



# **State of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Merton 2021**

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## July 2021

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## About this research

This is the full report from the 2021 research. An Executive Summary is available as a separate document.

The research took place between January and May 2021. The research methodology included a mix of primary data collected through an online survey, surveys completed over the phone with researcher, online engagement workshops and one-to-one telephone interviews.

Secondary data was collected through accessing the Merton State of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Merton datasets from 2012 and 2016, recent South London similar research, reports from a range of regional and national organisations and the London Datastore.

In total 47 organisations took part in the research.

Methods used	Interactions
Online questionnaire completions	43
Online workshop participants	17
Telephone interviews	2
Direct emails/calls to participate from researcher	49
Direct SurveyMonkey email to 2012/2016 participants	72
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>183</b>

Securing engagement in the 2021 research was much harder than in previous years. Despite a 34% increase in direct interactions with organisations there was a 41% fall in participation. The research team attribute this to a range of factors including:

- Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on group capacity
- Lack of physical VCS meetings
- No hard copy questionnaires posted to Merton Connected mailing list
- Number of organisations not digitally engaged
- No incentive prize draw (2016 an iPad)

Participation in the research project was promoted through direct emails and social media activity from Merton Connected, Merton Council, Merton Giving, Merton CCG, and several voluntary and community organisations.

## The Voluntary and Community Sector in Merton

The voluntary, community and faith sector in Merton is diverse and includes charitable organisations with a range of legal structures, organisations not registered as charities, and social enterprises including industrial and provident societies (Co-operative Societies and Community Benefit Societies).

There is no legal requirement for voluntary groups to register as a charity until their income reaches £10,000. Most London boroughs have double the number of community groups that are not registered as charities and these groups are unregulated.

The diversity of the sector, its range of structures and different regulators has always made capturing its true profile and value challenging. Using Charity Commission open data sources, local engagement, mapping and research, Merton Connected can present valuable insights into the local sector. The data is very much a snapshot in time complimented by the qualitative information gathered through a range of research methods.

The Charity Commission live data as of May 2021 provides an overview of the local charity sector. This is pre-pandemic and does not include any factors that can be attributed to its impact on the sector.

**204** charities are physically based in Merton including schools and faith organisations.

- 24% are incorporated
- 8% registered in last 3 years (this figure has halved since 2016)
- 39% been around for over 21 years (this figure has fallen by 7% since 2016)
- 1,273 trustees
- 602 employees
- 4,432 volunteers
- £42,875,984 turnover in 2020

**428** registered charities include Merton as an area of benefit although their central office is based elsewhere (ranged from neighbouring boroughs to other parts of England).

- 31% are incorporated
- 2,568 trustees
- 3,224 employees
- 13,513 volunteers
- £191,933,871 turnover in 2020

This data for Merton based charities indicates the sector is shrinking. There has been a reduction in new organisations that choose to register as a charity and some long-standing organisations have ceased to operate. A range of factors could contribute to this including:

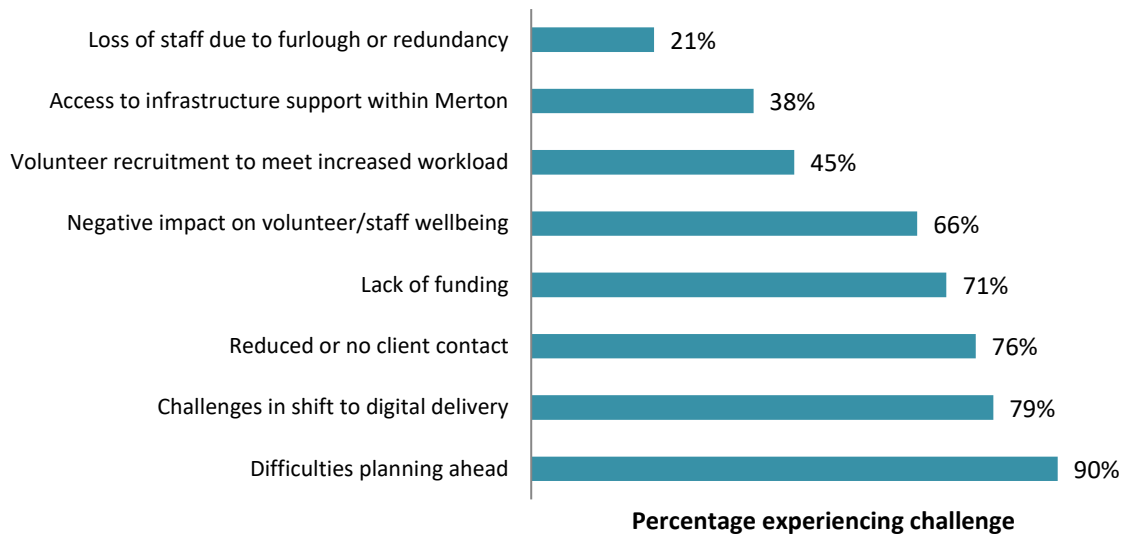
- New groups are opting for non-charitable structures
- Funding pressures have forced the closure of some organisations
- Mergers and takeovers to increase sustainability may have played a role in the drop of organisations that have been around for many years
- New sub-regional and regional funding streams may have encouraged charities to widen their area of benefit in order to remain compliant

