

# Tipping Point: The Cost-of-living Crisis

Lessons from the Voluntary  
and Community Sector

July 2023





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# Executive Summary

**This report describes some of the ways the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) has been responding to the challenge of the cost-of-living crisis, focusing on the early part of 2023. It draws out insights, knowledge and practical ideas to help inform future preparedness and response to an ongoing crisis that will escalate again as winter approaches.**

In its conclusions it cautions against any assumption that, without significant changes in the funding environment, the VCS will be able to continue to respond with the same effectiveness it has this year.

In the Winter of 2022, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) established a Cost-of-living Winter Support Fund, which was administered by the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) via the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) and UK Community Foundations (UKCF). The Fund distributed £1.2m to over 600 community and local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) in the form of small grants (the average size of which was £2,500). The Fund intended to provide for the rapid delivery of grant funding to frontline organisations in England to continue or enhance their support for communities. These grants were designed to increase their capacity to meet needs and protect the dignity of those seeking support. As was widely reported at the time, the interaction of rising fuel and food costs, winter weather, and economic uncertainty impacted not just those most vulnerable but also drew into financial security, and even hardship, those who considered themselves relatively wealthy and resilient.

The research in this report was commissioned separately by DCMS and had two aims:

- To provide the VCS with examples and case studies that have worked in addressing needs within the complex challenges posed by the crisis.
- To add to the evidence on the scale of need and support required to assist funders, policy and decision-makers. In particular, to highlight how pre-planning and preparedness – done well and with sufficient resource – supports the resilience of people, communities and organisations.

This report is divided into two parts:

- **Part One** – describes the VCS response. It identifies the issues that organisations are helping individuals, families, and communities address. It then goes on to illustrate, through case studies, approaches to meeting complex, urgent and multifaceted needs.
- **Part Two** – looks more closely at the experiences and impacts of rapid response on VCS organisations and their people. It draws together the key issues that need to be addressed to ensure that in the future, the VCS will continue to be able to play its role in meeting the needs of communities living through crises.





# Executive Summary

## How has the voluntary and community sector responded to the crisis?

According to the Institute for Government, writing early in 2022 ('Cost of Living crisis' 7 February 2022), the cost-of-living crisis is affecting the lives of all people but impacting particularly harshly on those already vulnerable or disadvantaged and, therefore, least resilient. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that 75% of the bottom 20% of low-income households in the UK have gone without essentials.\* In response, the government has been providing additional support to those on lower incomes in various ways.

### Food insecurity

Addressing food insecurity has been a massive priority for the sector. The response has been highly varied as the sector responds to immediate needs and looks for longer-term solutions beyond the 'sticking plaster' of food banks. The approaches taken in the sector broadly fit into three categories: serving prepared food, distributing groceries and vouchers, and equipping and upskilling. Work done has followed effective practice and sought to innovate to meet needs more effectively.

### Fuel poverty

The sector has taken creative approaches to addressing fuel poverty. As well as distributing items to keep people warm, it has repurposed existing community assets (principally buildings) to

become 'warm spaces' for the most vulnerable. VCS organisations across the board have observed 'a new wave of people' accessing these spaces and support for the first time – those who would previously not have sought such assistance. Those providing support had to do so in a way that avoided stigma and made help accessible to all those in need.

### Health and Wellbeing

The crisis has meant that people had to redirect money previously spent on leisure activities towards 'heating and eating'. Recognising this, the sector has responded by creating various social opportunities for people whose wellbeing has been impacted by isolation. Mental health was seen as a critical need, especially with the stress and anxiety brought on by financial precarity. Not only did the sector look at what it delivered, but also how it was delivered.

### Information gap

The VCS has long been relied upon to provide information, advice and guidance for those in need. Communities continued to turn to trusted VCS organisations to help them cope with the cost-of-living crisis. As well as supporting people directly, organisations also shared knowledge and insights, including resources for how the organisations themselves could navigate the financial challenges they faced. With the crisis changing the picture of community needs, the sector also played a vital role in the flow of insight into the public sector.



\*[Earwalker E, 'Going under and without JRF's cost of living tracker, winter 2022/23', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 14 December 2022, retrieved 29 March 2023, [www.jrf.org.uk/report/going-under-and-without-jrfs-cost-living-tracker-winter-202223](http://www.jrf.org.uk/report/going-under-and-without-jrfs-cost-living-tracker-winter-202223).] It is these most significant areas of impact where the VCS has focused its resources.



# Executive Summary

## How has the cost-of-living crisis impacted the voluntary and community sector?

The VCS is crucial in supporting people affected by the cost-of-living crisis.

However, as well as responding to the crisis, it is severely affected by it, too.

### Financial

Mirroring communities, organisations in the sector are impacted financially by the crisis in three main ways: costs are up, income is less secure, and resilience is down. With it costing the sector 'more to exist' due to increases in energy bills, rent, food, and fuel, some (often smaller) organisations are 'fighting to survive' - this wider experience was reflected in our smaller study.

### People

The cost-of-living crisis has also significantly impacted people working and volunteering in the sector. The impact is two-fold; firstly, those we spoke to described staff and volunteers as increasingly leaving the sector and not being replaced, as financial constraints hinder recruitment and retention, including the capacity to manage volunteers' and volunteers return to the labour market. Secondly, those who remain are facing a cost-of-living crisis themselves.

### Partnerships and relationships

The crisis accelerated existing partnerships (often with roots in pandemic response) and led to new approaches being tried. It undoubtedly put pressure on relationships between organisations, with some increasingly concerned about survival and many competing for scant funding resources. However, it is clear from the research that the response to crises has reinforced the sense of value that partnerships bring, both in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

### Strategy

VCS organisations collectively have unique insight into communities, their needs and the crises that affect them - often spanning many generations. As such, the sector is well placed and stands ready to help shape longer-term approaches to addressing cost-of-living issues on the basis that the current crisis will endure. Organisations in this study expressed concerns that a short-term, reactive approach will not be sustainable enough to tackle this crisis that has, by most definitions, become chronic.

### Conclusion

The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated some already severe challenges for the voluntary and community sector, especially in relation to its resources, both financial and human. The nature and intensity of overlapping crises tested organisational resilience, people, and relationships. Yet, despite all this, extraordinary positive impacts were achieved, and people's lives have undoubtedly been improved. The future is a mixed picture. Financial challenges mean that many organisations in the VCS will struggle to operate at the same scale: whilst the instinct to act and collaborate is intact, the constant struggle for scant resources is taking its toll. More positively, this report's case studies and stories show how even small innovations, new ways of working, and unconventional partnerships can benefit people during tough times. With the right support and investment, the VCS can continue to lead thinking and practice about how best to serve communities facing the growing dangers of social, climate and economic upheaval.





# Introduction

## Purpose of report

This report describes some of the ways the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) has been responding to the challenge of the cost-of-living crisis, focusing on the early part of 2023. It draws out insights, knowledge and practical ideas to help inform future preparedness and response to a crisis that is ongoing and will escalate again as winter approaches. In its conclusions, it cautions against any assumption that without significant changes in the funding environment, the VCS will be able to continue to respond with the same effectiveness it has this year.

In the winter of 2022, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) established a Cost-of-living Winter Support Fund administered by the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) via NAVCA and UKCF. The Fund distributed £1.2m to over 600 community and local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) through small grants (the average size of which was £2,500). The Fund intended to provide for the rapid delivery of grant funding to frontline organisations in England to continue or enhance their support for communities. These grants were designed to enable them

to increase capacity to meet needs and protect the dignity of those seeking support. As was widely reported at the time, the interaction of rising fuel and food costs, winter weather, and economic uncertainty impacted not just those most vulnerable but also drew into financial security, and even hardship, those who considered themselves to be relatively wealthy and resilient.

The Winter Support Fund has been separately evaluated, and the lessons will be available to those considering similar rapid distribution schemes in the future.

The research in this report was commissioned separately by DCMS and had two aims:

- To provide the VCS with examples and case studies that have worked in addressing needs within the complex challenges posed by the crisis.
- To add to the evidence on the scale of need and support required to assist funders, policy and decision-makers. In particular, to highlight how pre-planning and preparedness – done well and with sufficient resource – supports the resilience of people, communities and organisations.

## The structure of this report

This report is divided into two parts:

### [Part One](#)

Part one describes the VCS response. It identifies the issues that organisations were helping individuals, families and communities to address. Then, it goes on to illustrate through case studies approaches to meeting needs that are often complex, urgent and multifaceted.

### [Part Two](#)

Part two looks more closely at the experiences and impacts of rapid response on VCS organisations and their people. It draws together the key issues that need to be addressed to ensure that in the future, the VCS will continue to be able to play its role in meeting the needs of communities living through crises.

The report concludes by posing questions for all those interested in ensuring the resilience, effectiveness, and long-term health of the VCS, particularly its capacity and capability to prepare for and respond to the sort of crises we know the changing world will generate more frequently.

At the time of writing, the cost-of-living crisis continues to generate misery for many people in England and challenges for the VCS and other organisations. However, data in this report is mainly referred to in the past tense, reflecting the research period. The work for many continues to be ongoing and likely to be so in the foreseeable future, with pertinent themes emerging.

# Introduction

## Methodology

Data and insight for this report were generated using a range of approaches, focusing on qualitative accounts from those in leading and frontline roles.

- Survey data was generated from 131 organisations that had received grants through the DCMS Winter Support Fund.
- In-depth interviews were conducted with leaders from 30 VCS organisations across England.
- Insights and 'warm data' (focused on the interrelationships in this crisis) were fed into the analysis from the various networking and knowledge-sharing activities VCSEP does as part of its 'core offer' network meetings and events, as were various secondary sources to explore the nature and scale of the crisis.

