

Voices



Volume 2, November 2021 from the pandemic



Five thought leader interviews from across the sector



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Cover photos: Mencap, Save the Children UK and Voluntary Action Leeds

Introduction

The Voices from the Pandemic series started with a focus on hands-on work. Our first volume looked at how charities and community groups transformed themselves to meet the challenges of Covid-19. But as the crisis continued, it laid bare many existing issues for the sector, and raised wider questions. In this second volume, we ask what happens next.

Even in the depths of the crisis, there have been opportunities for funders, charities and communities: the chance to make permanent and bold changes to how they work. In this new volume, Thomas Lawson of Turn2us highlights the challenges of equality and equity, looking honestly at power and how we can use it to make a fairer society. Natsayi Sithole of Save the Children UK describes why localism matters, and how a national organisation can find its place in the ecosystem without overshadowing or distorting the work of small, grassroots groups. Edel Harris and Ciara Lawrence of Mencap explain the importance of voice: who gets heard and amplified, and how the voluntary sector can take its seat at the table for strategic planning and decision-making.

We also look at the important role of local infrastructure in enabling frontline work. Richard Jackson explains how Voluntary Action Leeds helped to channel 8,000 new volunteers to meaningful roles – relieving pressure on individual organisations and supporting the wider system of agencies across the city. From Citizens UK, CEO Matthew Bolton and local leaders Fiona Tasker and Salma Ravat share their work to build the capacity of people from disadvantaged areas to participate in public life and their communities.

Across all the interviews, we've heard how organisations looked for solutions as they navigated the challenges of the crisis. Here are ideas on how the sector can respond and grow to meet an unpredictable future: the questions it needs to ask, and the changes it can make for the communities it serves.



VAL

Voluntary Action Leeds

Volunteers, Slung Low



A conversation with Richard Jackson

COVID-19 prompted an outpouring of support. 200,000 people visited the volunteering webpages of **Voluntary Action Leeds** (VAL), an infrastructure organisation that supports doing good in the city. That’s a quarter of the Leeds population. “The way people have responded has just been staggering,” says Richard Jackson, VAL’s chief officer. “I couldn’t be prouder of the city.”

Unprecedented response

For Richard, the scale of volunteering “changed the face of what we did as an organisation.” 8,000 people came forward – more than they could immediately find roles for. That meant “some completely understandable frustration from those people about not being deployed quickly enough.”

The scale of volunteering
“**changed the face
of what we did as an
organisation.**”

Richard Jackson, VAL

So VAL looked across the sector, working to feed volunteers to the 1,500 Leeds organisations who were responding to COVID-19. It helped with vetting, such as driving license checks, and taking people through the process. “We had an online signup form, with an induction and a Q&A at the end, to make sure they’d understood what they’d been shown.”

Lists of volunteers were broken down, ward by ward, and linked with local organisations. “Our role was about brokerage: bringing volunteers on, making sure they had the experience we were looking for, then referring them to the most appropriate organisation” – either where was closest, or to make the most of specific skills, with bilingual volunteers deployed “where they were most needed”.

Helping charities to help each other

Some charities weren’t ready for this many new people. VAL provided a dedicated member of staff, with guidance, support, and a pack – induction materials, checklists, everything they needed to work with the volunteers. Support was particularly important for smaller organisations, which might not have an established relationship with the public sector, and needed to build up their internal infrastructure and confidence.

“Everybody in the city is going to have their **basic needs met.**”

Richard Jackson, VAL

They also asked organisations to help each other, for example by lending each other volunteer managers.

“Organisations from across wards wanted to work together to give each other respite, to make sure that needs were met.”

It meant staying in close contact. Leeds City Council set up “what we called the volunteering core group – all the key partners, from the different agencies,” meeting daily at the start of the pandemic. “It was basically saying, ‘How’s it going? Is the guidance right? What are the issues facing these groups? How do we resolve that?’

“We were the backroom staff... the ones that tackle those things, so nobody else has to worry about them.” That willingness to come together and solve problems has “changed how our relationships will work going forward. I hope so, anyway.”

He also praises funders’ flexibility, “giving permission for organisations to redirect their funding to where it was most needed. That made a massive difference to what we were able to do, and how quickly we were able to do it.”

