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Response, Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRR)

A rapid evaluation of the first £1,000,000
distributed in the initial Response phase
by Foundation Scotland

27 March – 14 April 2020



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1 Introduction

Foundation Scotland is Scotland’s Community Foundation. It works to a vision of confident, thriving, resilient communities across Scotland. It combines knowledge, finance, and expertise to work with communities across the country. Each year Foundation Scotland distributes thousands of grant awards, to support local charities and community growth. It takes a developmental approach, alongside responding to immediate and vital demands.

Foundation Scotland launched the Response, Recovery and Resilience Fund on Friday 27th March 2020 with funding from the National Emergencies Trust (NET). The overall aim of the Fund was to help those (most) affected by the recent coronavirus outbreak. The purpose of NET is to raise and distribute money and support victims at the time of a domestic disaster.

The initial ‘Response’ phase of the Fund was designed to get funding to grassroots activity as swiftly as possible. A rapid application and assessment process was quickly established to enable groups to receive funds within 72 hours of lodging an application. Within 12 days the first million pounds had been distributed with some 300 projects in receipt of funding.

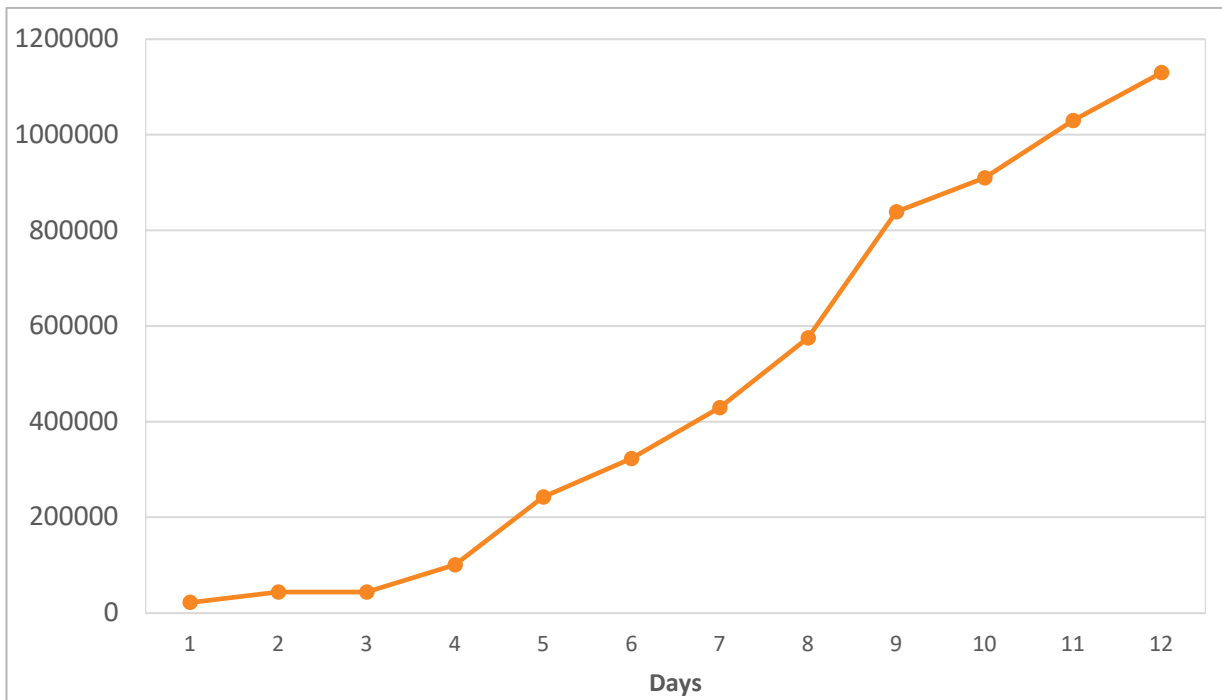


Figure 1 Cumulative Grant Distribution

In early April 2020, Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) was asked by Foundation Scotland (FS) to undertake an impact evaluation of the first (Response) phase of the Response, Recovery and Resilience (RRR) Fund. SCDC is the lead body for community development in Scotland. It works to a vision of an active, inclusive, and just Scotland where communities are strong, equitable and sustainable.

The aim of this evaluation was to gain insight into the difference the funding has made to groups and communities and understand their next set of challenges in the short, medium and longer term. This evaluation captures the views of a wide range of recipients of the RRR Fund first phase. This was conducted by means of an electronic survey to all grant recipients (291 at the 14th April) which was completed by 135 recipients, and a series of 31 telephone interviews with a cross-section of the grantees.

The response to both the survey and the request for interviews was very encouraging and shows how important this funding has been to the recipients and their commitment to continuing to support those people who are most vulnerable and at risk during the crisis and in the aftermath.

This report draws on the survey returns and the interviews to give an account of what the key impacts of the funding are, and the main challenges that the grantees are now facing. From this we have developed a set of recommendations for FS (and other funders) to consider when developing and delivering future phases of the Fund. The report combines an overall analysis of the findings with illustrative examples, along with a set of key findings and recommendations for Foundation Scotland and their partners in the RRR Fund.

2 Executive Summary and Recommendations

This section provides a summary of findings (which are covered in more detail in Section 3) along with a set of recommendations based on the priority themes emerging from the research. These recommendations highlight emerging priorities and will provide suggested areas of focus for the next phase(s) of the Response, Recovery and Resilience Fund.

2.1 Activities supported by RRR funding

Most of the organisations who responded have used the funding to change or expand their services to respond to the Covid-19 emergency. In most cases this has involved changing how their services are delivered from face-to-face to online or remote. In many cases they have also had to expand their service due to an increase in people self-identifying as needing support, or being identified by the project, or referred by other services.

2.2 Impact of RRR funding

The strongest short-term impact of the funding has been on ***meeting the immediate practical needs of isolated people***. Activities which have featured heavily in this category include: the provision of meals, food packages, IT support, and crisis grants.

The second highest category has been in ***developing working practices to operate remotely and meet increased need***. The funding has facilitated the purchase of equipment; training and familiarisation for staff, volunteers and service users; and the development of systems to allow the projects to deal with greater numbers and collaborate more effectively with other service providers.

The third highest impact (but still significant) category has been in ***tackling loneliness and promoting positive living, wellbeing and resilience***. Grantees are ensuring that people have what they need to isolate at home and are checking in to ensure that people are physically, financially and mentally fit. This area links closely to the previous category in that the provision of emergency food supplies, money and IT support/phone support has helped people to stay healthy and socially engaged.

The lowest impact category has been in ***easing the burden on statutory health and care services***. In most cases this has not been an explicit aim of the projects when they have applied for the funding but has turned out to be an unintended outcome. Grantees have indicated an increased number of referrals from statutory service providers and indicate that the work that they are doing will be able to relieve some of the burden on the statutory sector into the future.

