



# Working alongside local communities responding to COVID-19

2021



## Introduction

People's Health Trust surveyed funded partners in England, Scotland and Wales between March and April 2021. The purpose was to understand how the experience of project leaders supporting communities facing some of the highest levels of disadvantage has changed throughout the course of the pandemic. This was the third survey conducted by the Trust during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

The Trust's funding programmes support people to develop ideas and priorities locally that have the potential to improve local health by strengthening social connections and control to boost community power and take action on wider social determinants of health, including housing, local environment and jobs and income.

These findings build on surveys the Trust conducted in March-April and August-September 2020.

This report splits into three parts:

- Part one - The context and the challenges that people have faced living through increasing levels of hardship arising from the pandemic.
- Part two - The response of the community sector to these challenges, and hopes for the future.
- Part three - Some key demands to help strengthen the Voluntary and Community Sector's ability to respond to the challenges identified.

## Part one - Context

Our funded partners work with people experiencing steep marginalisation and have experienced some of the most severe negative health outcomes as a result of the pandemic. Deaths in the most disadvantaged areas are four times higher than in the wealthiest neighbourhoods in England<sup>2</sup> and the health inequality impacts are even more extensive.

People of colour, particularly people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani ethnic backgrounds have been particularly badly impacted by the pandemic, as have disabled people and people with learning disabilities. February 2021 ONS data revealed that 6 in 10 people who, up to that point died of Covid-19 in England were disabled people<sup>3</sup> and 80 per cent of all deaths for people with learning disabilities were from Covid-19, against 45 per cent in the general population. These are all groups which have historically faced severe social and economic inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated longstanding inequalities.<sup>4</sup> Various studies indicate the causes for this are a combination of prejudice, racism, deprivation and social inequality.<sup>5 6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Trust issued the survey to all active funded partners between March and April 2021. The response rate was 40%, or 102 respondents.

<sup>2</sup> [Poor neighbourhoods, powerful firms and missing research on race, Resolution Foundation \(2021\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics (2021), [Updated estimates of coronavirus \(COVID-19\) related deaths by disability status, England: 24 January to 20 November 2020.](#)

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/bame-communities-coronavirus-uk>

<sup>6</sup> Razai M et al, [Mitigating ethnic disparities in covid-19 and beyond](#), British Medical Journal (2021)

Themes emerging from the Trust's research reflect some of the challenges community groups in neighbourhoods facing high levels of disadvantage are experiencing.