## Key challenges resulting from the pandemic

In the online survey we asked organisations about the impact a number of issues had on them during the pandemic, and about the degree of impact these issues had on their activities. The most significant challenges were planning ahead (90%) and making the shift to digital delivery (79%).

Issues with access to infrastructure support from Merton was also a significant issue for more than one in three, though this must be put into the context of Covid-19 causing an initial shutdown of services while new delivery models were put in place, and information about these circulated.

## Challenges experienced during the pandemic



Contributions to interviews and engagement events overall mirrored what we learned in the online survey. Several themes emerged:

### **Beneficiary engagement**

Profiling support to meet emerging need was initially very focused on providing practical support such as food, money and medication. In the online survey 76% of respondents identified reduced or no client contact as a problem, and it was clear in our workshops carried out in April 2021 that this was still an ongoing issue for some organisations.

Organisations supporting people with specific disabilities, impairments that present communication barriers, learning disabilities or other cognitive impairments reported how hard it has been staying in touch with their users. Moving to telephone or digital engagement methods was not a solution for everyone. There was a real fear that the gap in connectedness will take a long time to recover, and this was seen as an especially challenging problem for those already on the periphery.

### **Mental health and wellbeing**

Almost two thirds of online survey respondents reported the negative impact the pandemic response is having on the wellbeing of trustees, employees and volunteers. Enduring a sustained period of longer working or volunteering hours, stress and uncertainty increases the risk of burnout and/or absence due to illness.

The mental health impact on service users is also an important factor, and one that in turn puts more pressure on organisations and their people. Several organisations cited the biggest increase in service demand being for mental health support for adults, children and young people and carers.

In workshops, there was tangible concern about the ability of all agencies to cope with the mental health needs of children and young people as we emerge from lockdown. Many organisations described their experience of increasing complexity of need as well as the demand for support starting to present by children and young people. A CAMHS service environment characterised by

struggles to access support and long lead in times was identified in 75% of the workshops. There were fears that for many children and young people the opportunity to prevent mental health crisis was being missed.

### **Emergency response and longer-term transformation**

Responding to another survey question (see *How the pandemic affected demand and the nature of services provided* below) 61% of organisations said they have changed their services to meet new or different demands. 58% have launched new services in response to the presenting need. The level of responsiveness, creativity and leadership demonstrated in Merton far exceeds comparative national data. NVCO reports that only 38% of organisations nationally reported an increase in their range of services since the beginning of the pandemic<sup>1</sup>.

The biggest challenges reported in our survey were moving to digital delivery which affected 79% and the inability to strategically and operationally plan due to the fluid nature of the pandemic and Government guidance which affected 90%. The inability to create robust funded strategies for recovery is impacting at both governance and management level.

Several organisations stated in the workshops that their business models have been ruined by the pandemic. What were historically seen as strong operational models for sustainability (often noted as good practice) had been impacted by a number of factors.

<b>Factors with significant effect on business model during the pandemic</b>			
50% + drop in income (sales of goods and services, fundraising)	Securing income or charging for online delivery currently not a feasible option	Inability to raise unrestricted funds due to regulations	Recovery needed to cover £150k bounce back loan payments

### **Digital**

Digital delivery, enabled by emergency grants for hardware and systems, has enabled many organisations to manage a 20-25% increase in demand within existing resources. In workshops several organisations confidently stated that their reach and activity participation numbers had been better online.

This positivity should be tempered by the fact that workshop participants expressed less confidence that those digitally engaged were those in greatest need.

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<sup>1</sup> NCVO/NTU Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19 May 2021

Hybrid or blended delivery models were seen as a realistic long-term change resulting from the pandemic. Online delivery alone was not deemed to be good enough in the medium term to meet everyone’s needs. Physical contact is seen to be a crucial factor to maintain mental and physical wellbeing, especially during recovery.

