

A place-based approach: How Cumbria-based funders are coordinating their response to Covid-19

A briefing

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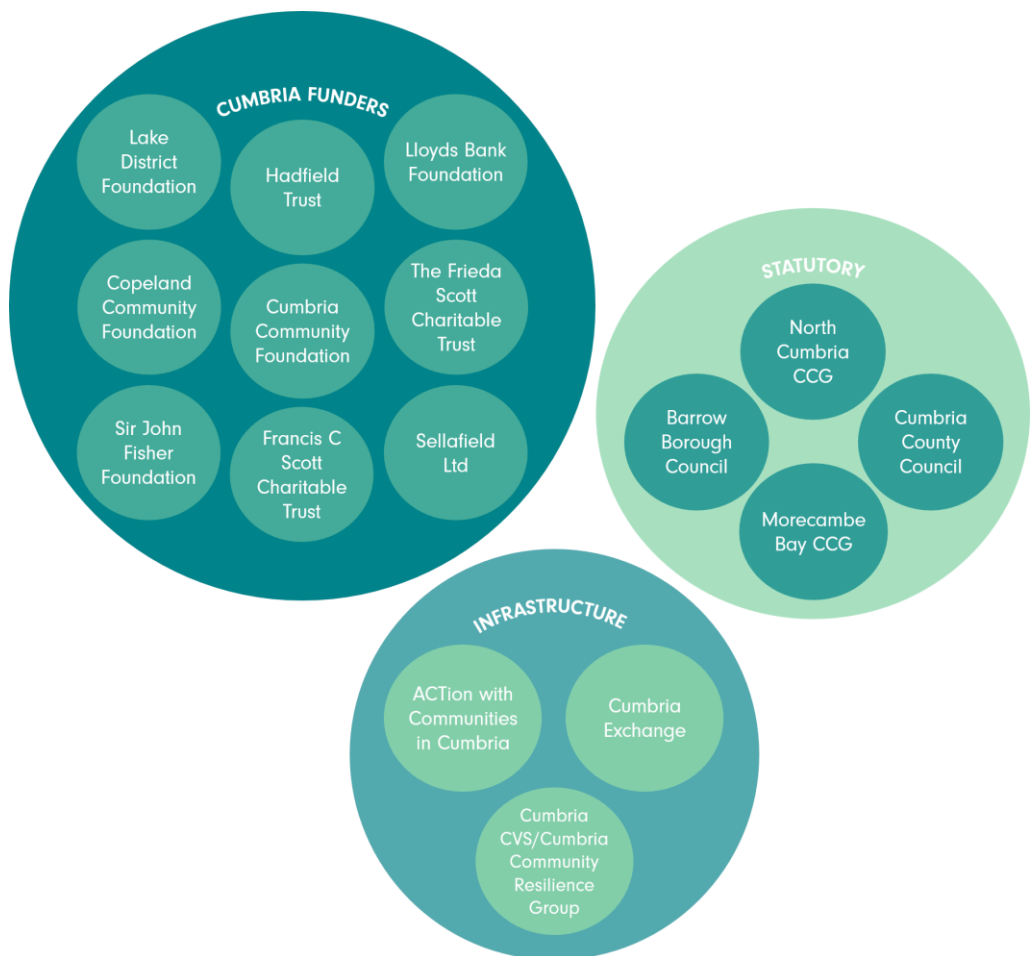
¹ Peer support Emergency Response session facilitated by IVAR with 16 Cumbria-based funders and infrastructure organisations, namely, ACTion with Communities in Cumbria; Barrow Borough Council; Copeland Community Fund; Cumbria Community Foundation; Cumbria County Council; Cumbria CVS/Cumbria Community Resilience Group, Cumbria Exchange; Francis C Scott Charitable Trust; Frieda Scott Charitable Trust; Hadfield Trust; Lake District Foundation; Lloyds Bank Foundation; Morecambe Bay CCG; North Cumbria CCG; Sellafield Ltd; and Sir John Fisher Foundation

Introduction

We are 'Cumbria Funders', a group of local and national funders with a focus on supporting communities in Cumbria. This briefing shares our deliberations about what a sustained and collaborative response to Covid-19 might look like now and into the future.

The ongoing and uncertain nature of this crisis requires longer-term collaboration and the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) facilitated a meeting of independent funders and other organisations, coming together for the first time to share learning and to explore opportunities to work together in the future and to support our thinking about the next stages in Covid-19 might look like.

For this meeting, we had 16 funders represented. These included independent, statutory (Local Authority and NHS) and VCSE funders, along with infrastructure organisations, all working in Cumbria.



