

Reflections on Covid-19 - #WeStandWithTheSector

(5 minute read)

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Before the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the time I will call 'before pandemic', I could tell you the exact number of weeks and days that had passed since I started working at the John Ellerman Foundation on 6 January 2020. However, since closing the office on 16 March, like so many, my sense of time has changed – time flies, it drags, and it sometimes even manages to do both. Days have felt never-ending or too short, and for a time weekends even disappeared!

As a funder in the arts, social action and environment, the pandemic is impacting those we fund deeply in a myriad of ways. Many of those we support are dealing with the health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic at a personal and professional level. As a team we are routinely faced with evidence of that which is being reported by the Office for National Statistics and others: the pandemic is disproportionately impacting black and minoritised ethnic communities; carers; Disabled People; older people; those with underlying and chronic health conditions; and women, especially those experiencing domestic abuse. Other impacts include the increased risk of loneliness and the implications of dealing with loss and grief currently being felt by so many. It has also been clear that different parts of our funding portfolio are impacted differently, with our performing arts and museums and galleries grantees reporting the biggest decreases in income and overall ability to deliver much of their work, but there are consistently high levels of anxiety, increases in workloads and delays or alterations to planned work reported across the board.

There are of course positives, if you can call them that, about what this pandemic has taught us. I found Carnegie UK's recent revisiting of their 2014 work on the [Enabling State](#) and how it can apply to the recovery utterly uplifting. The reflections on collaborative and community working in the Relationship Project's report [The Moment We Noticed](#), which draws together learning from 100 days of behaving differently along with initiatives like the [Connection Coalition](#) can only inspire. The increased awareness and discussions across so much of the sector on race, racism and Black Lives Matter, expertly explored by many including the Association of Charitable Foundations (ACF) in a [webinar](#) attended by over 200 trusts and foundations and by ACEVO in their new report [Home Truths: Undoing racism and real diversity in the charity sector](#), are galvanising the kinds of conversations and thinking that I didn't dare to believe were possible before pandemic.

The thinking being done by so many in the environmental sector about how we can build back or build forward better is transformative, and I would urge you all to follow closely the updates from the [Environmental Funders Network](#) and to familiarise yourselves with some of the research being shared by a range of organisations, including Greenpeace UK's [Manifesto for a Green Recovery](#), citing four key priorities to: redesign the transport system, make UK buildings fit for the 21st century, deliver a clean power system and support nature and create a circular economy, and Green Alliance's [Blueprint for a resilient economy](#), which explores similar themes and calls for investment in net zero infrastructure, restoration of nature, an end to wasting valuable resources, a focus on ensuring clean air and healthy places and a commitment to making the recovery fair, as well as Bright Blue's [Delivering Net Zero – Building Britain's resilient recovery](#) report, which calls for collaboration across generations and between the environmental sector, government, local authorities, academics, investors, infrastructure and building owners and operators, manufacturers and the public in the areas of transport, land, utilities, buildings, industry, waste, finance government and innovation to achieve net zero by 2050.

As a medium-sized funder, distributing £5.8m. annually, faced with all of the above, it can feel impossible to do anything of real value and relevance at this time. However, we know we have a role to play and are trying hard to contribute. You can find out more about what we are doing on our [homepage](#). Ultimately, as a signatory of the [We Stand With the Sector](#) pledge, we are trying to be flexible and supportive to those we already fund, and the main ways in which we are doing this includes altering dates of payments, delaying progress reports, releasing payments without a progress report, supporting charities to change their core funding towards specific core costs to completely unrestricted funding and making ourselves available to talk through anything else that might be helpful. We aren't back in the office properly yet, and so our meeting room remains unavailable to those we fund. Most recently we have also offered all grantees and recent grantees the chance to re-apply to us without having to wait for one year, which we hope helps groups at a time when some trusts and foundations very understandably have been offering specific emergency response funding or have had to suspend their grant making temporarily.

We feel that our funding priorities are as important now as they were before pandemic, and so we have continued to make new grants as usual – albeit now with virtual assessment meetings and second stage visits! Since lockdown in March, we have held three Board Meetings, in which we have awarded nearly £2.6m. to 25 organisations. Full details of all our live grants can be found [here](#), and within this group of 25 we have awarded a grant of £50,000 to the [Resourcing Racial Justice Fund](#), an initiative that was set up in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We are due to decide on a further 12 grants at the end of July worth approximately £1.1m.

We are also active contributors to the Arts Funders Group, a group of trusts and foundations in the arts that have been coming together regularly since April 2020, convened and chaired by Moira Sinclair at the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. We are a member of the Strategy Group for the [Funders' Collaborative Hub](#) hosted by ACF too. Ultimately, these initiatives seek to bring funders, namely trusts and foundations, together to determine the individual and collective ways in which we can effectively support those we fund and prospective applicants to manage both immediate need and beyond into the recovery and the renewal too. These groups are also important spaces in which we can reflect on the lessons learned from this pandemic that we don't want to forget – be it about the sector's approach to: core or unrestricted funding, flexibility and support to grantees, our strategic priorities, working together as funders, our processes, sharing and relinquishing power, especially the power held between us and those we fund, and much more. They are also safe and brave spaces in which we can openly share the things that inspire, motivate and worry us most – essential in times like these.

We talk a lot about the pandemic in phases and phrases, be it 'emergency, recovery and renewal' or #BuildBackBetter. They act as a useful short-hand and a time saver when we find ourselves so time poor. We can feel that we aren't doing enough. Sometimes, feeling exhausted, we can feel that we are doing too much. The truth is that we are dealing with an unknown. At Ellerman, we have been constantly inspired as a team by the resilience and commitment that has been shown by those we fund and our applicants to the causes they support. This, along with working closely with our grantees, our applicants and others in the sector, will continue to sustain us as we move towards whatever the new normal will be.

If you want to speak to a member of the team or me about any of the above, or anything else, please do [get in touch](#).