## What do you think the challenges ahead will be for your project over the next six months?

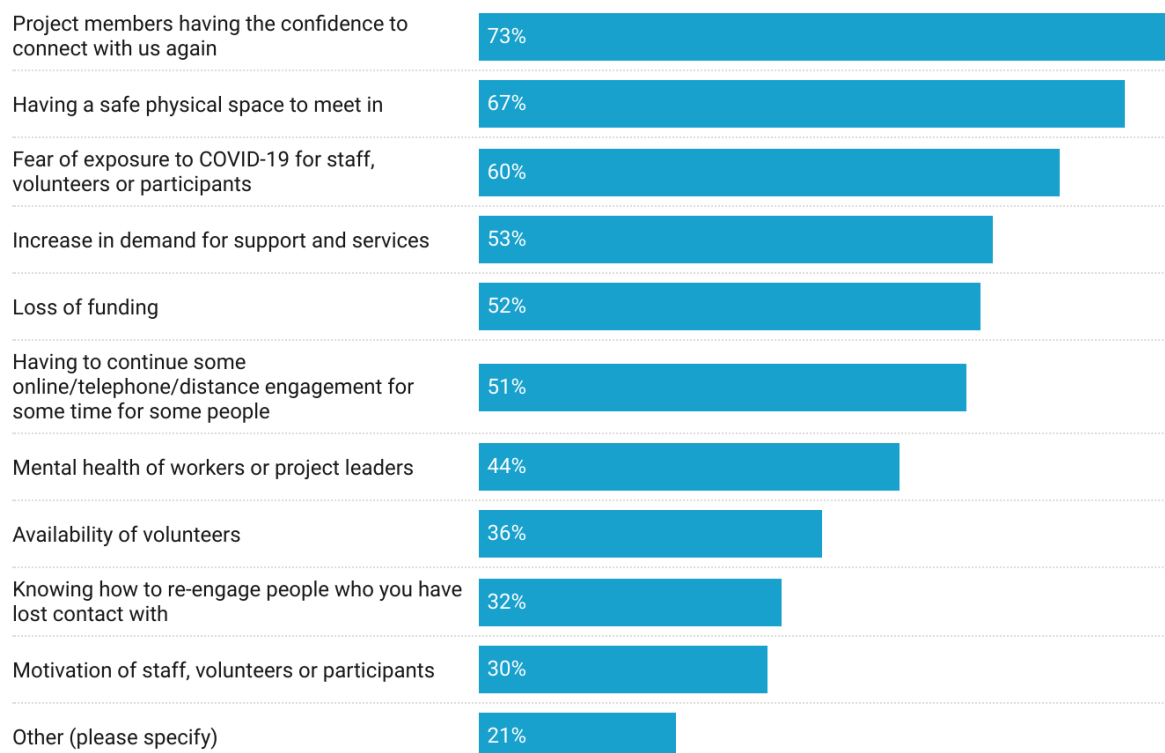


Chart: People's Health Trust • Source: People's Health Trust coronavirus response surveys, March-April 2021 • Created with Datawrapper

There was widespread concern about the capacity of the voluntary sector to respond to the enormous challenges facing communities, particularly when government support will eventually disappear.

## Part two - Key issues and how they are being addressed

We asked about four key areas which emerged as challenges both in previous surveys and through network meetings with project leads.

### What do you think the challenges ahead will be for the people you are working with over the next six months?

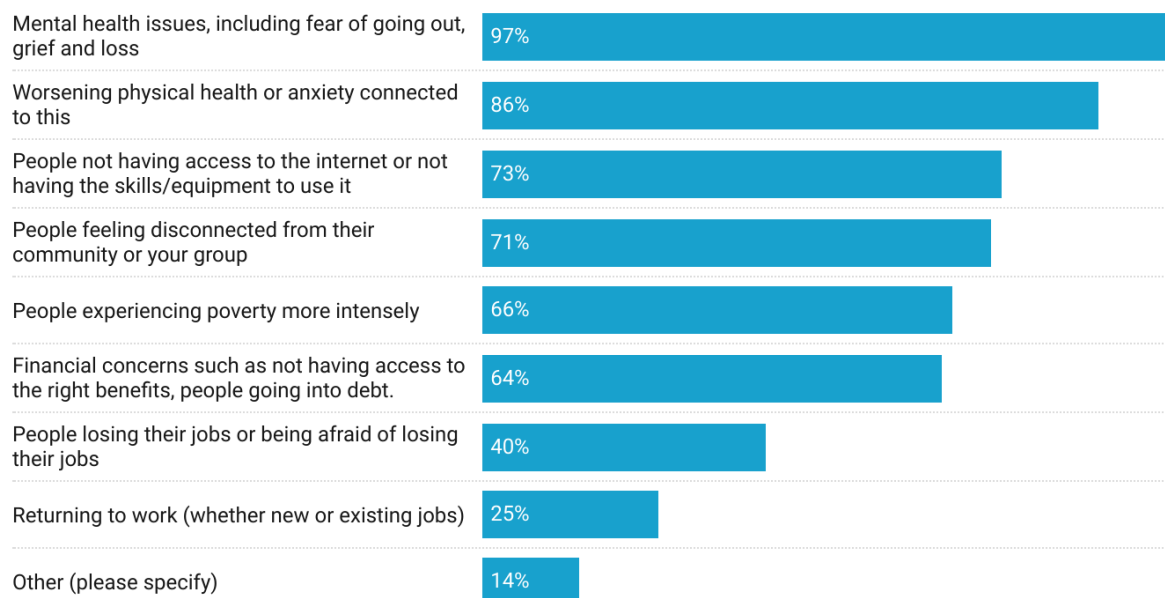


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### Mental health

Mental health was the area of greatest concern, with 97 per cent of project leads identifying this as a concern within their communities and neighbourhoods.

This has increased since Autumn 2020, when 85 per cent of project leads highlighted this issue.<sup>7</sup> Funded partners described deteriorating mental health as an issue for virtually everyone, across all age groups and diverse groups of people. Some reported for those already struggling with their mental health, it had worsened.

The Trust's funded partners also reported financial issues, food insecurity and health concerns had all been issues of growing concern for the people they work with, often linked to a broader increase in levels of anxiety.

This points to a very challenging context for many people living in neighbourhoods experiencing disadvantage, with clear concern about sustaining good mental health. The links between social disconnection, financial insecurity, poverty and digital isolation and mental health are well-established and provide a clear link to the roots of some of these mental health issues.