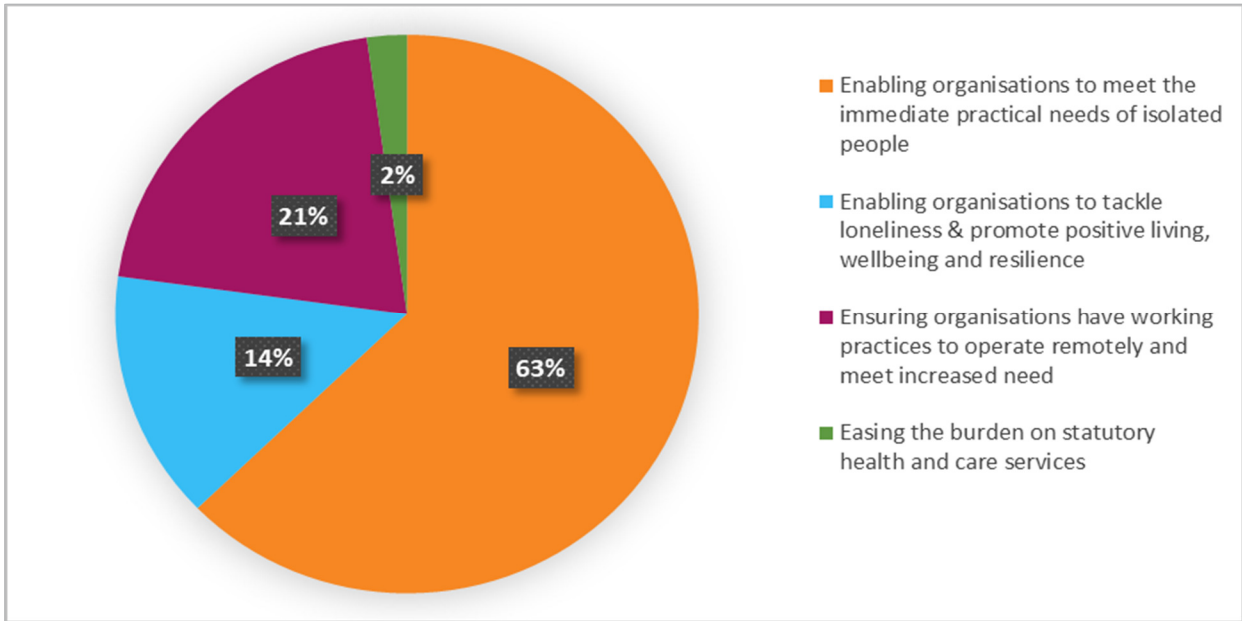


Figure 2 - Impact of RRR funding – breakdown by proportion of grant awards

2.3 Challenges and Opportunities

Our evaluation generated a wide range of responses both in terms of challenges and opportunities. These are summarised into four broad themes as follows:

- Responding to increased levels of need which have been identified and/or exacerbated through the pandemic.
- Mental health – dealing with and responding to the additional stresses caused by social isolation, and the economic impact of lockdown.
- Adjusting to the new ‘normal’ after the emergency phase has passed – this includes adapting working practices and the provision of continued financial and emergency support to vulnerable groups.
- The long-term viability and sustainability of the projects once the initial emergency funding period has passed.

2.4 Recommendations

Based on these key themes we have compiled a set of recommendations/ suggestions to consider when developing the next phases of the RRR Fund and future funding responses. These are listed below and discussed overleaf.

- Invest in core funding and capacity building
- Plan for implications of increased poverty and inequality
- Recognise mental health as a primary issue in communities
- Support groups to adjust to a ‘new normal’
- Collaborate for community resilience

2.4.1 Invest in core funding and capacity building

People welcomed the rapid response and simple approach employed during the application process for the first phase of the RRR fund. While recognising that bigger sums of money will need more intensive processes, they argued strongly for an approach that is proportionate, flexible, and as light touch as possible. In the light of the Covid-19 pandemic there is also a strong case for core costs to build the capacity of local organisations to not only respond to emergency situations but to plan and work collaboratively to build the resilience of local communities.

Recommendations

R1 There should be increased collaboration between funders and intermediaries (national and local) to identify trusted local organisations who can both provide an emergency response and work with others to build community resilience on an on-going basis.

R2 Funders should develop an approach to core funding which recognises the key contribution that community organisations make to community resilience and emergency responses. This approach could be co-produced with key community sector partners to ensure that it is informed by the frontline projects themselves.

R3 There should be more opportunities for funders and those that they fund to share learning and develop better working practices.

2.4.2 Plan for implications of increased poverty and inequality

The increased financial hardship caused by Covid-19 will fall more heavily on certain groups and will be a major factor in increased levels of need that local organisations will be dealing with. The type of need varies greatly and there will also be new groups coming through who haven't previously needed support. Community and voluntary sector organisations will need to meet increased demand while maintaining their service to existing client groups.

Recommendations

R4 Funders should recognise different types of need (e.g. crisis financial support, emotional support, social contact) and the impact these have on various groups within the community. Funders should work with local organisations to develop appropriate and proportionate responses to this increased need to ensure that there are no gaps in funding or response.

R5 Funders should have a focus on building the capacity of organisations, including funding volunteer recruitment, retention, and support; staffing; and IT/systems infrastructure support.

2.4.3 Recognise mental health as a primary issue in communities

Mental health issues have increased and/or become more apparent due to the pandemic and many organisations are not set up to provide this kind of support.

Recommendations

R6 Priority should be given to funding training and awareness-raising around mental health in the community for both organisations and communities

R7 Funders should continue to invest in social prescribing models, particularly those models that resource voluntary and community organisations to support mental health in their communities.

R8 Funders should support local projects to develop specific resources/infrastructure to deal with mental health issues e.g. employing counselling staff, or appropriate training for staff and volunteers, and mental health support for staff and volunteers.

2.4.4 Support groups to adjust to a 'new normal'

Many of the grantees are already thinking about what they will need to change after the immediate crisis has passed. Practical issues exist around maintaining social distancing and, where this is not possible, the protection of staff, volunteers and service users.

Building new working practices has been identified as a key issue and opportunity for the future. This includes continuing some element of remote working as a clear strand of delivery whilst recognising the importance of face-to-face contact in the way projects work.

Recommendations

R9 Funders should prioritise practical measures that will help organisations practice safe social distancing in their service delivery e.g. adaptation of workspaces and social spaces and procuring appropriate protective equipment.

R10 Funders should prioritise funding for training and support for staff and volunteers in operating safely and following official guidance.

R11 Funders should fund general support to staff and volunteers in the new context e.g. setting up supervision/guidance systems.

R12 Funding is needed to support training and organisational development for local organisations along with the IT infrastructure and hardware that will support this development to happen.

2.4.5 Collaborate for community resilience

There is a clear need emerging for there to be a much more joined-up, collaborative response, and approach to emergency response and developing community resilience. Local organisations are becoming increasingly recognised as a vital part of that picture but need resourcing to enable them to participate on an equitable basis.