Findings in this report cannot be said to come from a representative sample of the very diverse and large VCS in England, but the authors are confident that many of the themes respondents raised and shared here will resonate strongly with those whose activities over the last three years have been impacted by COVID-19 response segueing into the cost-of-living crisis. At various points, emerging findings have been checked in with VCSEP members to reinforce our sense that these themes are commonly recognised experiences and issues.

## The crisis context

The 'cost-of-living crisis' became apparent late in 2022 and widely recognised by the time winter came, quickly following the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of political and economic turbulence in the Autumn. Whilst significant resources have been made available to support individuals and communities through the pandemic (including from the UK government, local government, commercial organisations, charitable trusts and foundations, and public donations), there is a much longer-standing challenge facing many VCS organisations in securing levels of funding that make them sustainable in the medium and longer term. The sector is significant, mainly comprised of tiny groups and organisations and – unlike the commercial sector – its growth and contours are shaped by responding to need and not simply the availability of income funding. So, as social needs grow in scale and complexity, more, in turn, is sought by VCS organisations whose respective missions drive them to identify and deliver effective responses.

The process of organisational and people 'stretch' continues until either funding relieves some pressure, conditions abate, or organisations cannot continue to operate. It's a delicate balancing act in which horizons and planning approaches are often far shorter than VCS leaders wish for. Against that backdrop, 'the cost-of-living crisis' was described by one interviewee as 'a more significant challenge than the pandemic'. Others agreed, seeing the emerging challenges as dynamic – 'increasing', 'evolving', 'complex', and at times 'unaddressed'.



# Introduction



## Continuity and change in hardship

Our findings illustrate the far-reaching impact of the cost-of-living crisis. We know already that all regions of England are affected and that adverse effects are not limited to one group of people. Those in the VCS are working with the practical manifestation of this: older people who are increasingly socially isolated; young families struggling to pay for school uniforms; carers making the difficult choice to return to work; asylum seekers ineligible to work and some without recourse to public funds; households worried about opening energy bills; those entirely reliant on bottled gas (such as the boating and traveller communities) unable to afford to replace empty cylinders.

While this crisis has affected nearly everyone in some way, the challenges posed by the crisis are not being felt evenly. For those people from groups and communities whose vulnerability is well established, the experience is not new, but it is increasingly severe.

**“We’ve learned not to talk about the cost-of-living crisis in isolation. Poverty was a serious issue... prior to the pandemic, and many already struggled with housing, heating, and food costs.”**

### Thrive LDN

This deepening of hardship was most vividly seen when it came to food. Respondents told us how rising energy prices meant that they saw cases where people could not prepare even the cheapest foods, turning off their fridges and freezers to save energy. When clients faced these problems, respondents’ projects tried to adapt quickly, sometimes with new resources, which meant incurring extra costs.

**“People were telling us, ‘You know we love the potatoes you give us, but we can’t afford to cook them anymore.’ How do we deal with that? So, we push through more meals, but that also comes at a cost to us. Paying for fridges, chilling, vans, warehouses, staff, volunteers.”**

### Felix Project



# Introduction

However, for some people, the experience of financial hardship was novel. Many VCS organisations we spoke to reported dealing with people who had never previously accessed their services or spaces. One organisation described the most significant change as needing to help ‘so many people in work’ access support for the first time. This included people working in the VCS itself – a theme that will be explored further in part two.

**“People impacted haven’t experienced poverty or needed to claim benefits before; those in the ‘just about managing’ category (who aren’t really managing at all but hold it together) are finding themselves plunged into poverty, into an alien system and there is a lot of pride to navigate.”**

### *Communities 1st*

A potent theme common among VCS respondents was this twin phenomenon – of growing need amongst their key, more usual ‘service’ users and beneficiaries while encountering entirely new cohorts of individuals and families seeking help and support. Many organisations we spoke to described having had to scale up their responses,

with one organisation increasing its reach from 12,000 clients in 2021 to 18,000 by the end of 2022.

**“The number one lesson has been about the scale of the need. There is so much more support needed than we ever realised.”**

### *Lancashire BME Network*

Despite the many efforts by the sector to grow capacity, adapt to the fast-changing landscape, and develop new partnerships, respondents’ views in this research are that needs continue to be unmet. Those at the sharp end of delivery describe the sector as ‘overstretched’, with growing waiting lists and long queues. Those who re-granted money as short-term ‘aid’ were inundated with applications, many of which had to be turned down.

**“We had two-hour queues and people arriving very early (open at noon, started queuing at 9 AM). We saw a sharp increase in food insecurity”.**

### *South Lakes Action on Climate Change*

While most interviewees reported more people seeking support, those we spoke to also said that the needs they were dealing with were more complex and interconnected – the intersection of fuel

poverty, money worries, poor health and mental health, for example, with those responding facing painful dilemmas.

**“Because of the accessibility of the sector (it doesn’t turn people away), grassroots groups are seeing people come to them with increasingly complex and multi-faceted needs that they are far too stretched to deal with, but the sector won’t say no.”**

### *Wessex Community Action*

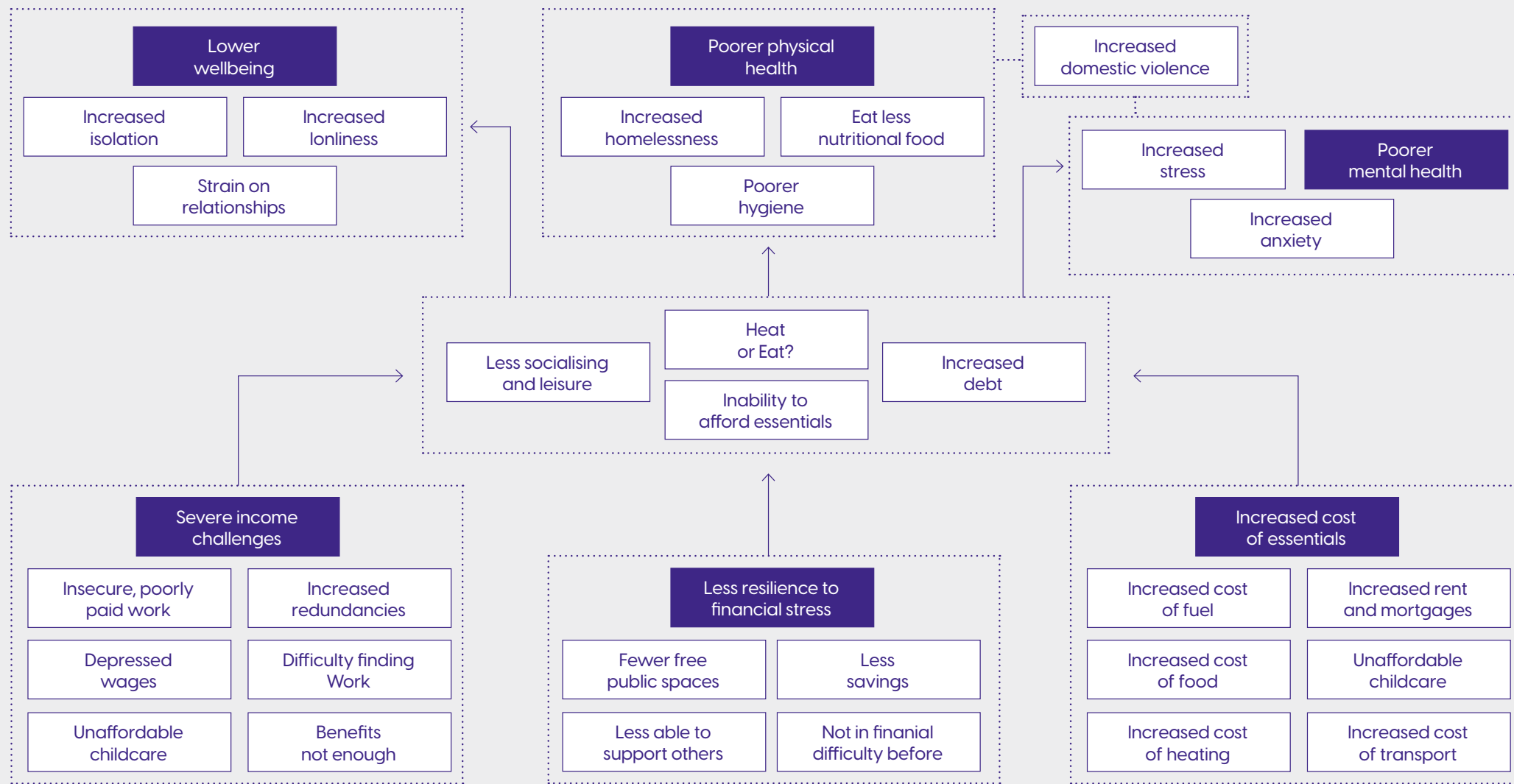
In the survey, grant recipients were asked about the priority needs they were dealing with. A problem tree representing this can be found in figure 1 below.

The picture painted by so many of our respondents was one of a sector under the most severe stress – doing everything in its power to address more significant and more complex needs, grateful for any extra support, but feeling overwhelmed. One leader interviewed used the phrase ‘tipping point’ to refer to the shared experience of individuals, families and communities facing the cost-of-living crisis hard on the heels of the pandemic AND the VCS struggling to keep up with the scale of need. This, in our view, is the dominant underlying theme in this research report.



# Introduction: Problem Tree

## Consequences



## Causes



# Part One

How has the voluntary and community sector responded to the cost-of-living crisis?





