



VCFSSE Sector Resilience Survey 2021

Report and analysis

June 2021

Introduction

“Our charities are playing a crucial role in the national fight against coronavirus, supporting those who are most in need” Rishi Sunak, UK Chancellor of the Exchequer

“Charities at the front line and all those working to support our society need help to perform their vital function bringing people together at this time of enormous challenge. They will need this type of support now and into the future as we come out of this crisis.” Sir John Low, Chief Executive of the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF)

Working closely with over fifty voluntary and community organisations across Lancaster district, this report sets out the impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector and the communities they support.

A lifeline to many of the 140,000 people living across the district; community and faith groups, charities and voluntary organisations have been delivering vital services for years, including the renewed focus in recent months to those in need of vital help. These organisations represent the diversity and breadth of the sector and the intrinsic contribution they make to the health and well-being of the population and reducing health inequalities.

With their grass roots connections and trust to reach the most vulnerable in our society, this survey reflects how communities have turned to our colleagues during this time and the part the sector has played in the pandemic response.

Building on the long-term work of the VCFSE sector across communities, this report highlights that for many charities and community organisations their future is uncertain. For example, organisations and groups are under financial pressure and for many digital capacity and capability is a barrier to their work.

The findings in this survey also show that the sector continues to be ideally placed to respond to the effects of the crisis in ways that really matter to people and communities experiencing complex social issues and economic disadvantage. Our research highlights:

- 1:** how the sector has demonstrated tremendous energy, flexibility and professionalism by understanding the implications of the crisis and continuously adapting its provision to ever changing needs and circumstances;
- 2:** how the sector during the crisis was concentrated on addressing four main areas of need - access to food, isolation and loneliness, information, and mental health wellbeing. Colleagues found multiple ways to maintain human contact by checking up on people, keeping in touch with them, and connecting them to one another wherever possible;
- 3:** how the sector during the pandemic has created value for a wide range of different stakeholders. Value has been created for individuals and communities through personal outcomes linked to health, mental health, and social isolation that have prevented lives from getting worse and ensured that people will be in a better position at the end of the pandemic than would have otherwise been the case. Value has been created for the economy by continuing to employ local people, keeping work local and accessing funding to support the crisis response. Further economic value for the public sector has been created by supporting people most likely to be adversely affected by the coronavirus and mitigating the wider effects.

Lastly, despite the incredible response of the sector to the COVID-19 pandemic, this survey shows that the sector is presented with challenges. There is the changing nature of community needs, which are increasing in severity due to the impact of the pandemic. There are a series of organisational challenges associated with financial and human resources, including possible reductions in services, unpredictability, and the uncertainty in funding, and concerns about charity leaders, staff wellbeing and how to avoid ‘burnout’.

Yak Patel, Chief Officer, Lancaster District Community & Voluntary Solutions

Aims and Background to this Report

The VCFSE Sector Resilience Survey was open for responses between 5 March and 31 March 2021. The survey was sent to over 150 leaders within charities, social enterprises, community, faith and voluntary groups across the Lancaster district to gain a stronger understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on:

