

Feedback from our frontline

10 April 2020



Over the past three weeks, all our lives have changed dramatically, and the future is uncertain. All of us running charities are thinking hard about the best way to use our resources to help. In mid-March, we were mid-way through over two hundred management consultancy projects, working with our volunteer consultants and charity clients, addressing issues such as reviewing strategy and writing business plans, mentoring leaders and managers, and tackling challenges in marketing, IT, finance and HR. Then everything changed.

Since then, we've reached out to all the charities we'd been working with, to check in with them and to offer any support possible. We've found that these calls take time, people want to talk, and to share their worries. Some of our clients – charity Chief Executives - are drained, but are doing a great job in keeping their teams together through Zoom and other channels. Through our conversations, we're trying to give people a little space to think and positive support – it's OK to be where you are, moving forward is good, just take it a step at a time.

For many charities, their capacity is changing week to week, as staff are isolating, ill or needing time to look after children. A lot of regular volunteers have disappeared, and it can be difficult to plan ahead at all – let alone in a substantial way.

To make rapid change in services and the way the organisation works, you need time, capacity AND skill – some people have capacity but not the skills or technology to adjust to home working and remote service delivery, and will need to build these in order to switch services over effectively.

An anti-trafficking charity is not set up for staff to use their own phones. It's too risky to use 'number withheld' as it's alarming for the people they're contacting, and staff don't want to give out their personal numbers – too risky for them

Most of our clients fall into two groups: those that are unable to continue their services – those who depend on using facilities such as day centres, community centres, charities working with and in schools. They need to keep their organisations alive while mothballed. Others are moving online, continuing to provide support – and often experiencing rising demand.

A Muslim youth charity has let us know that they are having increased demand for support, and are applying for funding, but they need help now, and some funding is slow to come through – at present they are unable to respond to 38% of calls.

Emergency funds have been rapidly put together, and government has now responded with a fund geared to frontline support – but these funds are not all being dispersed quickly, one of our clients said “emergency funding is great, but we need it now, we might not be here in June once they've processed the application.”

A charity supporting young people with family members with life-threatening conditions is experiencing high demand for support – so many young people are anxious about what COVID-19 means for family members with existing health problems. The charity doesn't fall within the remit of most emergency funds which are geared to immediate crisis response. Existing funders have been flexible, allowing the charity to drawn down funding pledged for the future years, but it is not clear what this will mean when those years come round.

Looking ahead, it's likely funders will have fewer resources to help charities after they come through the crisis. Foundations have – thankfully – scrambled to provide crisis funding, but investments have taken a huge hit, so they may be less able to provide the same levels of support in future. Corporate foundations may find that their funding drops as the economy struggles post-crisis, and there will be many, many claims on government funds.

Another charity client has highlighted a possible shortage of volunteers. Many charities have volunteers aged over 70 who are currently staying at home, and it's not certain whether they will return, now that routines and confidence have been broken. New types of volunteering – digital, remote – will provide benefits, but traditional volunteering roles such as staffing charity shops, may fall substantially.

At Cranfield Trust, we have the support of over 1,200 commercial sector volunteers around the country. They work with us as advisors, mentors and consultants. Now that we're operating entirely remotely, we have great capacity to support charities, as volunteers can work with charity clients anywhere. We have strong demand from charities but are keen to raise awareness of our free support and reach more charity leaders and managers with our services.

To find out more and to see how we can work together, please contact us via our website www.cranfieldtrust.org, email talktous@cranfieldtrust.org, or call 01794 830338.

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