

Spotlight Findings Paper 4

Beneficiary experiences during the pandemic

Evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund

September 2021

The Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) is a funding programme supported by a grant of £187 million from Government, distributed by The National Lottery Community Fund, to help Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations in England respond to the COVID-19 crisis and increase community support to people affected by the pandemic. Ipsos MORI and partners have evaluated the programme. This is one of a series of papers which focus in depth on themes that have emerged from the evaluation.

Over 8,000 organisations received grants from the CCSF, and they used the funding so that they could continue supporting people and communities (the beneficiaries) throughout the pandemic. Extrapolated results from a survey with grantholders estimated that the CCSF helped reach an estimated **6.58 million beneficiaries**¹. This paper discusses the experiences of some of them based on qualitative interviews with beneficiaries.

Grantholders used the funding in a variety of ways. For example, this ranged in terms of the types of people they supported, whether they delivered activities face-to-face or virtually or as

one-to-one or group sessions, and the focus or content of the support. Despite these various approaches, there were **common themes** when speaking with people about their **experiences of CCSF-funded activities**. This paper highlights six key messages that focus on the **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on them, their **interactions with grantholders**, and the **difference this made** for them.

1. Continuity of support was even more important in the context of uncertainty

Only a small proportion (5%) of grantholders said that they would have delivered a similar level of services as prior to the pandemic without the CCSF grant. In some cases, grantholders reported that the funding prevented them from closing or stopping services. The fact that they remained open and operational sometimes **set them apart in their community when other local organisations had to close**.

Acknowledging this context, beneficiaries who were involved with grantholders prior to the pandemic were especially grateful that they were able to continue engaging with the grantholder despite the circumstances. Even when grantholders had to adapt their support to comply with guidance and restrictions,

¹ This figure may include some double counting as individual beneficiaries may have been supported by more than one grantholder.

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beneficiaries described how it was **helpful to continue interacting with familiar staff, volunteers or other beneficiaries**. For example, groups of people were brought together in virtual environments, such as on **Zoom or WhatsApp**, instead of face-to-face. This transition was facilitated when groups were already established because people felt comfortable and often looked forward to seeing friends or familiar faces. The continuity of support helped people **maintain part of their normal routine from before the pandemic**.



Just being able to stay in touch with everyone and keep going through it and not just stopping it. Even though we weren't coming in, we were still doing what we'd normally do, just over Zoom.



Beneficiary

For those new to grantholders, the support also became a **reliable part of their week**. Although it was often a relatively short amount of time, people talked about looking forward to, for example, joining online sessions or the delivery driver arriving with a food shop. Given that there were **many unknowns** at the time, which often **heightened anxiety**, maintaining or developing a routine around the CCSF-funded support **brought consistency** for people.

For some people, **this continuity and consistency was critical to ensuring they benefited from the activities and support**. For example, regular sessions were needed to



I thought [the online sessions] were great, they did the best they could when they couldn't do the in-person sessions. [My child] has always had the same therapist and so that has worked really well for him. They've always been there and they've always done whatever they could to help.



Beneficiary

improve a health condition or people needed ongoing support with basic needs like food.

2. Support that was easy to access, non-judgmental and personalised enhanced beneficiaries' experiences

Regardless of the type of support grantholders provided, beneficiaries often mentioned several of the same features of the support that were meaningful to them. First, people appreciated when grantholders were **easy to contact or reach**. This helped people feel **more confident reaching out for support** when they needed it. This was potentially more critical during the pandemic when other services were closed or became harder to reach due to changes in operating hours or services.



It meant that we had approachable support, support that was easy to approach and easy to access. I guess simple is the word. Not complicated when there's enough complicated things going on.



Beneficiary

Second, beneficiaries often **described staff and volunteers as approachable and friendly**. This was important for both those that were existing beneficiaries and new to the grantholder. Several beneficiaries also emphasised that they liked how **support was non-judgmental** and there was an **open, trusting environment** between them and staff, volunteers and other beneficiaries. This was especially important for beneficiaries who were struggling with their mental health, which was also affected by the social, financial and other implications of the pandemic.

Finally, beneficiaries were particularly positive about their experiences when they felt it had been **tailored to meet their needs**. This personalised experience varied depending on the type of support provided by the grantholder. For example, grantholders delivering food,

wellbeing or activity parcels **asked beneficiaries what they needed**, or they provided items such as **age-appropriate activities for their children** to help parents with home-schooling. Other grantholders offered **training and skills development opportunities** that aligned with people's longer-term goals. This was common when beneficiaries worked one-to-one or as a family with grantholders.



It felt different to any form of support I'd had before. It was definitely the most non-judgemental support, and it just felt welcoming and calm. It was different to what I'd experienced ... everything was tailored around me so that I got the best out of it.



Beneficiary

3. Face-to-face support remained important for some people and COVID-19 safety measures helped put people at ease

A substantial minority of grantholders (40%) used the CCSF grant to adapt activities and support so that they could **continue to happen face-to-face**. For example, grantholders invested in **personal protective equipment (PPE)** for staff and volunteers and/or **signage for their premises** about how to stay safe and follow COVID-19 safety guidance.

Some beneficiaries interviewed had face-to-face contact with grantholder staff, volunteers or other beneficiaries. This included **doorstep deliveries** and **outdoor activities** when lockdown restrictions eased and allowed small, socially distanced groups outside.

People who went to a grantholder's premises and received in-person support felt confident that they **had followed guidance to make** it COVID-safe. For example, the key measures included social distancing and limiting the number of people inside, using PPE such as masks, adding sanitising stations, and more. Some people preferred face-to-face support where available because they **found virtual support**

challenging, and these safety measures helped them feel safe.