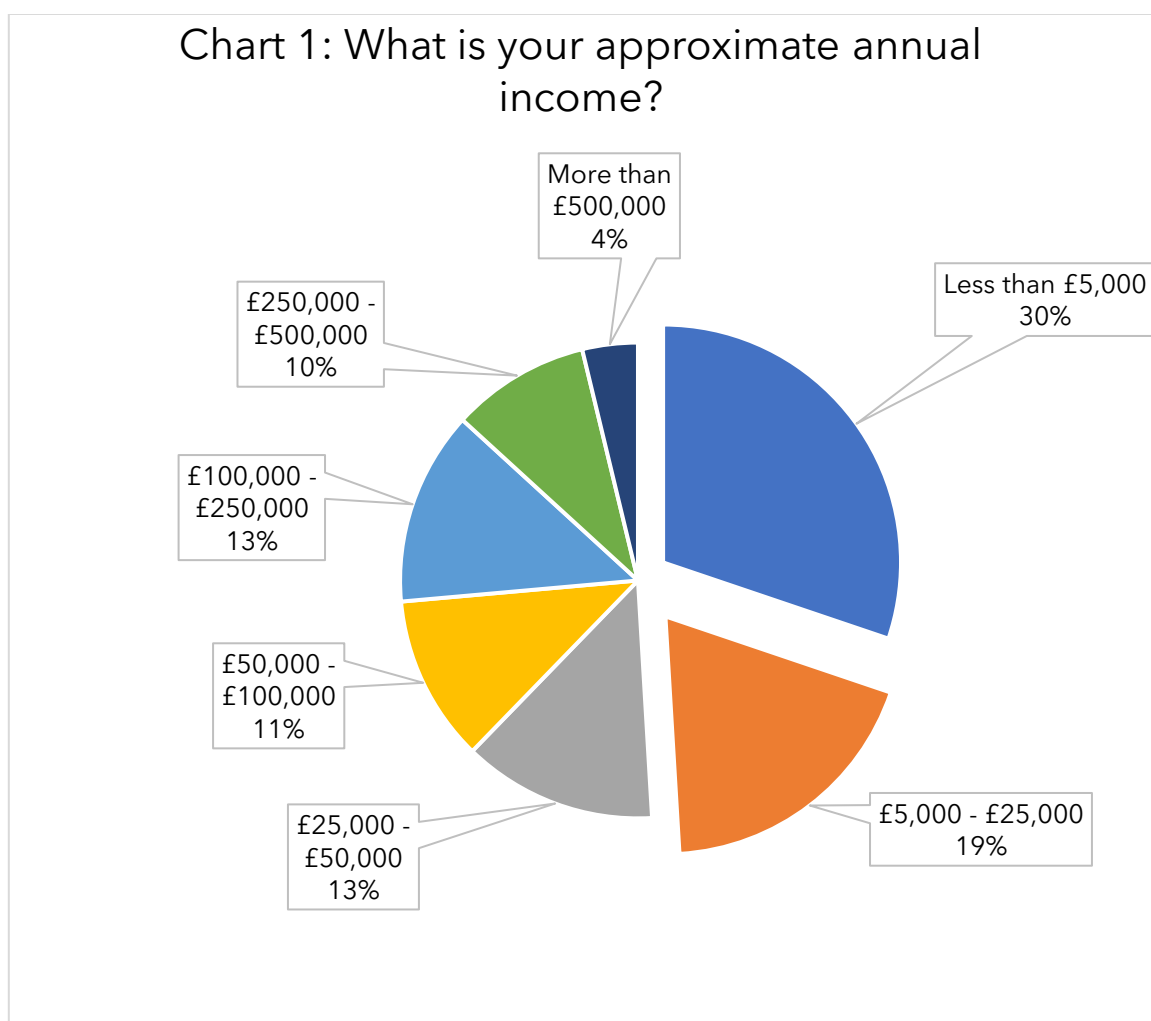
- Sector viability in the light of changing income and expenditure
- Pressures on organisations, communities and changes in volunteering
- The third sector's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and positive experiences.

Intended to follow-up on findings of our last survey, conducted in May 2020, questions were developed by working in partnership with Lancaster City Council and Bay Health Partners.

Respondents

Over three weeks we received 57 responses, representing a broad group of organisations including registered charities, community groups and faith organisations, alongside Community Interest Companies, an amateur sports club, and a trade union.

Half the organisations responding are small - they receive income of less than £25,000 a year. 30% had an income of less than £5,000 annually (see Chart 1).



Service Delivery During the Pandemic

"Workload increased by about 1000 per year."

"I feel we have improved - and learnt from making mistakes during the pandemic - this puts us in a good position to move forward."

Respondent organisations support a wide variety of beneficiaries and communities, through diverse delivery methods. During the pandemic, their activities coalesced around supporting people's mental and physical health, delivering food, medicines, and other goods, and running in-person activities when circumstances allowed.

Demonstrating resilience and innovation, 88% were able to pivot to new methods of working or take additional precautions in order to continue their activities.

Three-quarters of organisations felt they were at least 'OK' at meeting their beneficiary or service user needs, with just over half responding they had done 'well' or 'very well'.