#TogetherLeeds: inspiring action

Placing volunteers was the start of a conversation, with a new newsletter to share information and opportunities. Through social media, VAL shared case studies to highlight different roles across the city. They used the **#TogetherLeeds** hashtag to build positivity, showing how people could support their communities.

“In all our communication, we refer to #TogetherLeeds, and encouraged others to do the same. We got an incredible number of vignette case studies of what people were doing. The city began to realise that what was happening on the ground was an amazing thing.” The recognition is important: for Richard, making sure that people felt valued and had meaningful roles has been vital.

Positivity is a key lesson. “The news at national level was predominantly negative – all about the challenges and the worries, how many people were dying. The local response was far more positive: the great work that’s going on, how many people are being helped, the social, funny stories that people had come across. Much more of ‘we’re here to help you, we’re going to make sure that you’re okay’.”

That should be built into messaging, he argues. Communications should be “solutions focused. They’re not focused on how bad it all is, they’re focused on how brilliant it is to live in this city, what fantastic work people are doing, and how you can be part of that. There’s an optimism that says, ‘We’re in a crisis, but we’re going to come out the other side, better than we went in’.”



Volunteer, Hamara hub

Top down or locally led

When the crisis hit, VAL had to move fast. “If someone said, ‘That’s too much for us,’ we went to the next organisation and said, ‘Can you do it instead?’” Looking back, Richard now calls this a top down approach – not “as nuanced and locally led as it should have been”. But that has changed over time, with greater focus on partnerships.

Local systems are essential, working “on a neighbourhood by neighbourhood basis”. Trusted local organisations – such as an over-60s network, and **Hamara**, a community centre working with the local Muslim community – played a leading role in the pandemic response. “Some of them were big – large service providers. But people knew them, knew that their service offer was good. We didn’t want people engaging with a faceless system that they didn’t really understand or know. The trust was the key.”

Without grassroots knowledge, there was a risk of mismatched services: he cites “food parcels with no consideration of allergies, no cultural offer. That’s a real key learning point for me: don’t try to do local stuff from national level.”



Volunteer, Oblong hub

Though VAL acted as a broker through the pandemic, “We just didn’t have the capacity to manage that number – we became the bottleneck in the system.” They began to move to “a volunteering infrastructure which is more about individuals getting in direct contact with organisations, and us stepping back from that – managing the process from a distance, so those relationships become more organic.”

“There’s an optimism that says, we’re in a crisis, but we’re going to come out the other side, better than we went in.”

Richard Jackson, VAL

At the start of the pandemic:

200,000

people checked VAL’s volunteering pages

8,000

people signed up to volunteer

What does that mean for the future? “Does Voluntary Action Leeds step back and let that support happen in the locality? Rather than us being this body that’s brought in to provide professional skills support.” Richard also wants to include the new mutual aid and volunteer led groups, as well as communities of interest.

He stresses putting aside individual priorities to think more broadly, “from a system wide perspective. Making a decision that says, ‘Everybody in the city is going to have their basic needs met. And the system is going to make sure that that happens.’ That was an incredible thing.”

The story continues



doinggoodleeds.org.uk



Save the Children UK

Save the Children UK

A conversation with Natsayi Sithole

“For us localism means the movement of resources, capacity, and decision-making power closer to the everyday lives of children,” explains Natsayi Sithole, Save the Children UK’s Head of Business Development and Strategy for UK Impact.

Although she recognises this is a challenge, particularly in the context of a pandemic and recession, she’s excited by the upsurge of thinking around localism and what it can mean for the sector.



“It’s been a radical shift.”

Natsayi Sithole, Save the Children UK

The charity recently tightened its focus to get the best results for children. In 2016 it launched the Children’s Communities programme, inspired by Harlem Children’s Zones in the USA. It’s been a radical shift from a disparate set of programmes to a smaller group of initiatives, rooted in individual communities.



“We could co-design an emergency grant programme, reaching families directly.”

**Natsayi Sithole,
Save the Children UK**

The approach proved its worth during COVID-19. “The groundwork we laid, in the communities we work alongside, allowed us to respond really, really fast during the pandemic,” says Natsayi. It showed that localism works: “because of the new ways of working between agencies, services, schools, and councils, we could co-design and mobilise an emergency grant programme within a couple of weeks, reaching families directly through these new networks.”

Stepping back and making space

Larger charities have been criticised for overshadowing smaller grassroots organisations. During the pandemic, Natsayi has seen a change, with some larger organisations “stepping back, reflecting, and trying to work towards a different way of operating.”