# Introduction

**This research tells some of how organisations in the voluntary and community sector responded to the cost-of-living crisis over winter 2022 into spring 2023 whilst still addressing the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities. The story is one of an already stretched sector, rising to one challenge after another with a great deal of tenacity and no shortage of creativity.**

According to the Institute for Government ('Cost of Living crisis' 7 February 2022), the cost-of-living crisis is affecting the lives of all people but impacting particularly harshly on those already vulnerable or disadvantaged and, therefore, least resilient. In response, the government has been providing additional support to those on lower incomes in various ways. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that 75% of the bottom 20% of low-income households in the UK have gone without essentials. It is these most significant areas of impact where the VCS has focused its resources.

The areas of individual and community need during the crisis are therefore familiar – food insecurity; fuel poverty; health and wellbeing; and access to information. The sections below are organised by each of these areas of need and share: Approaches; Key Lessons; Practical Tips, and Spotlight practical examples shared by respondents. The intention is that, taken together, this may stimulate new thinking and identify sources of experience and good practice to draw on in the future.



# Food insecurity

The cost-of-living crisis has drawn even greater attention to what is a multi-faceted, widescale and long-term problem in the UK, evident in the emergence and expansion of food bank networks. What is evident in this research is the way in which respondents' organisations stepped in to provide the support needed urgently, knowing that in the absence of more substantial interventions, these could only ever be short-term responses. A refrain that summed up this dilemma was, 'We don't want to be doing this, but we have to...'. In so doing, there was no shortage of innovation and creative approaches, alongside the deeper concerns about fostering unsustainable dependencies and treating the symptoms and not the root causes of the issue.

If you would like to read more detail about the scale of food insecurity in the UK and who is affected, see our Insight briefing [here](#).

## Approaches

The approaches tried by the sector broadly fit into three categories, set out below in Figure 2.

- Serving prepared food
- Distributing groceries and vouchers
- Equipping and upskilling

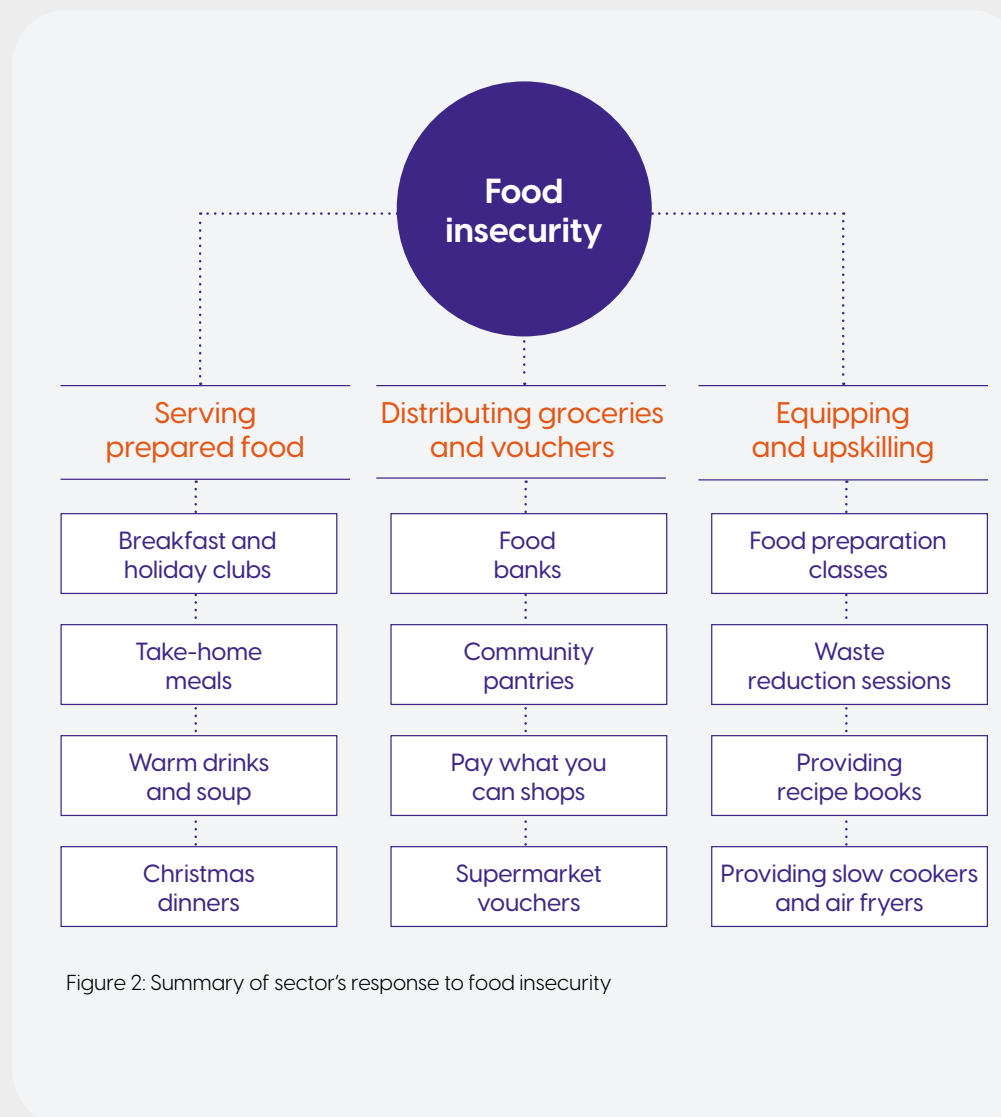


Figure 2: Summary of sector's response to food insecurity

**Key Lessons** Despite concerns about being drawn into focusing on short-term and urgent needs at the expense of developing longer-term solutions, organisations were, in some cases, able to help build greater resilience. For example, by moving to **equipping people** with low-energy appliances such as slow cookers and air fryers. This was often in combination with classes and demonstrations to improve people's skills to cook healthy and appetising meals.

**Overcoming stigma** was a concern to many VCS respondents, and shifting the way support was 'framed' helped move what could feel like 'Victorian' help for the poor to eat to tackling access and waste as part of wider societal dysfunction. For example, [South Lakes Action on Climate Change in Kendall](#) worked to reframe the issue to focus on waste reduction. By partnering with the Cumbria Waste Reduction Team, they made sure that more people were able to make use of their leftover food. This shift in focus also contributed to reducing stigma with the 'Love Food, Hate Waste' message resonating with all people.

**Listening carefully and responding appropriately**, being mindful of different needs and cultural sensitivities and respecting difference was universally agreed to be the best starting point. The work of [Lancashire BME Network](#) shows that just as people's needs vary, so should the solutions. Whether this is serving prepared food, distributing groceries or equipping and upskilling people, the community's needs must be at the heart



## Top Tips from the sector: Matching supply with demand

### Balancing sufficient levels of donations of the right items at the right time and distributing to those in need is a real challenge.

Here are five examples of how the sector addressed it:

1.

To deal with surplus seasonal fruit and veg produce and items looking 'different' to what you get in the supermarket, South Lakes Action on Climate Change partnered with the Allotment Alliance to produce a recipe library to help people gain confidence to use these items in cooking. This was popular and supported by volunteers. "If we have a huge influx of kale, volunteers pull out recipes on that and help people use it."

2.

When demand was high, and people were queuing for the larder in the cold, South Lakes Action on Climate Change created a ticketing system. This enabled people to leave the queue and stay warm.

3.

The Felix Project switched from packaging individual portions of cooked food to mass distribution at schools and community organisations. They began to turn up in a van and distribute food directly to people. See the [Spotlight for more details](#).

4.

To deal with periods when supply outstrips demand (such as Christmas when there is a surplus of food, but schools and community organisations are closed), The Felix Project secured funding for a 'mega-freezer'. This increased their ability to accept surplus food donations while alleviating dips during leaner times.

5.

To help ensure that donations of items aligned with what people needed, the [Afghanistan and Central Asian Association](#) set up an Amazon wish list. They updated their list daily with the exact items they were lacking or needed in the coming days.



**"If we have a huge influx of kale, volunteers pull out recipes on that and help people on how to use it"**

## Spotlight

### The Felix Project

Organisations adapted to the changes caused by the cost-of-living crisis

#### Need:

The Felix Project in London experienced considerable increases in demand for our regular services due to the rise in food insecurity. Six hundred community organisations and schools reached out to ask for food, up from 300 in August 2022.

#### What we did:

We collect nutritious yet surplus food from supermarkets, bakeries, and farmers and redistribute it to charities and schools across London. We also have a kitchen where chefs and volunteers prepare, cook and package over 3,500 fresh meals daily to distribute across 18 London boroughs. Last winter, we trialled a new way of distributing food to communities. Instead of packing individual portions and parcels and transporting them to a particular area, we took larger quantities of food to the community, handing out and decanting food directly to the people who needed it.

#### Impact:

By distributing food in larger quantities like this, 200 tonnes of food that would've either been wasted or gone into our freezers was provided to people when fresh. Going forward, we will receive funding from the Greater London Authority and the Mayor's Fund for London to cover children's meals during school holidays. This will allow us to supply food parcels and recipe boxes to communities, ensuring that children are able to have nutritious and fresh food when not at school.

#### Who was involved:

[The Felix Project](#), [Greater London Authority](#), and [Mayor's Fund for London](#).

**"We flex and bend and adapt and bring people together."**

## Spotlight

### Rainbow Services

Upskilling and equipping the community for more sustainable outcomes

**Need:**

Rising demand for food at both foodbanks and community larders from unemployed and working households.

