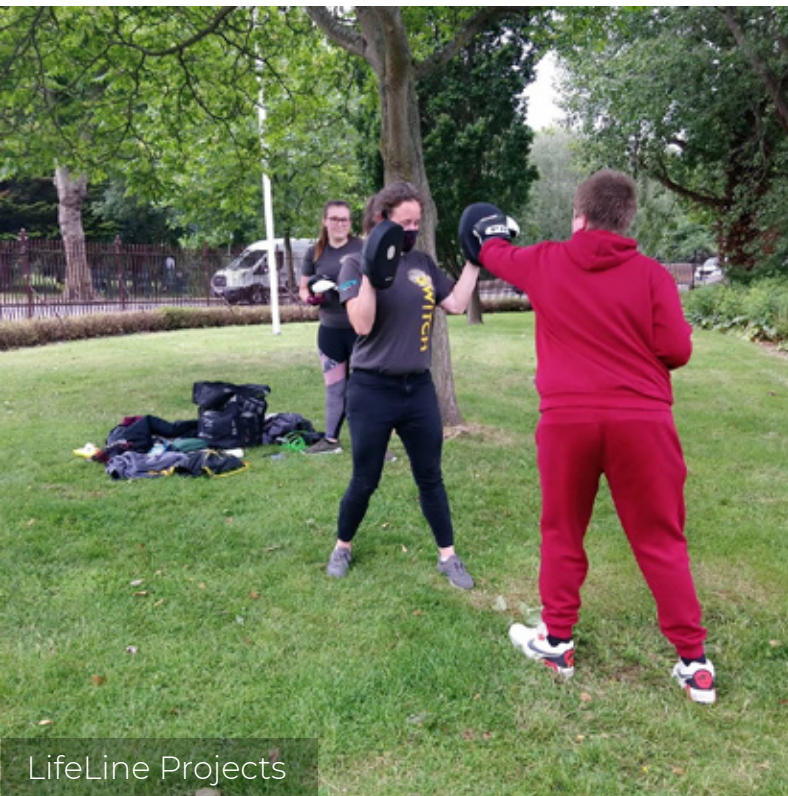# Barking and Dagenham Covid-19 Impact Report
The Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector

August 2020

LifeLine Projects

Excel Women's Centre

Report for:

BD COLLECTIVE

Report by:

Civil Society Consulting

About this Report

BD_Collective commissioned Civil Society Consulting CIC to produce this report (Phase 1) to assess the immediate and initial impact of Covid-19 on the wider social sector - in specific terms the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise sector - in the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham.

Civil Society Consulting CIC is a not-for-profit consultancy, specialising in the social sector nationally. Focused on galvanising collaboration and partnership ethos, the **BD_Collective** is a dynamic membership organisation for social sector organisations based in Barking and Dagenham, providing a platform and co-ordination function to enable local organisations to join forces to address local challenges, develop initiatives, share good practice and showcase the multifold organisational and community successes.

The report reflects the recent Covid-19 related experiences, views and concerns of more than 60 'frontline' local Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations; and assesses impacts on their work programmes, incomes, staff and volunteer teams and organisational infrastructure. Based on their particular individual and collective Covid-19 responses the report also looks to capture their ideas for further social innovation and policy recommendations as we move from phase 1 of the pandemic to the (hoped for) post-Covid recovery stage. The report aims to 'sharpen the saw', so that policymakers and funders can make high impact and informed decisions – based on the real life vibrant experiences and resilience of people and organisations on the ground in the borough.

" There's a real sense that people's and the communities' energies have been harnessed, mobilised in way I've not seen before. There's a great 'can-do' attitude."

" We now have a real infrastructure of support we didn't have before - the sector has really stepped up to the plate."

" The pandemic is a common enemy, its brought us together, for the NHS its increased engagement right across the social sector."

" I think there's plenty of good news and positive stories out there from this lockdown, we need to keep sharing them."

" The connectivity of the sector is better. The networks and collaboration are growing and strengthening. It even feels like there is an understanding of how much the social sector contributes to the borough's wellbeing."

" Keep communities working together - there is Life after Covid-19."

" We need to stay connected, keep listening to residents, better identify their needs and work together to find solutions."

" We need stronger support structures to maintain the impetus the pandemic has given us."

Some of the comments received from over 60 leaders in the local Barking & Dagenham VCSE sector, June-July 2020

Contents

1. Executive Summary

This Impact Report is the first of two to explore and understand the wide-ranging effects of Covid-19 in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD). It will form a central part of BD_Collective's emerging interventions to support and nurture the local VCSE sector's abilities to survive and thrive, and engender strong and tangible responses from public sector organisations.

The analysis and conclusions of the report are informed by qualitative and quantitative data from over 60 sector perspectives of local organisations operating in the borough. The impact of Covid-19 is assessed for each organisation according to the following **four** critical areas:

- Programmes
- Income
- Staffing and Volunteers
- Infrastructure and Logistics

The report concludes with a 'Post Covid-19 Recovery' section, in which the findings under each of the five key impact areas are collectively assessed in terms of challenges and opportunities in a SWOT analysis, which will provide the basis for a series of recommendations for the wider social sector.

The following are the key findings for each of the critical areas:

Programmes

- Most organisations had to **adapt or discontinue** their services, because of the impossibility of providing face-to-face activities and **closure of centres and service provision hubs.**
- Instead organisations have effectively and imaginatively switched to the provision of an emergency response and **prioritised essential services**, for example: delivering food and medicine; and keeping in touch with their most vulnerable service-users.
- Over three-quarters (76%) of organisations spoken to have been able to either partially or completely move to **online service delivery**, making successful use of Zoom and other online video-communications channels and platforms.
- Almost two-thirds (62%) of organisations have developed firm ideas and proposals for **practical, constructive solutions** for programme and service delivery, such as finding new ways to monetise, providing digital literacy training and developing social media strategies.
- There are drawbacks and opportunities to the transition to digital. The convenience factor has also contributed to a higher number of online service users as they tune in from the comfort of their own homes. But **digital exclusion** is a stark social injustice barrier - and remains a real problem for large sections of the community. The pandemic has shone a light on this more glaringly.
- **Maintaining the strong community bonds** developed by the sector in response to the pandemic and ensuring equal representation are strong concerns for effective programmes going forward.
- Social distancing and the switch to online operations means different social, racial, ethnic and religious groups have even **less interaction** than was previously the case. For many respondents this pandemic induced reduction in social mixing more generally risks increasing **perceived differences** between groups and could jeopardise the strong foundations of community cohesion recently secured.

- Under-represented and/or smaller groups, particularly those in the most socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods including BAME-oriented (and BAME-led) organisations, need: (1) extra support to develop community solutions in response to the pandemic and better participate in social sector **governance and decision-making**, and (2) **resources** (both financial and human) to ensure their organisation can weather the survival, and projected, recovery phases of the pandemic.

Income:

- 40% of organisations have a **budget deficit** resulting from the Covid-19 crisis and see maintaining regular income as the biggest foreseeable on-going challenge.
- Half of all respondents are specifically concerned with **non-emergency long-term funding**; these organisations expressed significant levels of anxiety that many funding avenues have stopped with little information on their future viability and/or re-emergence as income sources. This is part of a wider and profound concern about sustainability going forward; for example, many organisations' primary concern is how to sustain current numbers of staff. Many funders have been flexible and released funds quickly (especially those that are hyper-local and London-focused).
- Meanwhile, **limited emergency funding** for the local VCSE sector has arrived from the National Lottery and Government announced programmes; with many fragile organisations still waiting for the outcome of funding decisions.
- Covid-19 has brought about a culture of open dialogue and **collaboration** around funding, there is a demand for this to continue in future. 41% of survey respondents have asked **funders** for **flexibility** on spending, project delivery and/or reporting requirements.

Staffing and Volunteers

- During the crisis, organisations have had to operate on a **skeleton staff basis** (the absolute minimum number of staff needed to run programmes and be operational) due to illness, staff and volunteers shielding, and immediate pandemic financial difficulties
- Although this has happened purely out of organisational necessity, it is bringing up significant questions around **job retention** in the VCSE sector, as an increasingly poor economic and financial climate may dissuade employers from hiring more staff than the bare minimum they need to operate. Several interviewed organisations also raised concerns about the medium-term sustainability of this in terms of **burnout** of the fewer staff now working at their maximum capacity.
- Organisations noticed **volunteers** joining during the pandemic have often been from increasingly highly-qualified backgrounds, and have valuable and specific **skills** to offer in areas such as administration, technology and social media.

Infrastructure and logistics

- Half of those surveyed report that their organisation is more **agile** and willing to adapt its operational delivery model since Covid-19, boosting their **online service delivery and pioneering a 'blended' form of some face-to-face working with on-line provision** - making use of Zoom and other online video-communications platforms has become standard practice.

- There has been an impressive surge of collaboration (driven by BD_Collective, BD_CAN and BD_Giving) and spontaneous **social innovation** throughout the wider social sector, mainly for emergency essential support. Key public sector stakeholders (LBBD, NHS and also BD Giving and respondents) have commented on: (1) the strengthening of many **local, informal and faith network**s, and (2) a strong uplift of **mutual aid** support in many hyper-local settings. These exemplar stories of community activism and development of mutual aid support networks are admirably showcased on BD Giving's energising and community storytelling website.
- There is a **flourishing of formal social enterprise activity** allied to **an increase in determined 'can-do' attitudes and sector entrepreneurship** - despite the present difficulties!
- At the borough-level, **BD_CAN, coordinated by the council and the BD_Collective, has provided a highly-effective framework through which to co-ordinate borough-wide social sector and community action**. The organisations cited it as galvanising the borough's emergency response to the crisis, enabling organisations to step up to the new demands made by an initially frightening pandemic milieu. BD_CAN received copious praise from organisations across the borough, and the BD_Collective for its emerging collaborative reach, which indicates that it serves as a blueprint for future collective action.
- **A refreshed civic infrastructure has developed** with the sector robustly contributing to a strategic and crucial role in the borough's local pandemic response, igniting action and building social solidarity; and making the Council's VCSE Strategy come truly alive.
- The wider social sector views the recent coming together of the BD_Collective as critically important and timely - **as a mobilising vehicle for initiating collaboration, partnership working and crucially, better more equitable communication.**

Credit: G A Pflueger on Unsplash

2. Background

a. The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD)

Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) is an outer London borough with a population of 212,000. The borough was formed in 1965 initially as the London Borough of Barking, before merging with Dagenham in 1980.

Where is Barking and Dagenham?

Previously unaffected by suburban development the area grew at a phenomenal rate during the interwar period as families were rehoused from the slum conditions of the East End in council estates built in the borough. This coincided with the development of heavy and light industries, including a motor manufacturing nexus spearheaded by the Ford Motor Company; Ford built a huge factory employing tens of thousands of people. After World War II, this population increase continued as more Londoners were resettled, but by the 1960s began to fall in line with the decline in the UK manufacturing industry.

Traditionally a white working class area, Barking and Dagenham has seen one of the most rapid demographic shifts in history. Between 2001 and 2011, people from diverse ethnic minority communities grew from just 19% of the population to 51%. The borough also saw the greatest decrease in its older population, down by nearly 20% during the same period. These shifts were accelerated by the winding down of the Ford plant and sustained patterns of migration dating back to the 1980s. The speed of the demographic transition has posed challenges to social cohesion in the borough.

Today Barking and Dagenham is among London's most deprived boroughs; Trust for London reports **residents are 1.9 times more income deprived** than the typical London resident and premature mortality is the highest in the city. From 317 local authority areas nationally the borough is ranked the **21st** most socially deprived (IMD 2019). Compared to London overall, students have a below average educational attainment with **4 in 10** not achieving GCSE passes in English and Maths.

The demographics of Barking and Dagenham – and the speed at which they have manifested – makes LBBD stand out. It also means it has been hit hard by Covid-19. A Public Health England report found that the coronavirus has a disproportionately adverse impact on those experiencing enduring health inequalities, BAME communities and those living in more deprived areas. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports that between March and June 2020, **Barking and Dagenham experienced 143.0 deaths involving Covid-19 per 100,000, exceeding the London rate of 141.8 deaths per 100,000** (Deaths involving COVID-19 by local area and socio-economic deprivation, published 24 July 2020)

### b. The Social Sector in Barking and Dagenham

The Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector serving Barking and Dagenham is dynamic, hard-working and collaborative. It has long plugged the gaps left by ongoing reductions in funding (sustained on-going Government austerity) for public services, whilst successfully supporting vulnerable and isolated residents. During the Covid-19 crisis, it has been widely reported that the sector has quickly mobilised to support the community. Highlighting a few of many examples: Humdum foodbank distributed iftar meals for the Muslim community spending Ramadan in lockdown; Excel Women's Centre moved their popular sewing sessions and Creative English programmes online; Lifeline continue mentoring for parents remotely; and Studio 3 Arts is making art activities available for the community to access online. BD_CAN, a vibrant community network was initiated by the Council in partnership with the social sector to co-ordinate practical assistance to those who urgently needed help getting basic food and medical supplies in the direct aftermath of the crisis.

Nationally, the sector has been under financial pressure for a number of years – impacted by a decline in funding both from the public and Government imposed austerity – at a time when demand for its services is increasing. In a 2019 survey, Charities Aid Foundation found 92 percent of charity leaders felt their organisations were expected to fill in gaps in public service provision over the next five years. With concerns over sustainability, the sector has seen a shift towards social enterprises and VCSE-business partnerships.

