



Strengthening Bristol's social economy

An evaluation of Voscur's impact on Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations and a deep dive into drivers of change and their impact in the VCSE sector



Change



Drivers



Impact



Positives



Negatives



Learning



VCSE context



Voscur's impact



Bath Social &
Development
Research Ltd

QuIP
Qualitative Impact
Assessment Protocol



QuIP methodology

The QuIP methodology requires interviewers to begin by asking organisations about changes affecting people's work, rather than a specific intervention. This approach produces a much richer and broader understanding of all factors shaping the VCSE sector, so the results are valuable to every stakeholder. If interviewees mention Voscur services, they're included, but if not the study captures only other drivers and impacts. Interviews are conducted by independent researchers and organisations' responses are anonymised. This ensures the results are as objective as possible.

Coding, analysis and interpretation were then undertaken by BSDR to identify causal chains of positive and negative change. This means the benefits of the QuIP approach are that it:

- ☐ **Reduces bias**
by separating support delivery from evaluation and focusing on outcomes, not inputs
- ☐ **Clarifies attribution**
by documenting all the drivers of change, not just the results of one particular service
- ☐ **Improves learning**
by capturing both negative

and positive changes and the causes and effects that make up stories of change

- ☐ **Remains accountable to participants**

because it starts with people's unprompted perceptions of what's most important for their organisation.

QuIP was developed by the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Bath and is now managed by Bath Social & Development, a non-profit research organisation.



Scope of this study

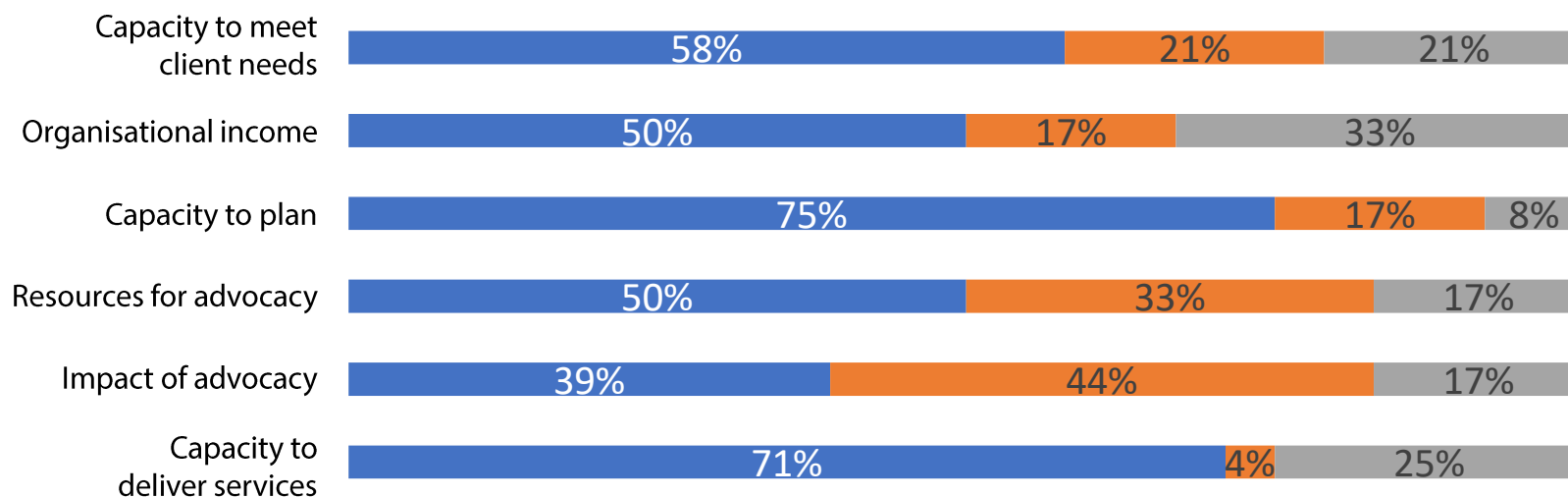
24 VCSE organisations were interviewed by independent researchers between August and September 2019 about their work primarily in the previous 12 months – as well as longer term trends. The organisations were selected from a long list in order to cover a purposive sample of groups in Bristol's VCSE sector, in terms of their size, type of work and the input received from Voscur.

five were small (or micro) organisations (turnover < £10k), 14 were medium sized (turnover £10 - £100k) and six were large (turnover £100 - £500k). Three groups worked exclusively in the North of Bristol, five in the south, 11 citywide and two in Bristol and beyond.