**What we did:**

We created 'Kelly and Kate's Kitchen', a three-week workshop teaching people to cook tasty, nutritious, and budget-friendly one-pot meals from food collected from the foodbank or bounty club (where £2.50 can buy a bag of fruit, veggies, and meat). We covered the benefits and tips for batch cooking, provided recipe cards and cookbooks and taught kitchen skills. Once participants completed the course, they received a free, small kitchen appliance – such as an air fryer or slow cooker – to carry on what they had learned at home.

**Impact:**

Households were able to prepare more nutritious meals in a budget-friendly way whilst making a new network of friends, with greater community connectedness and a sense of solidarity with others. This also aided in reducing the social isolation that many impacted by the cost-of-living crisis have felt.

**Who was involved:**

[Rainbow Services Harlow](#), [Harlow foodbank](#), [Harlow Bounty Club](#), and funded by [Active Essex](#).

**“Rather than just putting a sticking plaster on in it, we will have conversations about why they need the foodbank... so they don't need to keep coming back.”**





## Spotlight

# South Lakes Action on Climate Change

## Reframing food initiatives and delivering in partnership

### Need:

South Lakes Action on Climate Change witnessed a sharp increase in food insecurity in our community, along with social isolation and people needing a warm space.

### What we did:

What we did: We created a series of Winter Warmer food events offering a warm space with hot drinks and pop-up food demonstrations using surplus foods from local supermarkets, shops, and allotments. The Cumbria Waste Reduction Team also joined us at some of these events and gave talks about the Love Food, Hate Waste initiative. We also held community and family 'cook-a-longs' with small groups, cooking and eating together.

### Impact:

The events taught residents how to create simple, affordable meals at home, with recipe packs to take away. Hearing about the Love Food, Hate Waste initiative also allowed people to make use of their leftover food. This social and warm space has built resilience in teaching healthier eating habits and aided the reduction of loneliness.

### Who was involved:

Who was involved: [South Lakes Action on Climate Change](#), funded through [Cumbria Community Foundation](#).

**“We can achieve so much through reaching out to other partners... we can't do this without partnerships.”**



## Spotlight

# Lancashire BME Network

Organisations varied their response to meet the needs of differing groups

### Need:

The organisations we support saw increased demand for services due to the cost-of-living crisis. We particularly identified food insecurity as an issue affecting our communities as well as travel, which has restricted the support people in need can access.

### What we did:

We distributed a grant to 10 organisations across Kendal, Burnley, West Lancashire, and Preston, who provided support to underprivileged households. One of the organisations was [Kind Communities CIC](#), which used a grant to provide families in Preston with food parcels of staples such as rice, tinned pulses, and meat. Another was [Asylum and Refugee Community \(ARC\) Blackburn](#). They used a grant to provide transport for asylum seekers who had struggled to access their support services. One of the other organisations

funded was [The Wish Centre](#), which offers refuge to women and families fleeing domestic abuse. They used a grant to purchase essentials such as food, toiletries, and new pots and pans, particularly important for their Muslim families for whom cooking equipment must be halal. They also created 'starter packs' for those moving on to other accommodation, including kitchen appliances and utensils. The funding also provided 'Cook and Eat' sessions for those staying with them.

### Impact:

Kind Communities CIC supplied food parcels to 17 families (89 individuals), allowing these households some breathing space for a few weeks. ARC Blackburn was able to purchase bus tickets for 43 individuals to travel to and from their vital services and supply them with refreshments at their events. The Wish Centre received a grant to support 49 women aged between 19 and 47

and 50 children aged seven months to 16. Their 'Cook and Eat' sessions were also invaluable for reducing the social isolation many of their residents can feel.

### Who was involved:

[Lancashire BME Network](#), [Kind Communities CIC](#), [ARC Blackburn](#), [The Wish Centre](#)

**“Even though it was a very small grant, we were inundated with back-to-back applications – never seen anything like it.”**

# Fuel Poverty

Fuel Poverty means that a household cannot afford to heat (or cool) its home to an adequate temperature. Generally, a household in England is considered fuel-poor if they live in a property with an energy efficiency rating of B and D or below. If they have spent the required amount to heat their home, they are left with an income below the poverty line. National Energy Action provides more information on Fuel Poverty here.

If you want to read more detail about the scale of fuel poverty in the UK and who is affected, see our Insight briefing [here](#).

## Approaches

The approaches taken by the sector broadly fit into three categories:

- Creation of warm and energy spaces
- Distributing warm packs
- Providing energy-related advice

Figure 3 summarises the sector's overall approach to fuel poverty.

## Key Lessons

As well as distributing items to keep people warm, some organisations repurposed existing community buildings to become 'warm spaces'. Creating spaces welcoming to all and removing any stigma needed careful thought and planning. Not least because – as this research has consistently reminded – organisations within the sector have observed 'a new wave of people' accessing support for the first time. Respondents saw it as helpful to focus on creating family atmospheres and be mindful that the term 'warm spaces' could be off-putting to some, who associated this with old age or even destitution.

Respondents described the pattern by which people presented at community spaces with multiple needs. Many faced a grim dilemma - having to choose between 'heating or eating'. Organisations we spoke to created multi-purposed spaces - providing food, leisure activities, access to Wi-Fi, mobile phone charging, washing machines and driers, effectively reducing household costs for people, allowing them respite from difficult choices.

The crisis led organisations to find ways of combining strengths for more impact. For example, Rotary Great Britain & Ireland partnered with [Gears for Goodwill](#) in Derby, Nottingham, and Sheffield to support homeless people facing an altogether different challenge to staying warm. Read more about their work in the [Spotlight](#).

Organisations like [Up for Yorkshire](#) have recognised that new skills and specialist knowledge are needed to address the evolving crisis. They trained trusted individuals and organisations supporting vulnerable households to give energy-related advice. They provide them with up-to-date information and resources that they can share with their networks.

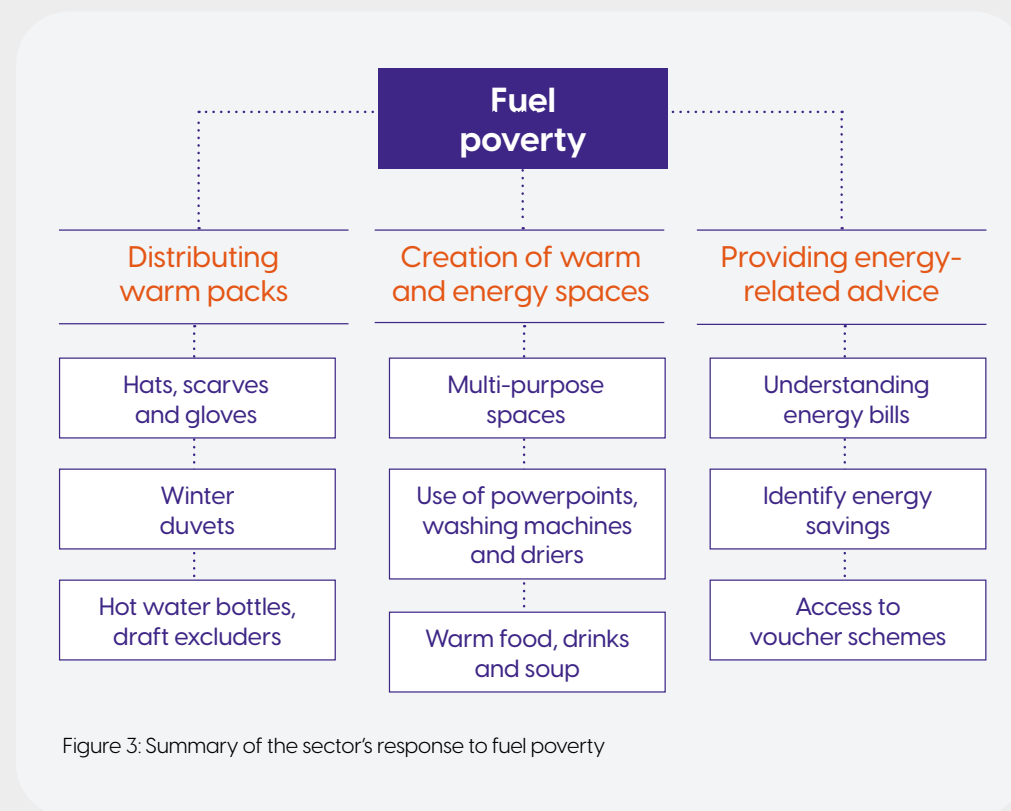


Figure 3: Summary of the sector's response to fuel poverty

## Top Tips from the sector: How to address multi-faceted crises.

**The cost-of-living crisis is not a simple linear crisis. It has complex causes and consequences. Individuals and communities are affected in multiple ways.**

Here are four examples of how organisations responded to this:

1.

To handle increasing complexity, organisations like The Sutton Centre are **set up to address multiple needs in one space**. They provided food, leisure, electricity, warmth, and advice in one community hub.

2.

To address the evolving nature of the crisis, many organisations needed to upskill their workforce. Thrive LDN provided **mental health first aid training to debt advisors** to support people experiencing the wider impacts of financial strain.

3.

As well as upskilling, working in **partnership with specialists helped tackle emerging needs**. The Wishing Well Project partnered with Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service as they saw people put the gas hob on to heat homes rather than the heating, which was a considerable health and safety concern.

4.

It is important to look at the whole picture and the whole person. Cambridge CVS recommends **considering practical things like transport links** to community spaces. People cannot benefit if they cannot get there.



**It is important to look at the whole picture and the whole person.**

## Spotlight

### The Sutton Centre, Bradford

Making spaces multi-purposed to take a holistic approach

#### Need:

The Sutton Centre identified that people in our community were experiencing multiple challenges related to the cost of living, with our food pantry seeing increased demand week by week.