Our response to the current crisis

Given Cumbria's history of emergency response work, we recognised the need to quickly share and discuss priorities. We also understood the need to balance flexible and 'swift decision-making' whilst avoiding duplication in grant-making.

For this, the Cumbria Community Foundation with the support of other funders and donors, launched the [Cumbria Covid-19 Response Fund](#) in March 2020. Drawing on learning from local community and VCSE responses so far, working closely with the CVS, and those from previous emergencies such as the 2001 Foot and

Mouth outbreak and the experience of floods (from 2005 to 2015) has enabled an experience-led response, with other funders being invited to join and collaborate. This fund has linked into the county-wide multi-agency approach to Covid-19, being led by the public sector with the third sector and community leaders collaborating at local and district levels – an emerging model that is vital in supporting 'new ways of working' that we want to encourage going forward.

Having this single pot of money in place for responding to the crisis, being clear on our approach and signposting to community organisations, has been good learning for us as a group. We have **avoided duplication and now have efficient processes in place with communication and information structures developing.**

'Cumbria's history of emergency response has helped the speed of the grant-making, its flexibility and partnerships between the local authority, private sector and voluntary sector have been superb. Coordination among them has been great as well.'

'Good partnerships have been built between the CVS and the county council, [based on] learning from the number of crises that Cumbria has seen over the recent years.'

Conversations and collaborations are the key

Like most funders, we had our traditional response to grantees. It was about **being flexible, signing off payments without reports and monitoring forms, not being too rigid in our impact assessment and being open to core costs being used for different purposes.**

With the Response Fund, we have collaborated across the funding sector to work with the Cumbria Community Foundation, which has managed four disaster response funds to date. We are working together as a **multi-agency crisis response to distribute funds to third sector groups** we have developed our own way of working together which is flexible and responsive to need and are collectively keen to keep our conversations going as part of the different stages of recovery. *'Cumbria has a really strong identity with the number of funders, infrastructure organisations and local agencies working together, which isn't always true for other areas in the country.'*

Several funders sit on **the grant assessment panel alongside the team from the Community Foundation** and we review proposals together every week. We understand that the speed of the response is the need of the hour as many community groups cannot wait for long processes/ stages or to write many proposals. ***'Looking at applications on a weekly basis has definitely been a high for me, in terms of the capacity and pace in which we have responded in Cumbria. It has been a really definitive response to need.'***

To add to this the **local authority, infrastructure organisations and other partners have too committed resources and deployed their staff to work in the third sector, which has helped in being closer to the need of Cumbria-wide communities.** We have moved from crisis planning to working towards recovery. All of us have ensured that good information is being shared and have been keen to *'deliberately engage'* and understand the funding priorities, together.

'This [community response fund] was such an agile and instrumental piece of the larger jigsaw... So glad that we made our contribution at the beginning.'

'We would not typically engage, across sectors but Covid-19 has deliberately made us collaborate and work together. Collaborating as funders and working together is a smarter way to deal with the situation and understand priorities for

local authority, CCGs and where and how we all fit together and what good looks like.'

Challenges for funders

As funders ourselves, we foresee some long-term challenges for us.

Fundraising: *'We have to raise our own money in order to give it away'. This will continue to be a challenge since the economy will hard hit, and at this point in time we do not know how this will impact on people's giving.*

Funder investments: A few of us are dependent on dividends, and given that companies have suspended giving these out, income and grant-making for us have reduced drastically. *'We are looking at the short-term all the time now, with the unknown of when the dividend will be reinstated. We don't know yet when we can look at grant-making and our situation in the long term.'*

Concerns with guidance and funding processes: Some of our statutory funders face pressure in funding the voluntary sector, given the guidance and processes that they need to follow. There is much concern from their end in wanting to support more local work which is needed at this time and going forward with the resilience and restoration of the third sector, and there will be a host of areas where people and communities will need relatively small funds to use in innovative ways to support their local communities. However, they are challenged in being unable to do so because the guidelines are often restrictive.

'We are constrained by our funding guidelines and we try to support our third sector providers as much as we can. But any sort of funding directly for the third sector would be good. Even if our guidelines change, we will probably not be able to be anywhere near as flexible as the smaller [funding] organisations can be.'