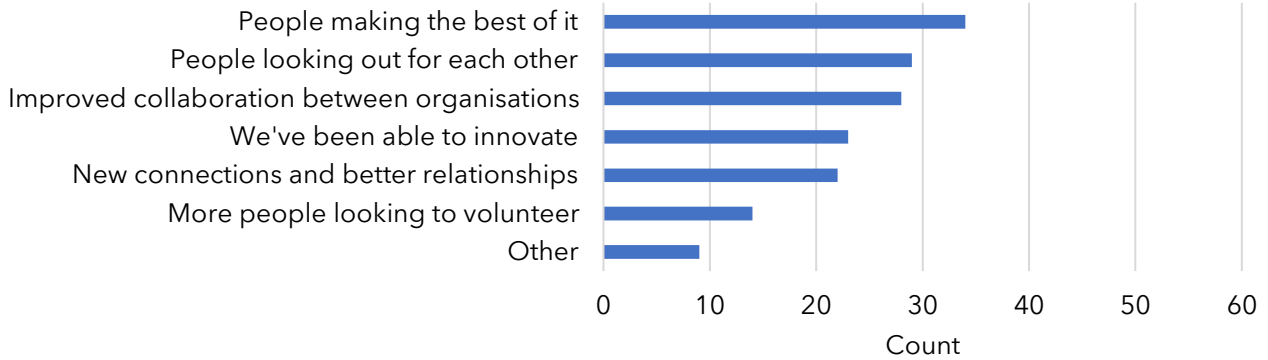
When considering how well their organisation was coping with a range of challenges related to the pandemic, respondents did not feel so confident, with most feeling that they were coping or struggling. Only a third felt they were 'doing really well' in these areas (see Chart 2).



We asked respondents how Covid-19 had impacted their organisation. Operational (80%) and financial (65%) impacts were the most reported, with subsequent impact on stress (52%), demand for services (48%) and communications (43%). Thankfully, relatively few organisations found difficulty in accessing information (15%) or accessing support (19%).

We also asked organisations to identify any positive aspects of the response to the pandemic. Significant numbers of respondents told us that they'd seen improved collaboration between organisations, had made new connections, or had been able to innovate (see Chart 3). This is significant in a sector which is not often perceived as working effectively across organisations.

Chart 3: Have there been any positive things or unexpected benefits of working during the pandemic?