Covid-19 has undoubtedly had serious implications on the VCSE sector across the country due to fundraising and funding 'falling off a cliff edge' (in the words of Charity Finance Group, in March 2020). One week into the national lockdown, the Charity Finance Group reported that 61 small charities had closed down. A consortium of charity research groups found that **charities around the country expect a 48% loss of income**, with the VCSE sector as a whole set to lose £4 billion. This predicted loss has now (according to the Institute of Fundraising, June 2020) risen to a massive **£12.4 billion**, which underscores the insufficiency of the Government's £750m of emergency support for the sector announced by the Chancellor in April 2020.

Barking and Dagenham has at least **620 not-for-profit organisations,** with the largest proportion being faith-based (according to a Report of a Cabinet Member of the Community Leadership Engagement published on 18 February 2019 and the VCSE Strategy 2019-2023).

Interestingly, the VCSE sector in the borough tends to be smaller than its peers nationally and in London: 76% have an annual income less than £100,000. There are advantages and disadvantages to this, which are explored in this impact report. There is also a lower ratio of active charities per head of population than in neighbouring and central London boroughs. Although the Council remains a significant supporter (and funder) of the VCSE sector, larger groups have increased their capacity and developed programmes enabled by mainstream funders such as the National Lottery and the Arts Council. According to the Council's VCSE Strategy document the combined annual income of the local sector is estimated at over £20 million.

76% percent of social sector organisations in Barking and Dagenham have an annual income of less than £100,000.
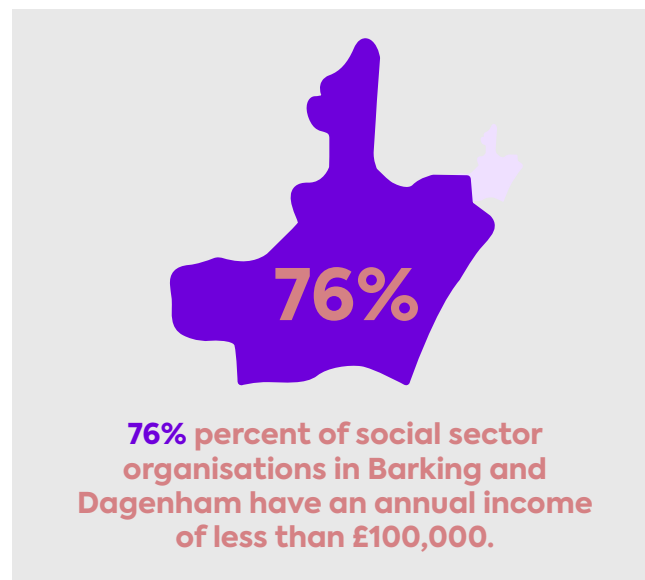
The crisis has highlighted the fragility of the sector on both the national and local level. The sector is particularly susceptible as it heavily relies on volunteers supplementing staff, supporters' disposable income provided by a strong economy, and grants from funders and government, all of which have all been impacted. Meanwhile, latest figures from the Charity Commission show almost three-quarters of charities are small with an annual income of less than £100,000, making them especially vulnerable to economic shocks. Many VCSE organisations in Barking and Dagenham fall under this profile, and face major challenges coping with reduced resources and capacity.

As we emerge from the crisis, the role of the VCSE sector in our society will be more important than ever. Undoubtedly, the recovery phase is going to test the already stretched social sector as communities begin to rebuild. It will require a further quickening and deepening of the recent increased collaboration, new ways of thinking and operating, and using all available funding and help to the maximum potential.
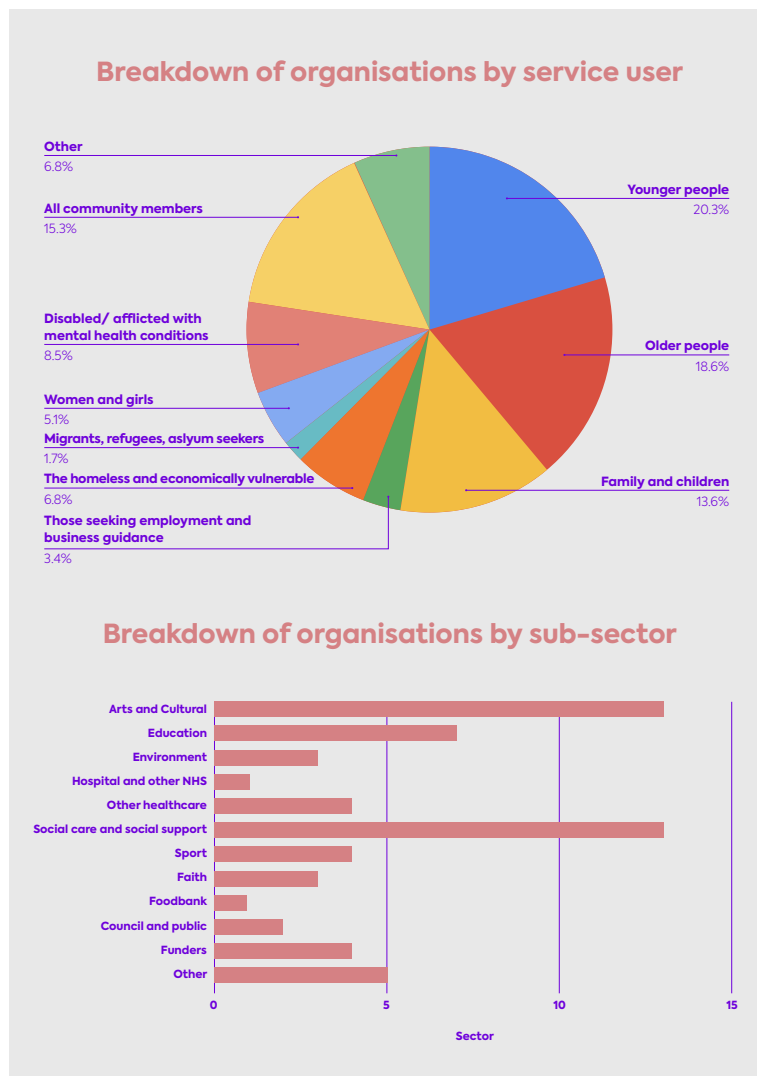

Images supplied by BD Collective
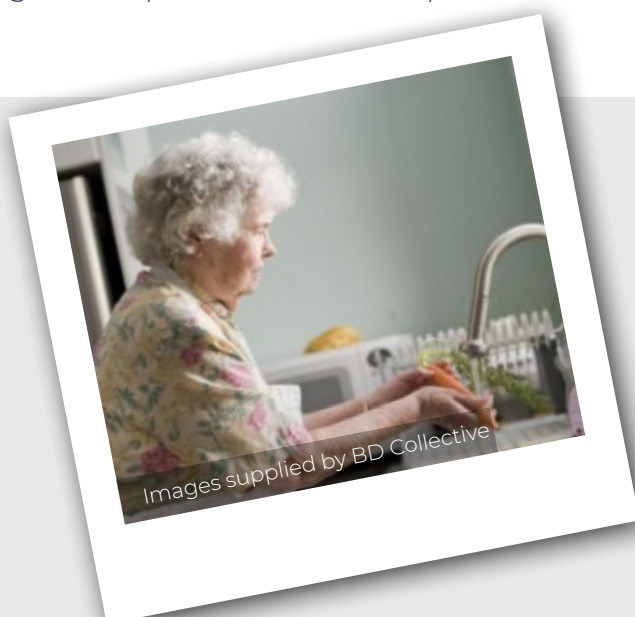
c. Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the sector: what we did

To assess the impact of Covid-19, we secured the views, and directly spoke to, **over 60 social sector professionals** from VCSE organisations operating in the borough. The exact organisations are listed at the end of the report. We made it a priority to hear from organisations of varying sizes and those serving all different sections of the community. For example, we were conscious that our research sample included sufficient perspectives from organisations headed up by and/ or serving the borough's BAME residents, those working in the emergent cultural sector and those engaged in supporting older, more established communities. We have mentioned several of these organisations in the report as way of animating and illustrating the diversity and range of VCSE sector activity.

We accounted for perspectives from these organisations using a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative data collection. Qualitative open ended questions and free-flow discussion with organisational representatives allowed us to extract key quotes, case studies and pertinent themes from conversations and survey responses. Quantitative questions within the survey and interview template provided concrete figures and statistics around the impact of Covid-19 on income generation, staffing, infrastructural challenges and more. Such quantitative data provided a backdrop from which to contextualise the qualitative quotes and case studies. Both qualitative and quantitative data was understood in relation to our initial desk research and prior experiences of working within the borough.

In accordance with social distancing guidelines, interviews took place over the phone and Zoom. In the interest of gathering a decent amount of high quality data, some of the interviews were carried out in group settings, including more than one spokesperson from different levels and positions of the same organisation. Such group interviews have the benefit of increasing sample size and stimulating idea generation. The latter is particularly fruitful when taking into account post-Covid recovery suggestions from those interviewed.

Breakdown of organisations by service user

Category	%
Younger people	20.3%
Older people	18.6%
Family and children	13.6%
All community members	15.3%
Other	6.8%
Disabled/ afflicted with mental health conditions	8.5%
Women and girls	5.1%
Migrants, refugees, aslyum seekers	1.7%
The homeless and economically vulnerable	6.8%
Those seeking employment and business guidance	3.4%

Breakdown of organisations by sub-sector

Sector (x-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15)

- Arts and Cultural
- Education
- Environment
- Hospital and other NHS
- Other healthcare
- Social care and social support
- Sport
- Faith
- Foodbank
- Council and public
- Funders
- Other

Through analysis of our data, we have been able to draw out key themes, narratives and an overarching picture of the impact of Covid-19 on the sector at the micro and macro levels. The analysis involved categorising organisations according to a traffic light system to quickly identify how they have fared in terms of 'surviving and thriving' during the pandemic:

- **Green** - an organisation has not only been unaffected by the pandemic, but has been able to develop new programmes and may even look towards expanding in size and reach as we come out of lockdown.
- **Orange** - an organisation has had to make adjustments but overall has been largely unaffected in terms of income, staffing, infrastructure and logistics and their programmes.
- **Red** - an organisation has been negatively affected, they may be facing closure or uncertainty about their sustainability in the next 3 - 18 months, there has been a significant and potentially long lasting reduction to their service provision which has a trickle down effect on income generation and staffing.

Looking at the proportion of organisations that scored green, orange or red provides a quick sense of the overall impact on the social sector. Within this we were able to explore the impact on income, staff, volunteers, programmes, infrastructure and prospects for post-Covid recovery and how each factor has fed into the overall state of the organisation and the sector.

Image supplied by BD Collective

3. Impact: Programmes

The Covid-19 crisis has placed unprecedented demand on VCSE sector services in Barking and Dagenham. Organisations have had to respond fast, adapting services to provide emergency support. Following this initial rush, organisations began moving online, with face-to-face activities made impossible by the lockdown.

The switch to digital has revealed new opportunities that will extend beyond the pandemic. It has also drawn attention to a digital divide, which has worsened existing social, health and economic inequalities. This chapter explores ways in which programmes have been impacted and adapted and the lessons we can take forward.

a. Impact

Positive

The social sector in Barking & Dagenham quickly mobilised to deliver **frontline emergency services** to the community. They responded to the immediate onslaught of social and economic impacts by providing food parcels, delivering essentials to older people and the vulnerable, and keeping in contact with the isolated.

For example:

- _Studio 3 Arts turned itself into a self-described 'phone bank' at the beginning of the crisis, calling vulnerable people in the borough, checking in and making referrals on their behalf._

This borough-wide crisis response was a crucial lifeline for vulnerable members of the community.

BD_CAN was cited widely as having been key to the mobilisation of the social sector's emergency response in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown. The network assembled a pool of non-shielding volunteers who were allocated specific people in the community to call, to deliver food and medicines, and to share digital resources. BD_CAN was also involved in referring community members to the appropriate services in the network. Outside of the formal social sector, members of the community have been keen to help out with the emergency response. Mutual aid support networks have spontaneously sprung up on social media. On Facebook nearly 500 people have joined Barking & Dagenham Mutual Aid and there are over 2,000 members in a Dagenham group called 'Dagenham Community Support'. BD Giving has skilfully profiled the work of many local people and their organisations, showing how they can best encourage others to participate and step up their activities to generate community action and their own projects.

As Covid-19 took hold in the UK, it became apparent that the nation would be in lockdown for the foreseeable future. On the whole, the sector was able to **adapt programmes** so they could continue to be delivered during the lockdown. Most sector professionals (68%) we spoke to reported that they adapted at least one service, with the majority of these adaptations involving the shift to digital delivery.

Organisations across the borough have reported that the **transition to digital** has brought with it significant **opportunity**. Access is no longer restricted to **geographical reach** and other **logistical barriers** are also circumvented:

- Studio 3 Arts has had people from as far away as Manchester and Scotland attending its weekly dance lessons. Digital delivery of services has also enhanced accessibility for service-users, eliminating logistical and childcare challenges.
- Excel Women's Centre says Covid-19 has 'opened different doors of communication' enabling them to reach women who couldn't previously make it in person to the centre to access services.
- In a similar vein, Triangoals, which has been running online sports classes for children, reported a higher attendance as whole families are now joining in on Zoom.
- UKON Careers CIC have developed innovative ways of providing on-line training, most recently for 'mask-making' and for the delivery of online talks and presentations.

56% OF ORGS HAVE SEEN AN INCREASE IN DEMAND

53% OF ORGS HAVE SEEN A DECREASE

56% of organisations experienced an increase in demand for their support during the pandemic.

