Churchill Fellows and the pandemic: understanding citizen-led change
Foreword: an inspiring model for change

In 2021, Churchill Fellows launched hundreds of projects across the UK to combat the effect of the pandemic in many areas of society. We created a new Covid-19 Action Fund to support their work. At the time of writing, we have awarded £457,000 to Fellows all over the country and more grants will be awarded in due course.

A key role of the Action Fund is to gather lessons learnt from how Fellows adapted their work during the pandemic - lessons that can be shared for the benefit of others into the future. This report is the first stage in that lesson-gathering and knowledge-sharing. It has been compiled from speaking to Churchill Fellows supported by the Action Fund, and offers a snapshot of how they have adapted and what they have learnt during this unprecedented emergency. All of them are still working on the frontline, and the pandemic is ongoing, so this is necessarily an interim report. We will continue to gather more detailed lessons and reflections. But certain trends are clear.

Fellows have learned key lessons from this time, which are explored in the report. These include ways to move faster and more effectively than before - partly through adopting digital technology, which so many of us have done, and also through maximising the advantages of their own particular model for change.

The first key aspect of the Fellows’ model for change is that it is based on highly motivated individuals rather than large organisations. These individuals, whether alone or in small groups, can be highly responsive, adaptive, nimble and swift. They operate close to the people they wish to support, so the feedback loop of practical learning is immediate and constant.

The second element is that Fellows are immersed in global innovation and are natural leaders of change.

Together, these attributes mean that the change model of Churchill Fellows combines high levels of motivation, responsiveness, local insight and global expertise. It is a highly effective model for citizen-led change.

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Fellows’ achievements are always impressive, from local grassroots impact to professional sector influence to national policy shifts. In the pandemic period, their contribution across the UK has been remarkable.

Julia Weston
Chief Executive
The Churchill Fellowship

The Churchill Fellowship is very grateful to the many supporters, partners and Fellows who have donated so generously towards the Covid-19 Action Fund, which is the subject of this report.

Further information on Churchill Fellows’ work against Covid-19 can be found online at www.churchillfellowship.org.
Executive summary

The unprecedented nature of the challenges presented by Covid-19 and the resulting lockdown restrictions have forced community-based service providers to rethink, almost overnight, how they deliver services. In a series of conversations with Churchill Fellows who were funded through the Covid-19 Action Fund, we learnt how such changes were enacted by them, the challenges they faced doing so and the unexpected opportunities these challenges presented. We learnt about the role the Churchill Fellowship has played, as a donor, in allowing the Fellows to continue their important work in delivering services to those in the community that most need them, and who are often the hardest to reach, an issue made significantly worse by lockdown restrictions.

We learnt how fruitful a partnership with public sector local authorities can be, an almost symbiotic relationship where the nimbler community-based organisations of the Fellows can respond swiftly to the immediate challenges typical of crises, trying out different approaches, demonstrating what works and what does not. They are not burdened by the more structured procedures that our colleagues in the public sector must adhere to. A trial-and-error approach can be instructive for all parties, with the larger, better-funded public sector organisations adapting successful small projects on a larger scale.

During our discussions, the Fellows recognised that a more structured, procedure-based approach to decision making is necessary when working with large budgets and greater reach, and that both larger and smaller organisations had much to learn from each other. To illustrate this point, the Fellows cited the healthcare sector, where change had been introduced at speed and successfully. Previously patients could not correspond online with their healthcare providers, but this was quickly reconsidered when the circumstances demanded. The new, secure systems put in place will endure beyond the pandemic, illustrating how swiftly change can happen when circumstances demand and minds are concentrated.

Similarly, the digitisation of services proved beneficial to mental health services, with the move online offering instant access from the safety and security of the patients’ home, and with local community leaders providing the technology to the most isolated. This allowed service providers to break down geographical barriers and reach those who could not attend an in-person appointment. While Fellows found adapting to the new way of delivering services challenging, they embraced the change and recognised that the benefits will endure beyond the pandemic.

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Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the knowledge the Fellows have gained through their Covid-19-related activities. We wanted to understand more about the Fellows’ experiences, to learn about the challenges they faced and how they overcame them, so this knowledge can be shared for the benefit of wider society and others who face similar situations, now and in the future.

The main research objectives of this piece of research were:

• To understand the impact Covid-19 and the lockdown have had on Churchill Fellows and their work,
• To identify the lessons they have learnt from overcoming the challenges in their work due to the pandemic,
• To explore how these lessons can improve decision making in future crises and inform best-practice methods more generally.

The research was commissioned from ClearView Research, who wrote this report.
Methodology

To explore the lessons Fellows had learnt from overcoming barriers and challenges in their work during the pandemic, the Churchill Fellowship connected us with 53 Fellows who had received funding through the Covid-19 Action Fund. Fellows were asked to participate in group discussions and interviews. All participation was voluntary, although contributing to the knowledge bank through this method was the reporting requirement set out as part of the Covid-19 Action Fund grant. A total of 34 Fellows with a diverse range of backgrounds and projects participated in our group discussions and interviews.

Before the discussions, Fellows completed a brief survey about how their work had changed due to Covid-19. These surveys helped our research team better understand the Fellows’ work and the challenges they had faced. As a result, the researchers were able to dig deeper into the discussions with the Fellows and explore the lessons they had learnt.

We conducted a total of six exploration labs (i.e. focus groups), three interviews and two joint interviews with the Fellows. For those who could not attend or participate in the exploration labs, we offered as an alternative the option to complete a questionnaire comprised of a series of open-ended questions where they could share their experiences and describe the challenges they had faced and summarise the lessons they had learnt during their Covid-19-related activities. A total of three Fellows chose this option.