Recommendation

R13 Funding priority should be given to support collaborative working practices between community/voluntary organisations and between these organisations and the statutory sector.

3 How RRR funding has been used and its immediate impact

3.1 Who has benefitted from the funding?

We received 135 completed responses to our survey and interviewed 31 grant recipients (some of whom also completed the survey). From the responses we were able to see the breadth of impact of the funding they have received. The organisations who responded to the survey reported that in total 71,543 people have benefited from the funding. The figures provided by the grantees are, by their nature, estimates, and will contain a mix of direct and indirect beneficiaries. However, a more detailed analysis of the responses shows that 46% of organisations are supporting between 100 to 600 direct beneficiaries and 39% are working with under 100 direct beneficiaries. These direct beneficiaries include isolated people (mainly but not exclusively older people), people facing extreme financial hardship, people in extremely vulnerable positions (e.g. young homeless people, young carers, etc.) as well as the broader population of the communities that these organisations serve.

Most organisations are in talks, have received, or have confirmed funding from the Scottish Government through one or other of the emergency funds. Organisations reported that they have been receiving small amounts of funding from other funders who have been able to respond quickly to the Covid-19 crisis and local campaigning. The most frequently cited funding routes are: STV Appeal; Cash for Kids; Faith in the Community; Go Fund Me, Just Giving campaigns and donations from the general public directly. A wide variety of charitable foundations and other organisations such as windfarms were also mentioned.

It was significant that relatively few organisations had contacted their local authority or NHS for financial support. This indicates a recognition by the local projects of the stresses on the statutory sector at the current time.

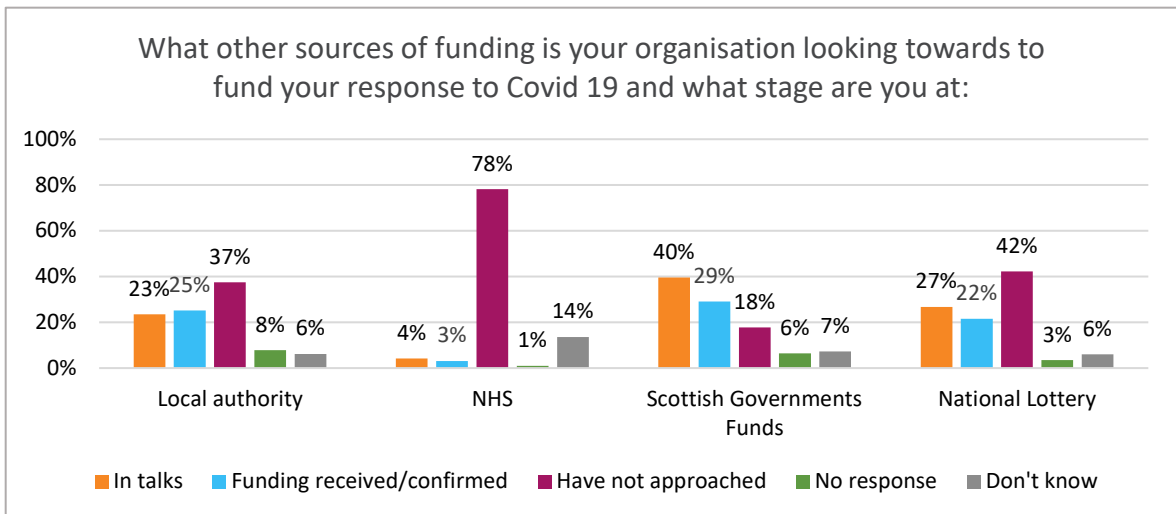


Figure 3 – Other sources of funding being looked at to fund responses to Covid 19 and what stage organisations are at

The breakdown of funding by local authority area is shown below.

