



# CCSF Learning Report

## Creating a culture of wellbeing to support staff and volunteers

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 grantholder organisations invited to take part (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 **supporting staff and volunteer wellbeing** that is relevant for wider organisations in the future.

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## Staff and volunteer wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic

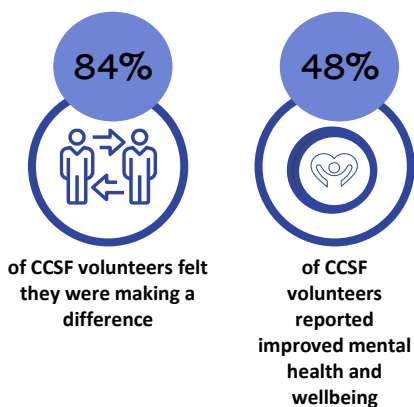
The pressures faced by Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on staff and volunteer wellbeing.<sup>i</sup> In this report, we have defined ‘wellbeing’ as relating to how people feel and function, both on a personal and a social level, as well as how they evaluate their lives as a whole. We have used the term ‘volunteer’ to describe people who gave their time and skills without being paid, both on a formal and an informal basis.

Pressures occurred as a result of changes to working practices and service delivery, shifting and increasing demand for support, and the need to adapt services in line with government guidance and regulations. A survey conducted by Third Sector showed that more than nine in ten charity workers had felt stress, overwhelm or burnout in 2020.<sup>ii</sup>

CCSF grantholders developed **new ways to support staff and volunteer wellbeing** in response to the challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. This report brings together this learning, with a focus on what will be relevant for VCS organisations in future. In some cases, the wellbeing support needed by staff or volunteers differed due to their varied roles and motivations. In this report, we have attempted to make it clear where learning relates specifically to staff or to volunteers and where it is relevant to both.

For many grantholders, **the pandemic highlighted that staff and volunteers were their organisations’ most important asset**. Grantholders shared how looking after staff and volunteer wellbeing increased satisfaction and engagement in their respective roles. Grantholders saw this as improving their organisation’s effectiveness and resilience in the face of challenges. Conversely, where wellbeing was not prioritised, grantholders emphasised the risk of staff burnout as well as trauma for those supporting people in difficult situations.<sup>iii</sup> This was identified as a risk in particular when staff worked from home without the immediate support from colleagues in the workplace. For these reasons, **grantholders saw promoting staff and volunteer wellbeing as a key part of their future strategy**.

“The wellbeing of the people we support depends on our wellbeing.” CCSF Grantholder



For some people, **working and volunteering for VCS organisations had a positive effect on their wellbeing**. Staff and volunteers felt they were doing purposeful work and saw the difference they made to people’s lives. This was also reflected in findings from the overall CCSF evaluation, which showed that half (48%) of volunteers reported improved mental health and wellbeing because of their experience of volunteering, while most (84%) felt they were making a difference.<sup>iv</sup>

“Staff have thrived in the most difficult circumstances and they have made a fundamental difference to the people we have supported which I think has inspired and motivated and energised all of us.” CCSF Grantholder

## Creating a culture of wellbeing

Many grantholders reflected that **creating a wider ‘wellbeing culture’ (through making wellbeing a consideration at all levels of an organisation)** was **more effective than holding one-off events** to promote wellbeing. Key features of creating a wellbeing culture identified by grantholders include:

- **Taking a person-centred approach**, recognising that every individual has unique needs and that different approaches to supporting wellbeing work for different people. Needs may also differ for senior staff - some leaders struggled to model self-care because of the pressures they were under to ensure the smooth running of their organisation.
- **Being flexible and responsive**, acknowledging that the changing context and personal circumstances of staff and volunteers mean that the approach to supporting wellbeing will need to adapt.
- **Bringing everyone on board** by communicating effectively and giving staff and volunteers a say.
- **Leading by example** to overcome any stigma about staff and volunteers looking after their wellbeing and mental health. By demonstrating ways to look after their wellbeing, leaders can encourage others to do the same.

The sections below explore what we learnt from grantholders about how to promote a culture of wellbeing in their organisation.