Challenges that Fellows faced during the Covid-19 pandemic

At the beginning of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic hit the UK. The response to the pandemic was to put the country into lockdown, restricting contact between people and resulting in the closure of offices, restaurants, shops and other services deemed not necessary to stay open. This situation meant change for the work of the Fellows we spoke with. With support from the Covid-19 Action Fund, they were able to target their efforts to adapt to the pandemic and provide services and support to help mitigate the negative impact of this national emergency. The Fellows we spoke with worked on a wide range of Covid-19-related activities, including mental health, bereavement, race equity, disability and domestic abuse. The varied areas the Fellows worked in meant some challenges they faced were different, although we found overlap in their challenges they faced in their sectors.

One of the biggest challenges for the Fellows was finding a way to continue their work when they could no longer meet people face-to-face. They spoke about trying different digital methods to continue engaging with their communities and how they had to rethink and adapt their approach to their work so it would work online. Most Fellows we spoke to had success with using digital forms of communication to stay connected with their communities, but for others, this approach did not work. These Fellows spoke about using other methods to stay connected, such as doing food-drops or calling people on the phone. For one of the Fellows we spoke to, not being able to liaise with people face-to-face meant they had to change their approach completely, and they ended up adapting their offer to fulfil a new need caused by the pandemic.

The Fellows spoke about the lack of certainty that came with the pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions. They explained how difficult it was to plan or make decisions as the information they were getting was changing all the time. This meant their ways of working had to adapt continuously to fit what was allowed at any given time, particularly as the national response to the crisis evolved. This uncertainty drove the Fellows to focus their attention to adapt to this new reality, and most of them recognised that with crisis comes opportunity. They felt this changing situation allowed them to try out new ways of doing things and, as a result, they were able to create new, more effective ways of working, such as working online. They believed that due to the pandemic this all happened quickly, and these changes would not have happened as quickly had there not been a pandemic.

One of the other challenges Fellows spoke about was the physical and mental drain of continuing their work through the pandemic. They were managing their worries about their families’ health and their financial security in uncertain times and taking on the worries and challenges of the communities they were working with. Fellows spoke about how they took on extra work to help meet the basic requirements of service users who needed their help, but they explained that this could not go on indefinitely because burnout was starting to affect them and their colleagues. Some Fellows had already tried different measures to combat this strain, including allocating time slots for staff to take part in wellbeing practices such
as yoga or meditation sessions while at work or setting up work environments where they were encouraged to take time out to have non-work-related chats with colleagues. While the Fellows considered these interventions helpful, they still believed a lot more needs to be done to support them and their colleagues to overcome and move past the stress and strain of the past 18 months. Overall, the Fellows felt they learnt from trying new ways of working and testing approaches to find what worked best for them but mostly they described having learnt the value of adapting quickly to change and being creative about new ways to achieve their goals.

To learn as much as we can from their experiences, we have broken them down into seven lessons, explored in more detail below:

1. Change happens more quickly if you embrace new methods without fear of failure.
2. Community-led change allows for rapid response in an emergency.
3. More effective change can happen when organisations collaborate to achieve a goal.
4. Digital technologies keep you connected and diminish geographical borders.
5. Digital is not always the answer - and it comes with its own challenges.
6. Prioritise mental health support - or even the most resilient will burn out.
7. A can-do attitude is essential for overcoming long-lasting and multi-faceted challenges.
Lesson 1: Change happens more quickly if you embrace new methods without fear of failure

With the pandemic came lockdown restrictions and this meant that the Fellows we spoke with had to change how they interacted with their service users. While many services provided by the Fellows could be considered essential, including domestic violence support and mental health support, to contain the spread of the virus these services had to reduce their face-to-face contact wherever possible. It became more difficult for people to gain access to support due to the added challenges posed by Covid-19, such as having to isolate at home, isolating at home with a spouse or partner who is an abuser, limited access to technology, job insecurity, financial instability, etc. Almost overnight, this left many Fellows in a situation where they could not reach their service users and those who needed their help could not reach them.

The Fellows in this situation spoke about their surprise at how quickly they were able to adapt. They explained that being in a situation where they had no better alternative meant they had to try out new approaches, for example, using the telephone, emails, creating an online hub, online therapy sessions, training online and providing people with financial assistance. However, not all of these attempts were successful, and some Fellows found they had to try out several different approaches before they found what worked best for them and their community. These experiences show how in situations where there is little pressure to reform or adjust, bringing about even incremental change can be difficult. Conversely where there is no alternative, you can adapt quickly by embracing change without fear of failure by trying different approaches until you find what is most appropriate for your particular set of circumstances.

“The voluntary sector always talks about change and change management, but this is not a change that anyone predicted. So, it’s working through an emergency and coming up with risk plans that I think was a really good lesson, that if something goes wrong, you have a risk plan and mitigation of that risk straightaway.”

“I think the lockdown has forced us to break down barriers in a way that’s been really helpful.”

An example case study on the multiple challenges presented by the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions came from one of the Fellows during an exploration lab. This Fellow provides women’s aid for predominantly ethnic-minority communities and spoke of the challenges of continuing to provide these services under lockdown restrictions. Before the introduction of restrictions in March, they had a building intended for use as a walk-in centre. However, due to the restrictions, this plan was no longer feasible in the short term, and the building was lost to squatters. To continue providing support, they reached out to recent-past and current users of their services to maintain lines of communication and ensure they had adequate necessities such as food by offering a grocery delivery service. While this support was certainly useful to their existing users, it was limited in scope and could not identify and reach those who had only recently begun experiencing difficulty and needed help. To address this problem without being able to rely on conventional outreach methods required a fresh, creative approach. As a result, an online forum and later an app were developed to accomplish this. Conceived and developed in a short time, these digital assets continue to be a point of access for new and existing users and will endure long after the lockdown restrictions have been lifted permanently. Reflecting on this experience, the Fellow noted that, were it not for the urgency Covid-19 and the related restrictions presented to its service delivery, these new digital tools would probably have taken up to five years to develop.

“So there’s an online community hub with an array of access points for women, and had the pandemic not happened, I don’t think we’d ever have thought of that. Or if we had, it would take another five years for us to get that. The pandemic brought a mental framework for the organisation to act fast and to make quick decisions and then to do it.”