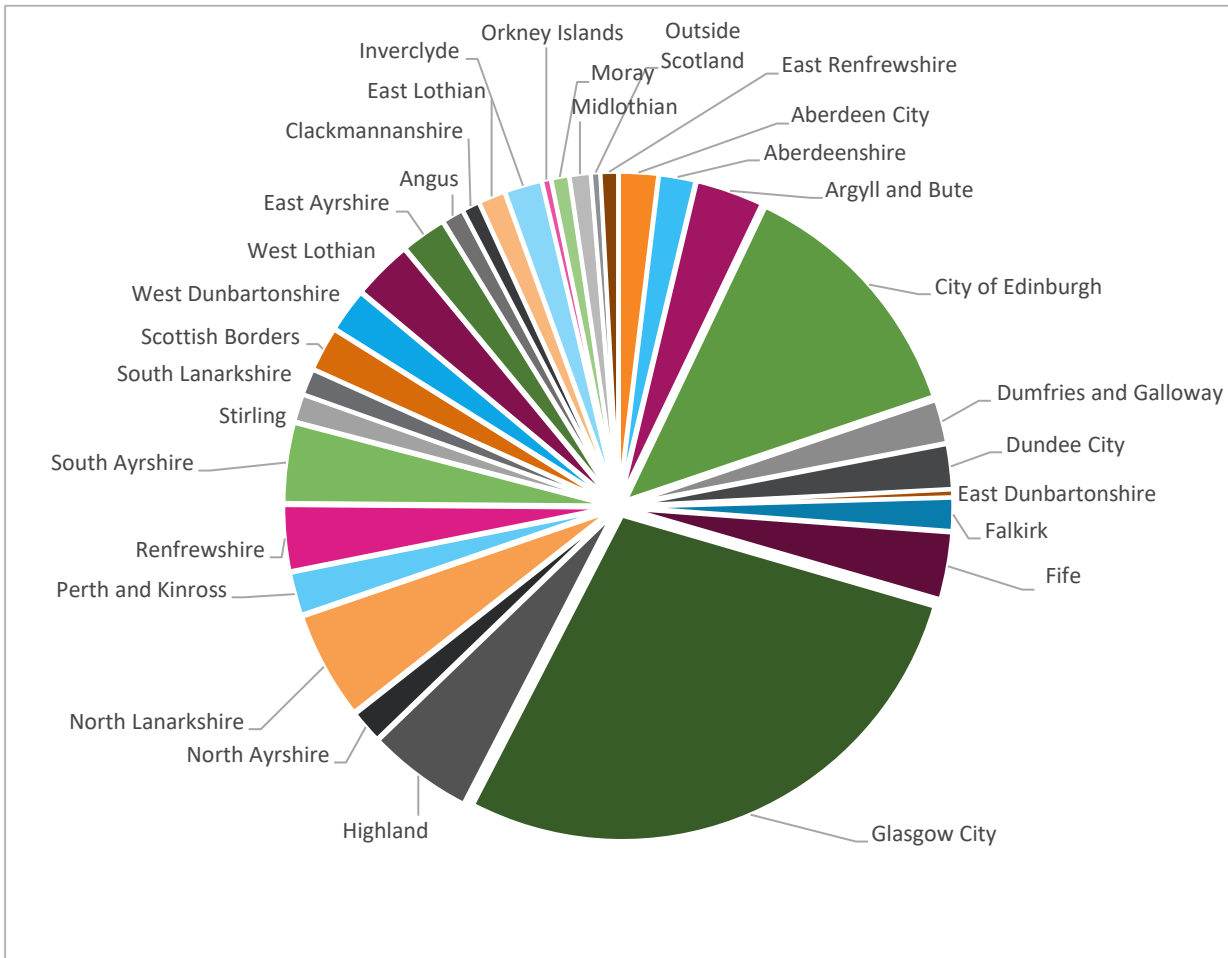


Figure 4 – Funding by local authority area

3.2 What the funding has been used for – and the impact it has had on beneficiaries

Most of the organisations who responded have used the funding to change or expand their services to respond to the Covid-19 emergency. In most cases this has involved changing how their services are delivered from face-to-face to online or remote. In many cases they have also had to expand their service due to an increase in people self-identifying as needing support, or being identified by the project, or referred by other services. We have sub-divided these activities (where possible) into the SCVO categories although many of the groups did indicate that their activities covered more than one area.

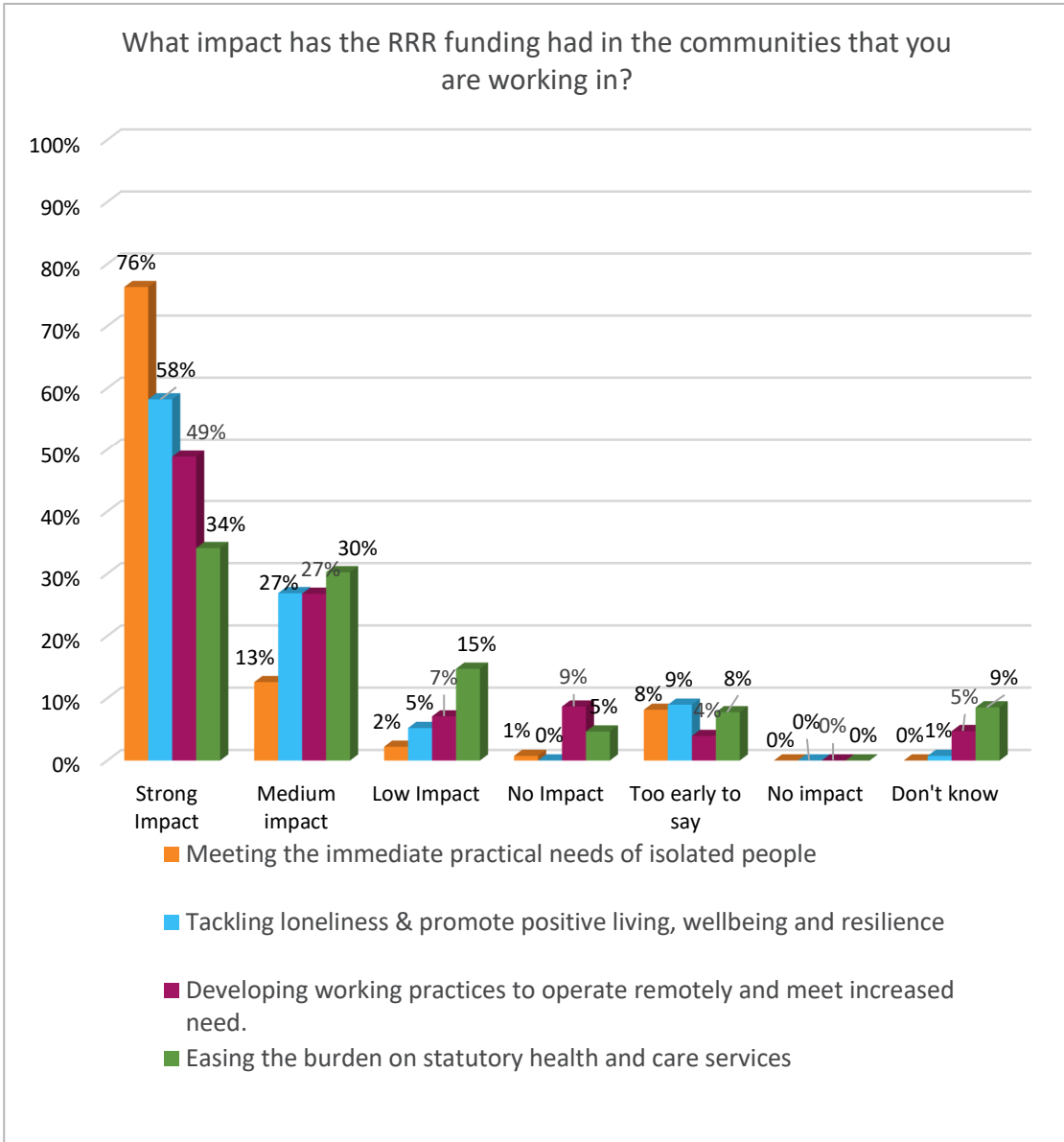


Figure 5 – Impact of RRR funding

3.2.1 Meeting the immediate practical needs of isolated people

Meeting the immediate practical needs of isolated people has been a core part of the response by the Grantees to the Covid-19 crisis and for most of the projects it was a substantial part of what they did prior to the outbreak. The speed at which the projects have been able to respond and adapt their services is testament not only to the speed of turnaround of their grant award but also the inherent flexibility and resilience of the projects involved.

Around three quarters of all respondents stated that the work supported by the Fund has had a strong impact on the beneficiaries. Examples of activities in this category include the provision of meals, food packages, IT support, and crisis grants. The quotes shown below from Grantees demonstrate how people are being supported.

“We deliver over 300 hot meals per day to vulnerable people in the community who, we have found, are getting no other form of support.”

“We have been enabled to provide crisis grants to unpaid carers to provide respite and relieve immediate financial distress in relation to Covid-19. Carers have reported an improvement in health and well-being and feel more connected to their families through the provision of additional technology.”

“Directly responding to the Covid-19 crisis, we have tripled our food package support with RRR funding and have extended our services to deliver to reach vulnerable and isolating persons.”

We found many strong examples of where the funding is making a significant impact on meeting the practical needs of isolated people. The following example is from Collydean Community Centre in Fife.

Glenrothes-based community organisation, Collydean Community Centre, has used the RRR funding towards the repurposing of the community centre as a community hub for a Covid-19 response ensuring vulnerable households are supported through the crisis.

The Centre’s community café has become a mini contact centre, the sports hall is now a temporary food-house storing ambient and fresh food and the Centre is distributing food parcels to those struggling, including the increased number of people made redundant. Volunteers get prescriptions and shopping for isolated people and also act as community buddies through a telephone befriending service.

