

Positive change:

The outcomes of an
unprecedented year

A BATES WELLS REPORT
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Foreword

It goes without saying that 2020 was an extraordinary year for everyone. Many of the charities I work with have suffered large reductions in income and as a consequence have had to make difficult decisions about the services they offer and the size of their workforce. It has been hard to watch well-run charities having to cut services and make staff redundant at a time when we all know their services are more needed than ever.

When there is so much going on and difficult decisions to make, it is helpful to take a moment to pause, step back and look at the bigger picture. We asked leading sector journalist Liza Ramrayka to write this report and her research chimes with the conversations that I've had with the charities I work with. I am continually impressed by the way they have adapted their services to make sure that the people they work with continue to get the support they need.

I only have to look at my colleagues to see examples of this. One is a guide leader who has continued to meet with her brownie and rainbow groups on Zoom throughout lockdown – coming up with games and activities they can all participate in remotely. Volunteers have also been engaged more directly in the pandemic response, and I think of other colleagues who have been trained by St John Ambulance to administer Covid vaccines and are helping with the push to vaccinate us all.

It feels as if the future will inevitably be different, and we need to be thoughtful about how we move forward. Although funding is likely to remain tough, there are still things to be positive about. One of the high points of the last year for me was working with Black Lives Matter to help them register as a legal entity in the UK. The seismic shift in focus and understanding of discrimination is an exciting opportunity for us all to support and create real change.

Charities remain the glue that knit our communities together and we hope that the ideas in this report will form part of the conversation we need to have about how we build back better.

Thea Longley
Head of Charity & Social Enterprise Department

For many charities, the deep reverberations caused by these crises were translated into a drop in fundraising income

Introduction

2020 was the year the world was forced to press 'Pause'.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not only the biggest public health challenge of this century. It has also created huge repercussions for global and local economies, changed the face of work and led to job losses, housing insecurity and food poverty.

Last year, while our leaders urged social distancing and stay at home, millions around the world united in activism as part of the Black Lives Matter movement protesting police brutality and racially motivated violence against Black people. Covid-19 highlighted the longstanding health inequities experienced by many people of colour, another source of tension.

And the global climate emergency responses that were set to launch last year were largely put on hold

or sidelined due to the dual crises of coronavirus and racial reckoning.

For many charities, the deep reverberations caused by these crises were translated into a drop in fundraising income, cutbacks and layoffs at a time when their services were, to use last year's rallying cry, never more needed. A recent survey shows that charities, community groups and food banks are now supporting 60% more people each week than before. Latest research into the scale of UK poverty finds that many already struggling to stay afloat have been the hardest hit by the economic and health impacts of Covid-19. These include part-time workers; Black, Asian and minority ethnic households; lone parents; and private renters.

But necessity is the mother of invention and the sector is nothing if not creative under pressure. Over the past year, charities have pivoted to new

ways of delivering existing activities and services. They've embraced video conferencing, virtual fundraisers and social media campaigns. They've collaborated with new partners and taken risks on quickly executed programs.

After one year of pandemic in the UK, what is the state of health of the charity sector? What solutions are civil society organisations finding to mitigate the effects of this unprecedented year on their clients, service users and donors? And where are the emerging opportunities for the sector to 'build back better' as the country embarks upon its road to recovery?

The here and now: so, what do we know?

2021 finds the charity sector in uncharted waters, trying to navigate based on what it has experienced over the past 12 months.

Some of the conditions seemed familiar. The nation fell in love with the [heroic fundraising efforts](#) of the late Captain Sir Tom Moore for NHS Charities Together, and clapped each night for essential workers. [Volunteering experienced a boost](#) as people sought to help those in need within their communities.

But there were also unexpected and impossible storms to negotiate. Repeated lockdowns and social distancing meant many charity events were cancelled. Face-to-face fundraising was halted. Many in-person services were rendered impossible to deliver. Workplaces and charity shops had to shutter.