The local social sector has been under significant pressure since the pandemic, with 56% of organisations reporting an increase in demand for services. In addition, the exceptional circumstances of the crisis has meant **people who previously shied away from support came forward to access and receive services**. At the same time, organisations have been **actively stepping up their outreach to ensure excluded people are not left behind**.

For example:

Barking Enterprise Centre supported businesses in sectors usually outside of their remit - retail, hospitality, and sole traders.

Despite the immense hardship that Covid-19 brought to the community, there has been widespread organisational flexibility and a willingness to shapeshift to meet the urgent identified needs of the community, and respond to particular sections of the community perceived to be particularly adversely impacted by the pandemic - those facing the greatest food insecurity, the most isolated and vulnerable, older members of the community and those with limited access to digital services because of poor data packages.

Negative

Overall, the social sector has been under immense pressure since the pandemic struck, this has often resulted in not being able to provide activities at all or cancelling events. As touched on above, there has also been exponential increases in service provision demand from very vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community.

74% of survey respondents have cancelled/postponed events or activities.

For example:
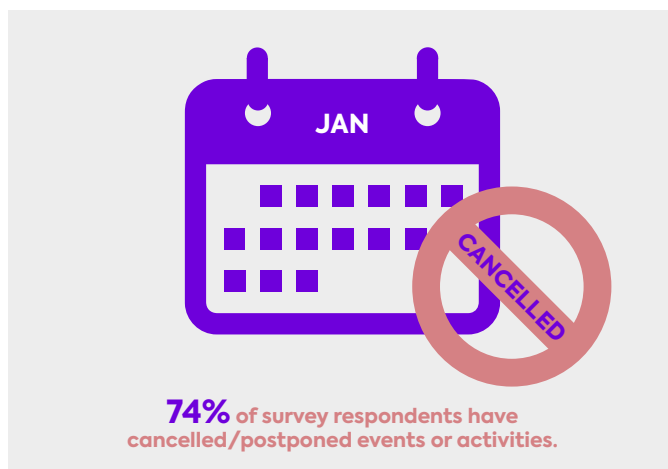
- *Newly established CIC, HumDum foodbank had to rise to the challenge of a **300% increase** in demand.*
- *The 17 food banks in the borough reported an increase in footfall: from **50 people each day to almost 300**. Foodbanks extended their opening times - for example, from one day a week to every day of the week.*

Despite demand, service delivery has been severely interrupted: **75 percent** of sector professionals reporting being forced to **cancel or postpone events and activities**.

While the **closure of community centres, service hubs and other sites** due to the pandemic restrictions were a major reason for the inability to run services, **the digital divide** was arguably even more of an insurmountable barrier for those struggling to afford data packages. It was reported that older people were the main social group most likely to lack digital infrastructure and know-how, and that they have generally experienced more hardship and frustrations in accessing and then receiving online services and support.

- *Dagenham U3A, an education-focused social group for retired members of the community, told us it was **unable to run any activities online:** ''We haven't been able to adopt many online meetings due to members' lack of access to IT or lack of technical skills.''*
- *In other cases, many organisations reported a massive uplift in traditional ways of working and communicating - having to do **doorstop visits**, distributing **hard-copy** newsletters, and making simple **phone calls** in order to keep in touch with older, more frail service users - this was labour and time intensive.*

The difficulties in reaching older and non-digitally connected people were cited as serving as a major **contributing factor** to the huge 83% of those we interviewed who said that they had been unable to meet beneficiaries needs due to logistical and infrastructural challenges and hence their inability to run programmes.

Whilst accessibility was boosted for those with existing **access to digital infrastructure**, for other groups it means being **further excluded** and harder-to-reach. The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted digital exclusion as a deep-seated inequality that exists locally and across the UK and is now one of the most profound indicators of disadvantage and exclusion.

The move to digital has also hindered organisations that provide **pastoral support** and deliver **sensitive one-to-one advice**.

For example:

- *The Hug Support CIC, a community group focused on parents' mental health and wellbeing, says it has been **difficult to reproduce the one-to-one relationships of trust** in online sessions that enable service-users to confide personal information.*
- *Similarly, Excel Women's Centre feels the nature of their advice centres is not disposed to digital delivery. Their work involves **sitting down with women** and working through the difficulties and the layers of their adversities - something which **cannot be replicated online**.*

There are concerns that the **confidentiality**, which underpin these sessions has been taken way. Service-users can only attend sessions from home, which might not be a safe personal space. This is particularly applicable to individuals at threat of/or experiencing domestic abuse.

We also heard from organisations that social distancing and the switch to online operations meant different social, racial, ethnic and religious groups have even less interaction than was previously the case. Social mixing has been reduced. Theses organisations did not report that this had manifested itself in any tangible and adverse way as yet, but it was frequently mentioned as an unsettling anxiety and concern as we move into the survival and post-recovery periods.

Images supplied by eg Consulting

| Specific challenges	Creative solutions
Digital exclusion and lack of digital skills further excluding the already hard-to-reach *Groups that need to be reached most - older people, low-income families, the homeless, the displaced and the isolated - are also the least likely to access digital infrastructure. In some houses and flats, there may be only one smartphone, with limited data; in other households there are none. This makes it almost impossible to properly participate in online sessions and events.*	<u>Reach them first</u>: Before being able to combat digital exclusion it is first necessary to reach and connect with the people suffering from it. Excel Women's Centre, reached out to their network via other traditional channels available. Pennu Charity also used a 'reach first, train later' approach: they procured tablets for older people and carried out induction trainings during the handover. LBBD Council leader posted a daily briefing giving out key information, this model could be developed further across the social sector. <u>Data and IT equipment provision:</u> Some organisations provided IT equipment, reimbursement for 4G data access, and IT training. Securing funds to extend this and reach more of the digitally excluded could be pursued.
Zoom fatigue *In many cases, digital delivery was extremely efficient and rode a wave of positive energy during the lockdown itself. However, over time, keeping service-users and other key stakeholders engaged after several months of digital delivery is emerging as a problem.*	<u>A bit of both</u>: Some organisations are moving towards a broadcast-style model for running events. These events will be partially in 'in-person' events at venues and partially online on Zoom, or other streaming channels, for service-users to attend from home. A hybrid 'blended' model of one week in-person, one week on-zoom is also being considered, and could be extended.
Closure of advice centres and support groups *Individuals who would normally receive support and advice from VCSE organisations in the borough were suddenly left in the lurch when centres had to close due to the pandemic. The early stages of lockdown were a worrying time mentally, physically and financially. An outlet was needed for service-users to receive correct public health messages and information about financial support.*	<u>Communications</u>: Keeping websites and other communication channels updated with coronavirus information helped to ensure service-users were aware of latest advice (including their rights and benefits) and helped to prevent the spread of misinformation in the community. The Council Leader undertook a Facebook/ council website broadcast with the latest borough Covid-19 figures. This firm leadership model can be further strengthened from within the social sector. <u>Beneficiaries</u> felt reassured knowing that they were doing their part to be a 'good citizen' without over-reacting to the guidance and inducing anxiety. <u>Signposting</u>: Organisations also put together lists of useful Covid-19 resources including online schooling for kids, apps for exercising, and information on financial support and food vouchers. This was real value-for-effort, relatively easy to do, and making a big difference to people's lives.
Attendance to online programmes *Whilst attendance was higher in certain circles, digital exclusion is endemic in the borough and other organisations have been unable to replicate the same attendee numbers in online sessions as in real life. Excel Women's Centre has seen much lower numbers in their 'Creative English' and 'Sewing Sisters' classes which were moved online at the beginning of the pandemic.*	To find out why online classes had such low uptake, Excel Women's Centre phoned service-users to see why they couldn't access the classes in order to mitigate the situation. They have set up a computer space within the centre for service-users to access the classes (even while the facilitators are at home) and will be starting a hybrid model of classes: partially in-person and partially on Zoom for those who can access it. Excel Women's Centre has had more success with online programmes for the individual user. Responding directly to user-demand, the centre has set up one-to-one advice online sessions. These have had greater uptake as women have been able to plan for childcare arrangements and have specific motivations for joining the session.
Maintaining community bonds and strong sense of community spirit between all sections of the community Organisations expressed a keen desire to see more programmes promoting the borough's strong sense of community spirit and pride (building on recent achievements and collaboration), and to further strengthen community cohesion and multiculturalism in the borough. There were further concerns that the lockdown would accentuate poor levels of social mixing and generate perceived differences between groups.	**Faith centres can be a hub to intermingle co-existing communities.** Such community wide activities, hosted by faith hubs, can break down perceived differences between subsections of the community. Many respondents talked of what they saw as this 'seize the day' moment, whereby connectivity had in many places improved, and that the foundations were now robust enough to sustain further collaborations to further strengthen the borough's sense of community based on mutual respect and justifiable community pride in tackling the pandemic and crisis 'together'.

a. Way forward: outstanding challenges

Digital exclusion and a lack of **digital skills** are two of the biggest programmatic challenges. There is a need to ensure all in the community have **equal access to programmes and services** going forward. Many of the most vulnerable beneficiaries are the very people who are also suffering from digital exclusion, meaning it has perpetuated existing inequalities. Moreover, the end of the pandemic is not in sight, which means virtual means of accessing services, attending events, and keeping in touch, will continue to be the most important way of being connected to support, services and the rest of the community.

The **knock-on effects of digital isolation** heighten the importance of this issue even further. The digitally excluded are more likely to suffer (or to have suffered) **social isolation**, which has implications for social anxiety, loneliness and other mental health issues. In turn, this makes them more-and-more difficult to reach, and **less-and-less likely to actively seek support**. As we exit the pandemic, there are concerns that this will lead to a **backlog of mild and often invisible mental health conditions** that will need programmatic attention.

There are many concerns about the impact of young people unable to receive the correct support and care due to digital exclusion. The closure of schools have meant an increased risk of abuse and neglect, cyberbullying, sustained stress at home, and more caring responsibilities. Digital exclusion needs to be taken seriously and addressed.

The sector is eager to open its doors to beneficiaries. However, even as lockdown restrictions are being lifted, organisations are concerned about opening up in the midst of **changing government guidelines**. They want to ensure their public spaces are safe for service-users, especially older people and vulnerable. Organisations also want to ensure that the delivery of services is in line with what the beneficiaries themselves are comfortable with - which varies a great deal person-to-person. Service providers have described short-term strategies for resuming programmes such as putting social distancing protocols in place and reducing group sizes, but catering for **different notions of what safe means** is an added layer of challenge. Without a clear sense of the direction of travel at the national level, it is difficult to plan programmatically.

Image supplied by eg Consulting
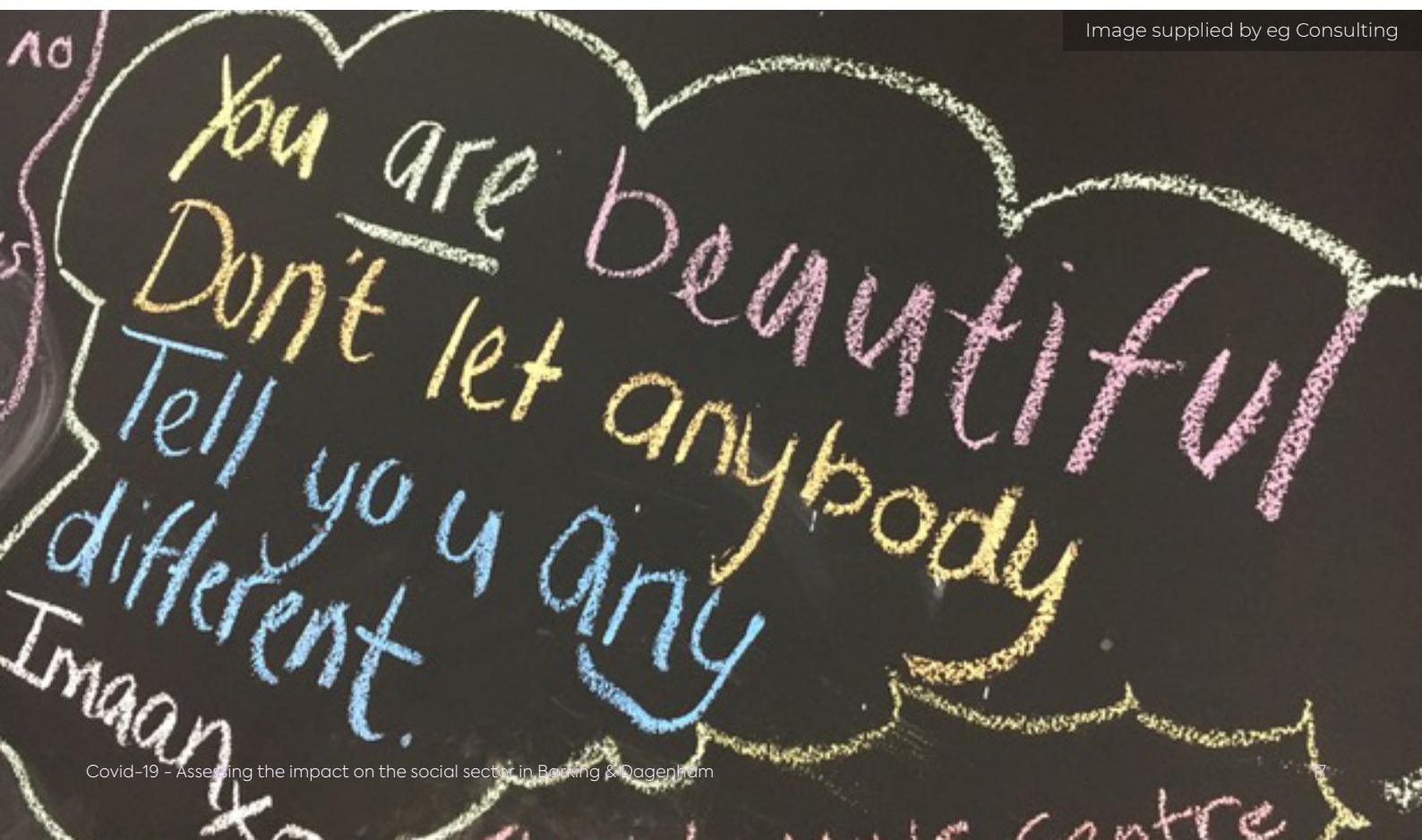
There are a range of divergent views on multi-culturalism in the borough and the lack of face-to-face contact during lockdown has meant, for some organisational respondents, an increased anxiety as to whether this may have a detrimental impact on community action and the social sector more generally. The Consultants have communicated additional key findings to the BD_Collective in this regard. Maintaining the borough's strong sense of community and the sector's 'can-do' spirit requires further initiatives, and it is to be noted that many local VCSE sector organisations have reported that ensuring inter-generational relations and community cohesion per se are key organisational goals, which drive Trustee, staff and volunteer's sense of social mission.