### Ideas for promoting a person-centred approach to supporting wellbeing

- **Carry out surveys with staff and volunteers** to understand their wellbeing needs, such as levels of stress, and to gather feedback on activities that they would find helpful to support their wellbeing.
- **Undertake wellbeing assessments** as part of regular check-ins and one to one meetings to make managers aware of any emerging or new needs.

### Ideas for being flexible and responsive to the wellbeing needs of staff and volunteers

- **Be transparent** with staff and volunteers about any organisational decisions or changes, so that these do not come as a surprise. Examples from grantholders about ways to keep **staff and volunteers informed** included regular newsletters update meetings. For example, one organisation implemented a ‘fiver’, where senior staff shared five things staff should be aware of. The meeting was recorded so that staff who were unable to attend could listen to the recording.

- **Be consistent wherever possible**, for example not cancelling or changing meetings at short notice.
- **Give staff a voice to raise issues** and let them speak about their concerns, such as through surveys or allocating time for this in meetings.
- **Give staff the autonomy to make decisions.** For example, one grantholder organised staff working groups to draw up proposals for new working practices. This helped staff feel involved and that their knowledge and experience was appreciated. Providing staff with options and giving them the opportunity to feed into decisions also helped people feel invested.

“What works for us is keeping to principles of everyone being involved and part of the decisions we make as we adapt to the changes. That way people feel included and invested. They have a stake in the decisions. It helps build resilience not resistance” CCSF Grantholder

### Ideas for how senior staff can lead by example

- **Sharing more about their personal lives and showing vulnerability** to encourage staff and volunteers to open up about their mental health and wellbeing needs and show that senior staff had wellbeing needs too. Examples from grantholders included sharing personal experiences in newsletters or in meetings.
- **Taking time to look after their mental health and wellbeing.** For example, taking time when feeling low or **to exercise during the working day** (such as going for a run or a walk) to re-energise or reflect on challenges.

### Working practices that promote staff and volunteer wellbeing

Many grantholders found that **the changes to working practices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had positive effects on staff wellbeing.** Working from home gave many staff members more flexibility and a greater sense of control over their work. Some grantholders used these changes as an opportunity to review their workplace policies and introduce new practices to give staff more choice about how they wanted work beyond the pandemic.

However, the move to **working from home also presented challenges** to wellbeing. Grantholders described **the difficulty of staying connected to staff and volunteers when there was no physical space to meet.** For many, remote working also **blurred the boundary between work and home.** This could increase stress levels for staff who felt the need to be constantly “on”. Working remotely also made it **harder to know when staff and volunteers needed support.**

The **blended model of working** - with staff working in the office and remotely at different times - also presented challenges. For example, not everyone’s home had appropriate spaces, for example for holding confidential conversations. This had safeguarding implications and also created additional stress for staff and volunteers who did not have a suitable space to work from. Depending on the type of work, people working from home may also be at greater risk of bringing the impact of difficult, or potentially traumatic, situations faced by the

people they support into the home. Ensuring people working in-person and remotely have the same opportunities to get involved and feel included to the same extent was also a challenge.

Grantholders also acknowledged **benefits of working from an office**, including more opportunities for collaboration, reflecting together as a team and providing informal support to one another. However, many staff were reluctant to return to the office full time due to the additional flexibility that working from home afforded. Therefore, **balancing staff and business needs**, including encouraging staff to come back to the office, was an ongoing challenge for grantholders.

#### CCSF project example: leaders supporting staff during the pandemic

“Hear what your team has to say, really listen and reflect it back to the team and also empower them to find solutions... Yes, we are accountable and responsible, but as leaders we do not have all the answers and it’s ok to be vulnerable sometimes and admit that and be totally honest. It’s really important for everyone to understand we [are] human, we are not machines.”

Lucy Brown, CCSF Grantholder and Disability Initiative CEO

Despite these challenges, many grantholders planned to **maintain flexible working policies**, including allowing their staff to work from home more in future. With this in mind, finding ways to replicate office-ways of working and ensure teams feel supported and connected with each other will remain relevant considerations for the future.