#### What we did:

What we did: Our food pantry distributed fruit and vegetable hampers. Those attending could also make an appointment with a welfare advisor who could offer advice and ensure they are getting all the benefits they are entitled to. We also provided community meals once a week in a tiffin box, allowing people to keep food warm when they take it home. There were very few warm spaces open at weekends, therefore, we started a Sunday family games night. Parents could access support whilst children are playing with our centre having mobile phone charging points, washing machines and dryers that they can also use.

#### Impact:

We distributed 70 food hampers worth £30 each, allowing families to focus their income elsewhere with welfare advisors making sure they were maximising their financial potential. Our warm spaces also allowed parents to take their children to activities and socialise without spending money.

#### Who was involved:

[The Sutton Centre](#)

**“People can co-work in the space, use the internet; on Sunday night, the warm space is a family games night with 30-40 people.”**



## Spotlight

### Rotary Great Britain & Ireland

Needs for similar groups varies from region to region

#### Need:

The cost-of-living crisis has disproportionately impacted the homeless, with rising costs affecting people on no or unstable incomes significantly. However, support is inconsistent across the country, with some homeless communities not receiving the basic necessities.

#### What we did:

We worked with Gears of Goodwill, an organisation helping and feeding people experiencing homelessness in Derby, Nottingham and Sheffield. We distributed food, clothing, and temporary shelter equipment to rough sleepers in city centres. This was a new partnership, which we will continue due to the scale of need. Rotary groups around the country found that access to food for those who are homeless varies widely, meaning we had to adjust our support.

#### Impact:

Homeless people, who had already struggled to pay for essentials before rising prices, received items that kept them warm and fed.

#### Who was involved:

Rotary Great Britain & Ireland,  
Gears of Goodwill

**“For those chronically homeless, in some areas, they had access to food, others not so Rotary needed to adapt their support to this group.”**

## Spotlight

### Up for Yorkshire

Sector developing new skills to meet the evolving crisis

**Need:**

Families in our community had to make the difficult choice between 'heating and eating' due to the substantial rise in energy prices and household bills.

**What we did:**

We co-facilitated an initiative with Yorkshire Energy Doctor, training over 500 people across over 250 organisations to become Community Energy Ambassadors. The course equipped those from VCS organisations to support others to understand their energy bills and the payments available to help.

**Impact:**

Our Community Energy Ambassadors supported 6715 households, saving £182,512, with information delivered via social media, newsletters, and flyers, reaching 31,351 people. Ambassadors were also able to increase understanding of energy issues within the community.

**Who was involved:**

Up for Yorkshire, Yorkshire Energy Doctor, funded by Northern Gas Network

**“I think the most important lesson is collaboration”**

# Health and wellbeing

The cost-of-living crisis is a public health emergency that is expected to exacerbate health risks and inequalities.

According to a survey by The Royal College of Physicians, 55% of people in Britain report that the cost-of-living crisis is causing their health to deteriorate. Of these, 84% cited increased heating costs, 78% blamed rising food bills, and 46% said transport costs were responsible for worsening health. One in four was informed by a doctor or medical professional that rising prices were negatively impacting their health, with stress considered a driving factor for 16% (Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, 2022).

Financial hardship and living in poverty **are known to** lead to mental health difficulties, and mental ill health can lead to financial hardship and poverty. People experiencing mental health problems are **three-and-a-half times** more likely to be in debt than people without mental health problems. In addition, mental health **problems significantly increase the risk of developing physical health problems** and vice versa.

If you want to read more about the impact on mental health and public health outcomes, see our Insight briefing [here](#) and [here](#).

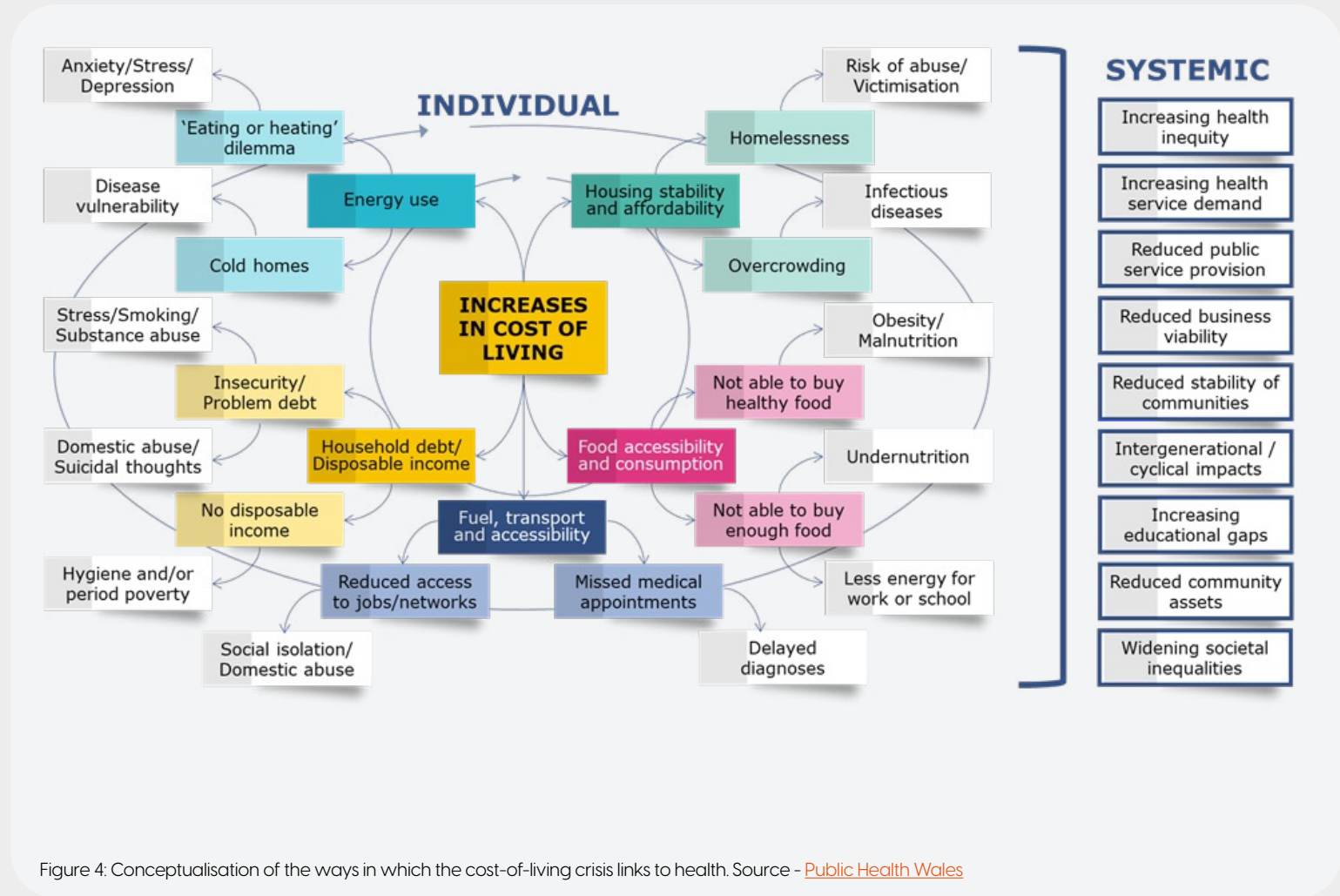


Figure 4: Conceptualisation of the ways in which the cost-of-living crisis links to health. Source - [Public Health Wales](#)



# Health and wellbeing

## Approaches

As set out in figure 4, the cost-of-living crisis affects people's health and wellbeing directly and indirectly. This section focuses on how the sector worked to respond to health and wellbeing issues directly.

The approaches tried by the sector broadly fit into three categories:

- Socialising and leisure
- Mental health support
- Physical health support

Figure 5 summarises the sector's overall approach to health and wellbeing.

## Key lessons

The crisis has meant that people have redirected money previously spent on leisure and wellbeing activities towards 'heating and eating'. Recognising this, the sector has responded by creating a variety of opportunities for people to socialise, including games nights, film clubs, and discos, sometimes integrating them into community hubs.

Mental health was seen as a key need, especially with the stress and anxiety brought on by financial concerns. Not only did the sector look at what it delivered, but also how it was delivered. It sought to upskill its workforce in

trauma-informed practices so it could provide emotional support and dignified responses alongside practical support. In addition, organisations like CommUNITY Barnet supported grassroots community organisations to improve the cultural sensitivity of mainstream mental health services by facilitating dialogue between the groups. By escalating issues about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on their communities and the lack of support available, it is hoped it will begin to address some of the health inequalities that older people from different communities face in the borough.

Many organisations increased their outreach work, including Teignbridge CVS, which worked with social prescribers, social care teams, hospital discharge teams, community mental health teams, key VCS providers and more to identify residents who are most impacted by health inequalities to get funds into families and at the same time further connect those families to additional support services. An evaluation of this project found a very different community to that which would typically apply through public web forms accessed this support.

To address people's physical health, some organisations promoted physical activities, including strength-based physical activity sessions, to younger and older people. Organisations also provided hygiene and sanitary products to combat

period poverty. St John Ambulance reported a rise in falls amongst the elderly; many attribute such accidents to the combined effects of cold homes and frailty exacerbated by poorer diets.