[The Chartered Institute of Fundraising](#) estimates that the sector faced a funding gap of more than £10bn last year, mostly through a combination of lost fundraising income and lost income from charity shops and trading. Many fundraisers have

been furloughed or made redundant because lockdown makes their jobs impossible to do right now.

Fundraising events like the [London Marathon](#) and coffee mornings were among the hardest hit in 2020, according to the [Charities Aid Foundation](#). The amount donated to medical research last year also declined. However, giving to hospitals and hospices increased significantly during the pandemic's first wave. Meanwhile, CAF reports that around a fifth of people specifically reported donating to charities that support the NHS.

Despite anxiety across the country around the crisis, in [research](#) from January to June last year more people than usual reported that they intended to donate more in the next 12 months (12% vs. a long term average of 7%). Previous analysis conducted by CAF suggests that charitable giving is broadly maintained even during major recessions such as the financial crash of 2008–2009 and the period of low growth that followed.

So, where were the lifelines in 2020? And how

successful have they been in keeping the sector afloat?

Last April, the government announced a [£750 million package](#) of funding to support the work of charities during the coronavirus outbreak, including grants for small- and medium-sized charities delivering food and essential medicines and providing financial advice. The package also included funding for charities providing key services and supporting vulnerable people during the crisis, such as St John Ambulance and Citizens Advice.

The government's [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#) has been extended until the end of September 2021 and will continue to contribute 80% towards wages. However, both the charity support package and the government's furlough aid are short-term solutions for charities. [Four in 10 charities](#) say they do not expect to be able to meet demand for their services in the first quarter of 2021.

The [March Budget](#) brought little direct relief for

civil society despite the sector campaigning for a package of support measures – outlined in the [#NeverMoreNeeded](#) coalition's [Five-Point Plan](#). Suggestions – which went unheeded – had included an emergency support fund to help charities experiencing rising demand as reserves are diminishing and a temporary increase in the Gift Aid tax benefit, worth around £360m to charities.

It's inevitable that the government faces a combination of spending cuts and tax rises to pay for Covid-19 borrowing. In its [recent review](#) of the sector's environment, NCVO points out that public sector cuts and failure to increase spending will have a significant impact on charities.

Former Charity Commission chair, Baroness Stowell, says [Covid-19 has brought home both the power of charity and its essential fragility](#): 'The power it has to harness our generosity and goodwill for the benefit of others; but also how much charity relies on the support it is given, in small and myriad ways, as people go about our daily lives – and how vulnerable it is to any disruption in those routines.'

The response

Charities have faced myriad challenges over the past year that have resulted in having to make unexpected or uncomfortable decisions. Some of these choices have involved rethinking services, cutting jobs, and revisiting their mission in order to focus on what – given funding restraints – they should really be doing during the pandemic and beyond.

Here are a few of the emerging themes highlighted by charity leaders, umbrella bodies and sector analysts when asked about learning over the past year...

INNOVATION AND INVENTION

Charities have had to think on their feet, pivot quickly to meet demand, try new fundraising approaches, and push through decisions that may have been burdened with bureaucracy pre-pandemic.

Homelessness charity St Mungo's became a key partner in the government's [Everyone In initiative](#) last year to get unhoused people off the streets or out of communal hostels and into hotels. It meant quickly diverting team members from other services

to hotels. The charity then saw an opportunity to offer its clients further support, according to Dominic Williamson, executive director of strategy and policy: 'At one of the hotels, we pivoted to working with an employment specialist because [work] is the most likely route for that group of people to be able to tackle their homelessness.'

Cornwall-based educational charity The Eden Project found a new way to connect communities struggling with the impacts of Covid-19. Its [Community Action Response](#) is working with over 200 community partners to encourage neighbourly support, particularly for the most vulnerable or isolated. These mutual aid schemes include shopping for people in sheltered housing – a needs-led approach from the charity, which had never done anything like that before.

