CCSF Learning Report

Building connections and trust in a crisis

October 2021

The Learning Strand of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) evaluation was a new way for the National Lottery Community Fund (the Fund) to create, share and facilitate learning from a major programme of funding for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations during a crisis. It was managed by Ipsos MORI and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR).

Centred around an online Learning Hub, the Learning Strand aimed to create opportunities for CCSF and National Lottery emergency grantholders (referred to in this report as 'grantholders') to build new connections and share learning about their experience of working through the COVID-19 crisis. Between October 2020 and July 2021, 3,244 members signed up, representing one fifth of eligible grantholder organisations (2,714, 20%).

As part of the Learning Strand, TIHR and Ipsos MORI coordinated a range of activities and outputs. Many were developed with input from grantholders: online discussions, information and learning exchanges, as well as longer-term thematic groups.

This Learning Report shares what we learnt from grantholders about **maintaining and building connections based on trust during a pandemic** that is relevant for wider organisations in the future.

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The pandemic highlighted **the role of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations as trusted sources of information and links** to the communities they support (for example, to share public health information).

The pandemic also changed how CCSF grantholders **connected to their communities**:

- Many VCS organisations **moved some or all their activities online** during the pandemic so they could continue to support people while face to face activities were restricted.
- The drive to meet new and emerging needs in communities also emphasised the **importance of being flexible and responsive** and **building the right partnerships**.

Grantholders found the move to delivering online services provided benefits for their work and many intend to keep delivering support online in the future. They also wanted to maintain and foster the connections they had built during the pandemic and continue the new ways they built connections and trust in their communities.

In this Learning Report we share insights from grantholders about **how to maintain and build connections based on trust**.

We define 'connections' as how people build relationships – with organisations, colleagues, individuals or the people they support. 'Trust' in this context refers to a belief that a relationship or service is reliable, dependable and safe.

Staying connected to people while working online

The CCSF evaluation found that most grantholders (58%) adapted face-to-face activities and support to deliver online during the pandemic.[i]

> "Maintaining an online presence during the pandemic was important because our beneficiaries are all in the shielding group, but we had to keep them engaged for their mental health and to prevent isolation." CCSF Grantholder

Grantholders identified benefits to online delivery:

- Delivering online allowed some staff members to have more frequent one-to-one conversations with beneficiaries and to see them in their own homes. This helped staff to **create deeper connections**.
- Online activities were **easier for some people to access** compared to face to face activities. For example, some people with caring responsibilities and those who needed to travel but for whom public transport, or the cost of travel, was a barrier were able to access activities more easily online.

As a result, many grantholders planned to continue to deliver some services online.

> "We work with families of disabled children and found in lockdown we almost doubled the number of parents attending training [...] via Zoom. We plan to now continue this for the foreseeable future as it means both parents can attend, no childcare issues and low cost for us as we don't have to book out a venue." CCSF Grantholder

However, grantholders also identified barriers to delivering support effectively online:

- Some people were **unable to join** online activities because they **lacked the equipment, access to the internet**) or digital skills.
- Others were reluctant to access activities online as they **lacked confidence**, had **negative experiences online**, or **did not value online communication**.
- Grantholders highlighted how **technology can sometimes "go wrong"**, for example cutting off sessions before they are due to finish. This was **disruptive and caused frustration** for both staff and beneficiaries.
- Grantholders described how **building relationships with vulnerable people can be harder online**. For example, people can choose to abruptly end a conversation by hanging up, and technology can fail. This made it more difficult for staff and volunteers to build a rapport with people. Many grantholders felt that face to face delivery was better able to facilitate meaningful connections.

> "We have learned that parents need time to gain the courage to turn their camera on; speak in front of others online and get used to using tech such as Teams and Zoom. All good learning which has certainly helped us improve as practitioners." CCSF Grantholder

Many grantholders found that a **combination of 'blended' online and offline activities was therefore more appropriate**. Some grantholders also found that **blended delivery helped tackle the fatigue** experienced by staff, volunteers and beneficiaries who were spending much more time online.

A combination of online and offline delivery is likely to remain. Where this adequately balances the needs of staff, volunteers and the wider community, this model can benefit both VCS organisations and the people they help.

Ideas for adapting activities for an online format

- **Make sure staff, volunteers and beneficiaries have suitable digital equipment**. Find ways to provide people with laptops, mobile phones or tablets and internet data so that they can take part. For example, some grantholders used organisations that donated new or refurbished items.
- Design sessions to **accommodate different needs.** For example, some technology has the option to add an interpreter feature that can be used for sign language. Make use of keyboard shortcuts to mute/ unmute microphones during a session to make it easier for attendees to hear the speakers.

