

The impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary sector working in criminal justice

The voluntary sector in criminal justice is essential to supporting people in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) through the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond and is key to the government's plans for recovery from this crisis. However the pandemic has created challenges for the sector that will need to be addressed, including those relating to safeguarding staff and service users, redesigning services, reduced capacity and financial uncertainty that need to be addressed if the sector are to continue to deliver their essential services.

Following the initial lockdown announcement, Clinks conducted four surveys throughout April and May to understand the impact that it was having on voluntary organisations in this sector. The surveys focused on service delivery; staff and volunteers; and funding. The findings showcased the sector's resilience and flexibility, as organisations worked hard to adapt their services to Covid-19 restrictions. However despite the flexibility shown, we found that overall service provision had reduced and that there were concerns amongst the sector about the quality of services they were able to provide remotely. We also found a reduction in volunteers and a lot of uncertainty about the financial impact, both long and short term of lockdown. Organisations were having to use their reserves to sustain themselves during the crisis but eligibility criteria was restricting the ability of organisations to access financial support from the government.

Now over three months since the country started to go into lockdown and as focus turns to easing restrictions and remobilising wider society, Clinks ran another survey to see what impact this was having on the sector, how organisations were still faring, and how they were adapting as guidelines for managing Covid-19 and lockdown have changed. We had 98 responses and this briefing provides a summary of the findings.

We found:

- **Service delivery** whilst for many organisations their service provision is still reduced, the demand for the sector's services is increasing. Some organisations are beginning to plan for a return to face-to-face services within the next month. This is predominately for services in the community. However there is still much uncertainty in the sector about returning to in-person services with many organisations not sure whether to and many who do not plan to restart in-person services to in the next month.
- **Service users** Of particular concern is that the overwhelming majority of organisations feel that the needs of the people they support are worsening during the pandemic. Combined with this we continue to find that organisations are concerned that the quality of support they are able to provide at this time has decreased.
- **Volunteers** We also continue to find that volunteer numbers have decreased, impacting some organisations' capacity to deliver services and meaning staff are taking on greater workloads. Others are concerned about the long-term impact on volunteer retention and capacity where volunteers cannot currently support an organisation because of lockdown restrictions.
- **Funding** Organisations are more likely to have applied for emergency grant funding from non-government sources. Whilst organisations are remaining cautiously optimistic about their long-term sustainability, there is clear concern about an economic recession in the future and

the impact this will have on the availability of funding. In particular there is concern about future rounds of austerity and a decrease in funding from trusts and foundations.

The people organisations support

- **The needs of the people this sector works to support have become greater during this time.** The vast majority of respondents (95%) agree or strongly agree that the needs of the people they work to support have become greater during the Covid-19 pandemic. This reinforces findings from the previous survey.
- **The impact of lockdown and the isolation it has caused has had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of those in the community and in prison.** Many organisations raised concerns about the mental health and wellbeing (as well as deteriorating physical health) of people in contact with the CJS, with reports of rising anxiety, drug and alcohol misuse and self-harm. Organisations expressed concern that those they work to support have often experienced trauma which lockdown is re-triggering and/or have pre-existing mental health concerns that are being exacerbated during this time. Concern for people in prison, locked in cells for up to 23 hours a day with limited social interactions and without access to purposeful activity, visits or support services, was particularly acute.

“We are increasingly concerned by the prolonged period of effective solitary confinement being experienced by those serving sentences ... The damage to mental health will be enormous.”
– survey respondent

“We have experienced a high increase in mental health issues and substance misuse concerns which have led to an increase in safeguarding concerns.” – survey respondent

- **The isolation and lack of contact has also increased anxiety amongst families and loved ones of those in prison.** Responses highlight the ongoing impact of stopping visits on people in prison and their families. We welcome that visits are starting to be reintroduced.

“Families have had no face-to-face visits with prison residents since 22nd March so this has had a big impact on levels of anxiety. We know this because we have been phoning families over the past two months to check on their well-being.” – survey respondent

- **There continues to be concern amongst the sector, given the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on people in the criminal justice system and a potential mental health crisis, about the effectiveness of virtual and remote services to meet the level of need and the limits of support that organisation can provide people in such restricted environments.** 51% feel that the quality of support at this time has decreased slightly or a lot. In particular the responses highlighted that getting people access to mental health services has become more challenging and that organisations feel less able to provide in-depth, therapeutic and trauma-informed services.
- **Supporting people being released from prison has become significantly harder, with organisations raising concern about people being released without their basic needs**

met. Responses highlight the challenges of supporting people on release during this time, with a number of organisations saying that they have not been able to be able to make contact with people prior to release to support them with the transition. A lack of preparation before release and lack of services currently available in the community means people are released without support in place.