<sup>7</sup> [COVID-19 report update](#), People's Health Trust (2020)

*'A lot of the things that would sustain people - friends, family, social groups, activities - have been removed, whilst economic and social anxiety has increased. It's hard to think of a group that hasn't seen overall deterioration in mental health! And that includes our staff.'*

The welfare of staff leading the projects was separately highlighted as *'a major concern and priority'*, with project leads recognising they need strong levels of health and wellbeing as well as emotional resilience to be able to engage with and respond to the community. Nearly half of project leads indicated their concerns around the mental health of workers (44%). This was higher (60%) from respondents from the Trust's long-term Local Conversations programme. The wider repercussions call into question the ability of local organisations to continue to effectively support people on the ground if they are themselves working through their own mental health challenges.

There were examples of steps to address the impending mental health crisis, including funding Mental Health First Aid training and the development of Mental Health Action Teams and befriending services, as part of a clear commitment to the continued support of residents' mental health. However, the level of support required to meet this challenge is far greater than can be offered through the existing capacity within the community sector.

*'[The] groups most affected are those who already have mental health challenges. This has also been a problem for the leaders of our group who have found that the added pressure of current mental health issues and working on the front line for Covid health delivery have been really stressful.'*

## **Food insecurity**

At the time of the survey, 41 per cent of funded partners were still engaged in providing emergency food packs, with nearly half (48%) providing other kinds of support such as entertainment packs for families.

Almost a third (30%) of funded partners indicated they would continue to undertake emergency aid, demonstrating that food insecurity and related issues remain a concern for many.

Of project leads, 62 per cent indicated they were aware food poverty or insecurity was an issue for the people they were working with and 19 per cent explicitly felt the situation was deteriorating. Only 4 per cent felt the issue was levelling off.

There were a range of approaches to resolve food poverty, including direct support through food banks, providing signposting support and working in partnership with other local organisations to provide referrals. One project took a different approach to resolving the issue:

*'We don't offer that (food relief) service, but we have been involved in setting up and disbursing a crowdfunder to help people pay their energy bills, so that they don't have to choose between heat and food. We focused on energy because many were providing food but not half so many helping with other essential bills. After all, no point giving people ready meals if they can't afford the electricity or gas to heat them up!'*

At one of the Trust's long-term projects, food insecurity had become a serious issue, overwhelming food banks. The project responded by creating an Action Team to focus on the issue, delivering surplus food and offering additional support to 74 local households. This sparked interest in developing sustainable solutions and residents established a large-scale food-growing project.

### **Financial insecurity**

Two-thirds (66%) of the Trust's funded partners reported that residents were experiencing more financial concerns as a result of the pandemic, often for groups who were already fragile in terms of their capacity to withstand further financial shocks. As one project lead stated:

*'The communities we work with are some of the most deprived and hard to reach. The pandemic has just added to the financial insecurities our communities face. Some have struggled to put a meal on the table.'*

*'The awareness that the rate of unemployment is growing is making many even more concerned as they see little or no way out of this financial challenge.'*

Unemployment was a key factor. Rising food costs, pressures on household budgets and furlough requirements, low paying work and zero hours contracts were also mentioned as contributory factors to financial concerns. One eighth (12%) of funded partners described issues with their own project's financial concerns and for their staff. In some areas, staff were particularly concerned about the impact of job losses on local industry when furlough ends and the full consequences of the pandemic on unemployment would be felt even more severely.

From the Trust's long-term, place-based Local Conversations programme, 60 per cent of project leads highlighted relationships with the Citizens Advice Bureau to help support residents with their financial insecurity and make referrals. Some Local Conversations were also engaged in providing direct support through additional financial and benefits advice and online money management courses.

### **Exclusion from community life**

Several funded partners stated that they felt everyone was being left behind from community life in the pandemic, with the bonds holding people and neighbourhoods together threatened by continued physical isolation. Some funded partners felt exclusion from digital access, a key pathway to social interaction, due to the high costs of devices such as laptops, tablets or smartphones as well as the internet, restricted access to devices within a family, or low digital capacity reinforced the isolation experienced by some groups.

We asked respondents to identify any specific groups of people they feel have been hardest hit by the pandemic. The responses indicated the pandemic has been hugely challenging for a vast number of neighbourhoods and communities already experiencing marginalisation and severe disadvantage.