Collydean has high levels of poverty, including child poverty, and the group’s work is making a huge difference to already vulnerable groups. The buddying system has been vital for people who are experiencing increased anxiety about the extended lockdown. The Growing Together Project, a key new initiative encouraging families to work with their children to grow vegetables, is benefiting people in terms of nutrition and saving money - skills that will hopefully continue to benefit families after the crisis.

3.2.2 Tackling loneliness and promoting positive living, well-being and resilience

Tackling loneliness and promoting wellbeing forms a large part of what the Grantees do as part of their day-to-day service delivery. This has been amplified through the current crisis and has proven to be much more explicitly valued by the beneficiaries of the services.

Nearly two thirds of all respondents stated that the work supported by the Fund has had a strong impact on the beneficiaries. Grantees are ensuring that people have what they need to isolate at home and are checking in to ensure that people are physically, financially, and mentally fit. The quotes below from Grantees demonstrate how people are being supported.

“There has been a positive impact mentally and physically as they have been able to get emergency food and fuel with a non-judgemental approach. Some people have had no family to turn to and do not understand complicated systems and we have made the process much simpler.”

“We are providing food to over 150 people each week. In so doing that meets an immediate practical need but the coordination also assists with keeping in contact with people, easing isolation and identifying those who are struggling the most, whether physically, financially or mentally.”

The following example is from Ayrshire Cancer Support.

Using the RRR funding, Ayrshire Cancer Support has just launched a new trauma relief service with the help of local radio and media. This is in direct response to cancer patients that are self-isolating and/or not able to get palliative care. The trauma relief is aimed at patients, families, carers and front-line NHS workers. In addition, the service is extending the reach of the organisation’s counselling by offering specialist relief for those that have been bereaved through Covid-19.

Alongside this, the organisation’s wellbeing service is for cancer patients who are isolated or who need a bit of advice or someone at the end of phone. This provides the tools to manage their anxiety to manage their fears and to equip them to manage their situation as best they can.

The charity illustrates the extent to which the service benefits the community by pointing out that, if it wasn’t for the counselling service, people would need to wait 15 months for NHS counselling. Having a readily available trauma relief and wellbeing service like this is more imperative during a crisis when people need to speak to someone urgently.

3.2.3 Developing working practices to operate remotely and meet increased need

The need to change working practices in order to continue, and in many cases, increase services has been a significant challenge to local projects. The speed of turnaround of the grant award has been explicitly mentioned as a significant contributory factor. It has facilitated the purchase of equipment; training and familiarisation for staff, volunteers and service users; and the development of systems to allow the projects to deal with greater numbers and collaborate more effectively with other service providers.

Around half of all respondents stated that the work supported by the Fund has had a strong impact on their ability to develop working practices to operate remotely and meet increased need. Staff and board members have been able to buy licences for video conferencing software, laptops, data bundles, and computers. They have also been able to develop online booking systems/databases to ensure that the work continues to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. The following quotes from Grantees demonstrate the impact this is having for their work practices.

“We are still delivering our services which we have adapted as much as possible. Our Board/staff have been meeting by Zoom regularly since we had to close our offices on the 19th of March. We have contacted all our vulnerable service users and have identified ways of keeping in touch with them.”

“We have put in place a strong computer-based system for requests for assistance, so that response can be almost immediate. Online meetings of the leadership team take place twice a week. We anticipate that in the coming weeks we will have an increasing impact on meeting the practical needs of isolated people and families as the economic impact of the coronavirus becomes more evident.”

“The laptops funded by this award have enabled our fieldwork teams (while supporting our service users from home) to work more efficiently, effectively and collaborative. This has had a direct, positive impact on our service delivery.”

The following example is from North East Sensory Services.

North East Sensory Services (NESS) received RRR funding in order to purchase a small number of laptops to enable fieldwork staff to deliver support services remotely to visually and hearing-impaired people of all ages, their families and carers across Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Moray, Angus and Dundee.

For an organisation not used to remote working, the laptops are crucial in enabling staff to keep in touch with its service users. NESS works with a large number of people who are older and with visual and hearing impairment. The work will support people who are already isolated to keep in touch with them by using digital technology.

Front line staff are trained in BSL and sign language so this can now be done over video.

Having staff able to communicate with one another remotely (an example is the organisation's use of Microsoft Teams) will also indirectly benefit service users as the organisation will be able to support staff and co-ordinate activity.

3.2.4 Easing the burden on statutory health and care services

In most cases this has not been an explicit aim of the projects when they have applied for the funding but has turned out to be an unintended outcome. Through their community networks and connections many of the projects have been viewed as valuable partners by local statutory agencies in helping to ease the pressure on their own service provision. This has also helped to establish new collaborative relationships or enhance existing ones.

Over a third of all respondents indicate that the Fund has had a strong impact on easing the burden on the statutory health and care services. Grantees have indicated an increased number of referrals from statutory service providers and indicate that the work that they are doing will be able to relieve some of the burden on the statutory sector into the future. The quotes below from Grantees demonstrate the impact this is having.

"Having the funds to pay a co-ordinator and cover volunteer expenses along with being able to provide future computer-based training for people to help address some of the issues faced by rural location. Supporting these people will greatly reduce the burden on the health providers."

"The funding we have received has assisted the community as a whole including the emergency services and the NHS in the area."

"Our money was primarily for EMERGENCY Food packs. People in crisis. Feeding starving people eases pressure on services."

"We take referrals for hot meals or care packages (a box of free groceries) from different sources such as the NHS and the Highland Council, easing the burden on their services. The majority of our lunches go to homeless people and those in temporary furnished accommodation. The Highland Council have cited us as an essential service."

The following example is from Glasgow Children's Hospital Charity.

The RRR support has been vital in enabling Glasgow Children's Hospital Charity to continue delivering a volunteer driver service that is in place to deliver donor milk to babies throughout Scotland. The donor milk bank service is vital, providing premature and vulnerable babies, many born with complex health conditions a supply of nutritious breast milk. Clearly, this has a longer-term benefit in terms of giving babies a healthy start as breast milk from a baby's own mother is always the best nutrition but this may not always be available especially in the first few days of life. Donated human milk is therefore the next best alternative.

In addition to continuing this volunteer driver service, the charity has been working to coordinate drivers across the whole of Glasgow for a range of services, something that has been made more challenging due to changing restrictions for drivers and increased demand for certain journeys.

The volunteer driver service has helped to support NHS, at a time of unprecedented demand for their services and care.

3.2.5 Building the capacity of groups and communities

The impact of the funding on the services that are provided, and the service users is the most important aspect of the first phase of the RRR Fund. However, the impact of the fund on the projects themselves and the community infrastructure which they are part of should not be underestimated. During the interviews we explored this in more detail and found that the local projects felt there were a range of benefits to themselves as key community organisations despite the circumstances and challenges that they were facing. In summary these fall into three main categories

Staff and organisational development

Most of the projects valued the opportunity to train or re-train staff and volunteers in new ways of working. Also, being able to provide them with the equipment and support to operate differently was viewed as being important. Many of the projects see this way of working at least partly continuing after the immediate crisis has passed. The funding has helped them to respond to the crisis but also to start thinking about how they could/should do things differently in the long-term.