“Those inside are concerned about what they will meet on release and we have not been able to meet to assist / plan for their release ...” – survey respondent

“The needs have been much higher for those released from prison without planned in the community support and little direct access to services available in the community.”
– survey respondent

“Many of our clients are isolated due to being newly released from prison and not being able to access the normal services, i.e. housing providers, face to face support with benefits etc. We have clients in custody who we have no way of contacting at present.”
– survey respondent

- **The pandemic is also exacerbating poverty and accommodation issues for people in contact with the criminal justice system.** The responses show that more organisations are needing to provide more crisis intervention and basic provisions including food packages and phone credit to access services that are now provided remotely. Organisations are struggling to access emergency accommodation for clients due to a lack of availability. Accommodation for prison leavers in particular was highlighted as an increasing issue, with people continuing to be released homeless. Debt and money issues are compounded by challenges accessing welfare and a lack of employment opportunities at this time.

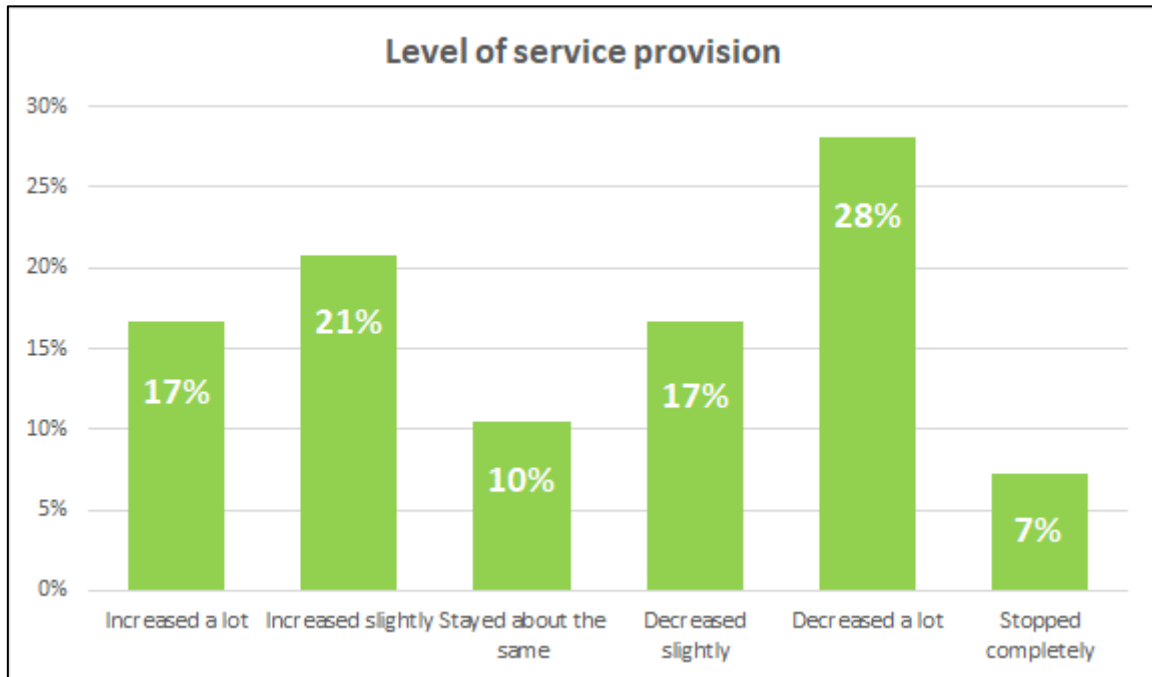
“The needs of the clients we have continued to support have increased, significantly in some cases. This is mainly due to the closure/reduction in other support services resulting in needs not being addressed as effectively / or at all e.g. homeless / temporary housing has been very difficult to address due to lack of available options, despite Government measures to assist with this.”
– survey respondent

“There has been a lot of work around food poverty ...” – survey respondent

“We have also had to provide more food parcels than previously and deliver them as part of a crisis intervention” – survey respondent