A second instructive case study illustrates not only the challenges presented by Covid-19 and the associated restrictions but also how impactful taking a less rigid approach to identify those most in need of support and disbursing bursaries promptly can be. One of the Fellows who experienced this first-hand works with young people in difficulty. The described how the struggles their charges faced were exacerbated by being isolated from their peers during the lockdown, further compounding mental health issues many had already suffered. Like the Fellow in the previous example, reaching those in need of support under lockdown restrictions became difficult if not impossible, as they had only limited access to technology. This Fellow found that due to a combination of low levels of self-esteem, an inability to overcome procedural hurdles to funding and a general dearth of funding in this area, the young people in need of support often failed to access the financial assistance they required to accomplish their goals. Through the Covid-19 Action Fund grant, this Fellow was able to offer a more flexible source of funding, unburdened by the constraints typical of conventional funding sources. While the bursary scheme was limited in the amounts of funding it could disburse, the nature of the fund meant it could be delivered to more young people faster, allowing them to achieve their goals while providing a much-needed boost to their confidence and a general sense of wellbeing. Having access to this source of funding allowed this Fellow to continue their crucial work in this area. Reflecting on its success, they noted that placing more trust in our youth pays dividends in the short- and medium-term, and making sources of funding nimble and less process-intensive can be a positive driver for change.

“And when I saw the Churchill [Covid Action Fund] opportunity, my thought was I was really struck with my Fellowship, how we were trusted to just go somewhere and look at some stuff and respond to it in a positive way. We didn’t have to fill in 78 forms and 38 outputs and all of that. But our work with young people is like that normally. So I wanted to set up some bursaries for young people so they could respond to Covid in their communities in their way … for us to invest in their ideas and then for them to take those ideas forward and not have to do it on a shoestring.”
Another Fellow spoke about how they quickly adapted to the new ways of working by identifying a new market or user for their work, and how this led to working on an international level. Having developed an alternative form of communication (AAC) through open-access pictographic symbols that could be used to communicate in any situation where speech, language and literacy are compromised, the Fellow quickly identified how this system could be used to overcome the barrier of communicating while wearing personal protective equipment (PPE). By adapting their technology to meet the needs presented by the pandemic, the Fellow was able to increase their market to include international collaborators in the USA, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Unfortunately, they found that due to the increased pressures on frontline staff they were too busy to embrace this new system, but they received a lot of interest from professional organisations, such as an American team supported by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Microsoft and UNICEF.

“Direct marketing did not really work during Covid-19 and letters and emails sent out to potential users such as care homes resulted in little response compared to channels known to the team, such as mailing lists, social media, blogs, tweets and Facebook. Where there were personal connections the individuals such as nurses and managers were very responsive, but they also felt that any lack of interest was due to time constraints and the very stressful Covid-19 situation over the last nine months.”

“It’s ongoing and what we’ve learnt is that there is a much wider audience, and surprisingly the countries that have come back to us range from something like the USA to the Eastern European [countries].”

By embracing change, these Fellows quickly adapted to their new circumstances, found solutions and sought out opportunities. As a result, most of them managed to adapt their work practices successfully. They were able to see the benefits and advantages of adapting quickly to change, even if their initial attempts were not always successful. Each of the Fellows spoke of the advantages of taking a flexible approach to change and many mentioned the importance of not fearing failure when trying new approaches.

Key learnings:

- The best way to find a new way of doing something is to try different approaches until you find what works best.
- Learning to embrace failure as a means of improvement by accepting you will not get it right the first time is an important stepping stone to success.
- Access to funding is often a bottleneck that prevents change from happening. Having access to even small funds means new ideas for solving problems can be tested more easily and new, more effective and efficient ways of doing things can be found.
- It is useful to complete a project risk assessment with multiple contingencies so that if the first try at doing something new does not work there is always a backup plan.
- Digital methods of communicating can be effective and may have a role in increasing contact between services and service users even beyond the pandemic.
- When face-to-face contact is limited, maintaining contact with existing service users can be difficult. One way to go beyond simply telephoning or emailing them is reaching out to existing members by offering services such as grocery deliveries. These approaches can help you sustain relationships with your community.
Lesson 2: Community-led change allows for rapid response in an emergency

As already described, each of the Fellows we interviewed managed to embrace the change that came with the pandemic and rapidly adapt their ways of working to overcome new challenges. They noted that most of the conventional ways of doing things could not be relied upon as face-to-face contact was not possible, so they tried new approaches which for the most part worked well for them and their communities. However, even as the Fellows reported rapidly adapting to the challenges posed by the pandemic, some reported barriers that delayed them from being able to apply these new solutions. Some Fellows reported that they required collaboration or partnership with local authorities or other established organisations to achieve their goals. This meant that they had to follow the processes and procedures set up by these organisations, which may prevent them from reacting quickly in times of crisis. Fellows tended to work with smaller organisations that could be more creative and nimble in their approaches. During the discussions, Fellows said they understood the processes that local authorities and government bodies work within and why they were necessary. However, in the circumstances of the pandemic, they found some delays to their services brought about by these processes frustrating. They noted that the more procedural an organisation, the more difficult it is for them to be open to innovations even in an emergency when they are necessary. Many Fellows were worried that the differences in approach to risk assessments and decision-making processes can cause delays in funding and make partnerships less likely and less effective when they do happen.

“Local authorities are very wary of change. Innovation is a word I think they are scared to death of. And we’ve struggled ... I certainly have challenged local councillors, to become more open to change. Things are not going to go back to whatever they were before. And I think change brings fear, people are scared of it.”

Another Fellow, who supports community leaders and groups across the UK through fundraising and other measures, expressed their frustration at the procedural approach taken by their local authority. They described how the paperwork and processes are not based on any form of risk classification; instead, the same process applied regardless of risk profile. They provided an example of having to complete a long key performance indicator (KPI) form for a grant of only £400. They felt this put people off applying for funding.