Furthermore, equal representation are strong concerns for effective programmes going forward, with those from diverse, and different lived-experiences participating more and ensuring inclusivity in leadership roles. Whilst huge strikes have been made on the road to the achievement of the Council's VCSE Strategy (2019-23) in embedding relationships of trust and increasing participation, and there are some clear signs of improved capacity, the pandemic for many of the smaller (often nascent and social enterprise orientated organisations) compounded frustrations about their abilities to participate - especially in social sector governance and decision making. Again, headway is being made and the infrastructure of support is strengthening; with BD_Collective leading the charge. Yet, for many sector professionals they have continued to indicate that oftentimes their limited capacity is a barrier to the participation they would like to be party to. Their current focus on organisational survival in the face on the on-going impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated their needs for additional investment and development support.

Image supplied by BD Collective

4. Impact: Incomes

The Covid-19 crisis has had a devastating effect on VCSE sector organisations' ability to raise revenue and, with social distancing lasting for the foreseeable future, there is no indication as to when much public fundraising operations can resume as normal. This **uncertainty** has left organisations in the borough facing significant **financial strain**. However, there has been an impressive fightback for survival. Organisations have **adapted income streams** to meet the new circumstances and are actively seeking emergency response funding, even a**dapting services** to meet different criteria.

Covid-19 has brought about immediate material change in the **availability of funding** and grant-making on a local and national level. However, the recent changes in grant-making practices have had mixed results for the sector. Some organisations doubt whether funders' wholesale shift to Covid-19 emergency response funding has been wholly positive for the sector (in terms of **sustainability**). Others believe the crisis has forced funders to reconsider the equity of their current policies, **work more closely with organisations**, and think about the **'bigger picture'**.

a. Impact

Positive

Organisations in Barking and Dagenham report a **wide availability of Covid-19 emergency financial support**. Since March 2020, LBBD organisations have applied for grants from emergency response funding streams emerging from both national and local sources.

This included:

- *Coronavirus Community Support Grant (allocated by the Government through the National Lottery).*
- *National funders including Arts Council England, Children in Need, and Lloyd's Bank Foundation.*
- *Borough-focused initiatives such BD_Renew and BD Giving's Rapid Response Fund.*

Image supplied by BD Collective

Overall, the sector has reported that funders have been **flexible** and **responsive**, and **open-minded** to the new set of circumstances - as well as the opportunities produced by the pandemic. There have been widespread **improvements to grant-making** and a shift of emphasis towards making funding as accessible, viable and practical as possible during the crisis. Organisations report they feel **more listened-to**, understood and trusted by funders than previously. They indicate that they have been able to negotiate the terms of current and future grants. **A third of organisations report that they have received extensions** to grant periods, whilst a further third have been offered increased flexibility around grant spend. Organisations even described being allowed to repurpose current grants to meet new demands. For example, Green Shoe Arts worked with Children in Need and the National Lottery to do this.

A wide range of funding has been successfully secured in the borough. This included small-scale funds for **specific needs** or to cope with **immediate challenges**, as well as larger sums to help organisations **future proof themselves**.

For example:

- *BD Carers accessed funding for an immediate fix. At the beginning of the crisis, staff only had four work phones to keep in touch with service users. To procure sufficient equipment to do their work during the pandemic, BD Carers made successful applications to Lloyd's Bank Foundation and City Bridge Fund to provide staff with laptops and phones.*
- *UKON Careers CIC received funding from Art Council England's Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund to maintain provision and help develop online learning resources.*

Around a third of organisations in the borough have applied for financial support through emergency grant sources. From our survey results and speaking to several major independent funders, including the Tudor Trust, we believe there has been a marked increase in VCSE organisations in the borough applying for mainstream funding during the crisis. The independent funders told us they received only one grant application from VCSE organisations in LBBD in the year prior. Additional research would be necessary to understand all the reasons lying behind why there has been this scarcity of **mainstream funding** in the borough, historically and even in recent times.

From easily available information we can report that (from 409 grants totalling £1.8m made as part of Grant Wave 1 - the initial crisis response) three small grants were made to specific Barking & Dagenham based organisations totalling £15,000 to:

- Barking Churches Unite
- HumDum CIC
- London Riverside Church.

Other grants were made by the London Community Response Fund to organisations which have a London-wide remit and also include mention of the borough as one served by the grant, alongside many others. In addition, in further waves, 12 location specific organisations in the borough received a total of £90,919 in smaller grants (from £16.7m allocated across London up to 14th June 2020):

- Carers of Barking & Dagenham
- Company Drinks CIC
- ECYS
- Girls Development Project
- HumDum CIC
- Nekh Welfare Foundation
- Community Resources for Change
- East African Education Foundation
- Excel Women's Association
- Hope Family Trust
- Independent Living Agency
- Triangoals CIC.

Emergency grant

LBBD

£

£

30%

11%

Only **11%** of social sector organisations have applied for emergency financial support from LBBD. **30%** have applied for emergency financial support from national emergency grant sources, e.g. National Lottery.

BD Giving reported robust and lively response ('inundated with brilliant applications' totalling 44) to their £100,000 Rapid Response Fund (a fund made possible by the Lankelly Chase Foundation) and one co-designed by local people who are also part of the decision-making process. More generally, in discussions with BD Giving, there is ample evidence of an uplift in community spirit and endeavour, demonstrated in the spontaneous development of strong community networks such as BD_CAN, and this has linked with the excellent response received by BD Giving to their Rapid Response Fund. Clearly, local VCSE organisations have been actively engaged and successfully encouraged to apply for emergency funding support by BD Giving which for many feels grounded in their everyday experiences and is a much trusted ally.

Negative

Despite the promising actions of funders, the Covid-19 crisis has inevitably left VCSE organisations across the borough in financial difficulty: 41% of sector professionals report having a **budget deficit** as a result of Covid-19. The majority attribute this to a **reduction in funding** due to the crisis; only three organisations told us that they lacked knowledge of the funds available and the know-how to secure funding.

41% of social sector workers who shared their perspectives have a budget deficit as a result of Covid-19.
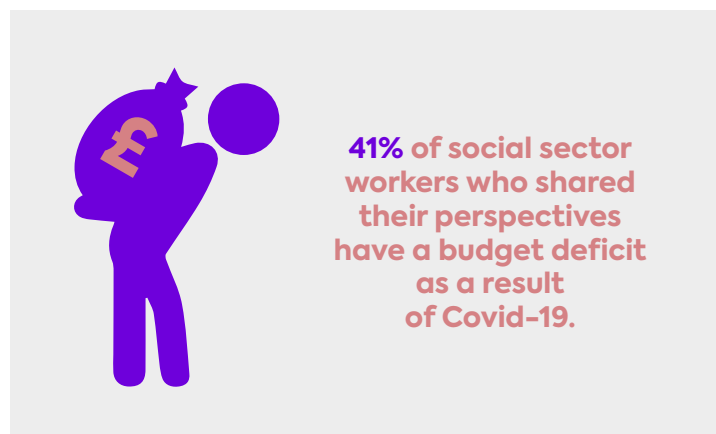
Half of those with a budget deficit voiced specific concerns around **longer-term, non-emergency funding**: whilst there is an abundance of Covid-19 emergency response grants focused on the next 18 months, many longer-term funding streams have been **paused and postponed** with little or **no information available** on their future availability. Small organisations with fewer resources report that applying for all the smaller funds is just as time and energy intensive, and that they have had mixed results. Meanwhile, several organisations told us that unless **grants applied-for pre-Covid** came through, or current grants were **renewed**, they would be in significant financial difficulty.

Other organisations not involved in frontline work or emergency response, or with partial (non-charity) business models, reported similar concerns: many of them were unable to access *any* grants at all during this time, as the vast majority of funding has been orientated toward the Covid-19 emergency response.

Income generation was also affected by the logistics of the lockdown itself: organisations that rely on sites and **physical spaces** for income streams report that income has been slashed. In fact, we observe that organisations with more diversified funding channels (i.e. what is normally considered to be a more sustainable and resilient model) are actually struggling just as much as those solely reliant on grants, since they now face a gap in **sales-related income**.

For example:

- *Most of The Boat House CIC's pre-Covid-19 income came from room hire. However, all events that were booked for their spaces have been cancelled until at least October.*
- *Barking & Dagenham CVS's income is almost entirely reliant on venue and room hire, and this presents significant challenges as we move out of Phase 1 of the pandemic with social distancing rules continuing to preclude collective activities.*

The interruption to income generation has come hand-in-hand with a **rise in expenditure** due to an increased demand for support services, plus the additional costs of supporting staff to work from home. Organisations affected by a combination of these factors have experienced immediate financial stress; 15% have initially considered closure, many more express financial concerns for the future.

Broadly speaking, the last few months have just been about survival for most organisations (at least financially speaking):

- *Positive Change Consultancy told us, "Quite a lot of the challenge is obtaining some basic funding to pay for insurance and to keep on operating during this period."*

Zooming out, it seems that whilst the LBBD social sector has been proactive in its attempts at securing funding as a whole, although thus far into the crisis, for example, limited funds have been allocated as part of the London Community Response Fund to those local organisations with a specific borough-focus (estimated at about 0.5% of the total allocated). Similarly, the government's new £200m Coronavirus Community Support Fund for the VCSE sector has yet to fully infiltrate organisations in the borough. According to publicly available information just five VCSE groups in the borough have received Covid-19 response grants, totalling some £32,000, from this Fund. However, in discussions with several organisations they report that they have received larger grants than this from the Fund, or that they are waiting upon formal responses and notifications. Our research suggests that national funders who are acting as distributors of government-allocated money, appear to be having some difficulty in getting emergency funding support to the frontline across the country. Further detailed research is required in the latter half of this year to see what further progress the sector in the borough has made.

Specific challenges	Creative solutions
Inability to supplement income due to physical distancing measures *Lockdown put a direct halt on ticketed events, renting space out, operating cafes, and in-person educational activities (etc). Post-lockdown, organisations are torn between reopening and the risks and costs associated with doing so.*	Switch to a subscription-based income model: During the lockdown, some organisations switched to online events and/or encouraged personal donations. For those continuing with online delivery, using a subscription-based online streaming system is a way of restructuring the financial model. This makes most sense for Arts and sports organisations, for example: BIBA/TKO is moving to this model for their boxing events. Meanwhile, for other organisations, the answer has been to promptly invest time and money in making spaces viable for on-going social distancing. For example, Barking Enterprise Centre has fitted its meeting rooms with high-tech equipment to enable socially distanced meetings to take place in person. Either way, it's clear that being decisive, communicating decisions far-and-wide and encouraging - in your networks within the community - to support you all contribute to success.
Reduction of income due to the closure of revenue streams *Organisations are looking for new revenue-making activities now previous practices, running ticketed events, cafes and shops have become obsolete.*	Look to a fundraising and donation-based model: It could be assumed that personal donations to charitable organisations would decline in line with the flailing economy and insecurities brought about by lockdown. However the state of emergency has given individuals an impetus to donate to causes directly. We have seen fundraising for new projects, such as the HumDum foodbank, explode. The newly established CIC launched a fundraiser through Just Giving and word-of-mouth personal donations, raising the £15,000 they needed to start up. This success story has now been greatly supplemented by direct grants received by the CIC. Another viable option is to create 'a commercial arm' of the organisation to generate income. For example, the Sew London Project has imaginatively been selling custom-made facemasks. Before the crisis, The Sycamore Trust, an autism charity, were setting up a 'commercial arm' for autism awareness training, aimed at local businesses. The intention was to sell the training to create income to sustain the organisation.
Inability to plan ahead due to immediate financial challenges *Even large and robust organisations have been in more of a 'survival mode'. For example, Barking Enterprise Centre says it is normally a performance-driven organisation that plans things out for the year. Now they are prioritising their internal organisation to be highly responsive and accepting that their ability to plan ahead is restricted.*	Make use of Covid-19 emergency funding options: With the impossibility to plan ahead in any great detail, organisations should try to focus on what they do have the power to change in the here and now (without compromising future opportunities). Also, maximising the potential of the emergency response funding available now can help sustain and future-proof organisations. For example, many types of organisations have been turning into food banks and service call centres to meet the immediate needs of a community in crisis. Studio 3 Arts reported their funder was surprised that their arts organisation has such a significant role in the council's emergency response to Covid for the sector, since informing them, they now have more leadership in the conversation with funders.
Rejection of funding bids *Several organisations across the borough mentioned the futility of applying for funding when strategies have not been put in place to use the money effectively. Other organisations say they have opted for smaller amounts of money rather than larger ones as they don't have the corresponding long-term organisational strategies or plans in place.*	Seek expert additional 'short-term' support: Help could break this cycle of funding blockages, shortages and too many rejections. The support should cover: business strategy, programme design including ensuring people with lived experiences are driving projects and services, evidencing need and demonstrating success, developing partnerships, and implementing new approaches and projects. In this vein, BD Carers are working with Lloyds Bank Foundation (pro-bono) to develop a longer-term five-year strategic plan. Many other organisations could benefit from dedicated capacity-building and nurturing, especially the borough's nascent and dynamic social enterprise sector.

b. Way forward

After going through the 'initial shock' phase of the first few months of the pandemic, our entire economy is now in an adjustment period. Within the sector, there is a notion that organisations need to be more business-minded to survive in this tough climate. However, social sector organisations are still finding their feet on the new landscape of a majority-online model. It is not clear how or when this will become as financially viable as pre-pandemic business models.