When social distancing put a halt on car washes and jumble sales, The Scout Association had to find a new way to help 500 of its hardest hit groups. [#RaceRoundTheWorld](#) was a virtual trip around the globe, raising over £350,000 through sponsorship and direct donations. Earlier in the year, the [#HikeToTheMoon](#) raised £700,000 through online sponsorship for a real hike of one mile or more.

Digital consultant Zoe Amar says: 'It really shows that if you can come up with a really compelling digital fundraising proposition that speaks to your community, then people are still going to donate even in very cash-strapped times.'

Peter Lewis, chief executive at the [Chartered Institute of Fundraising](#), says: '80% of giving is a result of an ask. So, if your ability to ask is restricted, your ability to raise money is severely restricted. And, therefore, what the fundraising community has had to do is to move pretty much everything into the virtual space. And they have been incredibly committed and innovative in doing that move.'

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI)

The [death in the US of George Floyd](#) in May 2020 set off a summer of protests around the world building on the Black Lives Matter movement and calling for an end to widespread and institutional racism. In the UK, this gave further impetus to the [Charity So White](#) campaign, which calls out power and privilege in the sector and wants charity leaders and decision-makers to reflect the communities that they work with.

A [report](#) by ACEVO and Voice 4 Change found that 68% of respondents had experienced, witnessed or heard stories about racism during their time in the voluntary sector.

Asif Afridi, deputy chief executive at Birmingham-

based equality charity [brap](#), sees charities using external tensions around race to look at their own behaviour:

'Charities are all at a different stage in their journey. I think there is a recognition that there's a need for more internal reflection on issues of race and racism. There's been a greater interest in exploring anti-racism, and how to respond to it both within organisations and outside.'

The sector has had some [pretty bad press](#) in this area and [brap's](#) research has found that the sector lags behind others in its diversity work. Its [report on race](#) as part of the [Civil Society Futures](#) study concluded that the sector would benefit from deeper conversations about racial inequality.

Events in the last year seem to have stimulated thought and renewed work in the sector around DEI. Paul Farmer, chief executive of mental health charity Mind, [announced in December](#) a 'root and branch approach' to improve the organisation's delivery on race equality. Aspirations include diversifying the trustee board and senior management level. Farmer recognised the failures of the mental health system for Black people and acknowledged the need for Mind to build trust in BAME communities.

East London-based anti-poverty charity [Toynbee Hall](#) has worked with a nearby BAME-led organisation, You Make It, on its [first diversity report](#). Recommendations include more inclusive recruitment and supporting progression. Toynbee

Hall chief executive Jim Minton says the work so far has already been transformative: 'The critical thing coming out of this process is to stop assuming from the top that we know what's best for people.'

THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

2020 was the year that much of the workforce – with the exception of frontline and field workers – moved from the meeting room to the Zoom [video chat] room.

For many charities, this was a steep learning curve, but virtual meetings are now core to the working day and to the work of the board. Meanwhile, some charities are giving up part or all of their rented space or divesting of property as more and more employees stay at home.

A virtual and fragmented workforce has demanded that charities put more time and effort into communication with their employees. Dr Caroline Harper, CEO of Sightsavers, says the charity has [actually increased the level of connection](#) between staff during the pandemic. Previously, country office staff would be on video conference while UK staff would be together in one room.

Toynbee Hall's Jim Minton says he's appreciated the more regular video meetings, which can now include a greater number of staff, including those who have been furloughed. 'We are being really clear about what's going to happen over the next two weeks. We've managed to keep that sense of purpose together.'

GOVERNANCE

The role of the board has become even more important during the pandemic. Charity leaders talk about the need for greater engagement from their trustees as they navigate difficult decisions such as layoffs, dipping into reserves, mergers or more collaborative working.

Boards that have gone through risk assessment and scenario planning are better equipped to support their organisations. For example, St Mungo's is a charity and a housing association that does regular stress testing and risk assessment due to its diverse commitments.

Williamson says the board discussed worst case scenarios a few years back, and the conversation included pandemics. Williamson says planning and strong reserves have allowed the charity to take risks, allowing it to quickly pivot to operate services then finalise contracts and bill for payment, for example.