The inability to fully understand the role technology can and will play in the future is a major difficulty organisations face when planning. Insufficient specialist support and guidance could result in missed opportunities, misplaced investment and a paid and voluntary workforce lacking the required competencies.

## Finance

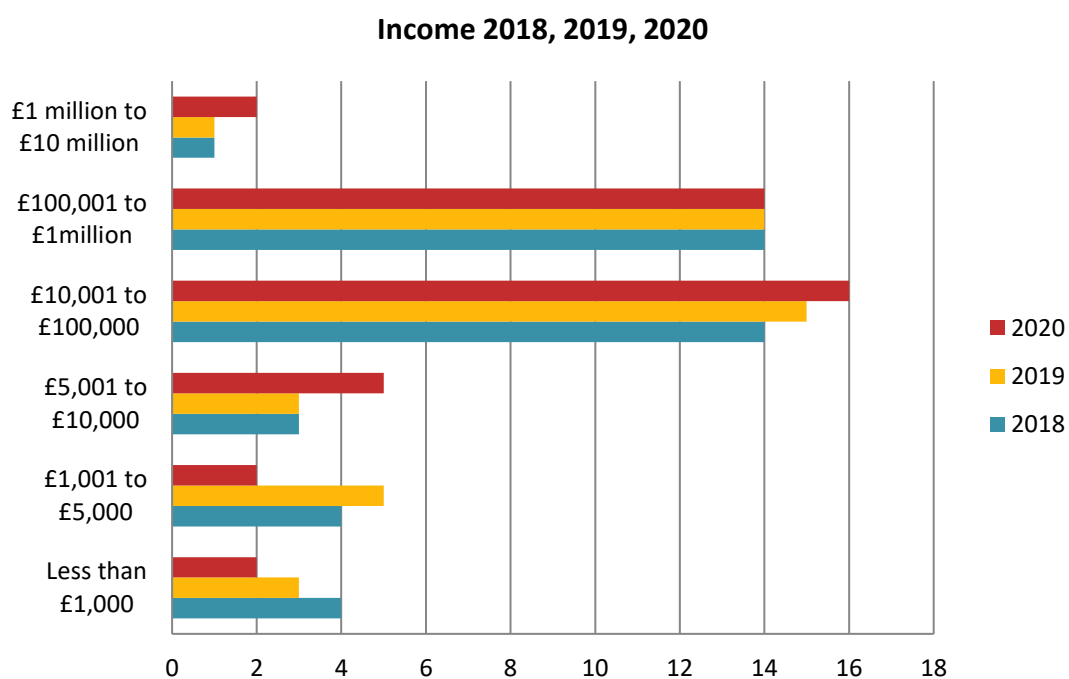
As with previous Merton State of the Sector research projects, we explore the income profile of organisations to better understand their sustainability and trends. This year we included questions relating to the pandemic.

### Income

Income has been fairly stable over the last three years for the organisations that participated in the survey, but there are significant nuances.

The organisations demonstrating growth over the last three years are those with an income between £5,000 and £100,000 and the two largest with turnover exceeding £1m. Small and micro organisations (often volunteer led) experienced falling incomes over the same period.

The pandemic has demonstrated the importance and value of organisations across the income spectrum. A healthy community needs to be characterised by an environment that is equitable and fair for groups of all sizes – recognising value in diversity.



## Funding sources

A wide range of funding sources is relied on, with LBM a dominant and very important funding source used by 44% of respondents in 2018/19, 46% in 2019/20 and 49% in 2020/21 (up to the point the survey concluded in April 2021.)

While the most and least frequently used funding sources remained fairly consistent across the period, the importance ranking changed slightly. Notably, unrestricted fundraising, and funds from charitable trusts and companies remained an important source.

### Funding sources used

2020/21 (to survey closure date)	2019/20	2018/19
LBM	LBM	LBM
Other charitable trusts/companies	Unrestricted fundraising	Unrestricted fundraising
Unrestricted fundraising	Other charitable trusts/companies	Other charitable trusts companies
Contracts for services	Fees paid by service users	Housing association (e.g. Clarion Housing)
National Lottery Community Fund	Contracts for services	Fees paid by service users
Housing association (e.g., Clarion Housing)	Housing association (e.g. Clarion Housing)	Contracts for services
City Bridge Trust	National Lottery Community Fund	National Lottery Community Fund
Fees paid by service users	Central Government	Merton NHS (CCG)
Central Government	City Bridge Trust	City Bridge Trust
London Councils (London Borough Grants)	Trust for London	Trust for London
Merton NHS (CCG)	Merton NHS (CCG)	Awards for All
Lloyds Foundation	Lloyds Foundation	Central Government
Trust for London	London Councils (London Borough Grants)	London Councils (London Borough Grants)
European Funding (ESF etc.)	Other Lottery distributors	Other Lottery distributors
Any other statutory body (police, fire service etc.)	Awards for All	Lloyds Foundation
Other Lottery distributors	Any other statutory body (police, fire service etc.)	European Funding (ESF etc.)
Awards for All	European Funding (ESF etc.)	Any other statutory body (police, fire service etc.)