01

Organisations are successfully building capacity but it doesn't always translate into impact and the spread is uneven

Improved No change Got worse

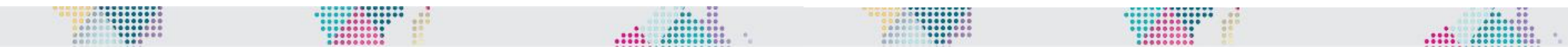


Capacity to plan and deliver is increasing for large and small groups

Generally organisations were positive about the overall direction of change in the VCSE sector, especially in relation to their capacity to deliver services and their capacity to plan ahead.

Medium-sized organisations are struggling most

Most of the negative responses were from medium-sized organisations or those delivering services citywide rather than specific communities.



02

Investment in organisational change is increasing income but funding remains unreliable and short-term

Half of respondents reported an increase in overall income:

- Some respondents explained how access to funding was influenced by changes to image/branding, increased visibility, becoming a community interest company (CIC), and more collaboration with other organisations.
- Some organisations reported a positive collaborative relationship with their funders.
- A few organisations mentioned an increase in income from donations and trusts/foundations/developers.
- Many reported receiving more/enough funding, as well as generating more income themselves.

Access to funding was cited as leading to other positive changes, most commonly improved/broadened services, and better/more help for clients, as well as capacity to plan, invest in strategy and fundraise.

We became a community interest company which opened up a lot of funding streams we didn't have access to before. Which meant that we could expand on what we were delivering.

You have to jump through hoops for funding these days ... the amount of time and effort put into little grants and reporting ... you can understand why sometimes people just say it's not worth it.

Just over half of respondents mentioned that their funding was less reliable or had reduced/stopped, putting more pressure on staff and affecting service delivery:

- Austerity and changes to funding requirements were the most frequently cited drivers of negative change.
- Many organisations identified frustrations with increasingly “labour-intensive” applications, expectations to evidence impact and requirements to be sustainable or innovative.
- Respondents felt they were spending more time, energy and resources, sometimes in the pursuit of smaller and more restricted pots of money.

The funding environment is much tougher. The hardest thing is the focus on innovation... It's awful, but if we don't play ball, we'll lose funding.



03

Investment in management and board capacity is leading to positive change, especially for smaller organisations

Support services are strengthening organisational capacity and resources predominantly through advice, training and specialist consultancy.

The impact on organisations of this increased capacity includes:

- Increased understanding of the organisation's situation and clients' needs
- Increased strategic capacity and availability of senior staff and directors
- Better understanding about how to use consultancy and training for organisational change
- Staff being more capable and confident in their roles
- Identification of new funding sources

Voscur consultancy on business planning led to us investing in a new worker and a new board member which helped strengthen our strategic capacity, and we hope in the long-term made us more sustainable.

A few larger organisations said that their organisational support needs were sometimes more specialist than Voscur's standard services. Comments range from technical issues to 'outgrowing' the level of support available.

This is to some extent inevitable, as Voscur specifically targets smaller and less well resourced organisations for its support – based on the assumption that larger and better resourced organisations are able to find and pay for development support from a wider range of sources.

However, through targeted collaborations and investing in internal capacity, Voscur is also working to better meet the support needs of larger organisations particularly in the areas of health and social care, social enterprise and investment and inclusion.



04

Organisations are expanding their services strategically but staff capacity is under pressure to keep up with growth

Many organisations described changes to their services such as delivering new activities or expanding current programmes.

Access to funding was a key driver enabling these developments. Another influential factor was working in collaboration or partnership with other organisations, even if this was initially a response to funding requirements. Organisations also talked about adapting or scaling services based on the needs and wants of their clients.

Some felt demand had been exacerbated by the context of political or social issues, such as service withdrawal from council/other charities as a result of budget cuts/austerity.

Overall, organisations felt these services were better able to support their clients.

Probably the biggest impact of the last two years has been public sector funding cuts. We had a 30% cut to our core services which meant closing our office one day per week and reducing staff hours. So we now get a lot of demand but we have less supply.

Organisations perceived there to be a higher demand for services, as well as more complex client needs.

Whilst this has led to some programme adaption, it has also put increased pressure on staff and resources, sometimes resulting in reduced or constrained services.

Less reliable income and limited resources has also contributed to the pressure on services. Austerity was mentioned by several as “biting into services” with reduced statutory provision and less funding available.

Other external social/political factors mentioned as drivers affecting services were Brexit, the refugee crisis and educational policy reform.