They took [COVID-safety] extremely seriously. It was incredibly clean, we were all obviously masked up and [used] hand gel. It felt very safe.



Beneficiary

4. The social benefits of support were significant

One of the most common benefits mentioned repeatedly by people involved in CCSF-funded activities was that they had **more social contact** than they otherwise would have during the pandemic. Many people felt **increasingly isolated during the lockdowns**, especially those who were already experiencing some loneliness prior to the pandemic – for example, some older people or new mums. **Shielding** and **less contact with normal local support networks** exacerbated these challenges.

While some grantholders actively sought to reduce loneliness as part of their support, many others appeared to meet this need indirectly. For example, food delivery staff and volunteers often stopped to speak with people on their doorsteps and this was sometimes **one of the few social encounters people had in their week**. The regularity (e.g. every week) gave people something to look forward to as well.

People also **benefited from virtual social contact** through regular online sessions– for example, shifting crafting, fitness or wellness sessions online delivered via Zoom. Some grantholders also created **messaging groups** that **enabled people to continue communicating outside the core delivery sessions**. By remaining in contact, people described feeling less lonely. Many enjoyed being able to **talk to others about how they were feeling** and relate to their **collective experiences**. It helped **people feel part of a**

community despite not being physically together.

“

It felt still, although you couldn't meet anybody, you couldn't see anybody, you were still part of something.

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Beneficiary

5. Wellbeing benefits ranged from being mood-lifting to life-changing

In interviews, many people talked about how their involvement with CCSF grantholders during the pandemic supported their mental health and wellbeing. Some people found **comfort in knowing the staff or volunteers were available to help**. The regular activities gave people something to look forward to and helped them stay connected. Some said this **helped lift their mood and gave them a positive distraction from the pandemic**.

“

[The organisation] hadn't forgotten about us, the group would happen again and this was just to keep us going until [the face-to-face delivery] restarts. And keeping us going in a nice way, an enjoyable group way. ... It definitely gave us something to distract you from the doom and gloom of the pandemic.

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Beneficiary

For some people interviewed, the mental health benefits were more significant. They talked about being in very difficult situations before their support from the grantholder – for example, some were **homeless, struggling with bereavement or severe mental health problems**, including anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. Some beneficiaries described their support as **life-changing or even life-saving because of the positive impact it had on their mental health**.

“

I went from being so anxious and depressed that I couldn't really function – I could barely look people in the eyes, I didn't really even know how to speak fluently for a time – but now I walk to work confidently, I can talk to people, I can liaise with clients, I'm happy to chat to people I've never met before, which is how I used to be several years ago.

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Beneficiary

The support also sometimes acted as a catalyst that helped people to refocus their attention on longer-term goals. For example, one grantholder supported young people who were interested in the music business. In addition to giving them pastoral care and support for their mental health and wellbeing, the beneficiaries described their opportunities to **develop their employment skills** – ranging from technical to client-management. This helped them feel more **confident about their future** despite the pandemic because they were being equipped with tools and experiences that would continue to be relevant for future opportunities.

“

It's been instrumental in me changing my life. Like, now I have a way clearer sense of direction and the support has also meant that I could develop skills and become more competent in a lot of the areas.

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Beneficiary

6. Beneficiaries may not have been able to receive similar support elsewhere

When asked whether people were aware of other support similar to the grantholder in the local area, most could not think of examples. In some cases, the support appeared to be unique or **filled gaps that other services did not provide during the pandemic**. As such, people often felt that they would not have received similar support without the grantholder – which

emphasises the **importance that the CCSF had for grantholders remaining operational and/or adapting their services to continue delivering support.**

Furthermore, for people who were already existing beneficiaries of grantholders, they were **wary of the challenges associated with finding support elsewhere.** This was because they were familiar with the grantholders, its staff and/or volunteers, and they knew the type of support they offered and what worked best for them. If the grantholder had closed or stopped delivering support during the pandemic, some **people said they would have found it challenging to find other support that suited their needs.** Although it is not possible to know what would have happened, some beneficiaries thought they **would have struggled for longer and/or be in a worse place now.**



It would definitely have been harder to get support. I don't know if I would feel as comfortable accessing support from other organisations because I just don't know them as well. [The grantholder] definitely made a huge difference.



Beneficiary

Key takeaways

Although the qualitative research included a relatively small number of interviews with beneficiaries involved in CCSF-funded activities, people provided detailed examples of their experience with grantholders and what difference this made to them. While there were many useful findings, this paper explored six key themes that emerged based on the experiences of people supported during by grantholders the pandemic. These messages were:

1. Continuity of support was even more important in the context of uncertainty.

2. Support that was easy to access, non-judgmental and personalised enhanced beneficiaries' experiences.
3. Face-to-face support remained important for some people and COVID-19 safety measures helped put people at ease.
4. The social benefits of support were significant.
5. Wellbeing benefits ranged from being mood-lifting to life-changing.
6. Beneficiaries may not have been able to receive similar support elsewhere.

Evidence sources:

Grantholder survey: Ipsos MORI conducted an online survey with grantholders that received funding from the CCSF. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2020 and April 2021 and a total of 6,712 grantholders responded.

Findings from the grantholder survey were extrapolated to estimate the overall figures among all grantholders. This assumes that the findings among those who did not respond to the survey would have been replicated proportionally among those grantholders that did respond to the survey. Numeric data presented in this paper represents the extrapolated data.

Qualitative interviews: Ipsos MORI, NPC and TIHR conducted a total of 266 depth interviews with grantholders, and a further 33 case studies, including interviews with 72 staff members, 25 deliver partners, 28 volunteers, and 49 beneficiaries.

You can read more evaluation findings at the following weblink:

<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-grantholder-evaluation>