Staff and organisational development

Feedback from the projects has strongly indicated that their reputation with other local service providers and decision-makers has been enhanced due to their response to the crisis. Many organisations were already working closely with their statutory sector colleagues, but many weren't and they are now seen as being vital parts of the local emergency response 'picture'. There is a danger however, in projects which are already operating on a shoestring being overwhelmed by extra demand/referrals. Respondents to the evaluation stressed that they want to work in a collaborative fashion with statutory agencies rather than being 'dumped' with extra referrals that they would be unable to cope with.

Community connection

Even though the majority of these projects are well-grounded in their community many observed that they had begun to know their community even better as a result of the crisis. They had become more aware of isolated people and people in more vulnerable situations, many of whom can't easily get out to community venues or take part in community activities. An enhanced understanding of their community is seen as being a positive thing, but they recognise that this in turn can create greater demand for their services.

4 Challenges and opportunities that have emerged for groups

4.1 In the short-term

Voluntary and community organisations we spoke to have been able to respond well to the immediate crisis thanks to their own resilience and funding such as the RRR fund. Organisations have been impressed by the response from their wider communities and a few have highlighted longer-term opportunities including building on this ‘community spirit’ and exploring new ways of working.

However, there have been significant challenges in responding to the crisis in the short-term and these are summarised below.

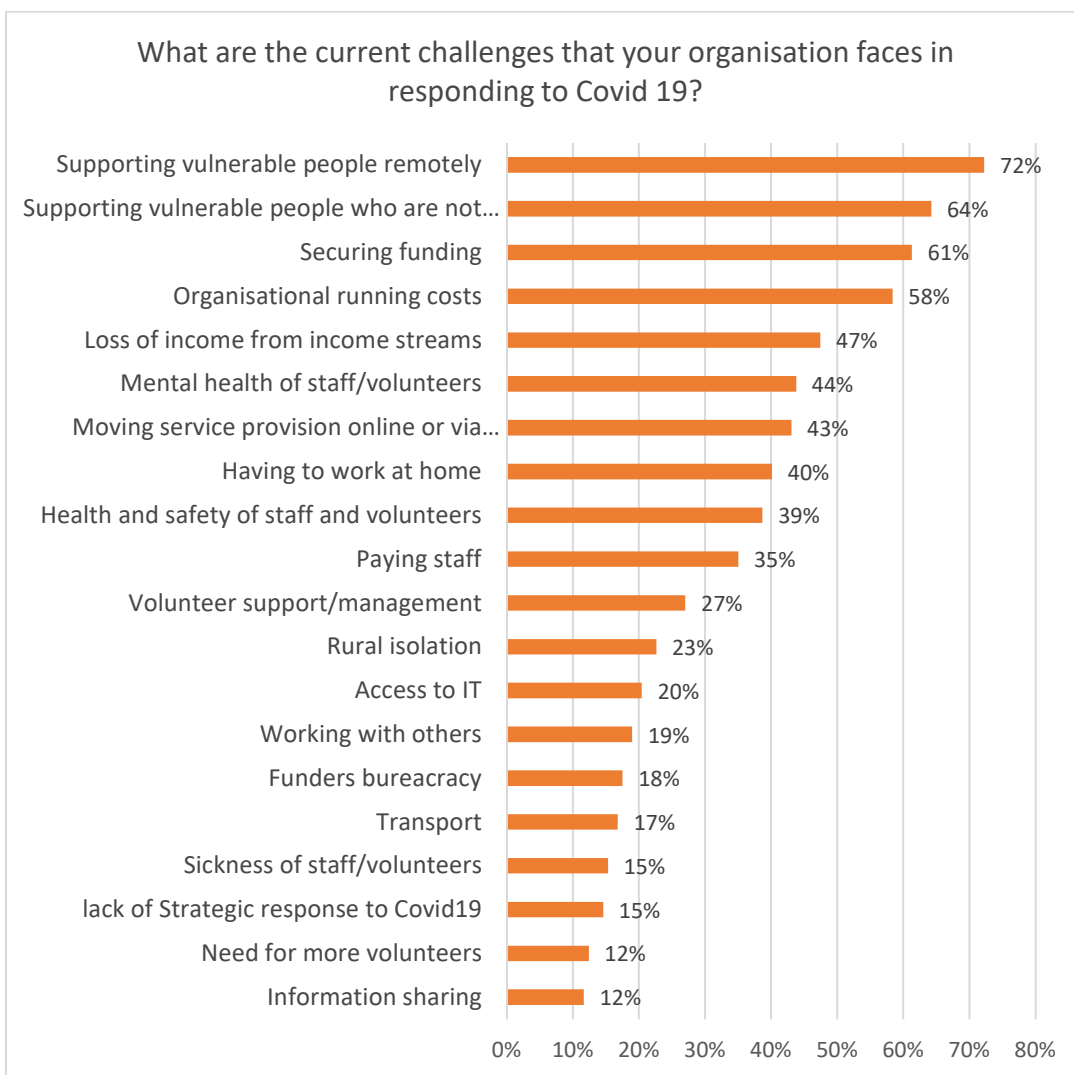


Figure 6 – The current challenges organisations face in responding to Covid 19

Most Grantees appreciate that the RRR funding was easy to access, that the application form was straightforward to complete and was quickly processed by the funding partners. They were impressed that the decision-making process was seamless and ensured that the money was quickly in their bank accounts. The speed of funding and the flexibility of use has allowed Grantees to hit the ground running and set up systems, processes and support for their community much faster than they had thought possible.



This is the easiest process that has ever been in place. It's exceptional."

Organisations report that the situation in communities is changing fast and that they need to work closely with their service users/beneficiaries to understand what is needed for the future. As the lockdown is lifted Grantees say that there will be new kinds of challenge e.g. around mental health, access to information and coping with unemployment which will require different kinds of support and more flexibility from funders.

Some challenges have been identified in relation to the funding although these are relatively minor. Grantees would like to publicise the funding support that they have received through RRR but have not had any direction from Foundation Scotland either to go ahead or about how to do it. Grantees were not clear how the monitoring process for the grant will be carried out but indicated that they hoped that it would be as straightforward as the application process. One project hopes to have young people film their activities and put this together as a montage for funders.

4.2 In the medium to longer-term (3 – 12 months)

We have explored with participants what they feel are going to be the challenges for them and their communities in the medium to long-term (3 months to a year and beyond). It is clear from both the survey responses and the interviews that the future challenges are what is causing projects the most concern. Our evaluation generated a wide range of responses which are summarised into four broad themes as follows:

- Responding to increased levels of need which have been identified and/or exacerbated through the pandemic.
- Mental health – dealing with and responding to the additional stresses caused by social isolation, and the economic impact of lockdown.
- Adjusting to the new 'normal' after the emergency phase has passed – this includes adapting working practices and the provision of continued financial and emergency support to vulnerable groups.
- The long-term viability and sustainability of the projects once the initial emergency funding period has passed.