Key:

green shade used by 10 or more respondents, orange shade used by 1 – 9 respondents, grey shade not used at all in the period



## Funding from Covid-19 specific sources

As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, a range of specific financial support sources were introduced. Organisations in the voluntary and community sectors were able to get support from central government for areas like staff salaries through furlough and small business grants and loans, while locally the Merton Giving Coronavirus Fund stepped in.

Across two funding phases the Merton Giving Coronavirus Fund awarded a total of £339,462 in 106 separate grants with an average grant value of £3,203, reaching an estimated 13,121 residents.

Among respondents to our survey 65% made successful grant applications to at least one Covid-19 specific funding source. Within that 65% over half (54%) successfully applied to Merton Giving, and 25% have accessed other local funding sources. Exactly half (50%) have benefitted from the London Community Response Fund.

Smaller organisations, especially those from diverse communities, welcomed the increased accessibility and application success rates. They felt this was an acknowledgement of their value and hoped it will be sustained.

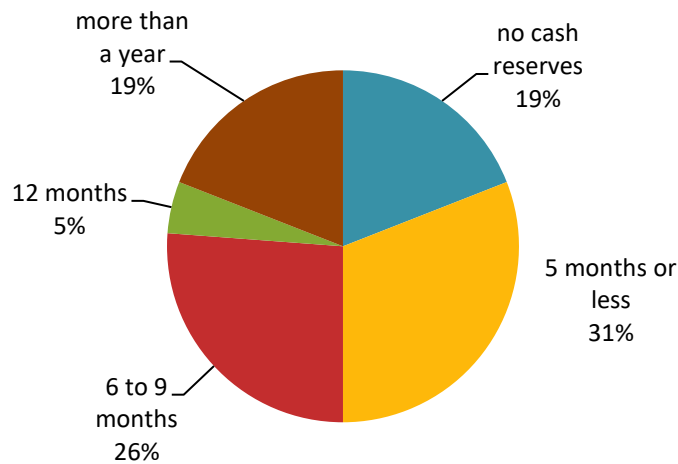
### Funding from Covid-19 specific sources



## Financial security

The last year has been difficult, and we learned how challenging some organisations have found their financial security. It is concerning that in response to our survey 62% of organisations told us their cash reserves would not last them a year, 13% could only survive for five months or less on cash reserves, and 8% had no cash reserves at all.

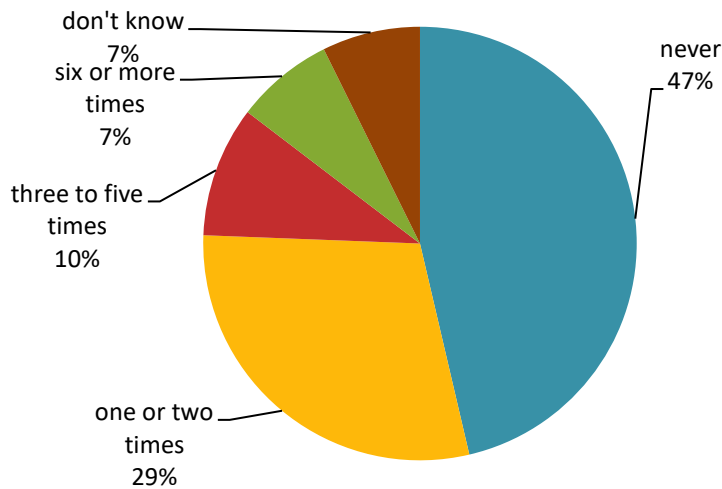
### How long will cash reserves last?



In times of difficulty organisations may need to draw on their cash reserves. While a small number of organisations were unsure whether they had accessed their cash reserves (7%), we found that of the remainder an equal proportion had used reserves and had managed not to do so (46%).

Digging deeper, we learned that some had used reserves on multiple occasions. This potentially impacts on sustainability, the ability to attract future grant funding and organisational resilience.