Service delivery

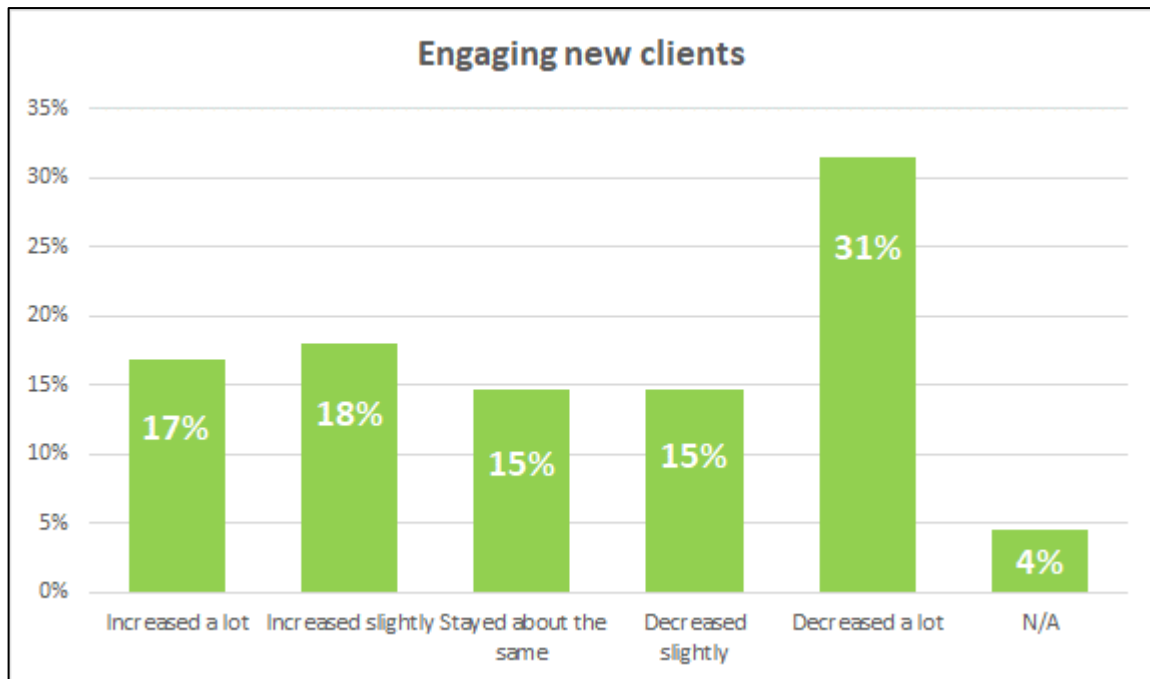
- **Demand for the sector’s services has increased**, with 53% of organisations saying demand for their services had increased slightly or a lot.
- **However the ability of the sector to respond to the increased demand has been significantly hampered during this time and many organisations have had to reduce their service provision.** 45% of organisations say that their service provision has decreased slightly or a lot during the pandemic.



- **Some organisations have found that the number of new clients or service users accessing their service has fallen during the pandemic.** 46% say the number of people they have been able to engage has decreased, with 31% of those saying it has decreased a lot. This could be for a number of reasons:
 - For organisations that have had to reduce their service provision and are working at reduced capacity, they will be less able to take on new clients. This is concerning because at time of increased need, it may mean that people are unable to access the services they need, increasing pressure on other services and increasing the likelihood of more people falling through the gaps in support.
 - For organisations now delivering services remotely it can be a barrier to developing meaningful relationships with new clients and encouraging them to stay engaged with services. This is exacerbated by digital exclusion, with prison leavers and those experiencing multiple disadvantage and poverty facing greater barriers to accessing the technology needed to engage with remote services.
- However the picture is mixed. 35% say the number of clients or service users that they have been able to engage has increased slightly or increased a lot. This is likely to represent services that have continued to operate in-person services and who are working to fill the gaps following reduced statutory services. Clinks has collected qualitative information through engagement with our members which suggests that substance misuse, accommodation and resettlement services in particular have been responding to greater demand and redeploying staff to try and cope with greater caseloads. For others, whilst remote provision creates barriers to delivery of their services, for some organisations this could extend their reach, particularly for clients who live further away.