Building back better – how to effect positive change

The examples in the previous section give a flavour of what charities have managed to do despite the pressures they may be under right now. However, economic recovery is some way off and people may not be giving in the same way – or to the same organisations – as they grapple with job losses, wage freezes and personal issues.

But what support or change does the sector need to ensure that organisations can build on these successes?

PLANNING FOR FINANCIAL RESILIENCE

The March Budget was a disappointment to the sector, which had hoped for some direct support to ease some of its burdens in 2021. Charity Finance Group (CFG) chief executive Caron Bradshaw says the Chancellor ‘failed to repair the safety net used by millions of our citizens every day’, leaving the sector having to decide between ‘mobilising or mothballing’.

Bradshaw is concerned about what happens when emergency funding for the sector ends, and about the impact on the sector following an economic

shock. ‘So, you’ve sold [an asset] to try and stabilise your financial position, and your position this year looks great, because you’ve now got extra money in your reserves,’ she says. ‘But what do you do in future years... once the money runs out, or if this crisis continues for much longer than any of us are expecting?’

While the March Budget brought little direct support for civil society, it did announce some measures that will benefit the sector, including ‘restart grants’ that could help charity retailers, and increased funding for cultural and sporting organisations. There was also specific support for armed forces charities, veterans’ mental health services and programs tackling domestic abuse.

The pandemic has shuttered door-to-door and street fundraising agencies for now. And it will take some time for those fundraising streams to recover. Diversifying income is both a challenge and an opportunity for the sector.

Sector analyst nfpSynergy recently suggested the idea of charging beneficiaries for services, which could offer charities a legal and potentially viable

method of income generation in response to falling revenue elsewhere. Joe Saxton, driver of ideas at nfpSynergy, says charities should first look into how this route could affect mission, values, equality and diversity.

He says: 'Fundraising is not going to be good. Maybe getting money from your beneficiaries makes a lot more sense than it used to, whether that's entrance to a museum or charging people to show an exhibition in your theatre. But [charities] are going to have to look more carefully at the full range of income generation activities.'

A [report](#) into how to maintain the 'lockdown community spirit' was prepared last year by Danny Kruger MP at the Prime Minister's request. Recommendations included a Community Power Act to give local people power over the design and delivery of public services.

The government has announced 'a new framework for public procurement by central government', designed to level the playing field for small business and social enterprises so they can win more contracts from government. Kruger talks of the possibility of 'a wholly new paradigm', in which community power replaces the dominance of 'remote public and private sector bureaucracies'.

EMBRACING DEI

While many charities have begun to review DEI in their organisations, diversity expert Asif Afridi from brap warns against tokenism. 'We often think about this in a "plug and socket" sort of way. So, if we get the right recruitment strategies, if we get the right approach to interview, have we got the pipeline... All of those ingredients are important, but I think

there's a bigger challenge, which is: does the sector recognise its responsibility and role in responding to systemic racism?'

'At the moment, civil society isn't very aware of how it uses power and isn't aware of how inequitable decision-making is.'

[The Charity Governance Code](#) sets out guidance on key elements of charity governance, including diversity. The code's seven core principles include 'equality, diversity and inclusion' (EDI), introduced in December 2020 to replace the original 'diversity' principle. The new EDI principle is framed around the potential journey a charity board could make to meet its diversity challenges. Recruiting a diversity of trustees and encouraging inclusive participation with 'safe spaces' are part of the journey.

ESTABLISHING A DIGITAL STRATEGY

According to the [Charity Digital Skills Report 2020](#), 51% of charities don't have a digital strategy and 66% rate their board members' digital skills as low. Yet Covid-19 has meant that around two thirds of charities are currently delivering work remotely and 27% have cancelled services due to their or their users' lack of skills or tech.

Over the last year, just under half (48%) of respondents said that their charities have not accessed any digital funding; 50% cited lack of funding as the biggest barrier they face to digital progress.