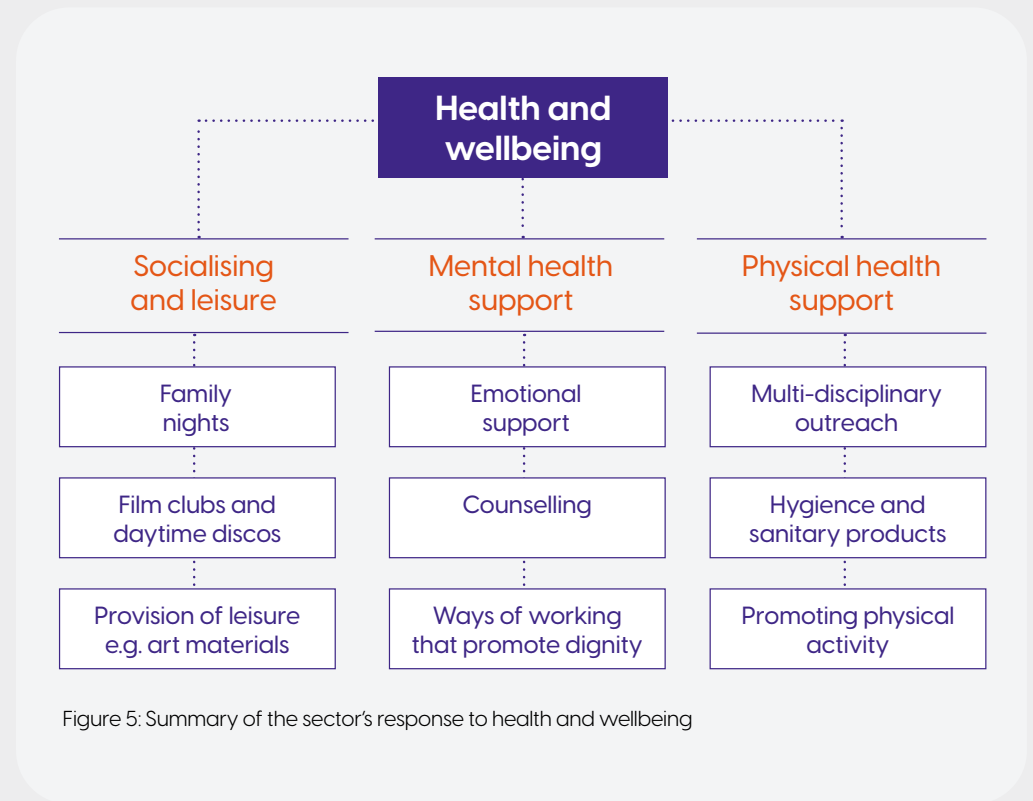


Figure 5: Summary of the sector's response to health and wellbeing

## Top Tips from the sector: How to provide a dignified response.

**Asking for help can be difficult, especially if it's your first time. Organisations we spoke to in the sector reported seeing many people who felt embarrassed and ashamed to be in difficult predicaments.**

Here are six examples of how the sector helped people whilst recognising their concerns about stigma:

**1**

[3SG](#) is a partner in Bath and North Somerset's [Community Wellbeing Hub](#), which sees collaboration across the local council, adult services, and VCS organisations. Residents who needed support could call the Hub and be triaged rather than having to navigate multiple referral routes. This means people seeking support **only had to tell their story once** before connecting to the 'pods' within the service, which focus on their needs.

**2**

**Build ways for people to give, not just receive.** This can happen in many ways, like with [Three13](#), who encouraged peer-to-peer support in their training, or [South Lakes Action on Climate Change](#), who facilitated community lunches between Syrian and Ukrainian refugee communities and some of the most isolated residents.

**3**

The sector is keen to build on sustainable food networks. By **reframing food issues to be about enjoying food and reducing waste**, cooking with seasonal vegetables, and sharing good practices, people met their food needs without asking for help.

**4**

People who are struggling won't always reach out for help. Organisations like [Rainbow Services](#) recommend organisations are proactive – **tell people what they are entitled to, don't wait for them to ask.**

**5**

By having support in multi-purpose venues, people could access support more discreetly. Many we spoke to suggested **creating spaces that aren't only accessed when in crisis, creating a 'family atmosphere'** and making services available to everyone (not just the most vulnerable).

**6**

Some people felt most embarrassed when being seen to access support, such as in queues for food banks. Some organisations opted to **eliminate queues** by starting home delivery or ticketing systems.



**People who are struggling won't always reach out for help**

## Spotlight

### Teignbridge CVS

Reach out to people where they are;  
don't wait for them to come to you.

#### Need:

South Devon is mainly rural with a significantly older population who, following the pandemic, had become more isolated and were not having their cost-of-living needs met. We also discovered that many in our communities were not applying for the benefits they were entitled to.

#### What we did:

We worked with local social prescribers, social care, hospital discharge teams, mental health workers and critical VCS providers to identify communities most impacted by the cost-of-living crisis and health inequalities. We decided to take advice services to where they were needed, developing a multi-agency roadshow model.

#### Impact:

Our roadshows allowed energy, housing, and benefits advisors, VCS organisations, and others to go directly into our rural and isolated communities to answer questions from families, provide advice, and explain more about the support available. We are already planning to deliver more of these events in rural communities this autumn.

#### Who was involved:

Teignbridge CVS, local social prescribers, social care, hospital discharge teams, mental health workers and key VCS providers.

**“We ‘found’ a very different community to that which would normally apply through public access forms on the District Council website.”**

## Spotlight

### CommUNITY Barnet

Mainstream services are only sometimes sensitive to cultural needs.

#### Need:

Organisations in our network said that high demand for their services had meant limited capacity to fundraise, with their rising costs adding further pressure. We also identified that many Black-led organisations and their communities were disproportionately affected by both COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.

#### What we did:

We redistributed funding to several small organisations, including [Romanian Culture and Charity Together](#) and [Barnet African Caribbean Association](#). We established a Black Elders Collaborative – an organisation supporting older people in some of Barnet’s most deprived and multicultural areas. A grant was also used to fund staff for the Collaborative to advise on strategy and business planning.

Our new mental health partnership provided culturally sensitive services – conditions worsened by COVID-19 and the economic crisis.

#### Impact:

The Black Elders Collaborative escalated issues about the impact on their communities of the cost-of-living crisis and lack of support to Barnet’s Commissioners for Dementia and Older Adult Services. This dialogue can begin to address some of the health inequalities older people from different communities face in the borough. Participants have responded positively to wellbeing activities delivered by people and in locations they trust.

#### Who was involved:

[CommUNITY Barnet](#), funded through NAVCA.

**“Mainstream mental health services weren’t culturally sensitive – our community partnership trains staff and volunteers to deliver support.”**



## Spotlight

### St John Ambulance

The crisis is having knock-on effects on people's health.

#### Need:

The NHS has seen increased demand for its services. A rising number of people cannot afford to put their heating on or buy essentials such as food; this leads to them becoming unwell and therefore needing medical attention and support.

#### What we did:

In 2022, we were commissioned as the nation's ambulance auxiliary service to add resilience to NHS ambulance trusts by treating and transporting patients while helping reduce waiting times. Over winter, we worked with the NHS to surge our emergency ambulance support by up to 25%, delivering 8,500 hours each month to address increasing patient and NHS demand. The main factors causing these winter pressures included surges in COVID-19 and flu cases and the public health implications of the cost-of-living crisis.

#### Impact:

Our St John fall response teams attended 3,100 falls, saving 2,800 ambulance callouts in 2022 reducing the impact on NHS ambulance services. However, we have seen a rise in the number of falls with people, particularly the elderly, saying that due to cold homes, they cannot feel their feet, so they are falling or are living on such small amounts of food that they are becoming dizzy and unwell and then falling.

#### Who was involved:

[St John Ambulance, NHS](#)

**“With people, particularly the elderly, saying that due to cold homes, they cannot feel their feet, so they are falling.”**

# Access to information

The problems of food insecurity, fuel poverty and health and wellbeing issues are not new to this winter. However, the cost-of-living crisis means these impacts are widening and deepening, and the need for new forms of support is urgent. With more people affected, including people who have never needed help, providing clear information about accessing appropriate support is critical. As the crisis affects different groups and communities in different ways, there is a growing demand for insight data and access to practical and nuanced information about differential impacts and what forms of trusted support, advice, and information are available.

## Approaches

The VCS has long been a source of trusted information and advice, and the cost-of-living crisis has underscored this vital relationship. As well as supporting communities directly, respondents' organisations also shared resources with each other and others, recognising their critical role in raising awareness and understanding of how the crisis impacted people and communities.

The approaches tried by the sector broadly fit into three categories:

- Sharing information with individuals
- Sharing with others in the sector
- Sharing insight with the public sector

Figure 6 summarises the sector's overall approach to filling the information gap.

## Key Lessons

Organisations like [Three13](#) continued their training courses to help people get into employment. They found that small group work, in settings where learners can support each other, has been key, as well as getting people involved in community projects that benefit wellbeing, attitude and aspiration.

Other respondents described how organisations shared resources with each other via weekly newsletters, networking events, cost-of-living specific briefings, and adding sections to their website. They shared good practice, national information, as well as developing their own, which they then passed on to the communities they support.

With the sector also affected by the crisis, infrastructure organisations prioritised helping organisations navigate the crisis. This included advice on budgeting, strategy and business planning, maximising income, and supporting staff and volunteers. They also increased the number of their 'Meet the Funder' events, which bring together grant-givers and groups/services seeking funding to build relationships and develop an understanding of what funders look for in applications.

The evolving crisis meant that new needs were emerging in communities. Organisations such as [Cheshire West Voluntary Action](#) helped facilitate dialogue between the community groups and the public sector. It was approached by the local authority to join their Cost-of-living Response Group. Being involved meant they could bring the voices and needs of the communities to the fore.