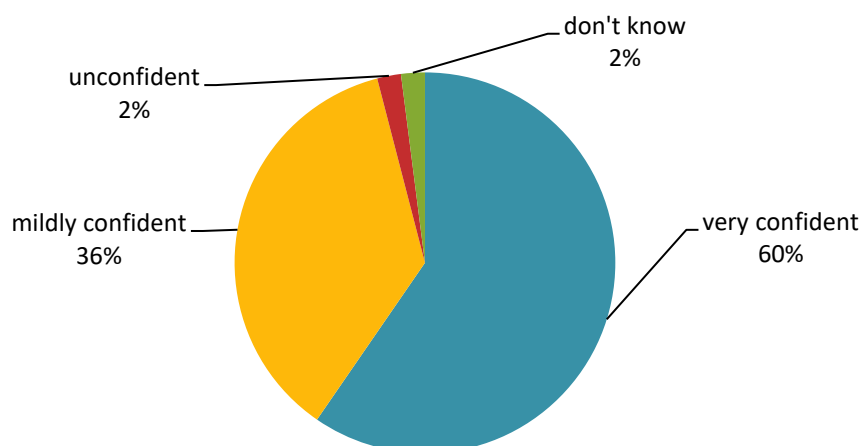
### Use of cash reserves



## Resilience, capacity and capability

In our survey we asked people how confident they are that their organisation would continue to exist, given all the challenges that the past year has brought. Overall, 96% said they are either very confident or mildly confident that their organisation would continue to exist, with just 2% unconfident and 2% not knowing.

## Confidence the organisation will continue to exist



This presents a very positive outlook compared to the most recent national data, where 6% reported that it was quite likely or very likely that their organisation would no longer be operating next year<sup>2</sup>.

Analysis by Pro Bono Economics has predicted a significant decrease in both the number of charities and their ability to deliver vital services nationally. It found 10% of charities say they were likely to close, while 80% expected a negative impact on delivering their planned objectives. A combination of lost income and increased demand has led to an estimated funding gap of £10bn across the sector over six months alone. This picture of increasing and complex demand paired with lost income is echoed by what we have learned about the situation in Merton. The sustained level of optimism in Merton has been demonstrated over the last nine years of State of the Sector research, and is a positive sign that the sector can, with the right support, remain resilient.

When we asked people to talk about the sustainability and resilience given the challenges they had faced over the last year what came through was a picture comprising a mix of organisations that have found ways to work through changed circumstances and organisations that have faced considerable difficulties.

The coming period will require a nuanced, personalised and very hands-on approach to ensure that every organisation gets the right level of support. This will include not only financial help, but support with management and organisational development.

Here are some of the things people told us:

*“We have weathered Covid but worry about our survival in the aftermath”*

*“Despite the recent challenges we have proven to be resilient and adapted quickly to different ways of delivering the services we offer. We hope to be able to expand further our services to meet the demand of our clientele.”*

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<sup>2</sup> NCVO/NTU Respond, recover, reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19 May 2021

*“We have acted quickly and managed to maintain service online we have been extremely lucky but think the next 6 months when help is reduced will be more of a challenge”*

*“We have proved beyond doubt that our Project really does help people and have genuine testimonials to prove it. However, it has to be properly funded to grow and help more people.”*

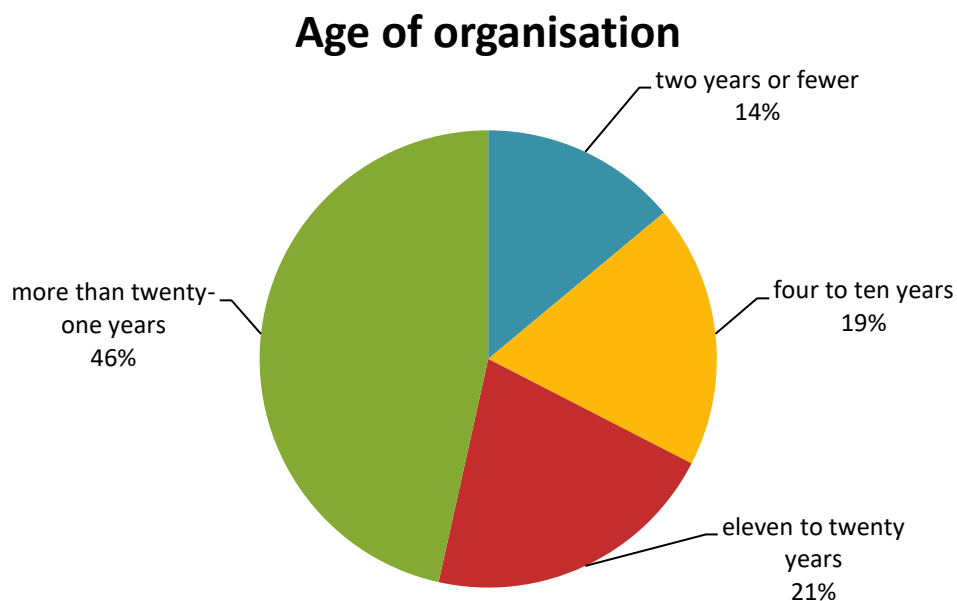
*“We have proven to be resilient in the past but the future is currently unknown. We have been prudent in our financial management but will need to monitor our financial position carefully as we go forward”*