CLINKS

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- **There is uncertainty amongst the sector about returning to face-to-face services.** 42% are unsure whether they will start face-to-face services in the next month and 23% say they will not be.
- **Of those planning to start face-to-face services within the next month, the majority are planning to do so in the community.** 58% of those planning to restart face-to-face services say they are planning to do so in the community. Just 5% say they are planning to start face-to-face services in prisons and 18% plan to do so in both the community and prisons.
- **13 organisations report that statutory services have requested they restart in-person services.** Only 40 respondents answered this question, equating to a third of responses reporting this to be the case. Qualitative evidence collected by Clinks through our engagement with the sector in our support work and network events, shows that there has been an inconsistent approach across the prison estate – that is also inconsistent with the national framework for recovery - towards the delivery of in-person services, with some organisations feeding back that they have been asked to start delivering services again.

Volunteers

- **Organisations continue to see reduced volunteer numbers**, with 48% saying that the number of volunteers that support their organisation has decreased slightly or a lot during the Covid-19 pandemic. Just 10% say the number of volunteers they have has increased.
- The responses highlight a mixed picture as to the reasons for this and the impact this is having on the organisation:
 - **For some, volunteers cannot support the organisation whilst they cannot access prisons.** While this does not currently impact capacity, there is concern about continuing to engage volunteers and the potential for this to impact volunteer support when services can restart.



"We are regularly contacting with our volunteers in order to try to keep them engaged with the organisation. From 1/7/20 our coordinator is working a few hours a week and furloughed for the rest of the time" – survey respondent

- **For others that are still running services and rely on volunteers, capacity has been significantly impacted** because volunteers are not available for reasons such as shielding or concern about the risk of Covid-19. This has led to a reduction in services or other staff and volunteers taking on greater workloads.

"We have had to use paid workers and intensify recruitment to meet the demand." – survey respondent

"We have been unable to provide support services to the community as we would have liked." – survey respondent

- **There is also concern that those vulnerable to Covid-19 will chose not to return and impact capacity long term.**

"Impact is yet to be fully realised - many older volunteers have been shielding at home, while services have been maintained through other volunteers on furlough/with additional free time during the lockdown taking up extra shifts. We anticipate a sizeable proportion of those may choose to delay their return or not to return at all, creating a shortfall as other volunteers return to work." – survey respondent

- **Some organisations are trying to recruit more volunteers but finding it challenging doing so in the current climate** and facing issues of safeguarding, supporting and training volunteers during this time sometimes requiring greater resource to do so.

"more resource is required to train and mentor them" – survey respondent

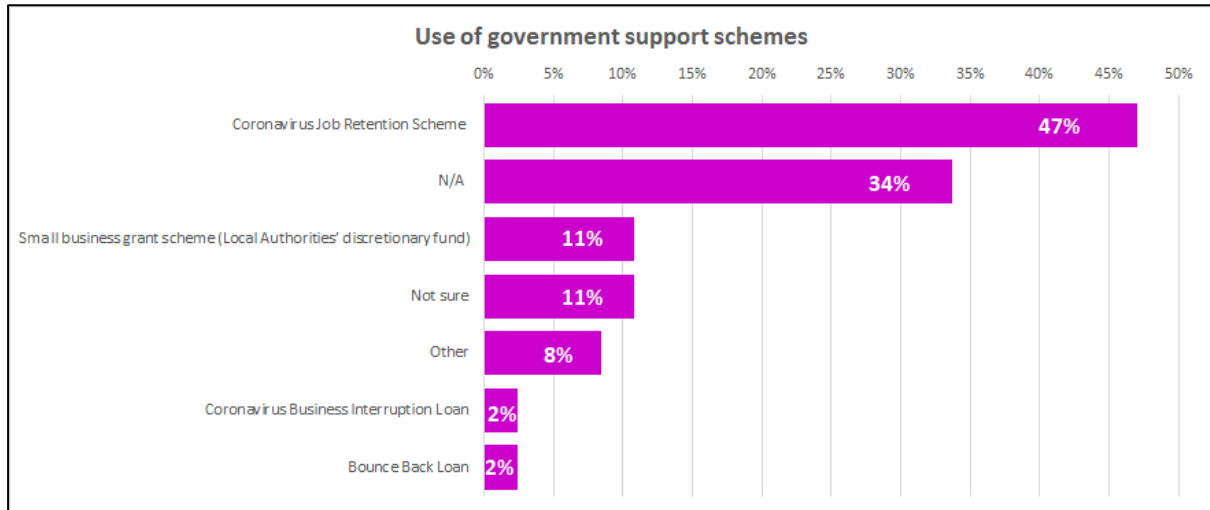
"...Our other trading activities have been hampered as we have less volunteer support due to social distancing and shielding and increased costs due to the need for increased PPE and increased hygiene measures." – survey respondent