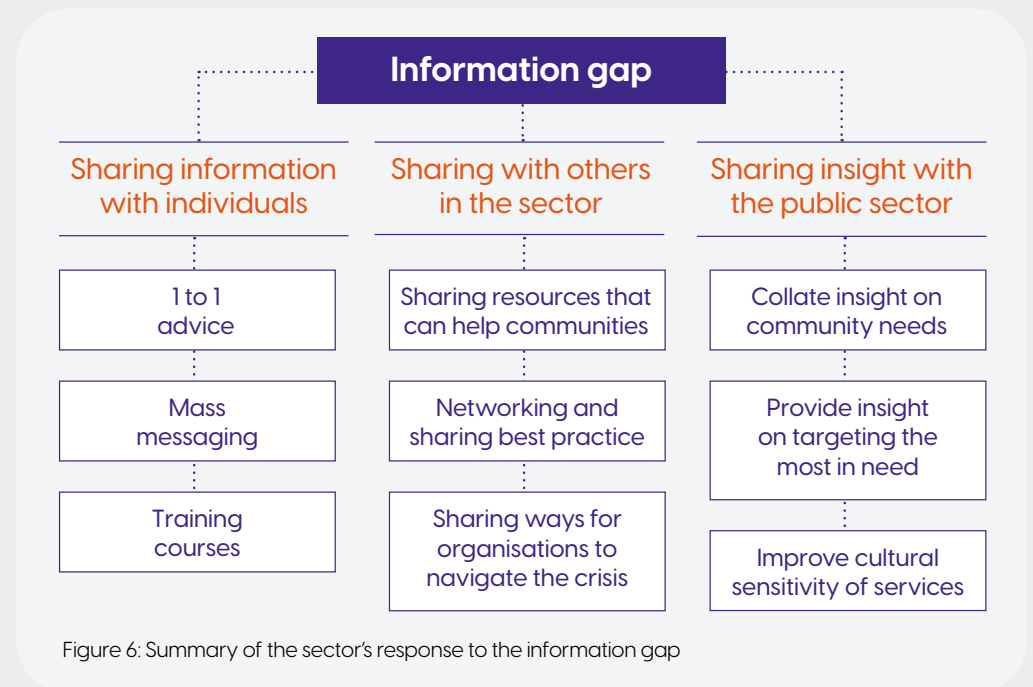


Figure 6: Summary of the sector's response to the information gap

## Top Tips from the sector: The best way to share information

**Information has been crucial in mitigating the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. Information flows from the sector to communities, the public sector, and within the sector itself. With so many audiences with differing needs, organisations adopted different strategies.**

Here are five examples of how the sector shares information:

**1**

There is so much information available that finding the right information is difficult. 3GS found that **less is more**, and so created a filtering system (funding/pro bono/toolkits/top tips webinars) - tied in with the news stories they tag with the cost-of-living. <https://www.3sg.org.uk/costofliving>

**2**

Community Platform, Wiltshire Together, set up campaigns where organisations can **tag activities and support specific subject areas**. This brought all cost-of-living activity in the area together on a single website. This meant people could easily find information to support people with their questions. <https://wiltshiretogether.org.uk/activities>

**3**


It is important to **recognise the digital divide** – many methods for sharing information require a certain level of literacy and digital skills to access, which is not possible for many people. Face-to-face and paper alternatives should be made available alongside digital solutions.

**4**

Acknowledge that you can't do everything but can connect people with others. **Networking is a great way to make connections** and find out the strengths of other organisations for more effective signposting.

**5**

**Listen to volunteers, colleagues, and partners** responding to community needs. Organisations can respond more effectively when they are led and designed by the community. It is crucial to speak to people to learn and listen.



**Organisations can respond more effectively when they are led and designed by the community**

## Spotlight

# Cheshire West Voluntary Action

People will seek information from organisations they trust

### Need:

We identified that provision for children under five years old and their parents was limited. We were also aware that both the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis significantly impacted those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

### What we did:

In August 2022, we were approached by our local authority to join its cost-of-living Response Group. Being involved meant we could bring our communities' voices and needs to the fore. Subsequently, we were asked to manage the local authority's Household Support Fund through our networks. Our knowledge of communities allowed us to target underserved groups where we knew there was a lack of resources. We were able to give funding to several organisations, including one that ran parent and baby groups and a SEND group that supported people to live independently.

### Impact:

Funding from the local authority's Household Support Fund allowed additional services, such as more parent-and-baby groups and activities that allowed stay-at-home parents to access support and reduce isolation. The SEND group were able to extend their offer, providing specific work on finances, energy saving and cost efficiencies. With this increase in their services, there were already relationships within the community, meaning an already vulnerable group was supported quickly and effectively.

### Who was involved:

[Cheshire West Voluntary Action](#),  
[Cheshire West and Chester Council](#)

**“Existing services are best placed to access those in need; they are already working with the individuals or families, and so the inbuilt trust between them exists.”**





## Spotlight

### Three13

Trust is crucial, and peer-to-peer learning can enable it.

#### Need:

Those who are unemployed have been significantly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. However, we know that simply focusing on changing a person's employment status isn't always going to lead to sustainable change.

#### What we did:

We worked with people who are long-term unemployed and ex-offenders to build a better future through training and support. We found that small group work, in settings where they can support each other, has been key, as well as getting people involved in community projects that benefit wellbeing, attitude and aspiration. The grant allowed us to build on and enhance the work we were already doing. We have further implemented peer-to-peer learning and sessions, including understanding debt and the benefits of earning.

#### Impact:

This is an example of one person, but it shows that small things can make a significant change. He initially came to us on probation, knowing that as an ex-offender, he would face more barriers getting back into the world of work. Through our sessions, he realised he was spending hundreds of pounds every month on takeaways and alcohol but wanted to make healthier choices. The visual change was astonishing. The health benefits from budgeting were an unexpected but welcome outcome. For this person, the courses, funded by a grant, made a significant difference to his confidence.

#### Who was involved:

[Three13](#), funded through the [County Durham Community Foundation](#)

**“Delivering in an environment where people can trust each other with genuine budget chats, etc., is helpful.”**



# Part 2

How has the cost-of-living crisis impacted the voluntary and community sector?



## Introduction

**As seen in Part One of this report, the voluntary and community sector played and continues to play a crucial role in supporting people affected by the cost-of-living crisis.**

However, as well as responding to the crisis, it is severely affected by it too. The crisis has negatively impacted the sector's human and financial resources. It has forced mission-driven organisations into short-term responses to meet urgent needs, taking energy and resources away from longer-term strategy and development work. Small organisations have flexed to cope with rising demand, the changing nature of need, and challenges to their people and volunteering capacity. At the same time, the crisis has arguably brought about a renewed sense of the importance of working in partnership, formally and informally, with the sector repeatedly demonstrating its value. It has also reinforced the power of the sector's knowledge and insights about community assets, strengths, needs, and the ways crises impact some more than others. The sector is eager to use its insight to develop and deliver a joint long-term strategy to address the crisis, as it is clear that 'sticking plaster' solutions cannot be sustained.

**Eager to develop a long-term strategy 'sticking plaster' solutions cannot be sustained.**



# Financial

Mirroring communities, the sector is affected financially by the crisis in three main ways: costs are up, income is less secure, and resilience is down. With it costing the sector 'more to exist' due to increases in energy bills, rent, food, and fuel, some (often smaller) organisations are 'fighting to survive'.

**"We reached a tipping point last summer when the fuel crisis began, we rely on stability: with volunteers, fuel, food, and, of course, all costs have gone up. Every aspect of the service had increased."**

## *The Wishing Well Project*

While costs have increased, the sector has been delivering to pre-crisis budgets. Donations are down, and bringing in new funds is also a significant challenge. Unrestricted funding for infrastructure and long-term funding is highly desirable but increasingly rare.

Organisations we spoke to reported more competition for funding, but the capacity to both deliver and at the same time fundraise has been even harder to maintain.

**"Organisations need to have the capacity... so they can then spend time looking for funding because if you are struggling to... pay the electricity, you haven't got time to go out and look for the funding to do that. It's that chicken-and-egg thing".**

## *The Felix Project*

The resilience of the sector has been tested. It has yet to recover from the ravages of the pandemic sufficiently. More and more organisations are drawing upon their reserves (B&NES 3rd Sector Group, 2023). Having already undergone drastic cost-cutting measures, some still have a financial shortfall.

**"A further challenge is that community groups and organisations have not had time to recover from the pandemic – and the increasing complexity of compounding need without time/resources to respond sufficiently."**

## *Community Works*

All this results in a sector where, for many, there is a growing struggle to balance addressing the unmet needs of its communities while ensuring survival as an organisation. Many have wanted to do more but could not afford to, while others continue to address gaps unfunded. The strong sense of mission and moral obligation to help those most in need means saying no to those seeking help is unthinkable.



# People

The cost-of-living crisis has also had a significant impact on human resources. Respondents describe three levels of impact: firstly, staff and volunteers are exhausted, responding to needs that seem to be escalating faster than help can be delivered is corrosive; secondly, financial challenges mean that recruitment and retention are harder than ever; third, staff (and volunteers) facing economic challenges themselves are looking for more secure roles in other parts of the labour market.

Many organisations report being unable to make pay awards anywhere near the level of inflation.

**“Staffing is the biggest problem that’s come out with the cost-of-living crisis – keeping up with inflation, being able to support staff with that, and being able to recruit – with the pressures of the real living wage is one of the biggest challenges.”**

3SG

The sector’s remaining workforce is feeling the effects of this. As well as being personally affected by the crisis, fewer staff overall means that those who have stayed have taken on more. Following the strain of the pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis, organisations are worried about staff burnout.