According to our research, organisations' **fundraising goals are realistic** and organisations believe they can make a **real difference** with more modest amounts of money: 35% of survey respondents say they need to raise less than £10,000 this year. These organisations are going to have to push hard to initiate the fundraising they need to undertake in very challenging and uncertain times, so that they have the best opportunities of accessing funding to get through this period. Without this push the future for the sector in the borough, as nationally, will be unremittingly bleak.

Only a fifth of organisations have **reserves** to last for the next 12 months, whilst 35% have only 3 to 6 months of reserves. It is for this reason that there is **scepticism** and anxiety over whether the smaller pots of funding that have dominated the post-Covid response are a real substitute for larger, long-term funding options from mainstream funders. Nevertheless, those with some (limited) financial cushioning are in position to develop shorter-term strategies to sustain themselves until the situation improves. On the other hand, **another fifth of organisations (19%) have no reserves at all.**

How long does your organisation have reserves for…?

There are some organisations that have missed out on Covid-focused grant-making as they're not on the frontline, and can not show how they can deliver services at this time, but these organisations still need funding to be around in the future and play their role in the recovery phase. On the whole though, many organisations say their **relationships with funders have improved** since Covid-19, with a greater sense of communication (and even empathetic understanding between funder and funded) and a more level playing field between the funder and the organisations.

With the crisis having shaken up our **worldview** and **way of life**, the many positives that have come out of Covid-19 crisis should be noted and promoted during the recovery period, rather than for systems to bounce back into 'business as usual'. It is a real opportunity for mainstream funders to rethink their grant-making practices. This includes ensuring their policies are fair and equitable to all groups and communities. This is particularly relevant to BAME-led organisations who are often disadvantaged, and struggle with capacity to develop their organisation. In late March 2020, the *Ubele Initiative* surveyed 165 BAME community organisations and found that close to **nine in 10 could close over the next three months**, due to their low levels of reserves.Many people spoken to as part of this impact assessment exercise in LBBD's social sector were seriously concerned about this, including **the independent funders themselves**.

As we move on from the immediate crisis period into survival and recovery phases, funding marginalised groups will be game-changing in rebuilding the community sustainably. Taking steps to combat inequality in funding, such as giving more leadership positions to BAME people, will remove the rudimentary obstacles faced by organisations led by BAME and other marginalised groups.

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Images supplied by BD Collective

5. Impact: Staffing and Volunteers

Covid-19 has brought about significant changes to the staffing and volunteer activity within social sector organisations of the borough. For obvious reasons, being able to navigate new ways of **socially distanced home-working** was one of the biggest deal-breakers. VCSE organisations that were somewhat well-disposed to this model of working pre-Covid (or who began preparations in the few weeks before lock-down struck) had a clear advantage. Other organisations are still finding their feet.

Other key changes to the human resource landscape and experiences stem from: (1) shifts in the **volunteer demographic** and skillset, and (2) new concerns for **staff wellbeing** in light of pressures on capacity and the isolation of working from home. Also, many leaders of social sector organisations acknowledged (3) uncertainties around **staff retention** in light of both financial constraints and the logistical questions of how many individuals can safely be in one workplace whilst socially-distanced. At the same time, it is clear that (4) **new job functions** are set to emerge from a new hybrid model of service delivery: partially in-person and partially digital remote support.

a. Impact

Positive

Mobilising staff and volunteers for the **emergency response** in the borough has been highly effective. Staff and volunteers have shown an impressive **willingness to adapt** and take on new responsibilities in order to go above and beyond to support both their beneficiaries and residents of the borough as a whole facing hardship. Many organisations have been quick to **adapt service delivery** and the **roles of staff** to: (1) mitigate the negative impact that isolation presents for the mental and physical wellbeing of residents; and (2) provide home deliveries of essential food and medicines.

For example:

- The Thames Ward Community Project worked with the British Red Cross to distribute hand sanitiser throughout the borough.
- Trustees of The Source - Barking Churches Unite quickly took on the role of food deliveries.

This quick-step re-prioritisation was made possible by dedicated personnel.

Organisations praised BD_CAN - the Citizens Alliance Network - as a new and effective mechanism to channel human resources to where the need is most acute in the borough.; and this helped **ignite a whole range of community responses and uplifts in social solidarity and volunteering.**

Fruitful new connections have been made in terms of staffing and volunteers across the sector as a result. This has helped organisations to work together towards mutual goals in this emergency period, generating social solidarity, and paves the way for more of the same in the future with a refreshed and re-invorgorated civic infrastructure of support.

- *North Meets South were unable to continue with various programmes so referred their non-shielding volunteers to the BD_CAN network. Through this network the volunteers were re-deployed in the emergency response of the borough within other organisations.*

The pandemic brought with it a **sense of urgency**, combined with a wave of newly available **furloughed and redundant staff** who were interested (and well-disposed to) **volunteering** in the social sector. Although volunteer uptake so far has been relatively low, a number of volunteers initially came forward for the emergency response and there was an overall sense of **camaraderie, community spirit** and **neighbourliness**.

For example:

- *Young congregation members of a local Gurdwara took on the role of cooking in their own homes and supplying meals to local hospitals and those unable to access food supplies.*

Volunteers have been successfully deployed for the emergency response; outside of this, organisations still have more work to do to carve out longer-term roles to make the most of the new skills and additional pairs of hands.

For example:

- *Triangoals commented on an influx of skilled volunteers who were able to contribute expertise in administrative tasks, social media and tech-related jobs.*

The majority of organisations have been able to set up remote digital working and retain a sense of team working despite distance. On the whole, use of Zoom and WhatsApp is now firmly integrated into staff and volunteer communications, and organisations are making a conscious effort to boost and buffer **morale** and a sense of **connection** using them.

Remote digital working appears to have had a mixed impact on overall **productivity**. One surprising positive result of online communications is the constructive sense of a level playing field, with organisations commenting that there is a **flatter hierarchy** when communicating over Zoom and that communications are more fluid with the **removal of some formalities**. This has encouraged greater contributions from staff at all levels. A degree of **informality** helps improve **fluidity** of communications. Zoom quizzes and other non-work related online socialising has also strengthened relationships, and again social solidarity. Some organisations also commented that Zoom bodes well for more **succinct meetings**.

Training programmes and **new volunteer roles** have also moved online. This has made professional development easier for some workers and has enabled them to tap into national support and advice networks. It has also made it possible to take on volunteers regardless of their **geography**, and from the comfort of their own home.

For example:

> • *The Excel Women's Centre recruited a volunteer based in Northamptonshire.*
> • *Reconnections BD noted how accessibility was also improved for existing volunteers, such as a volunteer who was breastfeeding her baby another who is partially blind and uses a guide dog.*

For some staff, working from home has meant improved work-home life balance. It has eliminated logistical and childcare issues, commuting and more flexibility and agency is given to staff on how they split their time. Social sector leaders are conscious that remote working suits some staff more than others: some have struggled considerably with the blurred lines, lack of compartmentalisation and reduced social interaction with colleagues. To mitigate this, organisations have created new structures and systems to support both types of staff so they can complement each other, e.g. office rotation. Overall, the changing circumstances of the pandemic have led to more of an **open dialogue** between teams to navigate and cater for personal needs and preferences on modes of working amongst staff.

Negative

There has been a significant reduction in capacity in the social sector throughout the pandemic; 44% of sector professionals have either had to furlough or make staff members redundant and 30% have reduced volunteer numbers. It is clear that the sector as a whole is operating on **'skeleton' staff basis**, which, beyond the emergency response, is having a **knock-on effect** on the care and service delivery the sector can provide to the borough's residents. Some job roles and programmes simply do not have an online alternative, meaning furloughing staff is the only option; volunteering was also reduced by these organisations as well.

44% of organisations have laid off or furloughed staff.

For instance:

> • *The Sycamore Trust, have had to furlough their support workers who can only provide face-to-face care.*

Our data indicates that pre-Covid the bulk of social sector volunteers consisted of an older demographic, namely retirees and those slightly above middle aged (e.g. mid to late 50s) who have a higher availability to offer their time and services. The fact that many of these volunteers had to also abide by stricter shielding and social distancing was a blow to the sector; in many cases it meant having to pause all volunteer activities altogether.

• *BD Carers and Studio 3 Arts both indicated they had lost their volunteer force who are older or living with vulnerable individuals and therefore shielding.*

Only 1 in 5 organisations have recruited new volunteers.

On the other hand, organisations have noted the uptake of a new wave of younger volunteers, namely furloughed professionals with a more diverse skill set, however **uptake of new volunteers has been relatively limited**; only 21% of sector professionals report successfully recruiting new volunteers. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that the furlough scheme coincided with school closures and home-schooling has eaten into furloughed staff's availability. Another is that outside of the more concrete and practical emergency response tasks, organisations have struggled to fully identify appropriate roles for staff (hence the furloughing), let alone volunteers. With the shift to digital, this time intensive task of establishing how volunteers fit into this new picture has understandably been of a lesser priority.

For example:

- *The Source - Baking Churches Unite stressed that they did not have time resources to invest in the process of recruiting and inducting new volunteers as they were focused on the immediate need.*

In light of the above - furloughed staff and relatively low volunteer capacity - social sector professionals are stretched and many respondents have expressed profound concern about the risk of **burnout**. There are also concerns on the long-term negative impact of home working on the mental health and general wellbeing of staff and volunteers. 60% of organisations were actively concerned about keeping up the morale of staff with remote working. Despite the relatively quick and effective uptake of Zoom and other video communication platforms amongst teams, the shift to online has also been identified as a serious risk factor for mental wellbeing and overall team productivity. Video-call and other online forms of internal communications have been identified as **more mentally draining** than in-person interactions - consuming more cognitive energy per interaction and reducing the number of productive interactions staff and volunteers can manage in one day. Higher levels of screen time was also associated with a host of more subtle health concerns for staff; organisations noted that it leads to greater **fatigue** and **self-image anxiety**.

On a more practical note, remote online working requires **new protocols around safeguarding**, as work-life and colleagues are brought into the home sphere. Several organisations have also had to invest time and resources into retraining staff to carry out service provision to beneficiaries online.

Specific challenges	Creative solutions
Reduced capacity and the challenge of sustaining staff going forward *Significant numbers of organisations have furloughed or had to let go of staff. Volunteer numbers have also gone down as the mainly older demographic of volunteers of the sector have had to shield throughout the pandemic.* *Out of necessity, many organisations have realised that they are able to operate on the bare minimum of staff. As uncertainties around the economic impact of Covid and how to safely re-employ furloughed staff remain, staff retention is a real concern. Hum Dum UK foodbank, for example, have switched to a 'take-out' system for their meal provisions and have reduced down to 2-3 volunteers running the entire service. Will organisations like this ever go back to having their original numbers of staff?*	<u>Build on volunteer referral networks</u>: Organisations have reported that the council have supported the swift referral of volunteers. Further collective thinking within networks such as the BD_Collective can also help to facilitate the flow of volunteers, matching unique skill sets to where the need is most acute in the borough. <u>New job roles in hybrid and online service model</u>: Where programmes can be transitioned online, either partially or in full, there is an opportunity for roles to change as services are enhanced. For example, Ukon Careers CIC have recently created the role of Digital Production Assistant to co-ordinate their online programmes. There may be a need for retraining of social sector professionals to strengthen this.
Creating a conducive 'office life' *For some staff, work and homelife boundaries have blurred to the detriment of both, and the lack of social interactions with colleagues has not felt adequately supplemented by online communications. Individual social isolation is a real on-going threat.*	A number of organisations have adopted staff rotation systems so that staff those most in need of office space and in-person work socialising are able to take this up, whilst other team members can make the most of all the benefits of working from the convenience of their homes.
Lag on establishing appropriate roles for new volunteers *To date, organisations under strain have struggled to carve out new roles in order to make the most of new volunteers, especially in light of the structural changes to organisational operations (i.e. the move online). Organisations are still navigating how volunteers can contribute within this new form of operating.*	<u>Get expert support</u>: Organisations who were able to consolidate new ways of working and new roles within that benefitted from doing so. Workforces have been relatively quick on the uptake of digital forms of working and providing for their beneficiaries. A clearer structure to working, organisations can then delegate more concrete responsibilities to volunteers. In many cases, this may involve seeking external support from sector experts. <u>Streamline recruitment processes</u>: Reconnections BD noted that DBS checks needed for taking on new staff and volunteers can be done by photo-ing documents instead of sending in hard copies. Simple administrative changes like this can make recruitment more appealing to potential volunteers. BD_CAN also streamlined the process of connecting volunteers with corresponding opportunities.
Ensuring the morale and mental wellbeing of remote teams *60% of organisations cite keeping up the morale of staff as their biggest concern regarding remote working. Employers are also aware that dips in motivation may result from increased screen-time and reduced sense of social connection, which may not suit employees and may have long term negative impacts on mental health.*	<u>Use online communications in creative ways to have fun</u>: Employers and team leads have made the most of online communications to boost morale, for example getting colleagues engaged with Zoom quizzes and encouraging the use of WhatsApp in a more sociable 'not strictly business' sense to help boost morale from a distance. Organisations are now beginning to look at moving towards an in-person socially distanced model of the same, as the public mood has shifted. <u>A culture of flexibility and understanding around staff working style</u>: Employers have already been allowing for more flexibility on hours and whether employees work from home or socially distanced in the office. Sustaining this humanisation of colleagues will continue to be important for morale and productivity going forward. <u>Integrate mental health awareness and safeguarding at work</u>: While a number of social sector organisations are incorporating mental health into their programmes in light of Covid-19, there is an opportunity for the same to happen internally in VCSE organisations to support staff too.

b. Way forward

There have been drastic changes to staff responsibilities and how they meet their beneficiaries needs. In light of this rapidly changing and uncertain climate, staff and volunteers have shown outstanding **adaptability** and **resilience**. Recognition will be important to keep this up, and there are a number of remaining challenges.