Below are some ideas from grantholders of working practices and activities that promote staff and volunteer wellbeing.

#### Ideas for working practices that promote staff and volunteer wellbeing

- Prioritise staff and volunteer wellbeing by making it part of **internal workplace policies** (for example, alongside health and safety).
- Where staff **work from home**, make sure this is **reflected in your policies** and ensure staff have an appropriate set-up to undertake their work.
- **Allow staff to adjust their workload** depending on their other responsibilities. For example, choosing their weekly targets, rather than having daily targets, to enable flexibility.
- Where possible, **introduce flexible working hours** and let staff adjust their hours as they see fit. For example, allow staff to take off hours during the day and catch-up in the evening, or to start earlier and finish earlier.

#### Ideas for activities to stay connected with staff and volunteers and support their wellbeing

- Train staff and volunteers as **‘wellbeing mentors’** to provide support to one another and discuss issues outside of supervision or line management structures.



- Use **small but thoughtful personal gestures** to show appreciation to staff and volunteers to make them feel valued and recognised for their work. Examples from grantholders included: personal messages from senior staff or trustees; giving small gifts such as flowers, chocolates, gift packs or home-cooked food; and publicly acknowledging contributions through online posts (such as on social media or on the organisation’s website).
- **Organise group walks together as a team**, to encourage staff and volunteers to spend more time together and less time in front of a computer.
- **Share positive news** with staff and volunteers to keep them motivated. Share achievements such as how many people have been supported and stories that showed the difference they made.

“My team get a real boost when they see the numbers of people using the service going up.”  
CCSF Grantholder

- **Make space for fun** through offering regular **recreational activities**. For example, some grantholders provided online yoga sessions for staff and volunteers. Others **adapted creative techniques** used with beneficiaries for staff and volunteers, such as encouraging people to explore their emotions through poetry and art.
- **Implement online social activities for staff and volunteers to meet and chat outside of work**. Examples from grantholders included coffee mornings, bingo, quiz nights and virtual challenges (such as a sunflower growing competition).

“We need to have some more spaces for fun, not work related.” CCSF Grantholder

### Ideas supporting the wellbeing of senior staff

- **Share responsibility and accountability for key decisions among a senior leadership team**, to help senior staff avoid isolation or feeling overburdened by responsibility. Trustees can also provide support and guidance to senior staff.
- **Connect with other leaders** to share experiences, advice and provide reassurance.

### Ideas to promote teamwork when working remotely

- Encourage staff working remotely to **replicate a virtual office by using video conference software running in the background** while they are working, to promote a sense of community and help people feel less isolated.
- **Arrange “working walks”** to encourage staff to be outside while on a call with another person. Others had **“walking meetings”** to meet up and see each other face to face. While this was introduced due to COVID-19 restrictions, grantholders felt it could continue as more people work from home.
- **Hold regular online team meetings** to check in with staff about how they were feeling. One organisation implemented ‘10 at 10’ - a 10-minute meeting at 10am - structured around a minute of quiet reflection for all, then splitting staff into pairs followed by

groups of four. This helped staff speak about how they were feeling and raise any issues or needs they may have. The structure of pairs and groups gave everyone time to speak, while not putting the spotlight on any one individual.

- **Hold regular check ins to see how volunteers were doing and if they needed any support.** Grantholders made sure they used technology that volunteers felt comfortable with (such as telephone calls, emails or messaging apps). Some gave volunteers phones to stay in touch with them.

### *CCSF project example: showing appreciation to staff*

“Our chairman appreciates the staff performance by thanking and inspiring. Sometimes he offers motivational treats for any successful event. This practice makes a huge difference to be more inspired, make the staff to feel honoured and it make them more dedicated to their role. We congratulate the success of staff on our team WhatsApp group, also recognize contribution of staff at the Annual General meeting with awards and vouchers. The appreciation of staff has shown to be most valuable, showing increased morale, enthusiasm towards their work and organisation. At NHG appreciation and recognition has also created a stronger healthier and safer work environment.”