*“We have built reserves over the last couple of years to enable us to set a deficit budget this year with a degree of confidence that we can bridge the gap over the next 12 months. However, much of our current income is ending in 2022 and we will need to secure significant grants from LBM and or CCG to enable future delivery to the same extent and meet demand.”*

### **An established sector with increasing tensions**

The profile of organisations engaging in the Merton State of the Sector research could account for the level of confidence and positive outlook expressed. Only 14% responding to our survey had been in existence for three years or less, while 46% have been around for more than 21 years, 21% for between 11 and 20 years and 19% between four and 10 years.

With this history comes experience at both governance and operational level. Financial security offered by cash reserves, fixed assets, established relationships with donors and funders enables greater certainty when planning. All of these are important factors when assessing an organisation’s ability to continue operating.



The percentage of organisations with an income profile below £10k completing the online questionnaire this year was substantially less than the State of the Sector research in 2016 and 2012. For the first time however, we engaged some organisations in the workshops who failed to participate in the online questionnaire.

The research in 2021 uncovered tensions between smaller, emerging, often volunteer led organisations and the larger established ones outlined above. Many of the smaller, diverse led groups described an operating and funding environment in Merton that was perceived to be weighted in favour of the larger charities. In their eyes this created an inequitable, unfair and occasionally exploitative partnership arena. The last year has certainly heightened a sense of injustice and for some emotions are running high.

Several larger charities recognised the tensions in the local sector. Risk identified through good governance practice and due diligence when collaborating with smaller groups were stated reasons why there is not more joint working and shared resources. It must be acknowledged that larger charities do not have a charitable object or duty to support small or new groups.

Policies, criteria and procurement practice adopted by funders from all sectors often frame the environment for collaboration. In some cases, the requirement for joint working comes before established and trusted relationships have developed.

### **Effect of the pandemic on services**

The groups completing the online questionnaire in 2021 were not entirely the same as 2016 and 2012. As a result, we were unable to produce reliable comparable data on the number of people supported in the borough.

The point at which data was collected for this report also excluded key statistics of people supported through the pandemic. Many groups have been focused very much on delivery, leaving data analysis to a quieter time.

Across 43 organisations sharing their data, a total of 61,815 residents were supported. A growth of 36% since 2018 based on supplied data – but note that it is dangerous to read too much into this given the different response profiles of the two surveys (2021 and 2018).

The varied impact of the pandemic on demand highlights how challenging it is for organisations to plan for current, never mind future demand. When we asked about the effect of the pandemic on demand 20% said demand had fallen and 56% that it had grown.

<b>Demand for our services has fallen</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Demand for our services has grown</b>	<b>56%</b>