That feels like an important shift, a recognition of the “rich tapestry of organisations in civil society.” Larger charities need to consider what this means, and to ask themselves: “Do you understand the position of your organisation in this patchwork and the power you wield?”

That may mean acknowledging that a charity might not be best placed to lead on some issues. “We know that specialist organisations are more likely to operate very deeply in communities, which is something that national organisations like ours cannot do with the same legitimacy.” Instead, larger charities can offer a platform that will enable others.

Organisations need to look at their assumptions, at how they think as well as what they do. “It’s not enough to want to move in that direction,” she says. “You have to critically analyse all the behaviours that get you there.”

Natsayi advocates honest collaboration, with clarity on “what that dynamic should be, what principles you’re collectively working to”. Charities must be ready to “put aside our own ambitions in favour of those we are looking to work with or support. Be open to listening to what those [partners] really want and need. And be accountable to them.”

These conversations won’t be easy. It may mean “stepping away from delivering types of work that others are better equipped to do. Or actively strengthening other organisations, by taking a more activist approach to the way we work with funders. We should use our voice and power to ensure there is more money and infrastructure in place for specialist and small organisations to thrive.” It also means looking at issues like, “who is speaking on behalf of whom – and should we be speaking at all!”

A reorganisation of the sector

That awareness and focus on localism “speak to a fundamental reorganisation of the charity sector.” It’s a shift that could, “hopefully lead us to be more effective, more equitable in our practice, and more useful as a wider network within civil society.”

Natsayi sees equitable funding as “the one most important thing” to tackle. “Funders need to recognise that their behaviour and practice influences organisational behaviour in charities.” It needs to be kept firmly in mind as organisations plan for recovery and try to “sustain some of the good that’s come out of this crisis.”

Another important question is the sector’s “relationship to the state [...] to big tech – to all these massive players and aspects of our society. Really scrutinising how we orient ourselves, and how we behave.”

The crisis has highlighted longer term issues. “One of the biggest flashpoints during the pandemic was the crisis of funding, racism and discriminatory practices, around BAMER [Black, Asian, minority ethnic and refugee] led organisations. Because of COVID, these issues were foregrounded, and harder to ignore. And they were far-reaching, and implicated not only the funding world, but also all charities.”

She cites the Ubele Initiative’s warning in April 2020 that nine out of ten small and micro BAME-led organisations wouldn’t survive the first three months of lockdown without support. “If they’re allowed to disappear, or fall into crisis and languish, it’s taking away an important safety net for so many.”

And, she points out, those outcomes reflect our wider choices. “Failing to correct these longstanding inequities in funding and social investment speaks volumes about what we deem worth protecting and safeguarding, and whom. What is driving these decisions, and what does failing to act mean for what this sector truly stands for?”

“Save the Children UK’s new Explore, Play, Learn pilot in Sheffield supports children at risk of falling behind in communication. **“My oldest child really likes it and has now started to read to the baby,”** one parent said. Explore Play Learn is now being rolled out in other areas in the city.”

Natsayi Sithole,
Save the Children UK

We need to talk about funding

“For community and small organisations, it’s hard to talk about resilience without talking about funding.” Charities depend on funding for their survival, but also for flexibility. Natsayi praises organisations who could “pivot more seamlessly into a response mode” during the pandemic, turning from the corporate side of their organisation to focus on their beneficiaries.

She points to well-resourced organisations with advanced fundraising departments and business development teams, which “allows them to experiment - even during really difficult times.” How can the funding world help smaller organisations to do the same?

“What’s needed is a bit of a rethink: being more responsive to what organisations know they need, versus what funders think they need. I think it’s really important to change that dynamic between funders and grantees, and potential grantees, as well as rethinking how we assess resilience.”

“The groundwork we laid, in the communities we work alongside, allowed us to respond really, really fast during the pandemic.”

Natsayi Sithole,
Save the Children UK

Funders should “lead with trust”. She points to the “horrible cycle” where a small group that seems to lack resilience is less likely to get funding – which makes it even less resilient. To address that, “We need to think about infrastructure funding. What kind of infrastructure, across the sector, would allow us all to be adaptive, to be able to collaborate much faster across the boundaries of organisations and services?”