These changes seem to have had significantly negative impacts on service delivery, as well as staff wellbeing.

Two thirds of organisations had expanded their services and a small number had acquired a building which led to a step change in capability.



Two thirds of organisations also felt the pressure between staff/resources vs. service delivery had worsened.



05

Increased leadership capacity is leading to more collaboration both as a choice and a necessity

A majority of organisations now work in partnership, with larger groups being generally more positive about collaboration. Key drivers were:

- Changing requirements for and reductions in funding
- More pressure to work together for sustainability
- Social and political issues
- Greater focus on active networking

And the key outcomes of collaboration were:

- Improved prospects for sustainability and lower costs
- Better and more comprehensive support for clients
- Increased capacity and expanded services
- Increased organisational visibility

None of us is the complete package. But together we could have bigger impact with more joined up working in the area. It means less people fall through the gaps, we develop services that address their needs, and the organisations will be around for a long time.

Most organisations seemed to perceive the benefits from collaboration as outweighing the challenges of working together; but partnerships come with a complex mix of advantages (such as greater capacity and reach) and disadvantages (such as extra work/ management and competing agendas/ reputations).

Many organisations said that the capacity of directors, board members, and senior staff, had increased over the last few years. This was predominantly driven by training, with Voscur's Trustee training was highly praised.

Investment in training and development of senior staff and trustees



Greater strategic capacity and availability of senior staff and directors



Increased independence, sustainability and resilience of the organisation



06

Service users directly benefit from investing in the development of staff skills and capabilities

Key drivers for staff training include increased expectations from the regulatory environment, raising internal quality standards and investment in evidencing impact. This means that organisations are more effective, more efficient, better placed to develop new services and contracts and communicate to stakeholders about the need for and results of their work.

Crucially though, investment in staff capability clearly leads to clients and services users benefitting from an increased level and appropriateness of support, as well higher standards of governance and service delivery.

Most organisations invested in training to build their organisational capacity in a wide range of areas, including trauma and counselling, safeguarding, social media and IT, regulations (GDPR, Universal credit), conflict resolution, trustee development, fundraising and bid writing and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Voscur has been really helpful in costing services and packages... They were the best [relative to other services] ... I built a relationship with them and they believe in and see what I'm doing. It was really easy to access these forms of support.

58% of organisations invested in training for staff, directors and volunteers.



How do we make that 100% within operational constraints?



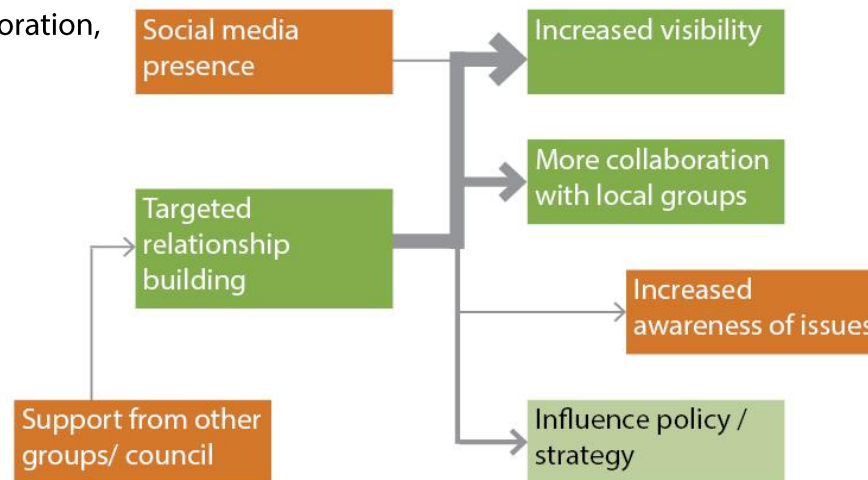
Advocacy and policy influence is becoming harder: organisations are choosing between system change and mitigating system impacts

Some organisations commented that it had been harder to influence people in positions of power locally and nationally. Shifts in government, policies, and structures made it increasingly difficult to have their say on key issues. Time and human resources continued to be key stumbling blocks in capacity for influencing. There was considerable frustration and scepticism around the reality of influencing decision makers.

A small number of organisations said they had reduced their advocacy work due to lack of resources. Investing in building connections was seen as more likely to raise their organisation's visibility and lead to collaboration, rather than influencing decision-makers.

Time and disenchantment are big challenges, in that we have done political influence work before and not got anywhere.

The diagram below shows links between positive drivers and outcomes identified. The weight of connecting lines indicates the strength of connection (number of respondents).



