



Working Together to Support Communities

The value of the GM Funders Forum
during the pandemic of 2020 and beyond

Clare Bonetree, September 2021

Introduction

This briefing summarises what we've heard from members about the value of the Greater Manchester Funders Forum (GM Funders Forum) in supporting them to work through and respond to the challenges of the pandemic in 2020, and what we hear they need from a regional forum going forward. It is based on correspondence and in depth conversations with a selection of members in spring and summer 2021, and with GMCVO staff who have supported GM Funders Forum. It offers a snapshot of the experiences of funders, and through their reflections of the community sector, at the start of what is likely to be a complicated journey to a 'new normal' for the voluntary sector.



About the GM Funders Forum

The Greater Manchester Funders Forum is jointly supported by GMCVO and 10GM, and facilitated by GMCVO. The Forum exists to enable independent grant makers, social investors and public sector funders to collaborate and coordinate programmes. The Greater Manchester Funders Forum is being funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

A note on the use of BAME as a term in this report

This report uses the term ‘BAME’ as this was used by all the forum members we spoke to, some of whom identify as members of Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities. However, the forum is currently exploring other ways to describe and talk about racialised communities who experience discrimination and marginalisation by mainstream service providers and authorities.

How GM Funders Forum helped during the pandemic

The GM Funders Forum began at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and held its first meeting in April during the first lockdown. It aimed to provide a space where funders could share their concerns, both generally and in the context of the pandemic response, and from the start recognised the particular need to support BAME communities. GM Funders Forum members we spoke to reflected that membership of the forum during the pandemic was helpful both personally, and to the work of their organization.

Personal benefits included being able to connect digitally and access peer support while adjusting to working from home at a time of high pressure. The networking with and learning from other members helped people to work more effectively, whether they were new to their roles or the sector, or experienced but having to work in a new way to meet the demands arising from the pandemic.

“It was great to be able to connect digitally when I couldn’t go out and visit projects or meet people; it was great to be able to touch base with people outside of my organization, with people who are talking about the same stuff, having similar issues, and from a wellbeing perspective that was really positive and really nice.”

“It helped me personally with my own personal development and growth, because I’m fairly new to the grant giving sector,

although experienced in working with community organisations.”

“It has been useful to be in a room with other people that sit in a similar role to me, and hear what’s going on for them. It’s been a good opportunity to meet new people, from across GM, in the funders’ world, and improve my knowledge – picking up and stepping into a management role, it helps me feel I’m getting to grips with my role.”

This learning and sharing brought benefits to the members’ organisations too; some of those we spoke to gave examples of having changed the way they worked following contact with other members. As we’ll see, new partnerships were an important part of how funders responded to the pandemic, and membership of GM Funders Forum supported this.

“As an organization it has been very beneficial in terms of meeting different funders of different sizes ... and get an insight into what are the different challenges in engaging marginalized communities. It helped us think about the way we developed our prospectus and look at the language we use and those types of discussions.”

“There have been a couple of things I’ve heard and thought, Oh that’s great, and then I’ve shared a link with the rest of the team [to share] what’s happening in GM, or what another organization is doing. It’s so helpful for me to learn about other approaches and projects that are being piloted or embedded elsewhere. It gives me that bigger picture – I’m very focused on [my borough] and there isn’t a lot that I do that is part of that Greater Manchester picture ... it’s quite useful to tap into another world.”

In addition to open meetings, GM Funders Forum hosted themed events featuring guest speakers and presentations on particular topics. The forum also set up two collaboration groups for members to work together on particular issues: supporting BAME communities and creating shared resources and working jointly. The BAME Collaboration Group has been particularly successful:

What happened in 2020?

Immediate issues & responses

When the lockdown was imposed in March 2020, voluntary sector organisations had to respond immediately to urgent new needs, and also very quickly change their own ways of working. Immediate changes included suspending all work, switching away from project delivery to providing a community-based humanitarian response, delivering work in new ways such as online. For all of this, organisations needed urgent support in the form of money to pay for additional staff, new equipment and services such as Zoom accounts, and flexibility from funders.

GM Funders Forum members told us that funders responded without hesitation and met these needs quickly, creatively and flexibly. They relaxed reporting requirements, provided booster grants and additional money, extended funding, helped fund emergency hubs, supported changes in delivery plans and timelines, and organized in-kind support.