4.3 Responding to increased levels of need identified and/or exacerbated through the pandemic

4.3.1 Poverty and financial hardship

Voluntary and community organisations have reported many of the same emerging needs that have been described by others, e.g. [The Improvement Service](#). They describe how communities, families and individuals are being impacted financially by job losses, reduced income and increasing debt. As a result, poverty is being exacerbated in both rural and urban areas, including food and fuel poverty.

RRR-funded organisations work with a wide range of communities who are likely to feel the impact of increased financial hardship, combined with social distancing measures. For instance, organisations who support families, women and/or children report increased strains on family relationships and rising numbers of referrals due to domestic violence.

Critically, those communities already experiencing poverty were seen to be particularly at risk.

“Our community is very vulnerable where most of the people live within the bottom 5% of the SIMD. We expect a long recovery and the community struggling longer than other communities to get back on their feet.” (quote from in-depth interview)

However, job losses in industries ranging from tourism to fishing mean new cohorts of people are falling into poverty and financial hardship as a result of the crisis, fuelling demand on services.

“Once people begin to return to work there will be a period of time potentially where they are having to claw their way out of debt, incurred during this pandemic. This will mean a rise in the numbers of people who potentially may need our service. There is also likely to be a rise in those unemployed which again will influence the number of individuals seeking support from us.”

Respondents recognised that increased levels of need, and corresponding demand on their services, will remain for the longer-term.

“I think that it will take some months afterwards to get the community back to a new normal. Many will become reliant on support such as foodbanks and until work situations improve then we have to support this transition”

4.3.2 (Digital) inequality

People we spoke to tended to talk about the different dimensions of inequality (e.g. poverty, health, food and fuel) without referring directly to inequality itself, although a clear implication is that inequality will widen.

A couple of organisations explicitly referred to the 'digital divide', which the current situation could exacerbate if people are increasingly reliant on digital technology in everyday life.

"The inequalities in society are already extreme and the digital divide has become more clearly demonstrated than ever before. The longer that our poorest children and families are denied access to online education; that our older people living independently and in care homes are disconnected from family and community, that our most rural and isolated communities are even more disconnected; the greater the inequalities will be as we emerge from the recovery phase."

4.4 Mental health – dealing with and responding to the additional stresses caused by social isolation, and the economic impact of lockdown

In addition to the financial impact, the other broad need emerging within communities is around mental health. Across the board, respondents explained how Covid-19 and the resulting social distancing measures and financial pressures have led to increased levels of anxiety, stress, distress, fear, loneliness, trauma and grief.

"Isolation is really starting to hit home for some individuals who have been self-isolating, this is starting to affect mental health."

4.4.1 A wider and deeper challenge

As with financial difficulties, previously unaffected groups and individuals are now experiencing adverse mental health due to Covid-19.

"The needs of the community are changing week by week and the reality and isolation caused by social distancing will cause even the most resilient to experience mental health challenges."

Again, there is also a growing level of need from those who already experienced adverse mental health before the current pandemic. This includes people with additional long-term health conditions, young people and refugees and asylum seekers.

“For those who are receiving treatment who knows what their norm will look like in the longer term if social distancing continues for vulnerable groups. Remember, these are people facing the double blow of cancer and the impact of Covid-19, and this will have an impact on mental health which isn’t just going to disappear when the restrictions are lifted.” (quote from in-depth interview)

In some cases, ‘hidden’ mental health issues are beginning to emerge. For instance, a community organisation supporting black and minority ethnic (BME) people reported that mental health referrals were likely to increase due to isolation, contrary to the assumption that BME communities are well connected.

4.4.2 Beyond Covid-19

Mental health challenges are likely to remain for the longer-term. The quotes below illustrate how a major event such as a pandemic has lasting impacts on confidence and anxiety. However, the mental health impact also contributes to other issues, with one mental health organisation reporting that harmful behaviours were increasing, such as alcohol dependency.

“This was a problem before but will be much worse by the time we come through this. We have witnessed some outstanding community spirit during the outbreak however people will still be nervous about doing things in groups now”

“As we know with other significant adverse life events, such as bereavement, it will take a long time for people to come to terms with the impact of an event, like the coronavirus. We expect some of our groups will want to discuss the event and how it affected them so we will be there to offer support to help people transition back into everyday life.” (quote from in-depth interview)

4.5 Adjusting to the new ‘normal’ - adapting working practices whilst continuing to support vulnerable groups

A handful of respondents referred to the “new normal”, and there was a general recognition that our ways of doing things at a societal, community and organisational level will not be the same as before the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.5.1 Support for communities

Increased poverty and declining mental health were the most frequently identified longer-term challenges by far. In addition, one or two organisations predicted a rise in other related issues, such as domestic violence, addiction and antisocial behaviour. Children having to catch up on education and declining physical health were other less-frequently mentioned concerns.

Respondents were also concerned about the lasting direct impact of Covid-19, including continuing having to shield vulnerable people, ongoing isolation for vulnerable groups, maintaining social distancing in the community, the physical health of Covid-19 on individuals and having to support people to stay safe from infection.

The combination of these factors was seen as a real challenge in terms of supporting vulnerable people in the medium to longer-term. In addition to having to meet increased demand from the wider community, organisations are reporting greater need from the people they already support. Organisations are therefore concerned about being able to meet this demand on a sustained basis.

“The main challenges for our community will be sustaining the level of support/services they are getting right now, and increasing access to services they need, _____ has many residents who suffer from life limiting conditions, addiction and poor mental health, the effects of the lock down will lead to relapses, breakdowns, and many, many more people who have chaotic lives will find themselves in crisis. Not seeing them on a weekly or daily basis means we can't support them.”

4.5.2 Supporting people ‘from a distance’

The quote above touches on another dimension of the challenges of delivering support to vulnerable communities, in that ongoing social distancing measures are making it difficult to give people the support they require.

This was reported by a range of different organisations working with different vulnerable communities, including cancer support organisations, charities working with visual or hearing impairments, projects supporting older people and charities working with children with additional support needs. In the longer-term, personal protective equipment (PPE) will be required in order to overcome these barriers to support.

“Supporting the people who need this service most; sometimes the people who need things more are the quiet and introvert type, who do not have access to the internet and struggle to communicate. It's a challenge to get to these people.”

“Continuing to support already vulnerable visually and/or hearing-impaired service users, many of whom are elderly, while adhering to social distancing guidelines”

4.5.3 Priority groups

Another more subtle challenge to supporting the most vulnerable has arisen due to the rise in demand from the wider community. Some organisations pointed out that it could now be more difficult to provide support to those most in need.