A time to rethink

The pandemic has often meant doing things very differently – something the sector can build on. For Save the Children UK, it’s confirmed the importance of the relationships carefully built up in local areas. “The pandemic has been an accidental proof of concept. [...] We’ve proved, with our partners, in the worst possible circumstances, that this is what it takes to shift a system towards working for the benefit of others, not ourselves.” She plans listening exercises to find out where and whether Save the Children “upheld our end of the bargain” with its local partners, “that we behaved with integrity – and if we didn’t, how didn’t we? Did we impose, rather than work alongside and with?”

The long-term economic and social effects of COVID-19 are still emerging, and we know that charities are facing increased need. Natsayi believes, “we’re heading into even harder times. [...] It’s a scary thing, but it’s also an opportunity for us to rethink and reorganise ourselves for this new reality.”

The story continues



[savethechildren.org.uk](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk)



**This article
is available
in Easy Read**

Mencap



Mencap

A conversation with Edel Harris and Ciara Lawrence

COVID-19 hit some groups and communities harder. The Office for National Statistics found that the risk of death from coronavirus was 3.7 times greater for people with a learning disability.

Many were cut off from their usual support and connections. We hear from Edel Harris, chief executive of learning disability charity Mencap, and Ciara Lawrence, an information officer who has now joined the charity's strategy team.

Explaining lockdown for everyone

Ciara, who has a learning disability, speaks passionately about the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people. "There hasn't been enough good, accessible information. Many people have been coping without their usual social care support, so haven't had help to understand the guidance."

Because people with a disability may be more vulnerable to COVID-19, it's essential they can understand the guidance, which has often changed or been updated. But not everyone has the support to do that.

“When the first lockdown started, I didn’t understand what I was allowed to do,” Ciara explains. “It took a lot from my mum – virtually, on the phone, by email – trying to explain it to me.”

Disability organisations developed accessible advice, working together to avoid duplication. Edel explains: “Rather than us all doing it, we’ve come together and worked out who’s best placed, who has the capacity or the resource to lead that work.”

1.5 million people

Live with a learning disability in the UK.

At Mencap, Ciara created an easy read work group to develop better guidance. “We took the documents, we went through them, we said, ‘Is this easy to understand? Are the pictures okay? Do they make sense? Is the text too long? Are there easy words?’ We’re making sure that everything’s as accessible as possible. Because if we’re putting something up on our website, that’s our reputation.”

She recognises that the audience has different needs and preferences. “There are 1.5 million people living with a learning disability in the UK,” Ciara says. “I’m only one person. But if I work with lots of different people, we can make sure it fits everybody.”

“That group has been so powerful, they’ve really helped make a change. Now Mencap are thinking about how they use them in the future, which is fantastic.”

A clear voice for the sector

For Edel, clarity and collaboration are essential in how the sector speaks for itself and those it supports. “I don’t think the charitable sector has one voice, particularly in England,” she argues.

She compares it with her years working in Scotland, where “the third sector did have a voice, did have a seat at the table. Whereas I think we have so many trade associations, representative bodies... COVID has exposed this: we’re all speaking to the same people, trying to lobby and change things, and we’re all tripping over each other.”

How does she square that with the need to recognise the diversity of the sector, which has many different opinions and points of view?

“If I knew the one-sentence answer to that, I’d probably be a very rich woman! There are so many wonderful community and charitable organisations, that provide that vehicle for their particular issue or group of people’s voice to be heard. You don’t want to lose that. But I’m thinking more of being a part of a national response. I’m thinking more strategically when I’m thinking about one voice for the sector.”