*'The groups that are likely most affected (by mental health problems) are older people, younger people, BAME groups and parents, as they have had to endure the most in terms of the virus itself and the social and economic costs.'*

### **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities**

Several project leads indicated they felt existing inequalities have been exacerbated at a community level. These trends are confirmed in wider national data, which show higher mortality risks and uneven effects on rates of unemployment for a number of particular ethnic groups.<sup>8 9 10</sup>

Some participants from Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnicities were highlighted as experiencing digital exclusion, which has affected their social connectedness. Some funded partners had also seen increasing racial abuse with subsequent effects on mental health. Several project leads indicated they felt that existing inequalities have been exacerbated at a community level.

These trends are confirmed in wider national data that shows the mortality risk from Covid-19 is much higher for particular minoritised ethnic groups including Black, Bangladeshi and Pakistani people, and there have also been uneven effects on rates of unemployment for young Black people for example, who have experienced disproportionate falls in employment over the course of the pandemic.<sup>11</sup>

### **Disabled people and people with learning disabilities**

The survey highlighted several concerns for disabled people and people with learning disabilities during and following the pandemic. One issue during COVID-19 was a lack of access to official guidance and information in easy-read or other accessible formats. Project leads also raised concerns about funding and the sustainability of their projects. They felt the pandemic and withdrawal of many services meant this group, especially children, are particularly vulnerable to any further retreat of activity to support them.

The mental health of disabled people and people with learning disabilities was also raised as a prevalent concern due to:

- An increase in isolation and loneliness for people having to shield
- Fear due to a far greater mortality risk
- A sense of guilt over feeling like a 'burden of care' on their families, who also had to shield
- Digital exclusion, which is particularly common amongst people with learning disabilities.

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<sup>8</sup> [Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19](#), Public Health England (2020)

<sup>9</sup> [Recent education leavers and young Black workers hardest hit by Covid-19 job shock](#), Resolution Foundation (2021)

<sup>10</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2021). [DWP Employment support](#), 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Public Health England (2020)

## LGBT+ people

Project leads highlighted a particular issue for members of the LGBT+ community was being unable to access the groups, events, and networks of support and solidarity which are often crucial to many people's wellbeing, as they are more likely than many groups to experience prejudice and stigma. This, compounded with the general social isolation that most of the population feels, created a disproportionate impact.

## Older people

Older people were identified as having significant losses in confidence, and some skills, including basic digital skills. This led to a feeling of digital exclusion, and further-emphasised their social isolation in many cases. This could be exacerbated by experiencing dementia or related conditions.

## Women

Single parents, 90 per cent of whom are women, were identified as a particularly hard-hit group. This reinforces research prior to and during the pandemic which demonstrates that single mothers face a far greater likelihood of financial instability and social isolation than the national average.<sup>12</sup> School closures also added significant pressure on single parent families.

Some funded partners were also concerned about women and the vulnerability they faced from domestic abuse in the confines of the pandemic.

*'With people stuck at home more with their abusers, and years of cuts to women's services, this has been a massive and growing issue. There is a gendered nature to the impacts of the pandemic and economic fallout as well, with women more often having to reduce work to take on childcare, and being over-represented in sectors affected.'*

## Young people

Isolation from their friends was identified as being particularly harmful for this group. Project leads indicated many children and young people were struggling with having to home school, particularly those in smaller homes, or houses of multiple occupation (HMOs).

Other concerns highlighted were:

- Stigma of young people, particularly around congregating in public
- Disrupted education and the disparity in levels of completed schoolwork
- Difficulty engaging with home learning
- Lack of support and careers advice for school leavers.

Some funded partners also expressed concern about the retreat of young people from communities as part of the shift online.

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<sup>12</sup> Stack R., Meredith A., [The Impact of Financial Hardship on Single Parents: An Exploration of the Journey From Social Distress to Seeking Help](#), *J Fam Econ Iss* 39, 233-242 (2018)



*'The mental health of young people is a concern. We're hearing more and more from young people about the struggles they are facing and the worries they have for their future as a result of the pandemic.'*

## Homeless people

The lead of a project supporting homeless people observed addiction rates were fast increasing for those with prior substance dependency issues, often relapsing for a sense of emotional support and escape. Some who had not previously had addiction issues had also reportedly developed them. Homeless people were described as losing important support functions for their daily lives as shelters closed, meaning advice and resources were not available to them.

## Part three - The response of the community sector: positive impacts of the pandemic

### Increases in volunteering and participation

While much of the wider context was hugely challenging, 78 per cent of funded partners engaged new people throughout the pandemic. Project leads indicated people had more time to engage with their local neighbourhood due to furlough and online delivery. There was also increased demand for services and a number of funded partners recruited more volunteers in response.