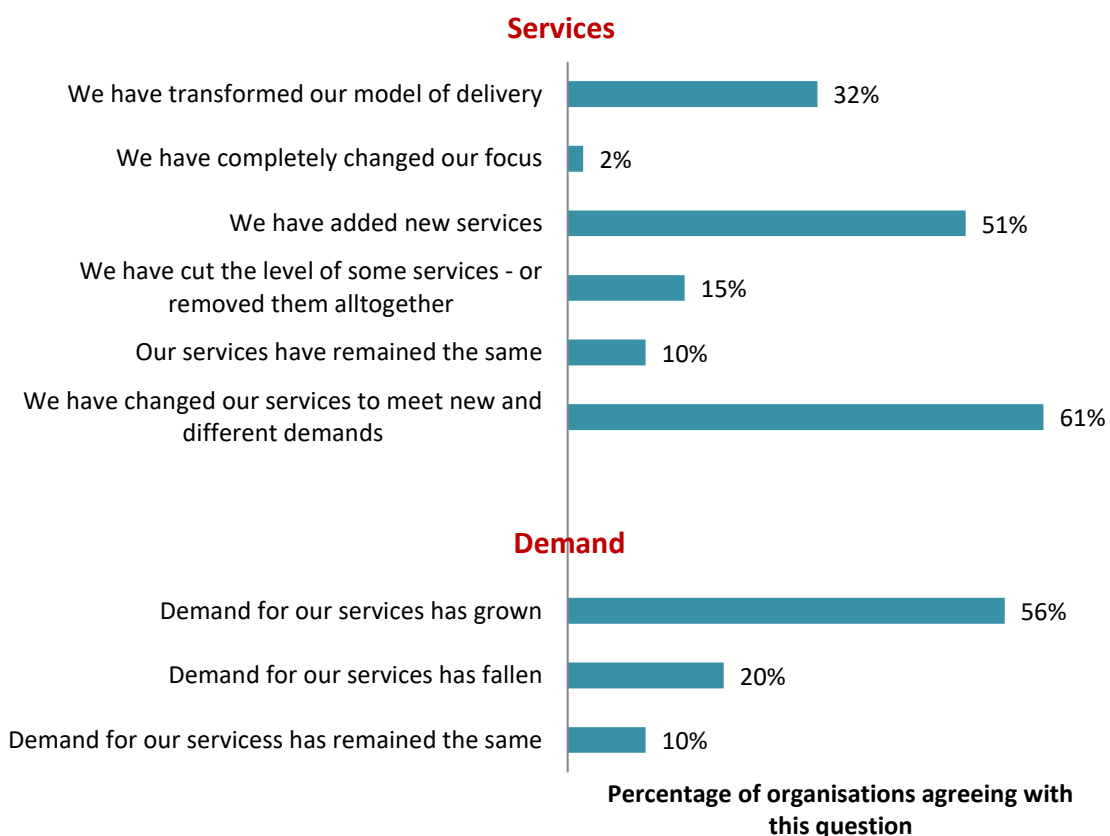
These results are in line with recent sector research in Bromley (December 2020) where 51% groups identify higher demand<sup>3</sup>.

NCVO NTU research<sup>4</sup> shows the trend for increased demand may not have peaked yet. Nationally, organisations experiencing increased demand has reached their highest number 66% in May 2021.

Many organisations have seen significant change as a result of the pandemic, either experiencing fluctuating demand or having to refocus in order to meet new and different demands.

Several organisations in the workshops were concerned about some regular service users and volunteers they had been unable to contact. Despite several attempts and utilising different approaches, some people just seem to have vanished. They recognised a range of factors that could account for this experience. However, there was worry that established connections and support networks for some residents could have been fractured, increasing their vulnerability.

### Pandemic impact on demand and the nature of services provided



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.communitylinksbromley.org.uk/latest-news/bromley-state-of-the-sector-su-2/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/2810-latest-research-reveals-mixed-impact-of-pandemic-on-volunteering-numbers-despite-more-positive-outlook-increased-diversity-and-rise-of-the-digital-volunteer>

The range and scope of comments people gave us about the effect of the pandemic on service provision illustrates the widely differing experiences had during this period:

*“We have changed to digital service delivery to minimise risk and offered additional telephone (peer and professional) support.”*

*“We have been connecting with other local organisations to develop and deliver new work in partnership. This has been productive for both of us.”*

*“Initially numbers fell sharply. We had to change and adapt to still be able to reach clients. Numbers are picking up again.”*

*“We have had to cut services because we cannot have a large number of service users in the room at the same time.”*

*“Despite expanding capacity for telephone and online queries, demand continues to exceed our ability to support.”*

*“Demand for our befriending (a new service) has grown as people have become more isolated and lonelier.”*

*“Most of our referrals come as a result of GP recommendation. As people have been going less to their GPs our referral rate has slightly decreased.”*

*“The reasons behind the huge spike in need for our services was that economically and socially our community was suffering. They are in the same group who suffered before the outbreak, i.e. families living in overcrowded households, low income households experiencing poverty, multigenerational households; all of those are key conditions to accelerate viral transmission”.*

*“At April 2020, we analysed all our services. Responding to lockdown restrictions, we moved activities online, including fitness & special interest groups, webinars, and counselling.”*

*“We have grown our social media activity and provided a series of pre-recorded online talks and presentations.”*

For the 2021 research we used the same service categorisations as previous years to assess if the pandemic had impacted this profile at all. It may, in reality, be too early to judge.