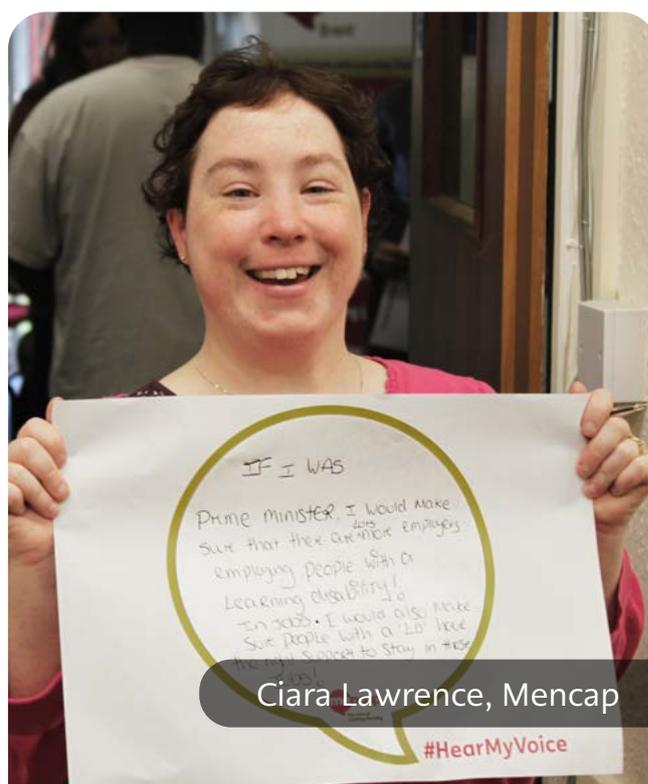
“We’ve been asked to be part of lots of meetings and forums and task groups. They’ve all been relevant and important, and yet when you go to the meeting, it’s all the same faces you see around the table. It’s a very crowded space.” She wonders how the charitable sector can become an equal partner in determining a national crisis response, in the way that the NHS, local authorities, and the government work together at that strategic level.

Vision and values

Edel also looks for another kind of clarity. “A clear purpose - a vision and a set of values. When you strip away everything else, that’s what holds you steady when you’re responding to a crisis.” Mencap began work on a new strategy at the start of 2020, before the pandemic. COVID-19 has “accelerated all that thinking.”

What is the vision? “For the UK to be the best place to live a happy and healthy life if you have a learning disability.” Mencap is working to “listen to, be genuinely led by people with a learning disability”, and “taking a much more community and partnership focused approach to the way that we do things in the future.” That means recognising that partner organisations will sometimes be “better placed to deliver the impact we want to see.”

She’s keen to reduce complexity, in “the way charities are governed and operate, the way we attract funding, the way we measure impact – there’s a lot of inefficiency.” During the pandemic, “we’ve all demonstrated that we can work in a different way. And sometimes I think we overcomplicate things.”



“For me, it’s really important that people **meet people with a learning disability** and actually talk to them, get to know them, hear their stories. That makes a powerful change.”

Ciara Lawrence, Mencap

She's looking for "the type of culture that allows for agility in decision making [...] so that the decisions that need to be taken in that instant can be taken by people who are best placed to make them – so stripping out a lot of layers of hierarchy and bureaucracy."

And for Mencap in particular, social care reform is a priority, "at all strategic levels. If we get to the end of this crisis and haven't taken an opportunity to value the social care profession, to see it as a sector that should be invested in, not as one that's a drain on public finances, then we should be ashamed of ourselves."

In 2020/21, Mencap produced **69 easy read guides** on everything from the latest government guidance to mental health and wellbeing.

Its COVID-19 information hub received **30,660 unique visitors**, while the online community more than doubled in size, from 1,668 users to 4,278.

Value the experts

Ciara points out that people with a learning disability have valuable insights to contribute. "They can tell you their experiences from their own mouth. And it helps when they speak up."

"For me, it's really important that people meet people with a learning disability and actually talk to them, get to know them, hear their stories. That makes a powerful change."

As well as recognising the experiences of people with a learning disability, this would open up skills and talents. "They have so much to give. They can give you training, they can give you expertise, they can give you advice." People now contact her through social media: "Now they know I'm there. I'm the expert in learning disability, I'm the expert in easy read, I can help them."

"So it's about, let's all work together. Come to people with a learning disability, talk to us, meet us. And they'll learn from our experience what they need to do to make things better."

The story continues

An Easy Read version of this page is available [online here](#). It can also be downloaded as a PDF: [Mencap Easy Read](#) (PDF 978 KB)



[mencap.org.uk](https://www.mencap.org.uk)



Turn2us

A conversation with Thomas Lawson



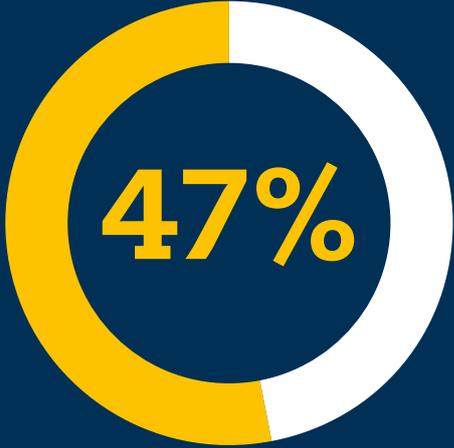
Thomas Lawson is chief executive of **Turn2us**, a national charity providing practical help to people who are struggling financially. Across the conversation, he highlights the importance of coproduction, diversity and inclusion. For him, these are tightly connected: bringing them together will “not only profoundly improve our impact, but also profoundly improve our legitimacy for influence.”