“How to protect vulnerable members of the community when other less vulnerable residents will start to demand activities to compensate for isolation and lack of opportunities during lockdown - balancing the needs of these groups will be challenging.”

A further barrier to reintroducing services to vulnerable groups is that it may take time for people to regain confidence to leave the home and/or join in with activities.

“Many of our participant groups have tendencies to isolate themselves and have needed a lot of support to overcome anxieties about leaving their homes to attend our programmes. For many, we might be back to square one again.”

4.5.4 Adapting working practices

The pandemic was seen as presenting opportunities as well as challenges for voluntary and community organisations to adapt to new ways of working, including delivering services in a way that maintains social distance. One organisation said it would be looking into changing the layout of rooms and extending opening hours so that activities could take place in a socially distant manner. Another said they might need to relocate away from the city centre so that they would be working closer to the communities they currently support.

“Re-designing services in a co-production manner to ensure ongoing social distancing without leaving service users feeling isolated and stressed”

“In the medium term, with the phased lifting of social isolation, we will have to have a mixed model of delivery which we are not set up to do.” (quote from in-depth interview)

The most frequently stated ‘new way’ of working was the increased use of digital technology. This was seen as largely positive though not without its own challenges.

“Our community are vulnerable with many being in the protected group who have to self-isolate for a minimum of 12 weeks. This means we will need to make sure we have online and remote support available for a significant period of time. Even when we are allowed to have face-to-face classes again the likelihood is that we will still have isolated beneficiaries who will need online/remote support. In the next 6-12 months the main challenge will be providing this.”

4.5.5 Building on community

A positive development has been the large influx of new volunteers. However, new volunteers will need training and support, particularly if they continue to volunteer on an ongoing basis. Some organisations wondered whether they would be able to retain new volunteers over time.

“Keeping up volunteers' morale and enthusiasm [will be a challenge] as the current needs from isolation and vulnerability will be there still but may become more hidden.”

The surge in volunteering that organisations have described relates to the wider notion of ‘community spirit’. Respondents reported that the Covid-19 crisis had brought out the best in their communities, with people looking out for and supporting one another. Organisations told us this was something they hoped to build on going forward.

“The Trust has seen the community coming together during the current pandemic to work in partnership with such local community support and providers and this has been genuinely heart-warming to see. It is hoped that this collective response is one that will continue and grow as we move forward.”

At the same time, however, social distancing has reduced social connectivity, something that could damage community-led activity in the longer term.

“It will be a challenge to live within the ongoing restrictions and social distancing that will clearly be in place for some time yet and in some cases, until a vaccine can be found. How communities remain connected generally in this new and ever-changing environment and adapt to this will be a real challenge going forward.

How can those community connections made prior to COVID19 in many community settings, buildings and venues be replaced whilst social distancing continues in one form or another?”

4.6 The long-term viability and sustainability of the projects once the initial emergency funding period has passed

Funding was the key concern from an organisational perspective. This included funding to continue meeting increased demand as well as concerns about existing revenue and being able to keep the organisation and core services running.

4.6.1 Funding increased demand

Organisations were understandably worried about how they will be able to continue meeting this increased demand after the initial Covid-19 funding, including the RRR fund, has been used up.

“The biggest challenge in the coming months will be the funding we have right now will run out, and people’s need will still be there.”

“We will need to secure further funding if we are able to meet this beyond the initial 3 months support we originally envisioned providing.”

4.6.2 Core costs and existing work

There was also concern about a lack of funding available for core costs, including for overheads and paying staff. Unrestricted funding for things like infrastructure, management costs and staff training was also seen as harder to obtain.

This was especially the case where capacity needed to increase to continue to meet increased demand. Some costs may be met through a one-off grant whereas others may be ongoing.

4.6.3 Loss of income

Similarly, respondents questioned whether the large-scale and rapid funding response to Covid-19 would leave funders with anything left to fund the existing core work of voluntary and community organisations.

“We have been reasonably successful in securing money to purchase food in the crisis, but salary costs and overheads are much more challenging for existing projects which were and continue to run successfully.”

These pressures were added to by the fact that Covid-19 and the resulting social distancing measures had cut off existing revenue streams, such as fundraising and social enterprise activity. Some organisations informed us that their reserves had been significantly reduced as a result, also due to them being tied to stock markets at a time of global financial crisis.

“We were in middle of intensive programme of capital work which has been knocked back. We were going out to tender and have lost a considerable amount of income. It will take a long time to get back to normality as we don’t have the same amount of reserves as before.”

4.6.4 Capacity

On top of financial worries, organisations also have to contend with pressures on their workforce due to staff sickness, furloughing, redeployment and reductions in hours.

“Our third main challenge will be delivering the support required by our community with the staff resource we have available as we have had to furlough some of our staff and reduce hours for others.”

Importantly, the physical and mental health of staff and volunteers was listed as a key concern for quite a few organisations and “staff burnout” was already evident in some places.

“We have staff and volunteers that are having to isolate during this pandemic which means that management styles have to be adapted to incorporate those individuals who are working in this way, ensuring that we are attuned to their mental health and well-being.

4.6.5 Increased recognition

As covered in section 1, some organisations felt that the funding helped them to raise awareness of their organisation both locally and beyond. Some also predicted that the Scotland-wide community response to Covid-19 would result in an enhanced reputation and increased role for the voluntary and community sector in addressing disadvantage.

However, it was noted that the sector would need to be adequately supported by the statutory sector and independent funders in order to fulfil this role. An additional question was that, however great the current funding push has been in terms of mitigating the impact of Covid-19, what will be the repercussions of not being able to carry out core work?

“If we’re still not doing core work for these funders in September, what happens after that. How long will they be content to fund us when not doing the regular work we’re funded to do?” (Quote from in-depth interview)

5 Concluding Comments

When we were asked to undertake this impact evaluation within three weeks we foresaw some fairly significant challenges. The most significant of these, we thought, was in getting a reasonable response to the survey and to our request for interviews. We felt that the projects on the ground would see this as an imposition and the last thing they would want to concern themselves with when they were busy responding to the crisis in their communities. Very quickly however, we found that the response by the projects was overwhelmingly positive – we received over 100 responses to the survey within 24 hours and had a very positive and speedy response from our selected interviewees.

On speaking to some of the projects we found some of the main reasons for this. The projects were extremely grateful for the quick turnaround of their grant applications and were happy to report on what they'd been able to do with the funding and the kind of impact that it has had. We even had people putting themselves forward for an interview because they wanted to tell their story and share it with others. Significantly, there were many people who wanted to talk about the challenges for them (and others) moving forward and who wanted to engage with the funders about this. Therefore, the opportunity provided by the impact evaluation was welcomed by many.

The overwhelming response to the survey and interviews has provided us with a rich store of information, views and ideas. We have tried to capture the common themes and elements that have emerged and hope that these provide a solid starting point for the further development of the RRR Fund and for a continuing dialogue between funders and grantees.

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