Organisations mentioned connecting with others such as MPs and other organisations within their relevant spheres. Local, regional and national networks were mentioned as a positive platform for discussion and support as well as signposting to and from other groups, and receiving mentoring or training from others.

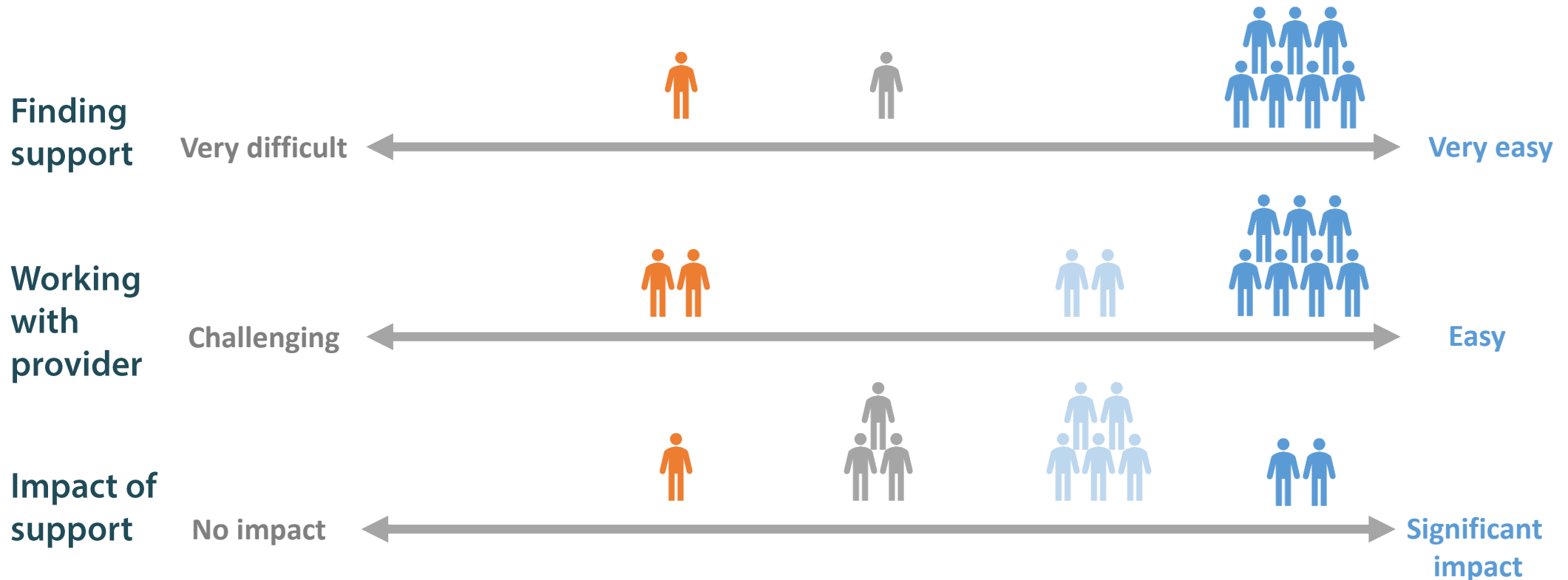
For many organisations, active networking included regular social media presence as well as one-off events such as award ceremonies. These were said to be increasing their profile and visibility within their communities.

We are trying to look after our clients and trying to raise constantly and do all the other work that we have to do. There's very little time left for lobbying and influence, it's always on the wish list.

08

Voscur's support is easy to find, use and creates substantial impact for organisational capacity

When asked about how easy it was to find a support provider, work with the provider and how much impact they perceived the support to have had, respondents rated Voscur's support positively.



Key insights for Voscur's service development

Analysing the results of this evaluation and the impacts specifically attributed to Voscur's support provides four key areas of insight for future service development:

1. Voscur's work has clear impact and it could do more:

- Board development and support strategic/business planning.
- Support smaller organisations to benefit from collaborations.

3. Voscur's impact is less clear and it could review:

- Support for larger organisations to better meet needs.
- Explore how easy it is for organisations to use our support and streamline processes.

2. To mitigate negative external drivers, Voscur could:

- Influence getting harder to achieve.
- Funding processes being complex and inaccessible.
- Pressure on the health and wellbeing of VCSE staff.

4. To amplify positive external drivers, Voscur could:

- Transferring public assets into community ownership.
- Organisations are becoming expert all-rounders and can support each other in a wider collaboration of community organisations.



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