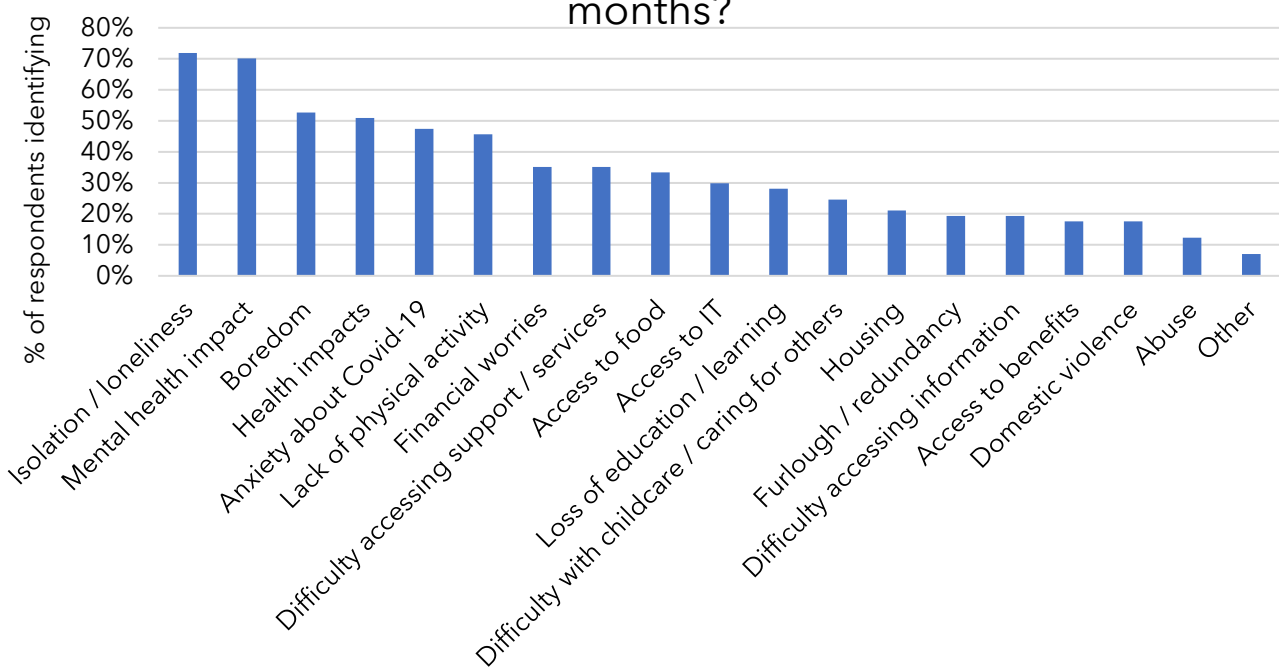
Impact on Beneficiaries

"We learned how to adapt rather than gave in because our beneficiaries are important!"

"The pandemic has exposed many inequalities in society ... those who have access to IT can continue to be involved, while those who don't are excluded; those who have strong, resilient personal support networks have coped well, those whose support networks are limited have struggled more."

Respondents told us that the pandemic had a huge variety of personal and social impacts on their beneficiaries or communities, consistently identifying physical and mental health, boredom, and loneliness as the major effects (see Chart 4).

Chart 4: What have been the main effects on your beneficiaries / your community during the last 12 months?



When asked to predict their biggest concerns for their community after lockdown ends, respondents identified a similar set of issues. Mental health (77%), physical health (47%) and loneliness (49%) were all identified as ongoing challenges.

Organisational Leadership

"The year has taught us that running a social enterprise is very energy and time consuming."

"It has placed a lot of strain on staff, especially those with children or partners who have lost their jobs. At the same time, our workloads have increased and has meant that people have struggled to take annual leave and have worked up overtime."

"Our staff and community have been brilliant - it feels like our community has become more connected."

We asked leaders to tell us about how they felt they were coping with several key areas of personal wellbeing: maintaining a work/life balance, managing stress and looking after themselves, providing leadership during difficult times, and supporting others within their organisation.

In contrast to their responses relating to their organisations, only one in six leaders felt they were 'doing really well' across these. The remainder split equally between reporting that they were coping and telling us that they were struggling, indicating that many individuals are under personal pressure.

Trustees have continued to fulfil their legal responsibilities. Three quarters of organisations with voluntary boards reporting that they have been able to use digital means to communicate, meet and make decisions. 20% reported difficulties such as being forced to meet less frequently or finding that some board members had been unable to participate fully.