“(They are) asking us to fill out a KPI form for a £400 grant. If someone is cooking meals for her community block of flats and are all shielding, and you are asking her to do record-keeping for £400. I want to just give her £400 from my own money and let her get on with it. So, finding a way that can cut through the kind of slow approach of risk-taking, using modern methods is something that we’re trying to do.”

The Fellows we spoke with would like to see a more proportionate approach. They feel these processes are slowing such organisations and making it difficult for them to support their communities effectively. Another example provided by the same Fellow was that their organisation completed a mapping exercise looking at available community space eight months ago, while the local authority is still in the process of conducting a similar exercise. Another Fellow provided an example related to digital exclusion: they described how their organisation, which supports children with their education, was able to provide them with laptops quickly during the lockdown, while the government bodies were much slower in doing this.

“We were able to support communities and mobilise six months faster than most local councils. And I’m assuming that’s probably your experience (the rest of Fellows nodding affirmatively). Yeah, and I found that the agility that’s needed for the communities to respond to this, it just wasn’t there from the infrastructure bodies in the way that it needs to be. I mean, the local CBS ... they’re still mapping the space, unlike we’ve already done it. That was done like eight months ago and we’ve moved on.”

“It was so slow in the actual getting things to children. Some of those things are only coming through now for some of our kids. So, the funding we [from the Churchill Fellowship] meant that we were able to secure some extra laptops and every child was able to use laptops and work from home, that we had a qualified teacher who was able to support all of the staff across the different homes so that they could provide the sort of education that the children needed to keep going. So, I feel like it was a really successful year that we kept all of our services up and running and all of the children stayed in placement.”

However, this type of delayed response due to existing processes was not an issue for all sectors. Despite being a large and often process-intensive industry, the healthcare sector was quick to adapt during the pandemic and the Fellows engaged in this sector reported that it became responsive and open to change during the pandemic. For example, one Fellow who specialises in providing healthcare solutions to individuals, such as the potential of using mobile phones to address mental health challenges, shared that before the pandemic, patients were advised against sharing their health data with doctors via email due to its data protection vulnerability. However, due to the limited face-to-face interaction as a result of the social distancing measures, many patients were isolated at home. They were advised to visit hospitals only if necessary and limit their contact with their doctor. The healthcare sector rapidly identified the issues this limited access to healthcare could cause and became more flexible about patients communicating with their doctors via email despite the digital vulnerabilities. While digital solutions were already becoming a part of the healthcare system, the Fellows who work in this area felt that had the pandemic not occurred, the shift to digital-based solutions in healthcare would not have happened as quickly as it did.

“I think working in the healthcare system has been quite a different...”
response, which is that there’s been a lot more flexibility around the way that doctors and others respond to this... There’s been a real shift, I’ve noticed in the industry over the last year. And I think that that’s going to have a quite substantial impact because it’s kind of demonstrating the value, I suppose, of some of these more remote approaches to health care that would have taken quite a long time for people to come on board with before, you know, because the reality is that you have to do it eventually... So there’s a real impetus, really hard impetus to support people, to think about different ways of engaging with their patients.”

Overall, the Fellows felt that change can happen more quickly when processes that are usually in place can be adapted in the face of an emergency. Those who were able to act quickly and respond to change as it was happening saw the benefits of this, and those Fellows who were delayed or faced further challenges in accomplishing their goals due to long processes felt strongly that this is not the way of the future. Out of all of the sectors the Fellows we spoke with operate in, healthcare seemed to be the industry that was most adaptable and flexible during the lockdown. However, the Fellows hope in the future to convince other large and public sector organisations that their fast and innovative approach of doing things does not overlook possible risks and to build more trusting and collaborative relationships.

Key learnings:
- In an emergency, it is necessary to be able to act quickly and adapt to a changing environment. This creates a problem for the traditional risk assessment processes and long sign-off times that are common in large and government organisations. As smaller organisations are often able to react more quickly and adapt better to on-the-ground change, funding should be made available to them so they can provide an immediate response while a more long-term solution is being put in place. The Churchill Fellowship Covid-19 Action Fund provides evidence of how effective this approach can be. The funding they provided allowed Fellows to implement their solutions and support their communities faster due to the availability of funding without long processes or paperwork attached.
- There is a need to reassess some traditional processes, such as risk assessments and KPI forms, that large and government organisations have in place to reduce response times to communities’ needs.
- The healthcare sector identified the need for patients to communicate with their doctors, reassessed the potential of communication via email and started to create new and safer digital ways for doctors to communicate with patients. These technologies will continue to be useful for many industries even after this emergency has passed.
Lesson 3: More effective change can happen when organisations collaborate to achieve a goal

During the discussions, many Fellows we spoke with reported that lengthy processes were not the only impediment to the application of new solutions when collaborating with other organisations. Often there is an overlap with the service the Fellows are offering and what other organisations are doing; most commonly with other government organisations such as local authorities. The Fellows spoke about how this can often mean two or more organisations are offering the same service rather than working together to achieve similar goals. If these organisations could work together to achieve their goals they would have the advantage of combining the resources of the local authorities with the on-the-ground knowledge and adaptability of the grassroots organisations, resulting in better outcomes for all. The pandemic has highlighted the inability of this collaboration to happen. Many Fellows felt that this was due to mistrust in their approach to risk assessment or unnecessarily complicated and detailed paperwork requirements. However, with a more concerted effort, these different approaches could be integrated in a way that would prove advantageous for both and result in more effective change.

“There’s a mistrust that grows up between the people that are doing stuff and institutions also doing stuff. And we felt across the country, there were often two responses. The community response was happening really quickly, and the local authority response was happening much later, and much more controlled by risk assessment and analysis and the growing mistrust.”

However, this is not true of all government organisations. One Fellow who works across multiple local authorities noted that one of them is engaged and collaborative. However, they have noticed that all the local authorities they work with are wary of change happening too fast and not following the pre-determined route of risk assessment they are accustomed to. On the other hand, the Fellows think that they themselves are self-starters who have seen the obstacles Covid-19 has brought as a learning opportunity to make things happen. The differences in flexibility and reaction time between Fellows and government bodies can create a climate of mistrust, but these two different approaches could be of benefit to each other under the right circumstances.