What the pandemic revealed

In the crisis, Thomas saw “community after community, street by street almost, setting up WhatsApp groups, and demonstrating the kind of community action that our sector is always hopeful for.” He points to high streets, “where shop staff were going way beyond their role to support local people. I think our sector has both grown from and contributes to that mindset.”

“The sector must think much more broadly about its partners.”

Thomas Lawson, Turn2us



47%

People living in a family with a disabled family member experience financial hardship.

He wants community organisations to do more to connect to action on the ground. If the best intelligence and connections are often hyperlocal, how can the sector “localise our activity even further? How can we sincerely and meaningfully value the wealth of hyperlocal organisations, instead of seeing them as a partner in the commissioning process?”

He praises the sector’s speed in adapting to lockdown and rethinking their services. Face to face training organisations discovered “new ways to achieve impact that they wouldn’t have been able to achieve in the room. The ingenuity of people has been very, very strong, and we should feel very proud of that.”

But online work can still divide “the digital haves and have nots”. Addressing that must be a priority – even though, he acknowledges, “our sector is very poor digitally. We tend to be behind on that.”

Holding ourselves to account

The wide differences in health and economic impacts of the pandemic, alongside the death of George Floyd and the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, have brought inequality into sharp relief. “The boards of the largest one hundred charities are less diverse than the FTSE 100 boards,” Thomas points out. “We have a sector that is not representative of the people for whom our sector exists.”

He’s glad to see more attention to “institutional racism, white privilege, and systemic dysfunctions. Organisation after organisation after organisation has been holding itself to account, from funders to delivery partners. I think that is really important” – though he’s also impatient for that journey to go “much further and faster”.

He sees an urgent need for disabled voices. “47% of people who live in a family with a disabled family member experience financial hardship [...] Well, that’s a huge, significant design flaw in our economy and our social security system – and something about which we should feel deeply ashamed.

“So where are the voices of disabled people in leading disabled organisations? I used to work for Terrence Higgins Trust, which was largely led by and for people who were living with, dying from and being bereaved by HIV. Why is that not also the same for disabled charities?”

“It smashed my prejudices about what people with learning disabilities could and couldn’t do.”

Thomas Lawson, Turn2us

Thomas was a trustee for Heart n Soul, a learning disabled arts production charity. “There were people with learning disabilities on the board - and it was one of the most functional boards I’ve been on. It smashed my prejudices about what people with learning disabilities could and couldn’t do. So I think we need to begin to insist – and I think the Lottery should begin to insist - on coproduction from board level through to delivery through to design through to evaluation through to programme development.”

New and diverse partners

The disruption of the pandemic forced our society to make radical changes. “Whilst there is so much up in the air, there is an opportunity, and we should grasp it hard. There is some brilliant thinking available – the Better Way network, the Build Back Better movement. I think we should be led more and more by communities, and less and less by hierarchy.”

He praises partnership work but wants to take it further. “Often those partnerships are led by funding opportunities. But the sector is making a mistake if it thinks that it’s operating by itself.” Along with statutory services, he points to the work of companies, like the high street staff supporting their communities.

“The sector must think much more broadly about its partners, and not be snobby about with whom we work.” We should ask who achieves the best impact, not which sector they come from.

He questions the mechanisms of the sector. “Philanthropy is sometimes part of the problem. Instead of taxes, people can get tax relief on their donations. That includes Oxford University, public schools, the Royal Opera House. That tax does not go to the Treasury, it’s given as tax relief to those organisations. So to the very institutions that protect privilege, we are giving up tax that could be distributed to social services that we know are badly underfunded. So what is the structure of the way in which the sector works, the way in which it’s funded, that perpetuates the dysfunctional design of the economy and privilege?”

“We’re not even in a position to talk about problems of diverse boards in companies, because our boards are less diverse.”