Resources

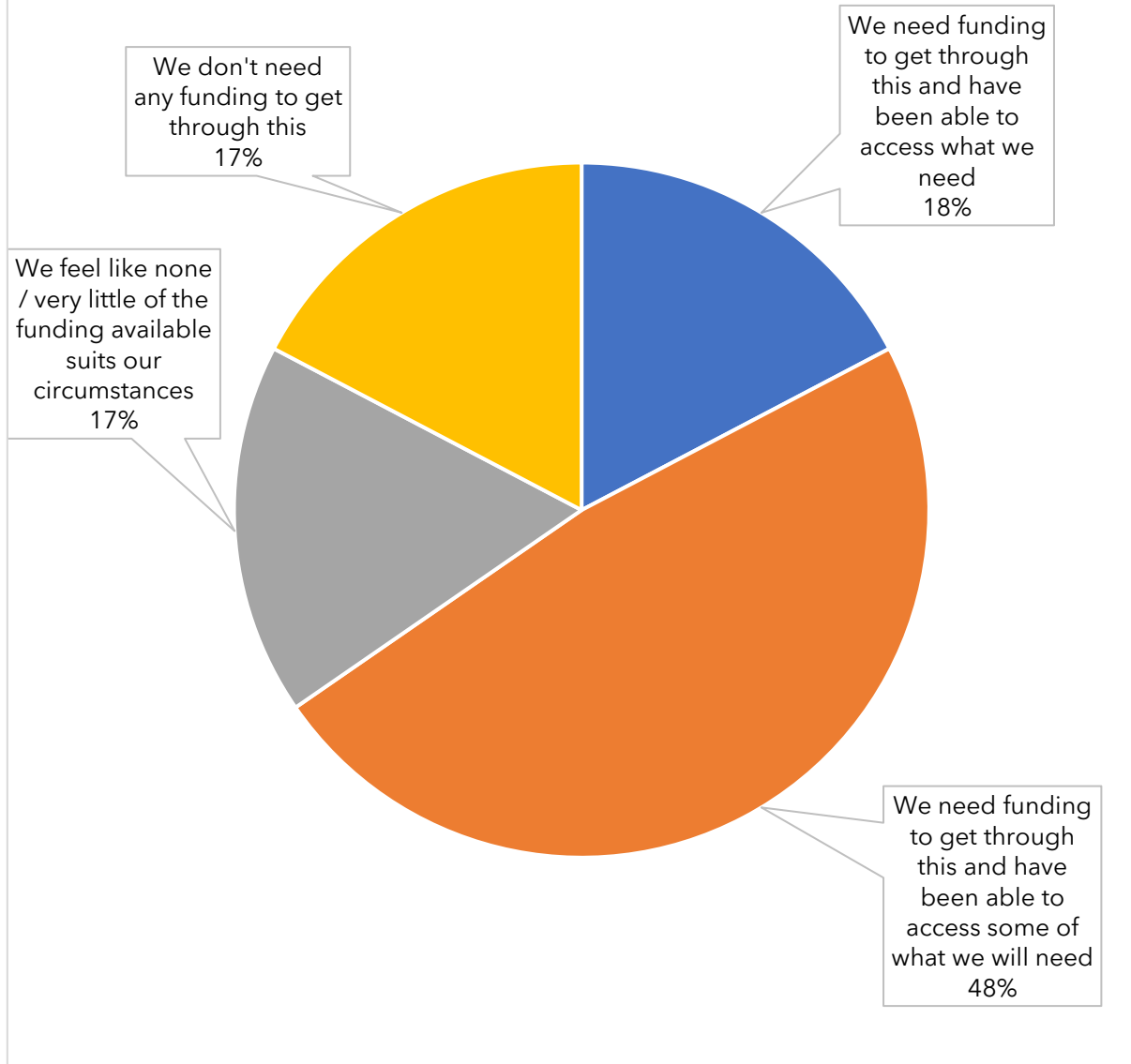
"...our funders were amazing, exceptionally supportive and flexible, and the local and national funding made available via CVS and Community Foundation for Lancashire was exceptionally beneficial."

"It is so difficult when as an organisation you rely on a certain amount of earned income that disappeared over night..."

"It has and will continue to change the way we work, you can look at it as a threat or an opportunity. For us we will use it as an opportunity to take the best of what has happened and make those changes to our organisation."

When asked to describe how well available funding had been able to meet their needs during the pandemic, 83% of organisations told us that they had identified a requirement for additional funds (see Chart 5). Of those, 79% had been able to access at least some of what they needed, up from 17% who had reported receiving pandemic related funding in our last survey of May 2020.

Chart 5: Which of the following best describes your situation with regard to funding?



The sector has been proactive in seeking funds to support services, bringing in additional resources through grant funding. Those organisations which did receive funds found them through a variety of means including grants (28%), donations/fundraising (27%), the local authority (16%), and health services (6%).

Recognising that not all organisations which had identified a need for additional funding had been able to find all that they required, half of responding organisations told us that they have or will need to use part of their reserve to keep operating, an increase from the 42% of respondents who had previously reported such plans. 15% of respondents now say they have used or plan to use their entire reserve.

We also asked organisations to give their thoughts on the resumption of services. The most common responses were that it would take time to build back up again (33%), that covering costs would be challenging (23%), and that it may be difficult to find willing volunteers (18%).

Case Study - Positive Futures (from a conversation with Jan Gomez)

Jan from Positive Futures is delighted with the way everybody pitched in to help tackle the impact of the pandemic:

"I'm so proud of everybody, so proud of the guys here, but every service - the way people managed to adapt. I'm proud to be part of Lancaster District ... It's been a massive learning experience, I've never known anything like it but even though it did feel overwhelming at times, it was fantastic that we could take on the role we did in providing support."

The first lockdown meant just three staff and volunteers were taking referrals and making calls, dealing with at least 150 between them each week. It's been difficult sometimes, especially for staff who also had to isolate and were working and managing staff remotely; but the experience of frontline staff and services co-operating to work together and provide support has been largely positive. Services have been altered forever as a result. The need and value of a dedicated phone service is something the organisation are taking forward - it's a way that people can receive support until they feel ready to see people face to face.