Financial impact

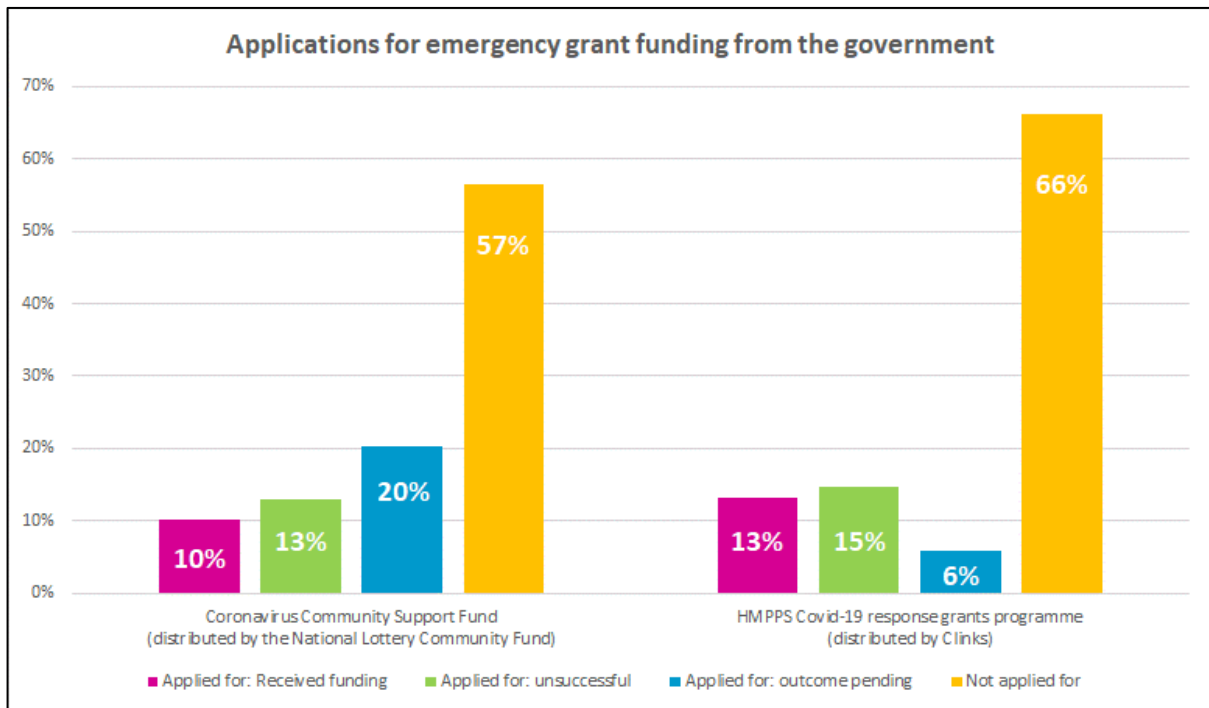
Financial support

- **Over a third of organisations did not apply for any form of financial support scheme made available by the government in response to Covid-19.** The most accessed form of support from the government was the coronavirus job retention scheme, with 47% of respondents telling us that they applied for this scheme. The loans made available were rarely used with just 2% applying for a business interruption and bounce back loan. Our engagement with the voluntary sector has identified concern amongst organisations,

particularly smaller ones, of paying back loans. We have also previously raised concern that these measures are designed with businesses in mind and therefore often not appropriate or applicable to voluntary sector organisations.



- **Organisations primarily applied for emergency grant funding from government sources primarily through the Coronavirus Community Support Fund and the HMPPS Covid-19 response grants programme.** Of the respondents, 42% applied for the Coronavirus Community Support Fund and 32% applied for the HMPPS grants programme via Clinks. The relatively low numbers of applications to these funds could reflect:
 - **The Coronavirus Community Support Fund** That the criminal justice voluntary sector historically does not have a strong relationship with the National Lottery Community Fund because of its policy no to fund activity considered adjacent to statutory services which means that it has not typically funded services in our sector. This may have increased concern amongst the sector about applying for support from this fund.
 - **HMPPS Covid-19 Response Grant Fund** The requirement for organisations to have a pre-existing relationship with HMPPS will have excluded many from the fund, particularly small, community-led specialist organisations.
- Organisations received limited funding from the other grant programmes available; only one organisation received funding from The Covid-19 Homelessness Response Fund, three from the Domestic Abuse Survivors and Survivors of Sexual Violence Fund and two from the Covid-19 Food Charity Grant Scheme. This reinforces how little of the emergency grant funding for charities made available by the government has been accessed by the criminal justice voluntary sector.