“I certainly have challenged local councillors, to become more open, to change. Things are not going to go back to whatever they were before. And I think change brings fear, people are scared of it. We’ve seen Covid and the obstacles that has brought, we use them as opportunities, and we make things happen. We haven’t always got it right. But it’s been a real learning experience...But unfortunately, the local authorities are not on board with us, and I find that a real sadness.”

Coming out of the pandemic, most Fellows hope local authorities and other government bodies will start to trust and support them more. They understand the need for risk assessments and processes. Nevertheless, for them, making these processes more proportionate does not mean ignoring potential risks. It means re-evaluating and adapting existing procedures and processes on a case-by-case basis, according to the size and financial requirements of a project.

Key learnings:
• When this emergency passes, both larger public sector organisations and local grassroots organisations need to work to achieve better collaborative practices. This may mean developing risk assessment procedures that work for both parties and finding ways to allow the smaller, more adaptable organisations to manage immediate responses to emergencies while the public sector organisations focus on longer-term solutions with a smaller risk profile.
• Generally, it is important to examine how these different organisations can collaborate better together. This may mean more access to smaller amounts of funding for grassroots organisations, or simply improving channels of communication and trust between organisations.
Lesson 4: Digital technologies keep you connected and diminish geographical borders

The pandemic made working face-to-face difficult, at times impossible, and, eventually to appear outdated. Each Fellow we spoke with reported how they viewed the move to digital as a learning opportunity. The widespread acceptance and almost mandatory use of technology presented some challenges for many of them, their colleagues and service users, but it provided an opportunity to upskill and adopt new technologies into their work, almost overnight.

Once they had overcome the initial challenge of moving to digital methods for most of their work, many Fellows noted how they were surprised by the number of new possibilities and advantages technology has to offer. During the discussions, Fellows shared stories of how the transition to digital and remote working enabled them to get more done and how it made their work more accessible and allowed them to engage more with their communities. Some realised that using new technologies offered them the opportunity to minimise geographical boundaries and reach broader audiences across their region, the country and even worldwide. Most Fellows realised that this new way of working reduces the need for face-to-face contact, meaning a reduced commute and potentially better quality of life. The travel restrictions put in place as part of the lockdown proved beneficial for some Fellows’ projects as they saw their operating costs decrease significantly. That decrease in travel and operating costs enabled them to invest the money saved back into their projects. Most Fellows said that before the lockdown they were aware of the prospect of remote working, but they would not have considered it or realised the range of benefits it offered, were it not for the pandemic.

One Fellow working with young people struggling with substance addiction explained how the use of digital technologies allows their organisation to maintain contact with these service users. Their organisation was offering a residential and a day-care rehab. Due to the pandemic, they had to move the latter online. Surprisingly, they discovered that their engagement rates remained the same and in some instances increased when they used online technologies to support the young people’s recovery journey. The overall success of the programme increased, as the organisation was able to provide people in their community with a tablet and a data package. The cost of providing these devices was low, compared to the tremendous impact the tablet had on these people’s lives. Having a digital device with access to the internet, people could connect virtually with other members of their community, reducing loneliness. People in recovery could instantly get online support when and where they needed it, helping to avoid a relapse. In this way, the organisation managed to prevent digital exclusion and social isolation, which are two of the main challenges of the pandemic. They hope that when the restrictions are lifted, face-to-face support coupled with online support will enhance their organisations’ services and their impact on the people they support.
“I think the lessons would be, you know, again, the technology, we didn’t particularly use it outside of staff training and meetings with people nationally and internationally. But what we’ve realised is that the people in our community with a relatively low cost of providing them with a tablet and some data, it had a huge impact on their lives. And I think that’s something that we will continue to do. And if somebody needs a tablet to be provided or a smartphone, previously we probably wouldn’t have done that. But we recognise now that we can make it an absolutely massive difference and can be a kind of a standard recovery lapse kind of issue if somebody has got the ability to contact somebody who can provide them with fairly instant support.”

One Fellow explained how they made a successful transition to working online and found that what they could achieve went beyond their expectations. This was an online training course in emotional wellness and mental health, and the Fellow found that, especially during the lockdown, their online courses provided a much-needed community where people who were socially isolated were able to come together and share their stories in a safe space. While many who engaged in these courses were safely isolating at home, the challenges people were facing due to their race and/or culture were still having a major impact, and this safe online community space was somewhere they could voice their concerns and vent their frustrations.

“...with some of the online courses that I was running, that people said what they really found helpful about it was a sense of community and being able to come together, particularly in the lockdown when people were meant to stay at home...And people were saying that they were socially isolated, basically, and that their mood was dropping and that they wanted to connect with like-minded people. And that one thing that my course did was to help them find their tribe and still connect with people while they were in lockdown.”

Two of the Fellows reported how they found that online mental health treatments and therapy work astonishingly well for adults. One of the reasons they offered to explain this is the ease of access online therapies offer. They spoke about how individuals are not required to leave the safe environment of their homes to access this type of support online, and some still access their therapy options online, even though the social restrictions are being slowly lifted.

“Another benefit of digital technologies is how they overcome geographical borders. Due to the restrictions, it became impossible to bring people together in physical groups, but one Fellow working with Asian communities shared how the use of digital technologies to bring people together virtually enabled their organisation to widen its participation. In the pre-pandemic setting, they were mainly attracting London-based individuals to London-based events. However, the use of digital tools enabled them to reach out to broader audiences worldwide, even getting speakers based in Asia to present at their events. Another Fellow working with cancer survivors echoed the same benefit technology had for their work, as people can now join their online events without the need to travel. These Fellows reported using various technologies to aid their work, including video-communication software programmes such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, messaging applications such as WhatsApp, event hosting services such as Eventbrite, and other bespoke technologies designed for this purpose.