The team have got used to working with Teams and Zoom, and those virtual meeting spaces have been a really important part of supporting each other. Part of keeping morale and energy up has come from weekly team chats, just to have fun and virtually share a takeaway.

Jan is keen to emphasise how much positive feedback has been valued too, and feels that multi-agency working over the lockdowns has really deepened relationships between front line staff and services, both voluntary and statutory, which has meant a more fluid service for people seeking support. The role that the Integrated Care Communities played was invaluable, and the regular information from CVS was also really appreciated.

Referrals increased enormously, and tended to be more complex, so new volunteers and staff were trained in telephone support and were able to provide those vital links for people. Even when sometimes it seemed like there was just too much work, they were able to find a way through.

Case Study - West End Impact (from a conversation with Tracy Kohl)

The experience of operating in a global pandemic under lockdown restrictions has been a massive challenge and sometimes a real struggle, says Tracy, but there have also been positives:

"It's been good, to keep things going. Straightaway we were thinking about our clients, we needed to keep in contact."

West End Impact provided about 48 food parcels to the most vulnerable of their clients throughout lockdown, finding that because the personal connection was already in place people felt more comfortable coming to a place they already knew. And because social contact was so limited, people were inclined to stop and engage in deeper conversations with staff and volunteers. The organisation found that it was able to support people on a more complex level, and more consistently. Need for their services increased, as people who were already struggling were impacted so negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their social media and Facebook groups for people with mental health issues quickly grew from 20 to 120 members, and a lot of effort went into ensuring that group were supported and had links and information to help them.

Worrying about ongoing funding never goes away for most VCFSE organisations, and it was often hard to find sources of more substantial financial support, for example for staff costs, when so much project work that would normally wrap around core costs was unable to take place. Some existing funders were supportive and flexible, but planning ahead in a pandemic was extremely difficult.

Other challenges included losing a lot of regular volunteers who had to shield, and needing to move staff from projects that couldn't operate to doing more online and phone support; in turn they were dealing with people often in great distress through issues relating to poverty or poor mental health - and the team missed their 'real life' weekly get togethers.

It's harder to read how people are over Zoom, even for a close knit and really honest team; Tracy was grateful for the staff, volunteer and organizational resilience that got them through, and team's joint determination to keep going and ensure they could return to face to face contact as soon as possible, subject to restrictions in force at the time. As always, West End Impact are now looking ahead to new projects and initiatives to benefit all the people who use their services.

Case Study - Stanleys Community Centre (from a conversation with Robyn Thomas)

For Robyn and her team at Stanleys, adapting to the pandemic and the lockdown was all about relationships; with each other as a team of staff and volunteers and as part of the community that they serve:

"It all had to happen very quickly. Contact with people being maintained, and getting food out to them, was vitally important. I don't think any of us had ever worked as hard in our lives"

Most of their support 'went digital'; which involved a huge amount of planning time in order to make it all work, but which also meant that they reached people they'd never engaged with before. Their family quizzes and challenges were phenomenally successful, kept people going, and will continue as a way of reaching out through links with local pubs.

Engagement, fun, positive feedback from the community and satisfaction from helping to solve some complex situations people faced all helped to keep the Stanleys team going. Staff and volunteers went above and beyond to make sure support was available; four young people decided at the outset to lock-down together so that they could work as a team sorting and packing 300 food parcels a week. The Sports and Youth Worker walked from Bare each time he visited the centre, so as to avoid public transport, and he planned and ran the quizzes that have engaged and sustained hundreds of people. Robyn is massively proud of her team and her community; and in turn she has felt supported by them, and by her family.

It wasn't all about crisis support, says Robyn,

"we've taken the last year to think about what we want to do in the future, it's exciting, it's scary, but we had a chance to look at everything with fresh eyes and that's what we've done."

As things unlock, Stanleys Community Centre is being continually adapted to offer safe spaces for people to come and meet and talk, and a dynamic group of young people has begun meeting to make sure they have the tools and understanding they need to have a proper say in their communities.



With thanks to
Bay Health and Care Partners,
Lancaster City Council,
VCFSE leaders who answered the survey,
**and every organisation and individual helping
our communities respond to the pandemic.**

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