the strengthening and building of relationships with other organisations.
- The service users who took part in the 5 *micro-commissions* provided positive feedback on the funded activities. For example, reduction of isolation and loneliness, learning of new skills, and feeling listened to.

What was the impact of the VCSE funding package?

On individuals and communities

As explained by a member of staff, the funding was awarded at the right time, after more than one year of the Covid-19 pandemic, when vulnerable people were feeling very isolated. The campaign to address loneliness and isolation and the creation of the online database of activities enabled people to engage with creative activities during the pandemic. The organisation observed increased website traffic that could suggest the successful engagement of individuals with their initiative, however the extent of the impact is difficult to ascertain given the absence of direct feedback from these service users.

“I felt really listened to.” – Service user

With regard to the five *micro-commissions*, which involved the participation of 396 service users and 16 volunteers, their impact was more clearly visible, thanks to the evaluation tools built into the projects. *Creative Lives* received positive feedback from service users describing how enjoyable and helpful the activities had been for them. The positive experience of service users also emerged from their interviews where they commented on the impact of the activities, on their interest in taking part in similar initiatives in the future, and on their desire to remain in contact with other participants.

“It was fun to do!” – Service user

For example, an online hand-sewing and stitching course offered the participants a chance to learn new skills, and also to socialise and meet new people. At the same time, the course involved mindfulness exercises to help the participants relax. Another *micro-commission* supported the organisation of a song-writing workshop where the participants were invited to share their issues with access to buildings and streets in their local area. The participants had the chance to collaborate in the writing of a song and in the production of a music video which was sent to the local authorities. This experience allowed them to meet with other people, talk about things they care about, and feel listened to.

On the organisation itself

The funding was not used to sustain the organisation’s liquidity, but it gave them the chance to adapt existing services and to implement new initiatives, such as the creation of the online database of creative activities.

There were some initial concerns among the staff with regard to the funding spending deadline, however the organisation was able to transform this into an opportunity to strengthen existing relationships with other organisations and to build new partnerships with local charities and other organisations.

“I think what worked well was having really good partnerships.” – Staff member

The funding also gave them the chance to work more on projects that directly target specific demographics. This is something that was not done very often in the past, but *Creative Lives* will consider this approach more readily in the future.