**“As with others – we are asking staff and volunteers to take on complex needs whilst at the same time managing their household response to the cost-of-living crisis; we wonder how long their wellbeing will hold out.”**

Teignbridge CVS

Respondents tried a variety of strategies to slow the exodus of the workforce and support those remaining. Where possible, some have increased pay, given one-off payments, and increased volunteer expenses despite operating within pre-crisis budgets. Others have introduced other measures to support their staff, such as providing lunches and allowing them to access food pantries.

**“Like COVID-19, you are responding to something that you’re also experiencing – as individuals and organisations. [We’ve] struggled with volunteer and staff fatigue. [We have] done much to support our staff: small pay increase, psychosocial support, wellbeing offers, personal/volunteer days.”**

Cheshire West Voluntary Action

Some in the sector have been able to maintain a dedicated team of volunteers. Where this has happened, volunteers have provided immense value.

**“Our success has come about because of others recognising the volunteers and the value of the centre... without the volunteers, we would have been lost.”**

Henfield Haven





# Partnerships and Relationships

Existing partnerships (often with roots in pandemic response) meant some were well placed to take on the new challenges of the cost-of-living crisis. New approaches were also tried in the spirit of more holistic community responses. The hard times also undoubtedly put pressure on relationships, with organisations increasingly concerned about survival and often competing for dwindling funds. But it is clear from the research that overall, one of the positives over recent years has been that the response to crises has reinforced the sense of value that partnerships bring in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and understanding and responding to need more effectively.

Organisations reported that working in partnerships often resulted in people getting the right help quicker. The increases in communication and understanding resulted in reduced duplication. Existing networks were found to be especially efficient, as many of the partnerships were continuations of relationships forged during the pandemic.

**“Being involved in the planning committee, they were able to directly influence key decisions and, in their view, prevented some unnecessary reinvention of the wheel. They managed the LAs Household Support Fund through their existing networks of organisations to quickly and more easily reach those with known needs.”**

*Cheshire West Voluntary Action*

As well as partnerships between the VCS and other sectors, there are also significant benefits to how the sector works together to support itself. Infrastructure and national organisations provided substantial

support to local organisations with space to share good practice, learn from others and source vital information and guidance. They also provided access to flexible funding to target the services based on the community’s needs. For example, the British Red Cross used its influence and size to raise and then distribute funding for community and grassroots organisations, while UK Community Foundations and NAVCA played a vital role in distributing funds quickly to their respective networks to support underway activity.

**“Having a grant to embed into the other work that we do is really valuable – appreciate not being hemmed in to create an entirely new project as we can build on the work we already do rather than a new project – refreshing this grant enhances rather than invents.”**

*Three13*

With people’s needs being more manifold and complex, the sector realised that working in partnership could deliver more appropriate support as partners combined their strengths. This was sometimes through joint working with organisations delivering their specialisms, or sometimes organisations upskilling each other. Often, it was just informal relationships and knowing who each other was and what they could offer.

**“I think the most important lesson is collaboration. Being connected to who is doing what is helpful because then you know who to go to and who will be useful. When you get a practical group of people who get**

**stuff done together, it’s amazing what can be achieved quickly. It is all about trust and collaboration.”**

*Up for Yorkshire*

However, working in partnership has its challenges. Partners did not always understand each other’s strengths and ways of working. This was noted, particularly in VCS and public sector partnerships where VCS organisations could sometimes find the size and complexity of the public sector difficult to navigate, especially when key individual relationships were lost through staff turnover. The sector didn’t always feel that they were equal partners in relationships, with less power, recognition, and understanding of its value.

Partnerships also took time to get up and running well while the right people were identified and ways of working were established. This work requires staff capacity, but partnership work is often unfunded. This was particularly felt by umbrella organisations whose role is to enable and facilitate connections between and within sectors.

**“We can achieve so much through reaching out to other partners; this can be very time-consuming to get off the ground and find ways of working. But this is how we can embed into longer-term ops rather than be a pilot. We can’t do this without partnerships”.**

*SLACC*

# Strategy

The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) has unique insight into communities, their needs and how crises will affect them. This research confirms the appetite amongst people in the VCS not simply to be engaged in short-term response but to contribute to wider and longer-term strategic thinking about how best to prepare for emergencies, build resilience, and what investment is needed to support this.

Throughout the crisis, the sector has acted as a bridge between the communities affected and the other sectors. The sector has participated in several projects (this is more successful when funded) to articulate the emerging needs of communities. It understands local assets and community strengths and can identify when initiatives would and wouldn't work. This grassroots insight has proven valuable when planning services.

**"[We] help coordinate the Black Elders group in Barnet – to deliver strategy, planning and services - to help our communities recover from the impact of COVID-19 and access community-based and statutory services. Mental health conditions worsened through the pandemic. We undertook research and engagement to develop a new approach. Through our new mental health partnerships, we are training staff and volunteers (who reflect the community and are sensitive to its needs) to be mental health practitioners.**

*CommUNITY Barnet*

With this insight, many we spoke to emphasised the need for long-term approaches to address the cost-of-living crisis properly. Organisations working from a social justice perspective and values base worried that warm hubs and other responses would be institutionalised in the same ways that food banks are. Many were at pains to point out that the sector does not want 'sticking plaster' solutions. Planning for winter 23/24 needs to start immediately. With the funding and people challenges the sector is facing, it cannot mobilise overnight.

**"Winter planning must start earlier. It routinely begins in September, and it's always too late. It also routinely is experienced as short-term small grant funding and does not take a strategic/systemic view. By continuously focusing on warm spaces and practical stuff – appears to deal with the issue – but is actually a shorter-term solution. New warm spaces created for this winter could be used as community hubs, but what does that mean for the spaces we already have?"**

*Community Works*

It was clear from all we spoke to that with longer-term financial security and the knowledge resources in place, the sector could embed practice that met needs most effectively – but without this, the response was likely to continue to be episodic and less effective.

**Existing services can easily flex and pivot to the communities' needs, they can change their function and go on from being warm spaces to welcome spaces, to cool spaces to whatever else is required – their success is in being embedded and trusted, built up over time – dial up/dial down nature doesn't work.**

*Communities 1st*



# Conclusion

**The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated some already severe challenges for the voluntary and community sector, especially in relation to its resources, both financial and human.**

The nature and intensity of overlapping crises tested organisational resilience, people, and relationships. Yet, despite all this, extraordinary positive impacts were achieved, and people's lives were undoubtedly improved. The future is a mixed picture. Financial challenges mean that many organisations in the VCS will struggle to continue operating at the same scale: whilst the instinct to act and collaborate is intact, the constant struggle for scant resources is taking its toll. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis is not subsiding and will escalate as winter draws near. The imperative to respond quickly to high volume and complex needs means that many have not been able to focus time and attention on strategic priorities and fundraising. More positively, this report's case studies and stories show how even small innovations, new ways of working, and unusual partnerships can benefit people during tough times. With the right support and longer-term investment, the VCS can continue to lead thinking and practice about how best to serve communities facing the growing dangers of social, climate and economic upheaval.





## Key Questions arising from the research

1. What would be the most effective way to ensure that VCS organisations were sufficiently well-resourced during crises to be able to play the full and active response role as envisaged under the UK Resilience Framework?
2. What would a robust strategic approach to the funding of the VCS look like if it were to ensure long-term investment in the capacity and capability of the VCS to prepare for and respond to emergencies?
3. What leadership development for those working in the VCS would enable them to ensure their organisations operated effectively in the (to some) unfamiliar world of resilience and emergency response?
4. How might we respond as a society to the wellbeing and mental health impact of traumatic events, particularly when they affect large numbers of people and/or particular communities?
5. What further investment is needed to release more of the potential brought to preparedness and response by volunteers?
6. What is the best way for the VCS and Local Authorities to maintain or re-establish ways of working formed during the pandemic, where the VCS was fully embedded in key processes and its value recognised?
7. What forms and levels of funding create the most favourable conditions for collaborations - such as investment in infrastructure to develop partnerships and maintain the health of local, regional, and national networks?
8. How might the VCS, the public sector, funders, and policy and decision-makers develop a joint long-term strategy to address the cost-of-living crisis?





# Acknowledgements

**Thank you to all those who shared views, experiences, and challenges with the Emergencies Partnership network.**

We heard from several organisations through 1:1 interviews and regional and national meetings, information and good practice sharing events over the 2022-23 winter. Key contributors are listed below:

- Action Hampshire
- Afghanistan and Central Asian Association
- African Emergency Foodbank
- Bath and North East Somerset Third Sector Group CIO (3SG)
- Community Works
- Bristol County Council
- Cambridge Council for Voluntary Service
- Cheshire West Voluntary Action
- Communities 1st
- CommUNITY Barnet
- Council for Voluntary Service Brent
- East Riding Voluntary Action Services
- Felix Project (Fareshare in London)
- Henfield Haven CIO
- Inclusion London

- Lancashire BME Network
- Lewisham Local
- Manor Gardens Centre
- Muslim Charities Forum
- Nova Wakefield
- Rainbow Services
- Rotary Great Britain & Ireland
- South Lakes Action on Climate Change (SLACC)
- Teignbridge Council for Voluntary Service
- The Sutton Centre
- The Wishing Well project, Crewe
- Three13
- Thrive LDN
- Up For Yorkshire (Selby District AVS)
- Voluntary Action Leeds
- Wessex Community Action

Finally, thank you to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). DCMS is a significant supporter of the Emergencies Partnership and provides the funding to enable us to gather insight and intelligence from across the sector during major emergencies. Your continued commitment to supporting the voluntary and community sectors' role in national resilience against major emergencies is enormously appreciated.