This ranged from IT and office equipment to training, sharing knowledge and skills amongst grantees, and capacity building. All of this was done very quickly -

“we created a new programme faster than we’d ever done before” – but in general built on the organisations’ relationships with their grantees.”

“Our immediate response was to contact all current customers and made it really clear we were here for them if they needed us, and made it really clear we didn’t have any expectations of them we just wanted them to feel they could come to us.”

“In the immediate wake of the pandemic we responded with our Emergency Response Funds, followed by our role as a delivery partner for the Government’s £1.96 billion Culture Recovery Fund.”

“Right from the start we said, ‘We know your service is going to change, forget about the outcomes and the monitoring, just do what you need to do,’ which was a real relief for the charities, and that worked very well.”

“We had just started a new programme with a different approach, three years’ funding with a three-stage process, development support and more in depth conversations with grantees. [Rather than suspend this new programme] we turned it into one year’s funding and a one stage process so we could get their funding out a lot more quickly.”



“We launched our new 10-year strategy, Let’s Create, just before the pandemic. We delayed the publication of its Delivery Plan until this year so that it could take into account the changing needs of the cultural sector.”

It was clear that often funders were able to respond appropriately so quickly because of the depth of their knowledge about their grantees’ work and the needs that grantees work to meet.

“In the first lockdown we did a survey of the sector to ascertain what are the main priorities and issues for the communities we support and what provision we could put in place.”

“We’re a relational funder – as well as formal six-monthly conversations I contact and touch base with my charities on a weekly basis by email. So we were hearing about how charities were adapting, what they needed, which fitted nicely into some of the development support we already have available.”

“We looked at the challenges around mental health and wellbeing not just of young people, but also thinking of the health and wellbeing of staff in the [youth] sector. It was crucial for us to look at how to offer support right across the sector, providing training and development, offering training around mental health first aid.”

“We saw that digital inclusion to help young people continue to engage with youth provision [during lockdown] was also about families, so it was also important to find ways to distribute mobile phones and provide data to enable engagement with other family members.”

Formation of new partnerships was another feature of the early response to the pandemic. These took different forms – from partnering to fundraise for the first time, to fast tracking relationship building that was already in the pipeline to enable response work and release funding more quickly.

“The pandemic sped up our partnership work with other funders [and it] came more to the fore ... it felt very timely as it met a new need coming out of the pandemic.”

“We’ve been more focused on making our money go further through partnering with other foundations to work on joint schemes to fund projects.”

Funders also talked about partnership with the communities that they work with, and with organisations receiving grants, underscoring the importance of listening as key to their pandemic response.

Flexibility was key to the way that funders dealt with this unprecedented situation. The GM Funders Forum members we spoke to were proud of the way that their flexibility had supported the impressive adaptability of voluntary sector organisations during the early months of the crisis.

“Early on we signed up to a funders alliance promise that allowed that flexibility in our processes ... and those conversations have been incredibly positive. We’ve seen projects really flourish at a time that’s been challenging and they’ve been responding to the needs – and all we’ve had to do is provide the flexibility to facilitate that, and we’ve seen great things come from that.”

Over time, the response shifted from reactive to proactive, as funders gathered intelligence from grantees and began to anticipate the medium term impact of the pandemic and immediate public health measures such as the lockdown, and social distancing.

The first new funds to be created were crisis funds responding to immediate needs, and grant schemes channeling Government funding from the Department of Media Culture and Sport. Like VCSE organisations, GM Funders Forum members told us they were working at capacity with this.

“Normally we have a lead time of four to six months, but we had to process these grants very very quickly.”

“We stripped right back our application

process and kept due diligence as minimal as possible, and that was about how quickly can we get money out to the organisations that need it.”

Funders in different sectors faced different scales of challenge and so found different ways of diversifying their pandemic-related support. Many worked with other organisations within their field of concern to develop new areas of work, from national cultural programmes to local food programmes.

Funders also adapted their usual ways of working to make sure that they could stay in touch with the evolving needs of VCSE organisations. Once again, flexibility brought rewards in improved effectiveness.

“We were doing drop-ins across the borough, and we’ve switched to doing those virtually, which has been really successful ... We’ve probably had better attendance to those virtually than we ever did before.”

Inequality, Increasing Need, and Racial Justice

GM Funders Forum members we spoke to told us that for the most part, the needs they identified through listening to VCSE organisations throughout 2020 were intensifications of issues that they already worked to support. None reported a change in priorities during the year.