Bradshaw from CFG says: 'It's highlighted decades of underinvestment, how far behind the curve we are in terms of our digital investment. Not

everyone, obviously; there's variety in all of it. But we've had years and years of being told we must maximise power to the front line, at the cost of back office. Our infrastructure is not in the place that it could be and should be in order to be able to deliver seamlessly some of these much more rich experiences using digital.'

Data protection and cybersecurity remain areas of particular concern, [according to NCVO](#). But data analytics present huge potential to shape future services that meet the needs of people and communities.

With online fundraising the default for the present, charities would be wise to skill up to take advantage of these opportunities. If you don't know your Twitch from your [Tiltify](#), find someone who does. Or investigate the plethora of free resources from organisations such as [Charity Digital](#) and [CAST](#).

Consultant Zoe Amar says the charities who are beginning to move ahead in digital tend to be the ones who had invested in it in some way before. 'That doesn't necessarily mean hundreds of thousands of pounds and infrastructure,' she says. 'But it does mean thinking about how to make some first steps with digital.'

SKILLING UP THE BOARD

Amar advises that charity boards should also have one or more trustees who understand your digital strategy. 'You've got a really competent executive and you've got some great people working digital. That's definitely going to take you a pretty long way, especially if you're relatively well resourced. But you will come to a point where actually it's very helpful to have that additional scrutiny and

strategic input and support from the board as well. I would hope that this time is really going to raise the bar for what we expect from trustees... and how they can really add value and grow their skills so they can make truly informed decisions,' she says.

WORKING DIFFERENTLY; WORKING WELL

The pandemic has created changes to the way organisations work that may continue. Remote working and video conferencing have become commonplace, making it feasible to recruit a geographically diverse workforce. Work-life balance has become more important for many during pandemic; offering flexible work arrangements could help organisations who may have found it difficult to recruit in the past.

With Salesforce declaring [the 9-5 workday dead](#) and employers such as [Google](#) considering a 'flexible work week', charities might want to follow suit and think about offering employees a menu of working options. This could foster a more diverse workforce. It could also help the balance sheet. Does your organisation need all the space it currently has? Could you divest of some, or rent out for additional income?

STAFF WELLBEING

Mental health challenges for staff in voluntary organisations have worsened since the pandemic began, according to a [recent report](#).

The ACEVO and Mental Health First Aid England report is based on a project exploring workforce wellbeing in the charity sector. It identifies specific features of the voluntary sector that can make workforces particularly vulnerable to mental ill-

Raising the status and the centrality of volunteers would be another good outcome

health. These include that charities exist for public benefit, and delivering their mission is their first priority.

The report recommends that boards must take greater responsibility for mental health and wellbeing within organisations, specifically recommending that at least one member of the board should take responsibility for organisational wellbeing. Is this responsibility included elsewhere, perhaps under HR? Do you have agreed policies for managing workforce mental health difficulties? Have you spoken about including mental health in your organisational strategy?

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIVE WORKING

As NCVO highlights in a [recent report](#), collaboration and partnership have become the default way of working for the sector during the pandemic. Collaboration has supported the deployment of millions of volunteers and has enabled charities to be agile in responding to changing community needs.

Sarah Vibert, interim CEO at NCVO, believes that there is an opportunity as the sector emerges from the pandemic for charities to build on this collaboration to ensure communities can continue to access high-quality support.

'We've seen much better collaboration happening between local government and the local voluntary sector in some areas, and the relaxation of procurement guidelines has really helped that relationship. We've seen cause-specific charities putting brands aside and focusing on impact.'

Despite the turmoil many charities faced in the early months of the pandemic, they have not been put off pursuing necessary mergers. According to the [latest research](#), 31 mergers took place in the first half of 2020 (46% of the amount seen in the 12 months to 2019/20, when 67 deals were concluded). This seems in line with past trends and may cast doubt on speculation that the pandemic could result in many small charities merging.