Thomas Lawson, Turn2us



Rewiring our relationship with power

More generally, he argues, the sector must “rewire the way it works” on inequalities. “If we don’t respond significantly, then this sector is not in a position to hold the rest of society to account. We’re not even in a position to talk about problems of diverse boards in companies, because our boards are less diverse.”

That means being “hyperconscious” of power. “I think people have a tendency to think about power as if it is a pie – ‘if I give up some pie, I’ll have less pie’ - instead of understanding that if we share power, power grows.

“Obviously, I’m talking about white privilege. When I’m invited to speak on something, are there other diverse voices who are also being given a chance to speak? If they’re not, then I should not speak, and that space should go to someone else. By doing that, society gets healthier and there is more power for all of us. Be very conscious that [power] exists, let’s not pretend it doesn’t. Once we’re conscious of it, then we can work out how to behave.”

“We exist to serve the people for whom our organisations are set up, not for the staff, not for the board.”

Thomas Lawson, Turn2us



His final thought is a call for “ever increasing transparency. Around salaries, recruitment methods, so that people can always contest or challenge the way in which one of our charities has behaved. We exist to serve the people for whom our organisations are set up, not for the staff, not for the board.”

And that should run right through the sector. “We need to make ourselves more porous, more visible, more transparent.”

The story continues



turn2us.org.uk



Citizens UK

Citizens UK

A conversation with Matthew Bolton,
Salma Ravat and Fiona Tasker

Citizens UK teaches community organising skills to local people, working through 16 citizens' alliances in England and Wales. "Our mission is to build the capacity of people from disadvantaged areas to participate in public life," explains CEO Matthew Bolton. Their iron rule is "never do for others what they can do for themselves."



Getting comfortable with power

Finding and training local leaders helps them work together "to identify common problems, and to have the power and confidence and skills to tackle those issues," explains Matthew. "You need to have some power to make change [...] to understand how power is working, how decisions are made on the things you care about." But people can be nervous about power, particularly when they haven't had much of it in the past.

Local leader Fiona Tasker has faced “some really dark times” in her life. She was supported by Citizens UK member organisation **ReCoCo**, which offers peer-led mental health recovery, and now helps to look after their student group. At first, she thought Citizens UK’s leadership training wasn’t for her: “I prefer to be in the background.” But when the trainer said, “‘Being a leader is having followers,’ I knew I had two or three. If I was to go out to an event that was trying to make a difference, they would come with me. So the penny dropped that perhaps I was a leader.”

That realisation “gave me a bit more confidence and belief in myself,” and she joined Tyne & Wear Citizens’ mental health action team.

Citizens UK’s Living Wage campaign has won over **£1.3 billion**

of improved pay for low-paid workers.

Listening to the community

Listening campaigns are a key part of Citizens UK’s work, a way to identify and understand local people’s priorities. As people like Fiona come forward and grow in confidence, Citizens UK helps them work on campaigns that matter to them.

“You speak to the people you support, who are members of your organisation,” explains Salma Ravat, manager of homelessness charity **One Roof Leicester**. The focus is on hearing the other person’s story: their passions, motivations and concerns. It could be a local issue, like influencing a borough council over access to parks, or large-scale initiatives for social change. The Living Wage campaign was founded by Citizens UK in 2001 and has won over £1.3 billion of improved pay for low-paid workers.

At the start of the pandemic, they ran a rapid listening exercise to understand what was on people’s minds. “Because the listening campaign is so baked in to how we work, that kind of adaptation was just automatic [and] so relevant to the crisis we’re in,” Matthew explains.

In places “where we had been working for a while, and there were good relationships of trust between our members and our staff, it was an acceleration of activity.” They found that the living wage campaign chimed with care workers, “who were out in very difficult circumstances, without the right PPE, but still not being paid enough.” In new locations, or where there had been recent changes of key staff, “adapting rapidly to the changing issues was much, much more difficult.”

The pandemic brought new interest in community work, particularly the boom in mutual aid groups: “good motivations, lots of people, lots of energy,” Matthew says. “From our experience, unsurprisingly, the great majority of that has dissipated.” His solution would be to balance new voices and existing groups. “It’s so important that there are sustainable local associations and organisations that can keep the hard work going. If they’re able to be porous, and to welcome and connect to some of the new energy that comes and goes, then that will keep them fresh, and keep them effective.”