The use of technology that other people talked about for us, that's actually widen our participation. We've had people joining us from across the country, rather than people who are predominantly based in London, we usually run lots of physical events for up to five hundred people at a time. So being able to do those things online that people can join us from, actually, it's been around the world, which has been nice and new.”

“Not having to travel to an event actually works quite well for them. And it also means we've been able to reach people in places where, you know, they just maybe would never have travelled from.”

“And so we had to build a new community of people all online. So in a way, it was like digital-first ... And the use of WhatsApp, it's amazing what you can do on WhatsApp in terms of organising people around the country and around the world.”

Nevertheless, Fellows did say that before reaping the benefits that digital technologies had to offer they had to overcome a steep learning curve and provide training for them and their staff on how to use these digital tools. They discovered that a digital etiquette was emerging to which they had to adapt. Despite this need for more training and continued learning, the Fellows saw the benefits of technology to their work and people’s lives and felt that these benefits will continue long after lockdown has ended.

Key learnings:
- According to Fellows, applying online tools and technology to the existing working model has multiple benefits.
- They were able to keep their communities connected and prevent digital exclusion and social isolation.
- Online mental health tools seem to work well for some individuals, as they offer almost instant support from the ease of one’s home.
- Geographical borders are no longer an obstacle for Fellows to increase their support base and reach out to broader audiences, as technology has offered the opportunity to connect with individuals and communities worldwide.
Lesson 5: Digital is not always the answer - and it comes with its own challenges

While the use of technology did help people and communities stay connected and prevent social isolation during the lockdown, some Fellows remarked that despite the advantages of reaching broader audiences, engaging the community and reducing operational costs, incorporating digital technologies into their working models was not without its disadvantages. Digital exclusion is one of the biggest challenges of moving to a more digital working model. What many Fellows realised was that there is a lack of digital devices or internet access for many people they support. Before the lockdown, individuals could have face-to-face support, and digital exclusion was not as profound as it became when the first pandemic lockdown took place.

In the previous section, two of the Fellows who work with young people described how they prevented them from becoming digitally excluded during the pandemic by providing them with tablets and laptops. However, there was one Fellow whose work was severely impacted by the effects of the pandemic. They work with imprisoned men and women, and before the pandemic, they delivered their educational programmes face-to-face in prisons. Unfortunately, the pandemic social distancing measures and the lack of digital devices in prisons hampered these efforts. Consequently, they had to deliver their educational programmes to prisoners by post. This might have helped the people inside the prison continue their learning, but it left those coming out of custody unprepared to engage with the new digital world.

“Prior to Covid, most of my work was doing face-to-face delivery in prisons since March 2020 prisons went into lockdown. Education was sort of stopped ... So, I went from face-to-face to a distance learning paper-based programme where I post stuff into prisons and prisoners directly. And now, obviously, the Covid Fund has helped to move into a more sort of digital version. So as the people finish my courses, which are paper-based, they come out of custody and then can engage in a more digital world. So, for me, the challenge is really about keeping up that engagement with someone which is hard to do anyway within the prison systems and then being able to work with them more in the future.”

The digital exclusion was not the only challenge Fellows faced when it came to taking their projects digital. Some were forced to undergo a rapid digital upskilling. The pace of this transformation to their work put mental and time pressure on them and their staff. For example, one Fellow described how the pandemic forced his team to move from not delivering any digital work at all to working almost entirely online, in just ten days. Another Fellow shared her frustration and the pressure she felt with her team, as they had to rebuild a significant number of their programmes online to keep their services running.
“Our objective is to prevent social exclusion. Well, Covid really excluded. We’re running other groups working in older people care homes, and we all left dry and high. We’re not doing any digital work and we are very small. So Covid within ten days, we were online. I’d to learn to teach using PowerPoint and Zoom. So, we’ve been on a real tech upskilling course as a team.”

“Another thing that has changed is that we had difficulties related to Covid, so we had increased demand with the schools and employers and charities we work with. They obviously were all moving online basically overnight. So, we had increased demand. So, we found ourselves in this really annoying situation where we had all this extra demand that we couldn’t exactly soak up. And while we had to maintain all of our existing programmes as well. So, we had to basically rebuild a really big portion of our technology as well as keeping everything running.”

As mentioned previously, the healthcare and mental health sectors transitioned faster to using digital means of communication than many other industries. However, many Fellows argued that the digital transition was not as smooth as it sounds. One explained how they and their colleagues had never worked therapeutically or clinically online before the pandemic. They had never had any training for it, which made them feel pressured. They had to master the digital technologies to learn an effective and efficient way to deliver trauma therapy online. Another Fellow faced a similar problem when transitioning to digital working. As they said, belonging to the generation of carriage typewriters, improving their IT skills was not a priority before the pandemic. Nevertheless, they spoke about how they overcame that pressure of digital upskilling and how they successfully assisted their organisation in increasing its social media presence.

“We increased our social media activities. It was null before the pandemic. But it’s something that I was always scared to pick up. I’m very bad at IT. I come from a time where I learnt to type on a carriage typewriter and for me to change my mindset, it was very difficult.”

While the use of digital technologies helped many Fellows overcome challenges caused by Covid-19 and the lockdown, this was not the case for everyone. In some cases, digital approaches just did not work. One of the Fellows, who works in youth mental health, spoke about the successes and failures of providing support and therapies online. While for some groups (such as adults dealing with prolonged grief) the online offer was effective for others (such as teenagers) providing only online support and therapy helped prevent things from getting worse but did not achieve any real healing or recovery.

“So, they came back into our buildings and that was really good. But what we noticed there was that the people had been engaging in online support and then did come back into our building, we realised that we had just simply held them. They have made no progress during the time of online support, they came back into the office, into our therapy rooms, and they leap forward again in their grieving process. So, we discovered that online is OK. If you want to just hold people, lower their isolation and, you know, just give them some kind of support. They're not alone, et cetera. But it was no good. It didn’t facilitate any forward movement, any therapeutic value in that sense.”