- **Reduce the number of attendees** to allow staff to respond to individual needs. **Smaller groups can help beneficiaries** who find it difficult to concentrate and those who benefit from more one-to-one personal interaction.

> **CCSF project example: Moving services online**
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> *"Most people we work with are disadvantaged with language barriers, have a lack of understanding of the UK system and no knowledge of health information and government strategy. The lockdown […] caused them to become more vulnerable and […] living in stressful situations.*
>
> *Moreover, most clients are digitally excluded with no IT skills and it is very difficult for many […] to participate in all our online work. Thanks to Good Things Foundation, DeviceDotNow has donated some tablets and mobile devices that we have distributed to [those] most in need. But there is still a high need for more devices for those digitally excluded hard to reach clients.*
>
> *In this pandemic crisis, our clients [need] more support and have found it difficult to share experiences without digital devices. So sometimes we share through telephone conversations, but that puts more pressure on the organisation that has limited manpower and resources."*
>
> **Dahabo Isse, CEO/ Community Support Worker, The Dadihiye Somali Organisation**

Ideas for building digital skills

- **Provide support that is accessible and jargon-free.** Organising social events online can boost people's skills and confidence to use online technology in other ways.
- Offer appropriate **digital inclusion training.** For example, one grantholder partnered with a local housing association to provide digital skills training to older people. Other grantholders involved young people to provide digital skills training for older people.
- Include **opportunities for people to be active and creative online,** through playing with objects, images, sounds and storytelling. Taking a more interactive approach can help people relate to each other and build trusting relationships.

Ideas for keeping people safe online

- **Restrict access**, by keeping links to video meetings private and introducing a password to access online meetings. Check before starting the session that all those present have been invited.
- **Look out for potential issues in people's homes**. Shadows in the background may be a sign that someone else is listening in. Watch how people are contributing (or not) in group sessions and be alert to carers who may be present.

Ideas for blending online and offline activities

- **Identify different ways to continue to communicate with people offline**, such as using local radio or paper newsletters.

- **Develop a buddy system** where volunteers are matched with someone who is isolated. Matching people can help to accommodate individual needs (such as daily, weekly or monthly contact, and contact by email, text or phone call).

Using local connections to meet local needs

During the pandemic, many smaller and grassroots VCS organisations used their connections and trusted status within their communities to:

- identify what people needed, and rapidly adjust their services to meet emerging urgent needs, and
- share information in a way people could understand and trust, keeping communities informed with reliable, targeted and accessible information.

The role of grantholders during the COVID-19 response highlighted the **value of local VCS organisations embedded in communities**.

Grantholders felt that the approaches they developed to sharing information with communities would continue to be useful beyond the pandemic. They hoped the important role played by local organisations during the pandemic would be recognised and built on.

However, some grantholders worried that the **work small organisations have done during the pandemic would be forgotten** after the immediate crisis. This would mean the knowledge and connections developed would no longer be valued, particularly by the public sector. They felt this would limit efforts to tackle health and social inequalities in local areas.

Ideas for being responsive to local needs

- **Use existing relationships in the community** to reach out and listen to what people's needs are and how they might be changing. For example, one grantholder realised that people they usually helped were going hungry and set up a kitchen to prepare meals.

> "[We looked to] adapt delivery based on community need, not what we or anyone else thinks is a good idea. Knocking on doors, talking to people outdoors and being aware of where things are challenging helped us adapt to meet needs quickly." Grantholder

- Use your knowledge of the people you work with to **think ahead to the services people might need in the near future** and prepare for this.[ii]

Ideas for becoming a trusted source of information

- **Talk to people** in the local community to understand what **information people find confusing** and where inaccurate information is being circulated. This can help you to adapt information so that it addresses people's needs and concerns.
- **Tap into networks with local public sector organisations** (such as local authorities, the police and Clinical Commissioning Groups) to **stay up to date** and make sure the information you share with people is accurate.

Building strong and lasting partnerships with other organisations

During the COVID-19 pandemic, **organisations quickly mobilised existing relationships and built new partnerships to extend their reach** and ensure their communities were supported.