In terms of sustaining staff: the furlough scheme ends in October. Meanwhile, with the risk of a second wave of the virus (BBC, 2020) social distancing is likely to continue for the rest of the year. Questions remain about how to retain staff that would usually co-ordinate in-person services with large groups of people.Social sector job roles involved in school workshops, arts and cultural events, or group exercise, are just some of those at particular risk. There is a need to find ways of re-channeling the energy of furloughed and redundant staff, so that it is retained in the borough and the sector.

Concerns around **burnout** and **mental well-being of stretched staff members** also remain largely unresolved. If financial and logistical constraints continue to dissuade employers in the sector from retaining or hiring additional staff, and if volunteer uptake continues to be relatively low, it is unlikely that there will be any relief on stretched staff in the near future. Just as organisations have incorporated mental health provisions into their programmes, the same could be done for social sector professionals too. This could be a collective effort by organisations facing the same challenges, since there is a general sector-wide consciousness about the importance of mental wellbeing amongst social sector personnel.

In light of strains on capacity that may continue to limit the social sector workforce, it is even more important for organisations to make the most of new volunteers. These volunteers include newly available furloughed and redundant staff, the under-25s and those who have been inspired by the sense of urgency and positive community action. There is also the opportunity to **engage volunteers from outside of the borough to make contributions**. Attention will need to be given to ensuring organisations retain volunteers that they have inducted and invested time in, particularly when the furlough scheme ends. Where this is not possible, organisations are advised to **'lock-in' skillsets** of short-term volunteers, for example, qualified volunteers could create training packages on their exit.

Numerous VCSE organisations also pointed to the positive impact of networks such as BD_CAN for streamlining the referral of volunteers to help organisations dealing with the emergency response. One potential is for BD_CAN to become more of a **digital platform**. Either way, there is a consensus that this type of collective action and co-ordination mechanism should continue in order to unite the social sector to best channel available human resources and volunteering enthusiasm.

6. Impact: Infrastructures and logistics

A whopping 83% of sector representatives report having been **unable to meet beneficiaries needs** due to logistical and infrastructural challenges and inability to run programmes. The inability to meet beneficiary needs stems from the limitations of digital infrastructure in (1) reaching the hard-to-reach beneficiaries with the type of support they require, and (2) dragging down in-house productivity.

Where digital infrastructure has worked, however, there have been a number of success stories and serendipitous advantages (see Programmes section). What's more, the emergency setting has created a borough-wide culture of **overcoming logistical challenges in a results-oriented and collaborative way**: (1) within organisations, with 50% reporting their organisation has become more agile; (2) between organisations, which is in contrast to a process-oriented and fragmented way of working that had previously dominated.

In terms of centres, hubs and office spaces, only 29% of organisations reported that providers stepped in to mitigate the impact of the crisis on their organisation. This meant that a considerable number of organisations have been paying for space they are not using, plus not being able to rent out or utilise space to supplement income as they normally would.

a. Impact

Positive

Renters have taken a bigger financial hit than non-renters. Fortunately, a significant amount of organisations access physical space by other means - such as for free as a not-for-profit organisation or by booking community spaces on an ad-hoc basis. Others do not need access to physical space. **Responsibility for a space** comes with maintenance costs, as well as the rent itself. Happily though, some organisations (29%) said that providers stepped in to help mitigate the impact of Covid; others mentioned the benefits of using contractors for utility services because it enabled them to 'press pause' on these expenses with relative ease.

Whilst all non-essential workers switched to home working, a number of organisations were pleased to be able to continue to access their premises during the lockdown to "keep on top of things". This has been beneficial for general organisational survival, or in some cases strategy development.

Covid-19 has initiated a massive shift towards digital. **88% of interviewed organisations have staff working from home**. This figure is particularly high given the front line nature of many social sector services. Like many of the repercussions that have come out of the pandemic, this has had a 'make-or-break' effect: it has polarised existing discrepancies.

The **transition to digital** affects both **service-delivery** and **internal coordination**. In terms of service delivery, 76% of organisations spoken to have been able to either partially or completely move to online delivery of services, making use of Zoom and other online video-communications channels.

76% of organisations have been able to move to online delivery of some or all of their services.
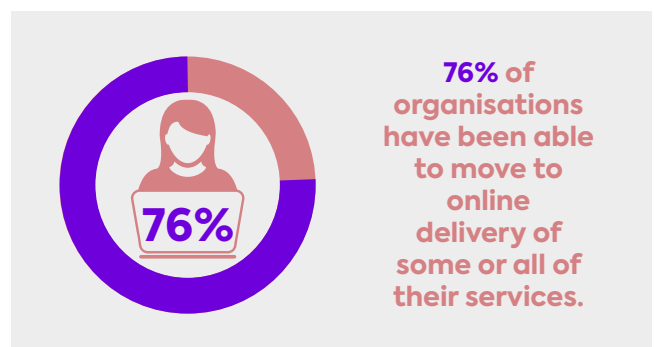
Where digital infrastructure has worked, there have clearly been a number of context-specific positives (see Programmes section). These include an *increase* in connectivity (with reports that some service-users and beneficiaries feel more connected than before), better access to certain beneficiaries, greater flexibility and higher attendance.

In terms of internal coordination, **52%** of sector representatives are satisfied that they have **introduced effective remote ways of working**. It was evident that (1) pre-existing infrastructure, (2) financial backing, and (3) good working relationships were the three key building blocks for successfully creating a new virtual office infrastructure. Within 'good working relationships', the data showed that the deal-breakers were: communication styles and efficacy, rapport, and appreciation for colleagues' skillset.

At the borough-level, **BD_CAN provided a highly-effective framework through which to co-ordinate borough-wide action**. BD_CAN received a lot of praise, which indicates that it serves as a blueprint for future collective action. More generally, sector representatives voiced that operational procedures with the council were generally more streamlined and logical compared to pre-Covid. Smaller organisations report feeling acknowledged and valued within the current framework. However, concerns remain about not making the mistakes of the past; a number of social sector professionals flagged that under-represented and/or smaller groups need extra support to participate in **social sector governance and decision-making**.

Negative

50% of organisations spoken to are renters. Only a fraction of social sector organisations in LBBD own the premises they use, with some surviving-and-thriving and some not. There was a clear pattern, however, that those with **rental responsibilities** were more likely to have a red traffic light score and a budget problem (70% of renters had a significant budget problem at the time of data collection, compared to 41% overall).

As mentioned, the inability to physically conjugate affected income generation for those who rent their premises out or hold ticketed events. Renting or ownership of a space also comes with **maintenance costs** and **utility bills**. In other cases, it was a lack of physical space that was throwing up challenges. For example, organisations providing essential foods and medicines found a **lack of storage space** became a problem due to the increased demand for support.

Though well-implemented digital infrastructure thrived, some services simply cannot be replicated online. What's more, there is a big **digital divide** between the haves and the have-nots. Since digital exclusion is socio-economic, it disproportionately affects the BAME population and the less mobile, highly income deprived sections of the Brough's older population. Meanwhile, some people, particularly the older population, lack digital literacy and fluency. Many people therefore remain profoundly hard-to-reach, isolated and at risk of being profoundly left behind - and respondents talked about both service-users and social sector staff themselves, all running the risks of slipping through the cracks.

Digital exclusion was a barrier to the organisations themselves. For many organisations, the switch to digital required a genesis of digital infrastructure. About half of the organisations interviewed mentioned that they had struggled with some staff who are less tech-savvy. Many organisations also came to a standstill due to the **lack of IT equipment**, and some were rejected for IT grants, leaving them nowhere to turn.

Co-ordinating teams remotely also throws up challenges for morale and productivity: when asked, participating organisations cited this as the biggest challenge when it comes to co-ordinating their teams remotely. While momentum was sustained at borough level, and BD_CAN was an effective co-ordination tool, some organisations cautioned that there was a communication gap between organisations that could be widened without the right measures and infrastructure in place.

The shift to **remote and socially-distanced ways of working** also requires **revisions to safeguarding policy**. This was a significant setback at the start of the lockdown, but a problem that only has to be resolved once.

66%
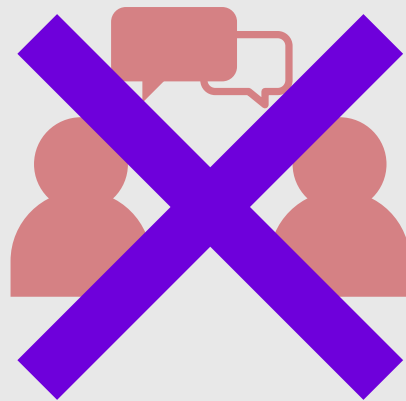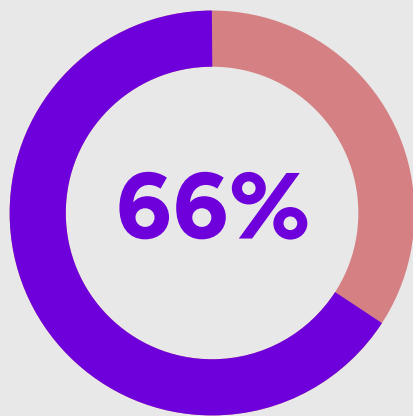
66% of survey respondents have had to cancel or postpone particular events and activities. The main reason reported was the impossibility of providing face-to-face activities and closure of centres and hubs.

Image supplied by BD Collective

Specific challenges	Creative solutions
Mitigating the costs of renting and maintaining a space. *Many organisations are paying for space and utility bills that they are not using, with 71% indicating that providers had not stepped in to mitigate the costs. This hit is further accentuated for organisations who rely on renting their space out or ticketed events to create income.*	<u>Secure support from providers</u>: Seeking rent holidays has proved successful in some cases. Other organisations felt fortunate to use contractors for many of their maintenance services, as this put them at an advantage to mitigate their other expenses. <u>Where possible, move events online</u>: Some organisations are beginning to make use of online events, including Barking Enterprise Centre (BEC). BEC, who noted that Zoom links particularly well with Eventbrite for easy organisation. BEC have even been using Zoom Enterprise for social events, such as doing evening 'mingles'. Moving to subscription-based online delivery similarly has some potential to serve as a new business model for those who were dependent on ticketed events to generate income.
Building digital infrastructure from scratch, and guiding staff and service users through the cultural transition. *Some organisations had to create digital infrastructure from scratch, with a lack of funds and under high pressure conditions. Some applied for IT-specific grants, but were unsuccessful.* *For these organisations, it is also the genesis of a whole new culture of working; the impact assessment made it clear that these organisations are finding it more difficult that those who already had a degree of digital infrastructure in place. Good relationships between people also lubricates the digital infrastructure.*	<u>Build the right foundations</u>: Organisations who had pre-existing digital infrastructure in place fared much better. There are benefits to building on any existing effective processes that people are familiar with. At the same time, going back to square one and procuring the right equipment and software proved key to establishing effective and sustainable new ways of working. This may mean a complete overhaul is worth it in the long run. The decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, but either way the overall message is the same: build strong foundations. <u>Thrifty procurement</u>: Many organisations justified the procurement of IT equipment as an investment. However, diverting funds for IT equipment was difficult for many, especially once grants had been denied. The crisis atmosphere made it possible for some organisations to accept offers from staff and volunteers to use home and personal computers. In addition, this is not sustainable; it is also not an option where staff themselves suffer from digital exclusion. Seeking innovative ways of procuring equipment is not a fool-proof plan because it relies heavily on "good luck", but it did work for one organisation who received eight screens from a local business. They are now providing services to residents through live-streaming, which allows them to be creative and flourish whilst they are shielding. <u>Prioritisation</u>: The switch to digital is also an opportunity to streamline processes; which in turn strengthens the digital transition too, in a virtuous circle. In setting up new digital infrastructure, organisations are therefore advised to prioritise well and support simplify work plans accordingly. This is particularly important if staff are still getting to grips with the new system. <u>Structure</u>: Regular meetings and clear deadlines came out as another important way to support staff in the transition to digital. Sector representatives identified that this provides structure for motivating and tracking progress; it also increases connectivity between staff, which facilitates fluid communication, and provides a clear sense of direction. <u>Relationships</u>: Many sector representatives noticed that collaborating online is easier if you are already friends and know your colleagues well. This requires concerted effort when teams are working remotely, but pays off by engendering a can-do attitude among staff in the transition.