Of those attracting new volunteers and project members, 41 per cent indicated shifts in ways of working towards more online activities had supported them to access new people. Digital engagement methods supported funded partners to reach people they never would have been able to previously due to their caring responsibilities, as well as transport and travel barriers. In some cases, project members had requested online sessions continue even when face-to-face activity is possible again, appreciating the immediacy of access and hugely valued the contact with the project.

*'Simply by our charity going online and talking more about what we do has resulted in a dramatic increase in those who have enquired about the support we can offer (42%,) and we have experienced a 180% increase in those signing up to receive our emails, our support, and access to our online materials.'*

### Growth in collaboration and partnership working

More than half of those surveyed (56%) indicated they could access new partners including local authorities, local voluntary sector partners, supermarkets of businesses. The opportunity to meet online also meant funded partners could connect with other organisations focused on similar themes, 9% mentioned these new connections explicitly.

A third (33%) also identified other new opportunities and a fifth (19%) talked about how they have enhanced their skills in using digital to improve their capacity to respond. Increased skills and confidence using social media and digital platforms helped funded partners to engage with new local partners to build awareness of important issues and seek support or joint-working arrangements.

There was widespread appreciation of how shifts in working practices have strengthened existing and built new partnerships and collaborations, with a third (34%) of funded partners establishing new partnerships specifically. Often, partnerships emerged from collaborative emergency response support and there was hope the relationships would continue to be built upon and consolidated. At one of the Trust's longer-term Local Conversations, staff noted they are now working closely with the council Public Health team and have secured temporary funding for two members of staff to work specifically on public health messaging.

### **Opportunities to access funding**

In some cases, partnerships resulted in access to new funding from local authorities, supermarket chains and even national funders. Some partnered with their councils and built relationships with supermarkets and food suppliers through emergency response work, which will endure beyond the pandemic.

*'The pandemic has given us the opportunity to demonstrate how effective our services are, and this will help us going forward when we enter negotiations in relation to contracts.'*

### **Summary and next steps**

The findings of this survey provide greater depth to the headline statistics in the national media about the impact of the pandemic on increasing health inequalities, with first-hand testimony from people living in neighbourhoods experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage in Britain.

The impact of the pandemic goes far beyond the immediate restrictions people have faced. The consequences have spread far and wide, affecting employment, financial and food security, social isolation (including digital), safety, and sense of community, which are all having a profoundly challenging effect on mental health.

The survey highlights that already-stretched project leads who have been at the heart of supporting people within communities are now also at risk of mental ill health. Without committed support not just within the sector but from government and health agencies beyond, the situation is likely to become worse.

There are important positive consequences of the pandemic, including a greater understanding of the critical role that the voluntary and community sector plays, as well as inspiring increases in the growth in partnership working with the VCS, often with statutory bodies, to co-produce effective local solutions.

There are important foundations of local knowledge, networks, energy and insight emerging in the Trust's grant programmes. When brought together with statutory and other local partners, this foundation provides the potential to engage in a way of working that will yield sustainable benefits, provided community organisations are recognised as a critical element of local systems and an essential partner to co-produce solutions.

## Next steps

It is clear the Voluntary and Community Sector has been critical during the pandemic. Its work has brought both unique insights, early warnings, and pragmatic solutions. There is a serious danger the VCS sector is in danger of being overloaded as it tries to meet demands not met by the State, including issues with food, shelter, and income.

The survey highlights two critical concerns for the Trust:

- The deteriorating mental health of residents living in neighbourhoods experiencing serious disadvantage in Great Britain
- The impending crisis within these neighbourhoods due to worsening mental health of the very workers trying to support those in need.

To navigate this, we believe that support is needed on several fronts:

- **Understand the support needed in greater depth** - we plan to work with other funders in assessing further both the mental health needs of VCS workers and some of their preferred solutions. We will use our considerable network of community organisations to quickly understand the issues further. This will need to be rapid work to enable us to mobilise support quickly.
- **Capacity building** - supporting those leading local VCS organisations to recognise the signs of mental ill-health in workers and support them to feel confident to address and signpost early. Additionally, supporting frontline VCS workers with mental health training to support them to recognise, work safely and understand referral routes.
- **Peer support networks** - building on existing VCS networks to ensure that there are well-facilitated networks for VCS community workers and leaders to support with emerging mental health issues they are experiencing.
- **Funding** - work with funders and government to consider resources required to enable VCS organisations to continue to respond to mental health and emergency needs of their residents, through expansion and increased focus on mental health in grant priorities.
- **Direct and prioritised mental health support for VCS workers and people within communities experiencing disadvantage** - through rapid referral to local counselling and support services.