Another Fellow who works with parents and infants was challenged by the adoption of technology, as the heart of their work requires face-to-face interaction. They explained that facilitating the bond between a mother and baby was already difficult pre-pandemic and became even more complicated during the lockdown. A Fellow who works on creating a more sustainable food system faced similar problems. Their work is based on the physical transfer of food items between restaurants and themselves and then onto those who need the food. When the Covid-19 restrictions were put in place and physical spaces such as restaurants were forced to close, it generated complications for their distribution chain. Nevertheless, some restaurants agreed to distribute to food banks when the pandemic measures eased. They were surprised at how well this operational model worked, with customers volunteering to take food to the houses of key workers or vulnerable people. The grant money helped them to move into a larger building so people could pack food safely according to the social distancing rules.

“As mentioned, the use of digital technologies was advantageous for some Fellows. Nevertheless, that working model has significant drawbacks for other Fellows due to the nature of their work, a lack of digital skills or a general lack of equipment. In a post-pandemic world, many Fellows see themselves utilising the digital working model and taking advantage of the benefits it comes with. However, they all agreed that physical contact and meeting people face-to-face should always be part of their offer and be carefully balanced with meeting people online.

Key learnings:

• Moving forward, it is essential to have digital upskilling for all staff and digital support to help manage the increase in the use of technology in emergencies.

• Despite the advantages of technology, face-to-face contact cannot be completely replaced, and there needs to be a balance between the two. What this balance looks like depends on the type of service provided and the practitioners providing it.
Lesson 6: Prioritise mental health support - or even the most resilient will burn out

For many Fellows, the conversations we had were an opportunity to reflect on the demands of the pandemic. Having to adapt rapidly to change, facing delays due to long risk assessment processes, and learning how to use digital ways of working were challenges Fellows faced. Each Fellow we spoke with discussed the importance of protecting our mental health and the dangers of getting burnout. Fellows used the word ‘altruism’ to describe their teams and frontline key workers’ efforts to support their communities throughout the lockdown period. However, they stressed that despite these selfless characteristics they are just as physically and mentally vulnerable to burnout as any other person. Finding themselves caught up in the storm of the pandemic, the Fellows we spoke to described how they put aside the importance of looking after their own mental health and wellbeing, as their number one priority was to support their communities in the best way.

There is a clear need to set up prevention mechanisms to avoid burnout and improve mental health support for Fellows, their teams and those working in the wider service-provision industry. Having the right supports in place can go a long way to ensuring these workers will be able to stand by the people in their communities in future emergencies. One Fellow observed that frontline staff are not the only ones affected by the physical and mental pressures of the pandemic. They spoke about how these burnout effects were prevalent among the managers of the frontline key workers as well. Although there is therapeutic support for staff in their organisations, they are still concerned about their mental wellbeing. This Fellow said while they understand that not everything can be done to reduce the impact of these stressful times, more needs to be done, and they feel that at the moment there is more talk than action about mental health and wellbeing. Other Fellows agreed with this sentiment.

“And I suppose what we’re seeing is, is more burnout from managers, who are usually the managers of the people there who are really supporting the care staff to be able to keep doing what’s a really tough job, even in the best of times. And it’s thinking about, you know, we’re incredibly lucky and we’ve got therapeutic support within the organisation. But even with that resource, it’s still thinking about how do you provide enough support because not everything can be cured within the workplace because it’s just living in a really difficult period... So we talk about the fact of like, you know, respecting the fact that, wellbeing and mental health is something we need to focus on. But I don’t know that it feels like we’re talking about it more than what we kind of have an action plan for it.”

The unprecedented nature of the pandemic in terms of workload, level of suffering, lack of certainty, loss, and fear was a tipping point for many Fellows’ teams. Another Fellow, a clinical psychologist, argued that many
studies of disaster responses, particularly after 9/11, suggest that the impacts of burnout among staff go on for years afterwards. They explained that some people who get burnout fall into a downward emotional spiral. They face depression and become unable to work. Therefore, while it is important for organisations to support staff who are already facing burnout symptoms, we need to be thinking about ways to avoid this happening in the first place. This Fellow suggested that instead of taking a top-down approach to support, where a staff member who needs support is assigned a support worker, we should encourage a collective effort within the team or organisation to support each other’s resilience and recovery.

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Another Fellow spoke about actions they took within their workplace for staff to better support each other’s mental health and wellbeing. They incorporated tools such as a buddy system. In the buddy system, each staff member was assigned another staff member as a buddy and they were allocated 15 minutes each day to speak with each other about anything other than work-related topics. This Fellow found that the system helped to form a friendly environment where staff could express their emotions and share their concerns. Another tool this Fellow trialled was holding one-hour virtual wellbeing sessions with their team. During these sessions, people were encouraged to take part in wellbeing exercises, such as yoga or meditation. Slowly, these virtual gatherings became a habit and were named ‘Wellbeing Wednesdays’. While none of these interventions is a silver bullet that can resolve all of the mental health and wellbeing challenges that people are facing, this Fellow argued that these kinds of experimental interventions do seem to have a positive impact on staff mental health and wellbeing. However, it is still too early for them to say if the interventions will have a lasting impact or if they will continue using them after the pandemic.

“We set up a buddy system, so staff still have their buddies, and they talk to their buddies 15 minutes a day, but they’re not allowed to talk about work... But that wasn’t enough. So, I started to do team wellbeing projects ... And now that’s developed into wellbeing Wednesdays. So, all the staff down tools at 4:00 on a Wednesday, they are still paid until five, obviously, but they go off and do yoga or meditation or whatever. And I just think, and I had to put quite a lot of resources into making them feel valued, but making them step away, making them look at something else and treat each other as individuals and just remind them to be kind to themselves and recognise that this is really rough.”

