

The Listening Fund and Covid-19

At the end of March 2020, Karl Wilding of NCVO spoke in stark terms to a DCMS select committee about the impact of Covid-19 on the charitable sector. Despite the Government's subsequent measures of support for the sector, the potential funding shortfall means many charities could close and those that survive will most likely face the combination of increased need and reduced resources. In this context, there is a real risk that some of the deeper, and already under-resourced work around voice, empowerment and listening is set aside to make way for other pressing priorities.

We know that those who were already struggling before coronavirus, who were marginalised and lacked a stake in society, are likely to be those that suffer most in its wake. Covid-19 has demonstrated the fragility of certain individuals' lives and the costs of their neglect, alongside the power and commitment of communities to respond – whilst thousands have signed up for Universal Credit, thousands more have signed up to volunteer and support the NHS and set up mutual aid groups.

In the short, medium and longer term, listening carefully and deeply to understand the implications of Covid-19 will be essential. Service-delivery organisations need to listen to their communities to inform the changes they are making to their operations; campaigning organisations need to listen to understand how the virus and the policy response are affecting the lived experience of those they represent and where it has created opportunities too; funders need to listen to identify where their resources can have maximum impact alongside others and use this opportunity to re-shape how they work – there is good evidence that this is what many are doing. Finally, local and national government will need to be supported and encouraged to listen to a diversity of expertise and experience as we collectively respond to this crisis.

The Listening Fund focuses on young people. It aims to ensure that organisations, influencers and decision-makers listen to young people's expertise and experience, whilst supporting young people to lead social change themselves. The Fund also aims to act as a resource for the funding community. It shares learning on how we share our power and how we improve our accountability to those we exist to serve. In the context of Covid-19 and its devastating, unequal impact across British society, The Listening Fund's work feels increasingly important. It is therefore crucial that the Fund critically analyses its role, adapting and responding where necessary.

Some emerging implications of Covid-19 for TLF:

1. Young people are likely to be disproportionately affected by Covid-19: already facing uncertain futures and huge concerns about climate justice, housing and youth unemployment, they are now having their education disrupted, and facing even greater economic uncertainty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies' analysis

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shows that those under 25 are two and a half times more likely to work in a sector which is now shut down as other employees.

The Blagrave Trust, one of TLF's funders, has heard the following concerns from their partners who work with young people:

- Material hardship: shortage of food, toiletries, sanitary protection, cleaning equipment, phone top ups
- Lack of access to the internet and technology
- The impact of homelessness and implications for being able to access information, health care and to self-isolate. This is particularly important following a reported increase in family breakdown during/after lock down.
- Young people with moderate to severe learning disabilities are at risk of becoming increasingly isolated at home as their full time and only care givers are now immediate family
- Young carers are now having to take full burden of support for family members. Many are also not known to services and take on their caring role informally.
- Young people no longer at school or involved in youth forums still need signposting to organisations and services that can help them.
- The uncertainty facing young adults being released from YOIs/prison (early releases are planned due to Covid-19) as well as those on curfew, and the potential implications for criminal behaviour
- Reduced access to mental health services and support
- The challenges facing young people who are leaving the care system for independence at this difficult time

2. Youth voice, participation and listening are already underfunded across the sector, with few resources available to organisations who want to invest the time and effort required to improve their listening practices and culture. This is precisely why TLF was established. Post-Covid-19, we anticipate there will be even fewer resources to support marginalised voices to share their expertise, experience and opinions, and to demand that their needs be understood and met.

3. Many youth sector organisations may not survive the pandemic and its wider impact, so there will be less voluntary sector support available to young people. That which remains will need to be better coordinated otherwise it risks exacerbating 'issue' and postcode lotteries in terms of available support. Unfortunately, NCVO's analysis demonstrates that infrastructure organisations, who play such an important coordinating role, will be the first casualties of the sector crisis.

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4. The value and importance of youth-led change and leadership will likely shift. Many young people were already rejecting the top-down ways of working of some charities, driven to campaigning through frustration at their situation or that of their peers. We are already hearing of young people mobilising in response to Covid-19, using digital technology and the lessons from climate activism to coordinate their work. For example, Blagrove recently learnt of a group of young people aged 17-22 calling themselves 'The Influenzers' who have formed a rapid response campaign collective – they believe the government has failed to provide a clear and coherent response to Covid-19, and are stepping up to support their community, sharing reliable information, ideas and building hope for a more compassionate future. Our obligation is to the young people we seek to serve through our mission and Covid-19 will likely sharpen our understanding of what that means.

How can The Listening Fund respond – now and longer-term?

As a champion of listening, TLF has a role to play in advocating for improved and continuing listening across the sector, and providing the resources necessary to support this work. Our current thinking is as follows:

- The majority of TLF partners in England have come to the end of their two-year grant and therefore there is limited scope for direct support beyond confirming our flexibility around reporting deadlines which we have already done.
- There has been a small underspend on the TLF budget in England. We are considering using this money to employ a researcher, working with TLF partners and potentially other youth sector organisations to understand how Covid-19 is affecting listening work. We want to understand if the pandemic has caused listening to be reduced or even stopped, and to share any emerging insights and learning from partners into how to protect listening practices and cultures at times of stress, particularly when delivery mechanisms are disrupted due to remote working. We think there is value in a rapid piece of work which examines how listening is impacted during emergencies and how it can be maintained under duress.
- We had two more workshops planned on funders' listening practices and cultures. These are being moved online. We are also changing the focus to encourage funders to reflect on what the pandemic has revealed about existing practices and power structures, what changes we are making in response to Covid-19 and how any positive shifts can be maintained long-term.

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- Funders in England are considering supporting a second phase of The Listening Fund. We are reassessing existing plans to see how they need to be adapted to our new context and, in particular, whether TLF can support some specific listening around Covid-19 and its impact. What will remain unchanged is our commitment to youth leadership during any second phase of The Fund. Young people's perspective and expertise will be vital in ensuring our resources reach those who need them most and we hope that by supporting young people to lead, and sharing what we learn through this process, we will be able to play a role in shaping a new, fairer, more effective way of working amongst funders.