- **Organisations were more likely to apply for emergency grant funding from non-government sources**, with 52% saying that they had applied for emergency funding from other sources.
- From our qualitative engagement with members, we believe organisations haven't applied for emergency funding from government sources as much is because there has been no fund aimed specifically at the criminal justice voluntary sector that also encompasses and is accessible to the breadth and diversity of organisations working in our sector.

Funding arrangements

- **In general communication from grant and contract managers has been positive, particularly from trusts and foundations compared to statutory funding:**
 - Of the respondents that receive statutory funding, 53% agreed or strongly agreed that their grant/contract managers had communicated clearly with them.
 - Of the respondents that receive funding from trusts and foundations, 72% agreed or strongly agreed that their grant managers had communicated clearly with them.
- **However there is concern shown about a lack of communication – particularly from central government - over the impact on funding in the near future, leaving some organisations heading into uncertain positions.**

“We were expecting an update at the end of June about our HMPPS contracts but have heard nothing since” – survey respondent

“Main statutory funder (MOJ) has not yet confirmed contractual support post 30th June which is significant concern to us as we have now missed opportunity to furlough staff” – survey respondent



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“Little information coming and we need to know what the picture looks like post September 30th”
– survey respondent

- **Some organisations have shown serious concern about the significant loss of income they face which is usually generated from trading and social enterprises.** 29 respondents indicated that they had a social enterprise or trading element to their organisation. Of those 11 (38%) said that this could no longer operate. The open responses highlight the impact of this on organisations:

“Covid 19 has significantly impacted our ability to generate income through trading. We were due to start delivering paid for courses as a further source of income but as these were face to face activities we have had to postpone them for the foreseeable future. Our other trading activities have been hampered as we have less volunteer support due to social distancing and shielding and increased costs due to the need for increased PPE and increased hygiene measures.”
– survey respondent

“Our fee-based income disappeared completely with lockdown (about 20% of our overall income - not for criminal justice work) and the grants we were planning to apply for have mainly been diverted to COVID-19 grants and we are not frontline enough to apply for a lot of these.”
– survey respondent

“No visits big loss of income Even when visits start there will be no food or drink on sale so yes visits may start but still no income. How are we meant to continue as a charity??”
– survey respondent

Financial sustainability

- **Organisations continue to need to use their reserves as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic.** This is the case for 43% of respondents. Of the organisations using their reserves to sustain themselves during this crisis, 27% anticipate they will only be to continue doing so for three months or less.
- **Most organisations remain somewhat confident about their long-term sustainability highlighting their resilience and determination.** 55% say that they are somewhat confident about the organisation’s long-term sustainability but 14% are not so confident and 4% not confident at all.
- Despite just over half of organisations being somewhat confident about their future sustainability, significant concerns remain amongst the sector about:
 - **The current availability of long term funding and grant funding outside of the Covid-19 emergency response.**

“I am concerned about the lack of information on long term funding. Many main funders have 'paused' normal application processes in favour of covid emergency funding. Difficult to plan ahead.” – survey respondent

“We have less income from Trusts and Foundations - mainly because many have put on hold their normal grant programmes. We are using reserves each month to support core costs in particular.” – survey respondent

“Less ability to forward plan for standard grants - grants that were submitted in Feb/March were frozen.” – survey respondent

- **A decrease in the funding available from trusts and foundations in the future** because of the level of emergency funding during this time and the impact of the crisis on investments.

“We are OK now, push will come to shove next year with Trust and Foundation funding, which will be under pressure because of how their investments have held up.” – survey respondent

- **Economic downturn as a result of this crisis leading to future austerity measures and further cuts to funding and statutory services.**

“Our fear is the next financial year when the full impact on public funds and subsequent cuts are implemented” – survey respondent

“Austerity measures inevitable in the longer term means that we will have to work harder to access less funds available” – survey respondent