The announcement in the 2021 Budget that community groups will be able to bid for matched funding to buy local assets, or a community-owned sports club or ground, could also present partnership opportunities for the sector.

VOLUNTEERING

According to research by nfpSynergy, volunteering levels among the over 55s have been declining over the last 10 years. The pandemic has exacerbated that, as older volunteers decided to self-isolate or shelter. In August 2020, just 9% of 55–64-year-olds had volunteered in the previous 3 months, down from 20% a few years ago.

There's an opportunity for charities to capitalise on the growth of younger volunteers who have worked at food pantries or delivered groceries for those in need. Volunteers might also have a more central role in charities, suggests nfpSynergy's Joe Saxton. 'You are going to have a boom of highly experienced people who are able to retire in their 60s. And maybe they will do the jobs that normally would have been done by staff, because, actually, we can't afford staff. Can we get by with 80 people instead of 100? And we'll have 20 good volunteers as well. 'Raising the status and the centrality of volunteers

would be another good outcome.'

Vibert at NCVO says organisations need to address the 'systemic barriers' around volunteering in order to get more people involved. 'I think the digital revolution in volunteering, which has definitely been hastened by Covid, will definitely break down some barriers for some people in terms of getting involved,' she says. 'If you've got an app on your phone that allows you just to do something in a 15-minute time slot, when you can fit it into your busy life, that's going to encourage people to volunteer.'

CLIMATE CRISIS & ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

2020 was meant to be the beginning of an important decade for climate crisis work, then the pandemic struck. The UN Climate Change conference [COP26](#) – postponed from last year – will now take place this November in Glasgow. [Greenpeace](#) is among the environmental charities making the case for tackling climate, nature, and health emergencies in 2021. They argue that, [contrary to misconceptions](#), the pandemic has not given nature a break over the past year.

Peter Gilheany, charity director at social change communications group Forster, says companies are realising that, coming out of pandemic, sustainability is going to be an increasingly crucial part of business success. But charities are still lagging behind on environmental sustainability and there is potential for the sector to put a stake in the ground and demonstrate its commitment to climate change this year.

Conclusion

The challenges of 2020 have amplified the delicate balance of the power of charity and its essential fragility.

There's consensus that what charities have learned over the past 12 months should not be forgotten. Peter Lewis at the CloF says quickness of decision-making and risk-taking are features that members are keen to continue.

'Our members are telling us that they've been able to innovate much more quickly. Going up the hierarchy to get things authorised has been much quicker than it would normally be. So, people have been able to try different things, which they've liked. And that's something that they wouldn't want to change into 2021 and onward.'

Several sector leaders say that the pandemic has been an opportunity to remove structural deficits or problems that have been built in over generations, that were harder to deal with in a non-Covid context.

CFG chief executive, Caron Bradshaw, says the longer-term piece is ensuring that government understands the need to support the infrastructure and the mechanism for delivering social change – that is, charities and social enterprises – in order to help deliver recovery. 'You won't have a decent starting base that enables you to quickly respond to youth unemployment, the need to retrain, long-term mental health issues, a spike in undiagnosed cancer.'

Minton at Toynbee Hall says the sector's activities may evolve through the pandemic, but its unique role remains the same: 'We can be a bit of glue in communities, and we need to be supported.'

As the Covid-19 vaccination program continues to roll out and the sector starts to get its head above water, the hope is that it's not back to business as usual but building back better so that the sector recognises its shortcomings, lives its values and is fit for purpose post-pandemic.

Thanks

This report is based on extensive research, combined with interviews with charity and voluntary sector leaders, sector consultants, and commentators, between November 2020 and February 2021.

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- Dominic Williamson, Executive Director of Strategy & Policy – St. Mungo's



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Liza has worked on several key civil society publications. These include authoring [Working in Fundraising](#) (Guardian Books), the first comprehensive guide to training and careers in UK nonprofit fundraising, and editing [The Good Trustee Guide](#) (NCVO Publications).

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