Staff are not techsavvy or well-positioned to work from home. *Many staff are not well-disposed to technology and/or well-equipped to work from home (e.g. due to childcare and homeschooling).*	Provide training: Whilst the digital structure is important, the people operating within it are the heart and soul of the operations. For those who are not tech savvy, the new way of working can become frustrating and disillusioning. However, staff and volunteers tend to appreciate the importance of technology and have an eagerness to learn, which means a small amount of IT training can go a long way. This was the case for The Boathouse CIC and Ukon Careers CIC who both carried out staff training. It can also help to produce guidance documents. Be supportive: Organisations stress the importance of being adaptive and flexible around the needs of each staff member/volunteer. This provides the conditions for less digitally-inclined staff to learn - and the will to do so! Outsource: Studio 3 Arts are outsourcing to a tech company to help with their streaming. This is another way to circumvent a lack of technological knowledge in the short-term.
Sustaining productivity and safeguarding staff who are working from home. *Keeping up morale and sustaining productivity is compromised by the new way of working, where tasks are "dragged out" and staff struggle with digital frustrations. Whilst there was a wave of activism in the immediate aftermath, some organisations have reported fatigue and concerns about burnout.* *This linked to the safeguarding of staff as much as it is productivity: staff working at home feel more alone. It is harder to shake off a bad day under these circumstances and tensions with colleagues can become worse through the phone than they would with face-to-face interaction to diffuse them. For instance, some organisations reported that teasing out difficult conversations and unpacking operational issues is more difficult to do through phones, email and zoom, which tests the trust between members of the team.* *Another dimension is that online engagements increase the pressure of each interaction and do not make use of the suite of non-verbal communication tools that we have at our disposal in face-to-face meet-ups. They are more mentally draining as a result, The same is somewhat true for socially-distanced interactions too. This means staff spend more cognitive energy on Zoom and socially-distanced interactions than they would on the same interaction under normal conditions. This implicates their capacity and/or their vulnerability to burnout compared to pre-covid.*	'Morale is the key': Morale stays high when things flow: when people feel the system makes sense and feel understood and appreciated. We found that successful remote teams tended to focus on relationship-building, and had a conscious appreciation for one another's skillset. There are team building exercises that can be done to encourage sector personnel to recognise and be recognised. Protect mental health: Often, staff know what they need to work best. Numerous organisations noticed particular staff were struggling to work from home for the prolonged period and allowed them to use the office space in reduced numbers and on a staff rotation. During the lockdown itself, a number of organisations rang their staff every week to check up. Many had the idea to ease workers back into routine gradually so it is not such a shock when they return full time. 'Prevention' measures: The most productive remote teams had a belief system that pre-dated Covid-19. This meant staff already felt well-looked after from day one, such as by being a London Living Wage employer, topping up furloughed staff's salaries, supporting professional development, keeping furloughed staff in touch and informed. Over time, this keeps morale high for those powering on throughout the pandemic, and means furloughed workers come back re-energised and ready to work.
Digital exclusion among service users *There is a big digital divide down socio-economic lines, which means it disproportionately affects the BAME population and older people. This perpetuates social injustice since access to support requires access to the internet. It was flagged that the effects of this is particularly detrimental for BAME young people who are at a 'fork in the roads' in their lives.* *There is also digital exclusion by lack of know-how: there is a skills shortage among service users, which means some people remain intimidated by tech and hard-to-reach.*	Reach them first, capacitate them later: Before being able to combat digital exclusion, it is first necessary to reach and connect with the people suffering from it. (See Programmes section) Providing equipment and internet access: Some organisations responded by providing IT equipment and reimbursing service users for their internet access by 4G. However, this needs to be scaled-up if it is going to ensure people do not slip through the cracks. Also, a system of upfront payments will be more inviting for those who are suffering from chronic financial anxiety.

Keeping people connected equitably *Disseminating information and keeping people connected through online tools is key for the social sector to carry out its role supporting the community.* *It also needs to be done equitably: communications should be inclusive of different sub-communities needs - particularly BAME and ESL residents.* *This last point was flagged by a BAME-led organisation, who said that communications, on national and local government level are not inclusive as things currently stand. More specifically, government public health messages have not been getting through to certain members of the community as they were not in the right languages and or distributed through the appropriate channels.*	<u>Get support for high quality digital communications:</u> In this day and age, when people have a reliable and well-updated website to turn to, they feel safe and looked after. Our findings demonstrate that a developed website and a digital communications strategy is essential to long term-survival, especially in a post-Covid world; it is also one of the most high-impact ways to channel support to the sector. However it is an area in which VCSEs often fall short and/ or lack capacity. Some organisations asked for help in the area of digital communications; one organisation took on a 'furlonteer' with digital communications experience. Consultants and training were other options mentioned (but not carried out) by the sector professionals who contributed to this report. We further advise that organisations can also reach out to bodies such as Media Trust who offer free training in media and communications. <u>Be proactive to ensure communications are inclusive</u>: Different members of the community prefer different channels: some get their news from the TV and newspapers, when government messages were coming through text messages and websites. These consumption preferences can be cultural, and/or result from language barriers. Either way, being conscious of this is important to ensure communications are inclusive. In terms of an example: one BAME-led organisation found translated materials from the World Health Organisation and recruited volunteers who speak community languages to get public health messages to those who had been excluded from mainstream communications.
Reopening physical spaces safely and effectively, in a way that beneficiaries find comfortable and convenient *Many organisations expressed concerns about opening up again, and the logistical barriers to doing so. Some organisations reported that their spaces were too small to operate meaningfully with social distancing measures in place. Others reported that the financial cost of covid-proofing their premises - though an investment in the long-term - was a considerable undertaking.*	<u>Reach out to beneficiaries to gauge what their preferences are</u>: Before investing in one system of operating, organisations have been reaching out to their beneficiaries to understand their needs, preferences, and constraints to make sure they are aligning themselves to as many of them as possible. <u>Make use of pre-prepared materials</u>: With many business and organisations facing the same logistical challenges, there are a number of materials to help and advise organisations making physical spaces social distancing-friendly. For example, BEC made use of the risk management templates they had prepared for their service users! Organisations can knowledge-share informally too. <u>Make spaces social-distancing friendly</u>: The majority of organisations are putting in measures for reopening in-person services. This includes the removal of soft furnishings, one way systems, two metre markings, face mask provision and sanitizing stations. Though some report they now look austere and/or clinical (which isn't ideal for comfort and/or productivity of the space-users) people have been glad to return to in-person hubs and service-users report feeling safe. Other organisations are going further to ensure they are ahead of the curve in the 'new normal': Barking Enterprise Centre (BEC) are fitting their conference rooms with 360-degree cameras, so that meetings can take place with up to six live participants.

a. Way forward

Whilst the **suspension of bills** and **rent holidays** has led to a huge sigh of relief to struggling organisations, these expenses will put a strain on further down the line, as they inevitably need to be repaid eventually. The social sector is going to need support on this front, or survival may become too much of an uphill struggle for some organisations.

Procuring **IT equipment** also remains a major priority, both for organisations themselves to run effectively and in tackling digital exclusion among service users. In terms of **digital literacy:** whilst some good initiatives have made some encouraging headway, much work also remains outstanding and it remains unclear the best way to **scale-up** such initiatives, as well as how to reach people who were not already being reached pre-Covid. Reaching the digitally excluded in a meaningful and comprehensive way will require **concerted** and **collective effort** and **innovative approache**s. It can be regarded as an early intervention that will reduce more severe social problems further down the line.

Digital inclusion will be game-changing for many people, and many service providers. However, **some services can't be delivered digitally**. The face-to-face interaction is an integral part of the value of some of the services and therefore they cannot be replicated online by their very nature; therefore the logistical barriers of in-person interactions need to be overcome.

- *Beneficiaries of the Sycamore Trust with Autism have enjoyed interacting on Zoom, but a big part of their mandate is to specifically develop children's in-person social and communicative skills to enrich their lives further down the line.*

For other organisations, digital delivery is possible but it i**mpedes the quality of the service** and makes them less **meaningful**.

For example:

- *Hug Support Group CIC flagged that it is not possible to create a confidential and safe space for someone who is on Zoom in their bedroom, whilst their co-habitors are in the next room. Nor is it possible for body language, facial expression or physical touch to engender comfort across, for example, a language barrier.*

Whilst the positive attitude towards the new normal (which was witnessed among sector professionals in LBBD) is to be encouraged, it is important to also **confront these limitations head-on:** (1) so organisations prioritise appropriately; and (2) in order to devise new infrastructure around identified insurmountable constraints. This is part of a wider need (as a country) to weigh-up the risk posed by the virus vs. the social impact.

Digital exclusion also has implications for **staying in touch with life on the ground**. It is more difficult to understand what is happening in the community when you're not meeting people face-to-face, which makes it harder to understand the needs and priorities of the community. Given that socially-distanced lifestyles mean people are out-and-about in the community less, infrastructure and **operating systems** need to be devised to support **sustained outreach**. This could be part of a wider shift in communications methodology, which could simultaneously take on the more equitable approach mentioned above and thereby achieve greater inclusivity at the same time.

As well as mitigating the negative impact, it's also important to **safeguard the positive impact**. Sustaining streamlined and results-oriented operating systems. Covid emergency has forced organisations to streamline certain **bureaucratic processes** to allow for **quicker action** and **reduced 'wastage'** during lockdown and going forward.

For example:

- *The Council facilitated sharing of data between organisations to allow for referrals of residents to correct support. The social sector had been advocating for this for a long time, Covid-19 gave the push to get it done in a GDPR safe way.*

This report serves as a **repository of good practices**; these can be built on to contribute to the design of supportive bureaucracy and operating systems in the post-covid recovery.

Images supplied by BD Collective

7. Post-Covid recovery

a. Introduction

Organisational recovery from a shock such as Covid-19 is a huge challenge, but there are ways in which we can start the process. The organisations who have been most successful at weathering the effects of the pandemic so far have some things in common, such as:

1. They have been switching up operations to **adopt an emergency response**,
2. They are **clued-up about external funding**,
3. They are **tech-savvy**, and
4. They have **energetic leadership** and **agile organisational arrangements**.

These shared traits indicate the qualities that organisations will need to monopolise on and take forward into the recovery stage.

The majority of organisations (57%) had developed some kind of formal **strategy** in response to the Covid-19 crisis and interruption to normal service it has presented. These strategies were mostly focused on the 'here-and-now': opening up physical spaces again, securing funding, and reaching as many service-users in crisis as possible. **Longer-term visions** prioritised: consolidating new ways of working, developing new income streams (e.g. subscription), and incorporating the rise of new social issues into programmes. However, there was little to gain from a comprehensive and detailed strategy, because it is impossible to plan in the constantly changing circumstances and **unpredictability** of the virus' course and now the prospect of further restrictions and lockdowns.

Despite all the on-going pandemic uncertainty, there is a palpable sense of **optimism** in the sector's ability to bounce back: half of the sector voices were indicating that their organisation is more agile and able to adapt since Covid-19. Meanwhile, **62% of the organisations have ideas or for practical, constructive solutions**. These included: finding new ways to monetise, providing digital literacy training and developing social media strategies.

62%

62% of social sector organisations in LBBD have ideas for practical and constructive solutions.

b. SWOT Analysis

We have categorised our findings relating to post-Covid recovery according to *strengths* and *weaknesses* of the sector, and *opportunities* and *threats* to post-Covid recovery.

This *SWOT* analysis puts LBBD in good stead to come up with a strategic and co-produced recovery plan that plays to the sector's **strengths**, circumvents its **weaknesses**, whilst making the most of **opportunities**, and mitigating **threats** to a positive recovery. It has also informed the policy recommendations put forward in the next section.

Strengths

- **The strong culture of collaboration and empowering sense of togetherness** born out of the emergency response and fostered by networks such as BD_CAN and BD_Collective. This is a realisation of the Council's VCSE Strategy, and its need to see a more robust and flourishing sector to work with. There appears to be an exciting 'cultural' shift and organisations have prioritised borough-wide and community cohesive concerns over individual organisational motives.
- There is a remarkable **flourishing of smaller social enterprise and cultural organisations**, many led by BAME women, and united in their sense of social mission and 'making a difference' to the borough.
- **Strong faith centres**, such as churches and mosques, have been identified as key hubs of support for the borough. The borough has a very strong faith social action heart which feeds into a wider civic infrastructure.
- **Quick updates to safeguarding policies** have aided a smooth and secure transition to online modes of operation.
- **'Love for the borough' community spirit**: a strong sense of involvement and engagement that unites residents in community activities and a sense of 'can-do' hyper local action, social solidarity and social entrepreneurship. There is an appreciation for the volunteers and on-the-ground professionals of the sector who really care as being a driving force for good; sector leaders and actors report feeling acknowledged and appreciated, which shields them from becoming disillusioned by the harsh sector environment. The consensus is for more participant-driven, grassroots action built on recent tangible experiences of increased connectivity..
- **Shared challenges have united individuals** and VCSE representatives commented on a strong feeling of connection and camaraderie that has been established despite social distancing.
- **Creative thinking about new opportunities** is a less well-documented feature of the 'new normal'. The organisations we spoke to were full of ideas, open to change, and open to partnerships. The Sycamore Trust, for example, are considering selling 'autism awareness' packages to businesses to generate a more commercial arm to their organisation.
- **Strong and unified teams:** The humanisation of colleagues and the 'rallying behind the flag' effect of the crisis meant that staff are working cohesively, and enjoying the effects of a more understanding and flexible work atmosphere.