“If a family or child or young person was already experiencing difficulty ... then their need has increased.”

“Our remit for funding is quite broad – our priorities are everything, all the projects that come to us that meet those priorities would be covering anything that’s happening out there in response to increased need because of covid, so we’ve not really had to tweak or change our priorities.”

“The core of what trustees want to invest in didn’t change.”

A widely addressed example of this related to support for and representation of BAME communities. The pandemic has highlighted existing inequality, and BAME communities

have been disproportionately affected, both in higher rates of illness and mortality, as well as economically and socially. As time goes on these effects are likely to be compounded, and funders are working on how to address both historic lack of support and current and future increasing need for support. In the summer of 2020 Black Lives Matter raised racial justice to a new prominence, driving some funders to speed up the development of existing plans for racial justice work. Nearly all the GM Funders Forum members we spoke to reported that their organisations had done this in some form.

“We recognized that BAME groups in our funding were really underrepresented in our funding partnerships - this gave us the focus to think about how can we ensure that we can work more closely with those organisations that are underrepresented.”
“We intended to do it anyway it just coincided with the pandemic.”

As a consequence, the forum’s BAME collaborative group has flourished, providing members with a place to learn from each other and invited guests, form new relationships and collaborate:

“It was useful to have speakers from BAME-specific funders talking about how they engage with the marginalised groups that we work with - it helped us as an organisation think about some of the ways we could work with these groups.”

The pandemic also disproportionately affected disabled people, and one member organisation prioritized this group with its emergency grants.

Other areas where members reported seeing an increase in need for support included work with young people and families, work on domestic violence, support for local food projects, and the impact of repeated lockdowns on social isolation.

“Young people are desperate for support and the services are really stretched. And they’re just: “We’re at capacity – there’s nothing we can do, we can’t get these children through faster.”

Starting to look forward...

By summer 2021 funders were starting to look beyond crisis response. Some were developing new funding streams to address particular issues:

“We slightly started to revert back to our previous main grants and small grants scheme. But those schemes will soon pause as we implement new grant programmes based on our newly developed strategy.”

“We are also doing some evaluation of the funding that we offer, so we’ve got some funding around mental health projects so we are looking to identify specific themes coming out.”

“From the local hub meetings I’ve attended, I think that the anxiety and the isolation associated with the fear of going back out is much greater ... We’re about to launch a wellbeing grants programme to spend the remaining money from the crisis fund [taking] applications for any project about increasing people’s physical and mental wellbeing.”

Funders are also starting to address unexpected issues arising from the changes of the last year:

“At the moment our programme is open with new regional priorities [but] interestingly applications have been very low.”

“Many organisations are still spending money on projects that should have ended a year ago, and also they received a lot of emergency funding and they’re still spending that. But we still need more applications coming in and we’re wondering how can we encourage people to come to us?”

Evolving Approaches

Funders are building on some of the new ways of working that proved themselves during the crisis months of 2020. These new or adapted approaches include extending their coverage of core costs or project overheads, making it easier to apply for medium-sized grants, and changing reporting processes. A lot of this is to do with addressing sustainability of small organisations, and appreciating the weight of grant administration for organisations working with high levels of community need.

“We still focus on [direct] project [costs] a lot but this can develop the conversation a bit more - so you want us to fund this building that doesn’t seem to be connected to the wider project? Can you think a bit about why it’s needed for the project. This can help widen those conversations.”

“[We funded core costs before, but now] we’re a bit more verbal about it. Before it was, we did, but sometimes the panel were unsure, and we really needed to clarify - particularly in the last year we really needed to clarify what we will and won’t fund.”



We should be happy to fund core costs because staff are instrumental to helping an organization do what it does. I think most people presume that funders won't fund core costs, and we wanted to put ourselves out there and say yes we want to do this."

"Because we are a relationship funder, we value the relationship rather than here's the money send us your monitoring at the end of the grant, we work in partnership and listen to the charities telling us what they need."

Many funders are also thinking about continuing with some of the approaches they learned in 2020.

"What's good about the funding [in partnerships] is the flexibility [and] looking at how communities and projects can work more creatively."

Looking Further Ahead

Some of the GM Funders Forum members we spoke to identified a slowing down of applications as 2021 progressed. This was likely due to organisations using up emergency funding, or having yet to complete delayed projects for which funding was deferred. With increased and evolving need they anticipate the pace of applications to pick up again by the autumn.