He mentions a primary school working with its local mosque, women’s centre and university, and argues that the pandemic helped awaken “something that’s already there: a drive to see schools as engines of social change in their area, as well as a place of learning and tests and exams. The potential for schools as hubs of civic activity and wider services is a massive opportunity for us all.”

33,000

new **pay rises** awarded since November 2020

20,000

going to **key workers** including more than

5,000

in **social care.**

Citizens UK’s work is place-based, but the pandemic encouraged looking at national networks as well as local connections. In England and Wales, 75 primary schools are members. “What have they got in common? What if we brought them together to talk about how they’re using organising to develop young people’s confidence, how the free school meals thing is affecting them. We’ve started to share learning across our network, by sector. That’s going to have a big long-term benefit.”

Salma agrees: “Pre COVID, we weren’t involved much at national Citizens level,” but has seen real benefit in taking part in national meetings, because “you realise that you’re not the only one facing those issues.

“You get that opportunity to find out how they’ve found a solution, how they’ve brought different members of the community together, how that action from the people it affects has had a lasting change,” says Salma. “For me, it’s really empowering. I just love the fact that it’s people and their stories being told, and it’s that that’s having the impact.”

Balancing responsiveness with focus

Matthew points out “one of the flip sides of the listening and responsiveness ethos – it’s important to prioritise.” Looking back, he’d have liked “to focus efforts on a few key areas”, rather than trying to do so many different things. And while Citizens UK is a big partnership of members, he thinks they could have done more to partner with outside organisations.

Flexibility improves response: organisations that “put people in the lead, that are able to listen and adapt, will be better placed as things change. But it is about financial resilience too.” Citizens UK was fortunate to have earned income streams from a diverse membership base, including mosques, churches, charities, and schools. They also received independent grant funding. And the two qualities work together: “the responsiveness and nimbleness, making sure we are tuning into how this crisis affects people from disadvantaged backgrounds” meant Citizens UK was “in a good place to receive funding and support.”

Crisis mode has got to stop

The risk of burnout is very real. “With the first lockdown, March to August, adrenaline, urgency, crisis meant that everyone worked at full pelt,” Matthew says. “We’re recognising now, that’s unsustainable.”

Listening to staff and volunteers, it was clear that “crisis mode has got to stop. We may still be in a crisis as a country, as a society, but you can’t carry on in crisis response mode as an organisation and as an employer.”

“You realise you’re not the only one facing those issues – there are people up and down the country with the same or very similar challenges.”

Salma Ravat, One Roof Leicester

Member organisations have mental health champions and are encouraged to link up with mental health trusts to inform their COVID response. Internally, the organisation has a wellbeing action plan, and employee assistance programmes include counselling.

They’ve offered practical help too, such as flexible working hours that allow staff to do school drop-offs or outdoor exercise in daylight. It’s important to recognise that “people are under quite different pressures. Those with kids are experiencing it very differently to those in house-shares or living on their own.”

Communication and listening are key. “You can create all sorts of positive initiatives, but actually it’s about the human beings, what they’re hearing, how they’re feeling.”

Modelling the right behaviours is essential. “What the director says in an organisation, and how they say it, does really count.” Matthew would normally start team meetings by praising the work and raising the energy. During the pandemic, he’s been “starting off with a little bit more vulnerability and slowness.” Feedback was enthusiastic, with new starters amazed to find staff wellbeing first on the agenda. “I think the more that those at the top give it airtime then everyone’s got permission to talk about it. It can flow from there.”

The story continues



citizensuk.org

What's next?

The pandemic doesn't have a full stop. Where perhaps we once hoped for a clear ending, it's become apparent that returning to normal will be gradual at best, as we face the pandemic's long-term effects.

Understanding what worked in the crisis can help to inform this building back and recovery. While Covid-19 has highlighted existing problems, the response has suggested new ways of tackling them. Under huge pressure, different approaches have proved their worth, from hyperlocal working to new constellations of partnership and collaboration, and the vital importance of more diverse voices in decision-making.

Looking beyond the pandemic, we'll continue to share and celebrate evidence and learning from our funding, demonstrating our grant holders' impact and continuing to promote their voices. We are proud to share the difference our funding makes and to show how our work helps to unite and level opportunity in communities across the UK.

You can follow our progress at:
tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights

If you have a great idea that will support your community, we're here for you. Find out more about how to apply for funding at:
tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/thinking-of-applying-for-funding

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