Our thinking around how we can collectively support the third sector

Currently we are in discussions as a group to explore how we can collectively continue to support the third sector now and for the future. We understand that it is important that we think about the changing priorities of the sector and focus on *'how can we renew the sector and its future needs'*. It will be important for us as funders to have more conversations and discussions around the challenges communities and the sector is going to be facing soon. ***'Getting out heads around the needs of the community that will be generated and what is going to be a new normal, with our world [is] being turned upside down.'***

We know that Covid-19 has exacerbated many of the issues faced by communities in Cumbria and whilst we think different priorities will emerge - financial hardship/poverty, children and young people, vulnerable groups and supporting charities working around issues of mental health will continue to be amongst our priorities. For us as funders - *'sharing our thinking around these priorities will be important, so we can spread out and fund different initiatives.'* There will be a greater need for funders to keep the momentum and energy of collaborative working and sharing information going into the future to continue to avoid duplication and ensure we are reaching out in Cumbria as widely as we can. This, unlike the other crises we have dealt with, is going to last a longer time and we must think - *'Is there a way to work together knowing our overlapping priorities? For example, if there is an increase in need to support mental health, we can make sure that money is not taken away from rehabilitation kinds of work.'*

We want to make sure we're supporting communities in the right way especially with those who have been furloughed and might have employment issues, along with other more deprived communities.'

We need to work together to develop a long-term vision for the renewal process that has to be more than just recovery, it has to be developing a new reality. The need to have lived experience and grassroots level organisations involved in the strategic thinking will be key. *'This helps in pushing people in the right direction and ensuring panels are listening to communities and are able to then fund the actual need.'*

Given the uncertainty around the future and how it will look, we are making some assumptions. Here are some of the questions we are asking right now:

1. *What would a good next phase look like for a local funder, looking at recovery and rebuilding, which is mired in the unknown unknowns?*
2. *What does two years plus potentially look like for the community due to the economic state of the country and financial difficulty for individuals, families and communities? What is our role as a funder in the bigger picture?'*
3. *Thinking about measuring impact, our thinking will need to be developed around 'what does good look like in the new regime?'*

Some of the other concerns on our minds include:

1. *When thinking about the third sector, we are worried that some organisations doing good work will be unable to sustain themselves and we as funders may be unable to support them because of competing priorities. 'Because of a combination of possible long-term reductions in funding and fundraising activity, some of the organisations that we might want to fund are actually under threat, making it a concern for us funders.'*
2. *There may be a missed focus on some themes within the sector that sit outside the healthcare and emergency space like the arts, music, theatre, and climate change etc. 'There are still many unknowns we are dealing with organisations working on climate change, arts and cultural providers have lost all funding because we as funders are dealing with another crisis and once the dust settles, we will need to re-look at priorities.'*
3. *Since we have been busy with emergency responses, we are worried that 'we haven't had a chance to stop and pause to look at the breadth of grant making we are doing. Are we missing out some of our rural communities and underrepresented groups? Is there capacity among the organisations to reach out to them? What will future need look like is an overwhelming question on our mind.'*
4. *Concern about capacity for thinking and planning for the future: Knowing that many of the third sector staff are either busy in emergency responsive work or are furloughed, we are unsure if this is the right time to introduce new funding pots. 'Seen from previous emergencies, that most groups in the emergency response work, would be too immersed to step out to write a proposal at this time.'*

Reflections on the positives and the future phase

We are glad to see that the third sector has been such a strong force in the response work in Cumbria. The sector is increasingly seen as a key partner to statutory sector and as funders we are keen to ensure this transition sticks in the future. *'There is a big shift of emphasis to support self-sufficiency, community resilience and the third sector rather than taking a traditional public sector approach. We don't want to go back to the previous normal as that didn't work for us and there is now a huge opportunity to build something different.'*

The sector has shown that there is a real passion and enthusiasm to deal with the inequalities that were previously deep-rooted in the communities and have been exacerbated by Covid-19. We as funders feel that our collaboration will help rebuild the community and for this to be effective, we *'need to keep re-evaluating our plans in the changing landscape and its needs and try to be as proactive as possible.'* We also agree that the language around describing the new recovery phase would be important.

'We are using words like repurpose, reimagine because the reality is that 'recovery' is going to be very stark for the sector. The new normal is going to be different and much longer-term.'

Conclusion

We believe it is *'important to not lose the momentum and adrenaline with which we have all been working, and as we move away from lockdown to whatever the new normal looks like, we need to be practical about the collaborations built and continue to share information and work together with the same energy and vigour.'* We have explored partnerships and coming together of funders with an appetite to work more closely in the future and there is a need to keep this momentum up and for it to become the way we do things in the long-term. We have learnt that there is a definite appetite for working collaboratively and smarter with funding partners in the future. At the same time, there is a need to share more widely the importance of funders working together through some hard data along with the softer, anecdotal data and stories.

'We must remember, through this that prioritisation and collaboration was our common strength and how can we hold onto this good practice and make it our new norm and business as usual? We have all been good in crisis mode, stepped up and worked together for recovery but we must explore how we continue to do this in the long term. It is important to hold on the positives.'