"We're below the target of what we should be funding at the moment; other funders are saying similar - they're just not getting the applications through. I think because charities still doing monitoring around emergency funding, and ... so the financial benefits of emergency funding are still keeping charities more buoyant than they would be. I think come September - December time it's going to start to kick in again."

"If [later in the year] applications are still not coming in as thick and fast as we'd like, maybe we should do some grant drives around specific themes if we hear there are specific needs. But it's too early now, hopefully by September we'll have a better idea what to do. Otherwise we're open and available for applications as usual."

In late 2021, with the crisis phase passed, GM Funders Forum members anticipated being able to look further ahead. In practice this means delayed strategy planning or implementation going ahead.

"Our funding is open, we haven't changed anything ... The other thing is we're developing new strategy for 2022 and a lot can change as a result of that strategy - at the moment we're just doing what we did at the latter part of last year. The regional priorities have changed a little bit, but across the northwest for every single complex social issue the need is high, it's as simple as that."

What do members want and or need from the Forum going forward?

The GM Funders Forum members we spoke to were clear that, for the most part, they would like the forum to continue to provide a framework and space for the practices and mutual support that enabled them to work so effectively in the crisis phase of the pandemic.

Collaborating:

"What I'd quite like is for the group to be able to collaborate, to develop similar approaches which are still inclusive of all applicants, to reduce the burden on applicants of working with different funders - standardizing enough so that if an organisation were to apply to us and we couldn't fund it, we know we've got a similar enough approach to another to [refer them on and] stop the duplication."

"In particular, regarding sustainability and how for BAME groups [funding is] still a bit short term, looking for a collective response or way of working at how we can empower these communities to become more sustainable."

"More strategic planning and actions made with Greater Manchester's diverse and marginalised communities on the barriers to accessing [our] funding and the changes

that the communities would like to see implemented.”

Networking:

“If I’ve got a charity that comes and we’re not the right funder for them, I can’t send them anywhere and it would be lovely if there were direct linkages if I could say there’s a charity that needs funding we’re happy for you to send them on to us.”

Learning and knowledge exchange:

“I would like to hear [from others] are they going to do the same as us and if other funders have a plan, because I’m trying to work out a plan for how to deal with [applications being] quiet at the moment, while there is an increased demand, but how do I work out a plan for the unknown?”

Some had suggestions of new areas that GM Funders Forum could open up:

“I think a focus on culture and its impact on communities might be worth flagging – particularly in terms of cross cutting themes such as health, employment and training, and community development and place - and how other voluntary sector organisations might utilise arts and a culture to meet their own objectives.”

Conclusion

GM Funders Forum members told us that listening, flexibility, networking, partnership, and sometimes, joint working were the key strategies for success in dealing with the crisis of 2020. These skills and ways of working enabled them to provide the right support quickly and effectively to organisations that achieved an incredible feat in responding immediately, and often before statutory agencies, to meet unprecedented needs. GM Funders Forum members were rightly proud of having done this, and were clear that they would like to learn from these strategies for success and continue to develop them through a forum where they can build good working relationships.

Current active GM Funders Forum members

A current and active member of the Forum is defined as an organisation that attended an event or meeting in the last 12 months (November 2020 - November 2021).

10GM

- Arts Council England (North West)**
- Association of Charitable Foundations**
- BBC Children in Need**
- Bolton at Home**
- Bolton CVS**
- Bury VCFA**
- Edge Fund**
- Garfield Weston Foundation**
- Greater Manchester Mayor’s Charity**
- Greater Together Manchester**
- LCM Family Ltd**
- Lloyds Bank Foundation**
- Macc**
- Mosscares St Vincents Housing Group Ltd**
- National Lottery Heritage Fund**
- One Manchester**
- Resonance Limited**
- Rochdale Boroughwide Housing Ltd**
- Salford City Council**
- Salford CVS**
- Stockport Homes**
- Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council**
- The Coalfields Regeneration Trust**
- The LankellyChase Foundation**
- The National Lottery Community Fund**
- The Oglesby Charitable Trust**
- The Pilgrim Trust**
- The Wilfred Charitable Fund**
- Trafford Housing Trust**
- Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council**
- Workers’ Educational Association**
- Young Manchester**
- Your Local Pantry**