*Sultana Kudrati Khoda, CCSF Grantholder and Community Development Officer, New Hope Global*

## **Key takeaways**

The uncertainty and pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the wellbeing needs of staff and volunteers and led to greater awareness about wellbeing issues in the VCS more widely. **Grantholders demonstrated ways to support the staff and volunteer wellbeing that others can learn from.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have **long-lasting mental health consequences** due to the grief, illness and trauma many people experienced. Initial research also indicates a greater likelihood for frontline staff experiencing trauma.<sup>v</sup> Acknowledging the responsibility of organisations to support staff and volunteer wellbeing and how to do so may help mitigate these effects. However, there is a risk that priorities shift away from supporting wellbeing.

Below we outline our key takeaways for VCS organisations and funders to ensure that wellbeing remains on the agenda.

## **For VCS organisations**

- VCS leaders must understand the strategic benefits of **prioritising staff and volunteer wellbeing**. By improving the **quality and sustainability of services**, promoting staff and volunteer wellbeing brings wider benefits to beneficiaries and communities.
- VCS organisations should **explore funding for wellbeing initiatives**, through highlighting the relationship between staff and volunteer wellbeing and wider organisational and community benefits.

- With remote working continuing and an increase in ‘blended’ working models, VCS organisations need to think carefully about **how to promote the inclusion** of all staff and volunteers and **avoid division** between people. Making staff and volunteer wellbeing a strategic priority can help with this.
- Some VCS organisations may be able to **use their expertise of supporting wellbeing to generate income**, by advising others on ways to promote staff and volunteer wellbeing.

### For funders

- By encouraging VCS organisations to **include support for staff and volunteer wellbeing in funding applications** and requesting information on how staff and volunteer wellbeing is supported, funders can **highlight the ongoing importance of promoting wellbeing** and encourage VCS organisations to put support in place.
- Funders can promote staff and volunteer wellbeing by **sharing good practice from funded projects about the tools and activities work best support staff and volunteer wellbeing**. Funding research can also help **demonstrate the benefits between staff and volunteer wellbeing and organisational resilience and effectiveness**.
- To minimise the risk of exhaustion and burnout among staff, funders should **consider whether funding applications include a realistic allocation of hours**.
- Funders can support the wellbeing of VCS leaders **creating opportunities for networks of leaders to support one another**. For example, by matching leaders to act as peer support to one another, or funding organisations to provide support to leaders.

### Further information

Other learning reports in this series include:

- Building connections and trust in a crisis
- 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](#).<sup>vi</sup>



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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The New Economics Foundation defines wellbeing as “how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.” New Economics Foundation (2012) *Measuring Wellbeing: A guide for practitioners*, London: New Economics Foundation.

<sup>ii</sup> Ricketts, A. (2021). Nine in 10 charity workers have felt stress, overwhelm or burnout over the past year, survey shows. <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/nine-10-charity-workers-felt-stress-overwhelm-burnout-past-year-survey-shows/management/article/1705083>

<sup>iii</sup> Vicarious trauma can affect therapists or other people who work with and care for trauma survivors, as a result of engaging and empathising with traumatic experiences (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). For more information, see: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/your-wellbeing/vicarious-trauma/>

<sup>iv</sup> As part of the wider evaluation of the CCSF, Ipsos MORI conducted an online survey of 9,466 volunteers who took part in the online survey. The survey was distributed by grantholders, who were asked to send survey links to their networks of volunteers. This means that it is not possible to calculate a response rate for the survey, as there is no record of how many people were invited to participate.

<sup>v</sup> Ventouris, A., Comoretto, A., Panourgia, C., Agata, W., Yankouskaya, A. and Taylor, Z., 2020. COVID-19: Vicarious traumatisation and resilience in Mental Health Psychology Practitioners. *New Vistas*, 6(2), pp.8-13. Holmes, M.R., Rentrop, C.R., Korsch-Williams, A. and King, J.A., 2021. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Posttraumatic Stress, Grief, Burnout, and Secondary Trauma of Social Workers in the United States. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, pp.1-10.

<sup>vi</sup> Wider learning from the CCSF evaluation is available at: <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/insights/covid-19-resources/responding-to-covid-19/ccsf-granholder-evaluation>