



# **NEXT STEPS FOR THE VCS**

The Voluntary and  
Community Sector in a  
world shaped by Covid



**"THANK YOU, VCS, FOR ALL YOU AND YOUR TEAMS HAVE DONE" JOHN SKIDMORE**

Over the last six months we have been working at pace to support our clients' response to Covid. Over recent weeks we have also supported them to step back, reflect on this period and think about what it all means for the future.

A key observation for all our clients has been the centrality of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in the response to Covid, with many of them expressing a desire to maximise the role of the VCS across the system moving forward. What is less clear to our clients is what this might actually look like. How can the positive energy of today be sustained, while doing the difficult work needed to support communities to 'bounce forward' (rather than just 'bounce back') and embed new ways of working?

In August, we brought together system leaders from across Adult Social Care and the VCS to discuss:

- Key reflections on Covid and the role of the VCS
- The big opportunities for maximising the role of the VCS from now onwards, and
- The next steps needed to 'bounce forward'

This publication summarises the key points made by participants.

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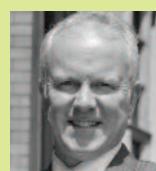
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## REFLECTIONS FROM COVID

While the conversations with system leaders and clients were extremely rich, we have distilled three key takeaways from them:

- 1 While the response to Covid has propelled some areas forward in their journey towards more joined-up working, this has been patchy and has not been the same experience for the VCS as it has been for Adult Social Care.** Some felt that good relationships in local areas have become even stronger, while others described struggling and feeling left behind. This was most acutely felt by some parts of the VCS.
- 2 Covid has demonstrated the vast inequalities that exist within and between communities and “exemplified the need for a whole system response to change” (Caroline Abrahams).**
- 3 Now is the time to start recognising the VCS as system leaders and equal partners, not as a ‘nice-to-have’.** The VCS have real expertise around their communities - as subject matter experts and in delivery - and we need to harness this and not suppress it.



We know how important it is to hear first-hand from those with experience of delivering at the frontline and leading change in their local areas and organisations, so this section draws on the voices of those we spoke to.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

“Before we can take action, we need to be comfortable that opportunities and challenges are often the flip side of the same coin” (Sara Storey).

Three key themes emerged from the discussion.

- 1 “Supporting shielded people has created a real shared ambition and there is an opportunity to build on this...” (Jess Hutchinson)....“by thinking about what enabling and building independence means for people now, and how to support them to build their confidence where vulnerability has been the leading narrative this year” (Sara Storey).**
- 2 “There is an opportunity for the system to recognise that the VCS can lead on local solutions, working with public sector partners, so that people have access to a range of support in challenging times” (Dipika Kaushal).** Demand for support from the VCS has increased significantly over this period, and there is an opportunity to better understand the potential the shift from acute to community has to improve outcomes for people, if it is invested in and embedded over the longer-term.
- 3 We need to “empower and invest in the expertise of the VCS and let them do what they are great at” (John Skidmore).** Funding and commissioning has long been a challenge, and there is an opportunity and desire to think collectively about how we enable long-term, outcomes driven relationships which are not limited to tightly scripted specifications and short-term output measures. Local authorities can play a key role in this conversation. “Staff are often on a merry-go-round of short-term contracts. Flexible commissioning that can pivot based upon skills and needs would be a game changer” (Julia Munro).

## HOW DO WE ‘BOUNCE FORWARD’ RATHER THAN JUST ‘BOUNCE BACK’?

“First of all, we need to listen, to VCS organisations of all types and sizes, to our staff, and most of all to our residents” (Mel Lock).

In practice, what might this look like? Here are the three priority next steps identified by the group:

- 1 Develop an inclusive ambition with the VCS as an equal partner.** Make sure the VCS are round the table (or round the virtual table!) as strategic leaders and embed this at all layers and across the system. This could begin a discussion around refocusing on strengths-based language and approaches with residents and communities.
- 2 Understand demand for support in communities and how this has (or is likely to) shift as a result of Covid.** What additional need is materialising in communities, and what role does the VCS want to play in meeting and managing this?
- 3 Proactively address funding and commissioning.** Understand what changes might be needed nationally to incentivise collaboration across the VCS, and identify your role in championing these changes while also looking inwards at your own commissioning processes. How can you work together, side-by-side, towards achieving outcomes with communities and retain the flexibility to respond to (and plan for) the path ahead?

Winter will not be without its challenges, but the momentum for change and a burning platform means that now is the right time to drive the role of the VCS forward. Both adult social care and the VCS need to focus on what they can learn from each other, both in terms of shared challenges and differences. And, as Julia Munro stated, there is a need for a new approach - it's time to “empower rather than manage”.

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