> "We are the ones who have been adaptable […] bringing large and small organisations together […] showing how networks can work together effectively, connecting hundreds of people with food banks, connecting into other networks" CCSF Grantholder

Grantholders reflected that the **shared purpose of supporting communities in a crisis made both statutory and VCS organisations more open to working together.**

> "There is compassion among practitioner groups and I'm finding that people are open to sharing resources and collaborating [and] pulling together." CCSF Grantholder

Grantholders shared how improved relationships - with other VCS, public and private sector organisations – meant they were better able to respond to changing circumstances, identify more people in need, share resources and work sustainably. They also felt that **being connected to networks reduced duplication of work and made projects more sustainable.** This led to grantholders wanting to maintain these partnerships in the future.

Grantholders were actively developing partnerships in their local areas and beyond. These partnerships helped grantholders create networks of delivery and identify ways to strategically influence public services and funders. They hoped that these new **relationships with public sector organisations would put VCS organisations in a better position to influence policies and practices locally**, by giving them a 'chair at the table' when decisions are made. Grantholders felt this would improve local strategies and make them more relevant.

However, grantholders highlighted the following barriers to partnership working:

- **Forming partnerships online:** some grantholders found it challenging to form trusting partnerships online. They said it easier to initiate relationships with others face to face, which they felt could then be sustained online.
- **Imbalanced relationships:** grantholders found collaborative working challenging where they felt the relationships were not based on understanding and mutual respect. For example, where some partners were paid for their time to attend meetings whereas others were not, or where one organisation was perceived to have more power due to their size or control of resources.
- **Reliance on insecure or short-term funding**: grantholders said partners could be sceptical about engaging in a partnership without evidence that this would be sustainable or worthwhile in the longer-term.

Ideas for building strong and lasting partnerships

- **Create a trusting working environment**: through being honest, open and brave enough to constructively challenge one another; and taking the time to think together about how services can be delivered in partnership and resources shared.
- **Develop a collaborative mindset** by being open to coming up with new ways of working (particularly where partners think differently and might struggle to agree based on existing working practices). This can allow common ground to emerge.
- Where partners have different systems and procedures, **agreeing shared principles and common purpose** that guides the collaboration (such as promoting beneficiary wellbeing) can help build trust. This helps to provide a solid foundation for partnership working.
- **Reflect on what each organisation brings to a partnership** before working together. It is important to communicate your unique assets and skills. This can promote understanding and respect between partners.
- **Find ways to show you are committed to working with others**, as this helps build trust with potential partners. For example, having long-term funding in place will give others confidence when they want to partner with you. It is also worth looking for opportunities to apply for funding together with other organisations.

"You have to demonstrate that you're going to be there through thick and thin." CSCF Grantholder

Key takeaways

Without the commitment and local connections that VCS organisations used to reach out to the people during the pandemic, it is likely that more people would have suffered more severely.

Grantholders were deeply aware of their crucial role during the pandemic and keen to use this increased confidence to affect wider and longer-term change. Public sector organisations

and grant funders have a vital role to play to ensure the value of VCS organisations is recognised and they are able to establish themselves in the post-pandemic landscape.

By working closely together, VCS organisations, funders and the public sector can make use of the lessons learnt from the pandemic to address inequality. Below we outline our key takeaways for each group.

For VCS organisations

- VCS organisations should embed new ways of working digitally, taking an active role in the digital transformation process that has been accelerated by the pandemic. They should use what they learnt during the pandemic to develop inclusive and hybrid ways of working, including a combination of online and offline delivery. To do so, organisations will need to continue to re-think how they deliver their work, starting from understanding the needs and strengths of the people they support.
- VCS organisations should nourish and grow the local relationships they have built during the pandemic, in order to provide better services and increase their reach.
- VCS organisations should see their expertise as strategically important and build on the relationships they have formed with local services to influence strategic planning and decision-making that affects their communities.

For wider stakeholders

- Funders should help VCS organisations invest in blended delivery approaches and share good practice about delivering both online and face to face.
- Funders should encourage VCS organisations to build local partnerships and make resources available for them to do so.
- Public sector organisations should see VCS organisations' connections with communities and the trusting relationships they have fostered as an important asset. They should actively involve VCS organisations when planning future public services, as well as planning for a future crisis.

Further information

Other learning reports in this series include:

- Creating a culture of wellbeing to support staff and volunteers
- How the pandemic shaped volunteering: learning for the future
- Building organisational resilience for the future

You can find more information about the CCSF evaluation on [The National Lottery Community Fund's website](#).[iii]

Endnotes

[i] These findings are from an online survey conducted with CCSF grantholders in the sixth month of their grant, as part of the CCSF evaluation. 6,712 responses were received.

[ii] For more information about planning for the future, read the learning report on "Building organisational resilience for the future", available at: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-grantholder-evaluation

[iii] Wider learning from the CCSF evaluation is available at: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-grantholder-evaluation