Each Fellow recognised the post-lockdown impact on the mental health and general wellbeing of their staff. They agree that organisations need to prioritise and implement a solid system that supports and preserves their staff’s wellbeing and mental health. They said organisations need to acknowledge the emotional toll of isolation and loneliness that the pandemic restrictions had on people and immediately create support mechanisms for their staff. When another global crisis emerges, it will be too late. If their staff are not fully prepared with the tools they need, they will not be able to support the people who need them the most.

**Key learnings:**
- All Fellows believe that prioritising and supporting staff wellbeing and mental health must be the number one priority for organisations in the post-lockdown period.
- Preventing staff burnout must be a collective effort that involves everyone and not only top-down measures in an organisation.
- Fellows applied interventions to support their staff’s mental health and wellbeing. These solutions seem to have positive effects on their staff; however, it is too early for them to evaluate if these interventions will have a lasting impact.
Lesson 7: A can-do attitude is essential for overcoming long-lasting and multi-faceted challenges

The Fellows we spoke with all had a common attitude to change: they were self-starters who believed they could make a difference. This meant that where others may see barriers, they were more likely to see challenges to be overcome. This may be why these particular individuals were selected to be Churchill Fellows, or it may be the Fellowship itself that causes them to develop this attitude. What is clear is that having this can-do attitude is key to the success of their ambitions.

“Lots of Churchill Fellows are self-starters. That’s part of, I think, the success of getting a Fellowship…we make things happen”

The way the Fellows described the challenges they faced during the pandemic as a result of both Covid-19 itself and the related lockdown was reflective of how they approached these challenges. Instead of looking at the challenges in front of them as obstacles that meant they could no longer continue their work, they described their solution-finding thought process. This involved evaluating their situation, identifying the resources available to them and brainstorming ways to use these resources to overcome the problems in front of them, one issue at a time. They spoke about creating risk assessments that allowed for multiple contingencies so that if one solution did not work, they could quickly move on to the next option without wasting time. They spoke about learning from what did not work and thinking on their feet to adapt quickly and constantly to their ever-changing environment. This pragmatic approach and positive can-do attitude helped this group to continue achieving their goals despite the challenging circumstances.

“We’ve seen Covid and the obstacles that has brought, we use them as opportunities, and we make things happen”

When we enquired what kept Fellows motivated and where this drive and positive approach to change came from, they said it was based on their close connection with the goal they were striving to achieve and the support of colleagues around them who shared their view that they had to achieve success and therefore they would. Many Fellows described the benefits of monitoring and evaluating the impact of what they were doing. They found that getting regular feedback about the positive impact of their work and understanding that what they were doing was working were strong motivators to continue pushing through the challenges, even when it was difficult.

Many Fellows projects were initiated because they either had a personal connection to it or they saw a local problem and wanted to be part of the solution. Both of these motivations bring with them an inherent knowledge and understanding of the situation. These Fellows have first-hand, on-the-ground knowledge
of the people they are trying to support or the situation they are trying to change. This knowledge is invaluable, as it means they can target resources where they are most needed and quickly adapt this response as on-the-ground needs change. Some Fellows spoke about how maintaining contact with their communities during lockdown meant they could be made aware of how their experiences were changing and then respond to those changes.

“We looked at necessities, essentials, food, grocery store, toilet roll, and things like that. So that was normally out of our remit, but we made a decision that if we’re going to reach people quickly so that they don’t feel isolated and they’re not living in fear, is to do that, to be able to do those deliveries, so there’s a connect there.”

The Fellows spoke about the support they got from their colleagues, and the support they gave to their colleagues. It was clear from the conversations with the Fellows that the work they are involved in requires high levels of empathy and emotional intelligence.

Despite the stressful lockdown period, the Fellows we spoke with had managed to maintain their own wellbeing and support that of their colleagues by putting themselves in each other’s shoes to better understand and support each other. For instance, one Fellow said their team had to learn to acknowledge the emotions of anger, grief, rage, distress, and to do it in a way that reflects the generational differences of the people with the different cultural backgrounds of those people. And so, I think we’re still learning about what that means, how to do it well. But it’s certainly something that we didn’t do or didn’t necessarily consider as part of our daily work. And now we spend a lot of time talking about it.”

By monitoring and evaluating their impact the Fellows said they were able to draw continuous motivation and adapt when things were not working. The Fellows who used formal tools to measure their impact spoke about using surveys and interviews with their communities. This helped them to reflect on their actions and to develop and improve their problem solving and decision making. They reflected that there is a certain amount of survey fatigue within their communities, and therefore it was important that surveys were kept short and insightful and that interviews took a more informal approach.

“I did a combination of a really quick survey like a three- or four-minute survey because we all absolutely fatigued to the max with online surveys. So, you have to keep them very, very short and sweet. And then I followed that up with 15, 20 min conversations with people.”

“We’re a lived experience organisation, we co-produced everything. So, we have a lot of qualitative storytelling type reports that we generate.”

These Fellows made change happen through perseverance and practical thinking. By believing they could be successful they found ways to make this a reality. With this positive can-do attitude they managed to overcome the long-lasting and multi-faceted challenges posed by the pandemic and the national lockdown.

Key learnings:

• Believing that change is possible opens up the problem; if you believe it is possible to overcome the challenge you are facing then you only have to find the right solution
• Being closely connected to the issue you are working on is a strong motivator to keep working towards your goals even when this is challenging.
• Having strong emotional intelligence and working with others who have this skill means you can work collectively to support each other’s wellbeing.
• Constant monitoring and evaluation of the impact of your work is a crucial aspect of measuring progress and areas for improvement.
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About ClearView Research
ClearView Research Ltd (ClearView) is an audience insight and strategy agency. We are specialists in working on research, evaluation and engagement projects with young people, minority ethnic groups, culturally diverse communities, people with protected characteristics and those who often go unheard. We are committed to ensuring that our work is always inclusive and equitable. We strive to ensure that all of our participants enjoy the research process and find it accessible, engaging and empowering. We ensure that their voices are central in the materials (e.g. reports and frameworks) that we produce. We work best with organisations that sincerely care and want to make a genuine impact.

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