Opportunities

- **New and effective potential partnerships** are coming out of the strong culture of collaboration; for example, food banks have set up a food bank network to distribute excess donated supplies. The appetite for sector-wide communication could pave the way for cross-sectoral partnerships that meet a niche need, or which generally promote innovation in the sector. One example is The Boathouse CIC, an Arts venue and community group, who have suggested collaborating with local food banks to provide them with a space to operate from.
- **Faith centres can be a hub to intermingle co-existing diverse communities**. Such community wide activities, hosted by faith hubs, can break down perceived differences between subsections of the community (It is understood that the Council have commissioned a separate study to further assess the potential future role of the faith social action sector)..
- **Increasingly efficient modes of operation** have arisen from the new safeguarding processes, helping organisations to support residents remotely and to share data to refer service users to appropriate support from other organisations. Streamlined operations increase impact-for-effort of social action, which can free up resources.

- **Combating the digital divide** will up opportunities for distanced support, engagement and entertainment for older people.
- **Devolved power facilitates community action**. The Council have acted on the demand for participant-driven social work and devolved power to community groups during the pandemic. This policy shift is set to be met with energy by community groups, who have advocated for such participant-driven, grassroots action.
- **Reaching more people with the move to digital**: organisations have successfully sourced more potential staff and volunteers (including remotely, from other proximities) and attracted more service users. As a result, organisations have potential to partner with similar organisations and leaders elsewhere. This comes with potential for: idea-sharing, monetising opportunities and brand recognition.
- **Organisations can widen programmes** to address Covid-specific issues. Covid-19 has raised awareness of particular dimensions of mental health and holistic wellbeing, as well as spotlighted domestic abuse and financial issues. Organisations can now tackle them in a more targeted way, which also makes them eligible for additional funding opportunities (for example, the charity Power to Change has secured Lottery funding to maintain the identified renewed sense of community spirit and further promote wellbeing). Triangoals, for example, are incorporating a number of these social and mental health-related issues in their new programme delivery.
- **Larger organisations** with access to space and local sector experts have the potential to work with and support smaller organisations, for example taking on the role of integrating different services.
- **A more unified sector:** Covid-19 has brought about greater consensus in the sector. For example, almost all organisations raised concern about the mental wellbeing of residents throughout the pandemic, and praised the increased collaboration within the sector. This bodes well for sector wide funding, instead of funding being fragmented between different organisations tackling the same issues, funding will go towards collaborative efforts to bring about positive change - which is likely to be more effective.
- Whilst older volunteers are shielding, there is an opportunity for organisations to capitalise on the availability of **younger volunteers who are seeking work experience**. Barking and Dagenham has a higher than average proportion of young people (17 percent of the borough population) than the London wide borough average (13 percent) (Young Londoners Fund, 2019).
- Whilst the **suspension of bills** and **rent holidays** has led to a huge sigh of relief to struggling organisations, these expenses will put a strain on further down the line, as they inevitably need to be repaid eventually. The social sector is going to need support on this front, or survival may become too much of an uphill struggle for some organisations.
- Whilst older volunteers are shielding, there is an opportunity for organisations to capitalise on the availability of **younger able-bodied volunteers** who are seeking work experience. Barking and Dagenham has a higher than average proportion of young people between 10-21 years (16.8% of the borough population) than the London wide borough average (13.4&) (source: Young Londoners Fund, 2019).
- **Commercial development** is raising the profile of the borough and bringing in more money, with corporate sustainability transitioning from being a trend to a whole new way of operating, some sector professionals expressed hope that developers will be interested in giving back to the community.

Weaknesses

- **Survival mode**: some organisations have been so focused on surviving they have not been able to engage fully with partnership and new programmatic opportunities. Nor plan for the future.
- **Resentment within the sector** exists where community members feel that some actors (for example, larger organisations) have not contributed proportionately to the emergency response.
- **Residents are disillusioned with existing solutions:** within the sector there is a feeling that existing broad support is too 'top down' and that such ways of working are ineffective and not meaningful to local residents.
- **Logistical obstacles** when navigating how to re-open centres safely puts strain on already stretched resources. There are also **severe financial constraints** for many organisations.
- **Intergroup tensions are a risk** as social distancing and remote working allows different subsections of the borough to live separate 'parallel' lives. Cohesion within the social sector also needs to be nourished and sustained.
- **Leaving no-one behind**: people are at a much higher risk of slipping through the net, particularly those facing digital exclusion, language barriers or those whose health and mental health struggles are mild enough to mean they do not qualify formal support services. Hard to reach individuals need to be actively sought-out if they are to be supported. **There is no shortcut for doing this without adequate resources, development and capacity-building support.**

Threats

- **Smaller, less-established organisations are at risk of closure**, especially those that do not have the capacity to engage with new partnership and programmatic opportunities. Organisations that have been in 'survival mode' are also at risk of being left behind.
- **Will there be an appetite for in-person services and activities post-covid?** Many organisations are concerned revenue generation will take a long-term hit and may never bounce back to pre-Covid levels.
- **The digital divide will heighten social inequality**. Some older residents do not have the confidence to use new technology, whilst some children are unable to access homework.
- **Organisations and individuals are at risk of burnout** due to increased pressure on existing staff.
- **There is a threat of community friction and an undermining of current sense of 'togetherness'** as prejudiced views between are not confronted by in-person meetings and collaborative working. The BD Faith Forum has already flagged the issue of Zoom Bombing in the borough.

c. Leaving No-One Behind

The effects of the pandemic have touched the entire community. It has had widespread financial implications and has intensified existing social issues. We asked the LBBD social sector about which sections of the community they observed and experienced as having been most detrimentally impacted by Covid-19. The following key groups were seen as being the most at risk of 'being left behind'. They were recognised as needing extra support from the social sector in the 'recovery stage':

Older people
Older people have been severely affected by the coronavirus. They are likely to have felt fearful, and to have lost friends and loved ones. Their lifestyle has been most dramatically affected too. Compounded by the fact they are likely to live alone and have limited access to online facilities and devices due to lack of digital literacy and infrastructure, this means they are the most likely age group to have suffered from loneliness and isolation.

BAME community
It is well documented that BAME communities have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19. Nationally, BAME people account for 13% of the population, yet make up 34% of the patients admitted to intensive care units. Although there is no conclusive evidence, a range of socio-economic and behavioural factors associated with ethnic minorities play into the correlation: BAME people are more likely to be in occupations with higher risk of being exposed to the coronavirus, they are more likely to experience overcrowded living conditions, and are more likely to be socially and income-deprived. Excel Women's Centre told us language barriers also prevented many of Barking and Dagenham's BAME groups from receiving correct information on coronavirus and on how best to follow social distancing rules.

Those experiencing illness but not clinically vulnerable
The sector identified people who suffer from milder physical and mental health illnesses as being particularly at risk because of the non-urgent and non-serious nature of their classification. For example: asthma and diabetes sufferers who have been shielding for the past few months, will be some of the last people to go back out into society and might not ask for help as they do not see their condition as serious and do not want to impose on others. People with poor mental health but no clinical diagnosis also risk slipping through the cracks, with neighbours, friends and healthcare professionals attention diverted to look for more serious cases. There is also a psychological impact of now identifying as 'vulnerable', which can affect a sense of self.

Young people and children
There is serious concern about young people and children who have been deprived of quality education. Some children have missed up to six months of in-person teaching, with the sad possibility of missing even more. There is a particular worry for children from low income backgrounds who have missed months of education due to lack of resources in schools and lack of digital infrastructure in homes. Young people are also more susceptible to loneliness than older age groups, and at the same time less equipped to recognise it and cope with the effects (ONS, Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, 2019).

d. Practical solutions from the community

Make use of currently disused spaces and community centres: they could be used by food banks or for other urgent service provision. These spaces could also be used by charities struggling with rent or spatial constraints going forward.

Organisations should reach out to BD Renew and other fundraising support services. It makes a big difference when organisations get the right advice and support for sourcing funding and understand how to navigate new relationships with funders in light of the pandemic.

Engage with beneficiaries through a broadcast-style events model; partially in-person and partially reaching service users at home through live stream.

Keep up resource sharing and sign-posting, either through community organisations channels or informally between community members so that everyone is aware of the support services out there.

Give positive feedback and public recognition to organisations and their 'worker bees' to keep up momentum; sustain the culture of 'clapping the NHS' to reinforce the value of community work long-term.

Traditional forms of communications, such as letters or the phone, have a place in the new normal too. As much as we need to help people who are digitally illiterate to access services online, first and foremost they need to feel connected and traditional communications can help with this.

Address and be aware of the mental health fall out from the lockdown; encourage outdoor activity, mindfulness and mental health awareness for staff and service-users alike.

Supporting staff to set up at-home working properly is key; having a good printer and investments in remote working software can go a long way for the wellbeing and productivity of social sector professionals.

We need to make steps towards a world where everyone has access to the internet: training beneficiaries and staff in online working, providing 4G for the digitally poor are good initiatives

Practical solutions from the community

8. Concluding Statement

Barking and Dagenham's VCSE sector organisations are diverse and energetic, and have displayed impressive **agility, flexibility and determinedness** to help all sections of the community during a difficult time. Ultimately, the sector is not short of **ideas, dynamic people** or understanding of the community - there is only a shortage of resources to support them.

Phase 1 is the initiation phase in developing a recovery plan. As such, this report has given an overview of the impacts of the pandemic, informed by the extensive and diverse **perspectives** of a cross-section of organisations in the borough. This process has given a clear picture of the sector and uncovered clear policy entry points.

Within the borough there are many **productive funding opportunities** which could create both immediate and long-term positive impact on the sector's ability to support the residents of LBBD. There are also a number of **tangible policy entry points** to help organisations maximise *their* resources and to **embolden** funders and policymakers alike towards making **cultural shifts** that will put the sector ahead in a post-Covid world.

Most encouraging of all is that within the sector there is (1) **a shared vision** and (2) **shared ideology**, including awareness of mental health issues and the digital divide, praise of the collaboration born out of the pandemic, and a drive to work collectively with **harmony** and **efficiency** to achieve maximum results in the future.

Investors in the borough (whether funders or governmental bodies) can be confident that funds will go towards a collective of organisations with clear visions and priorities, with the power to make a real difference to the community.

With warm thanks to the contributing organisations:

Through surveys, interviews and group interviews, we have heard from over 60 individuals, largely from leadership roles but also individuals from different levels (as Chairs of Trustee Boards, active volunteers etc) within the following organisations of Barking and Dagenham:

- Alzheimer's Society
- Barking & Dagenham CVS
- Barking Enterprise Centre CIC
- Barking and Dagenham Renew (survey and interview)
- BD Faith Forum
- BD Giving
- Carers of Barking and Dagenham
- Community Resources
- Company Drinks CIC
- Dagenham U3A
- Early Years Cocoon CIC
- Esmee Fairbairn Foundation
- Excel Women's Centre (6 in group interview)
- Faiths Forum London
- Freelance artist, involved in lots of community/ social sector activities as an artist
- Gale Street Organic Gardeners' Association (survey and interview)

- Green Shoe Arts
- HCC Foodbank
- HT Therapy
- HumDum UK Food Bank
- Individual volunteer, leader of Knit and Natter, exercise classes for the disabled
- J-GO Media
- Laureus Sport for Good Foundation
- London Borough of Barking & Dagenham (Participation, Policy & Engagement)
- Near Neighbours East London
- NHS CCG
- North Meets South
- Pennu Charity (2 people interviewed)
- Positive Change Consultancy
- Reconnections (2 people interviewed)
- Sew London Project CIC
- Spark2Life
- Street Tag
- Studio 3 Arts
- Sustainability Research Institute
- Sycamore Trust (2 people interviewed)
- Thames Ward Community Project
- The Boathouse CIC
- The Hug Support Group CIC
- The Source
- TKO Boxing Gym
- TrailNet
- Triangoals
- Tudor Trust
- TWCP
- U3A
- Ukon Careers CIC
- Valence House
- Wellgate Community Farm
- Whiting Avenue Tenants & Residents Association
- Whole Body Therapy
- Young Stars Football First
- Youth League International

Who are we?

Civil Society Consulting (CSC) is an independent, not-for-profit social enterprise – a Community Interest Company (CIC). We aim to enhance community cohesion by enabling and empowering VCSE groups to leverage social impact in the communities they know and love. This includes nurturing individual skills and talents, as much of our support is delivered through expert training and mentoring to members of community groups and charities.

We have a particular focus on working in the most socially deprived and diverse neighbourhoods. Properly understanding the needs people have, and then working alongside them to plan, develop and run services and projects has always been at the heart of our people-led approach to consulting.

The team have worked extensively with communities - a wide range of groups, ethnicities, and ages. Our recent work includes working with BAME-led organisations up-and-down the country (including #Steps2Sustainability in Barking & Dagenham, Coventry, Liverpool and Middlesbrough) to secure funding for emergency Covid-19 frontline work, helping with the development of an on-line training programme for the Campaign to End Loneliness, strategic development and governance support for the Multi-Faith Centre in Derby, and engaging with new mums in South East London to provide NHS England and Mind UK with insights into perinatal mental health in Bromley and Southwark.

We are academically-inclined, and keep a focus on the bigger picture: the strive for socio-economic rights and equality; but at the same time, our track record of working 'hands-on' with local grassroots organisations means we're not afraid to get stuck in.

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