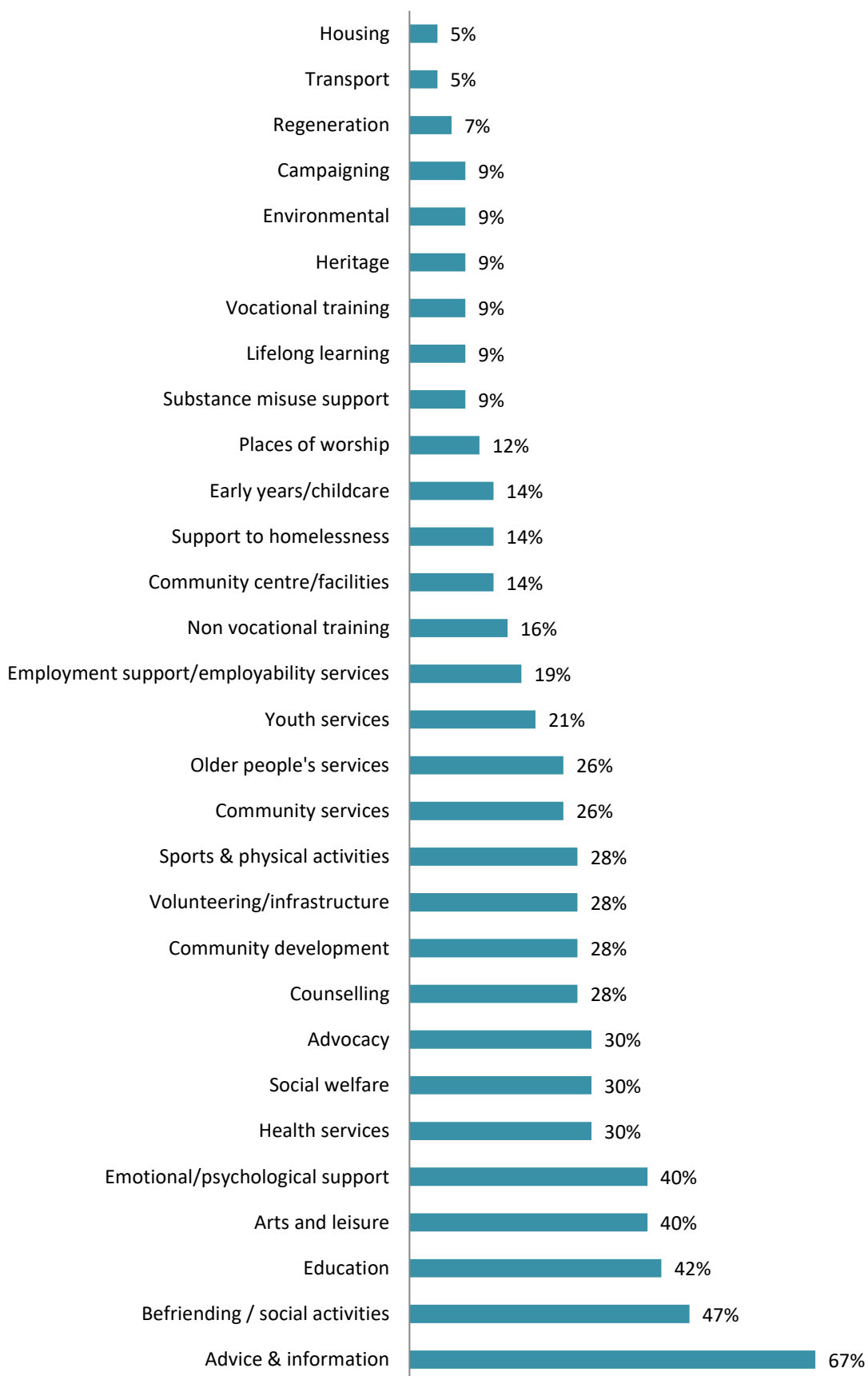
Despite the considerable pressures created by the pandemic, the profile of services and activities delivered by the sector has remained consistent and varied. Advice and information remains the biggest activity area for the sector, with 67% of organisations delivering varying levels of service in this field. Individual organisations will define ‘advice and information’ differently, but however it is defined, it will be central to recovery, so some work may be required to build referral pathways and the level of quality and accreditation needed to deliver this particular service to a high standard.

It is also notable that 40% of organisations stated they provide emotional and psychological support, and 47% are active around befriending and providing social activities. These organisations could be a valuable resource in supporting the mental health recovery of Merton's residents.

The experience, engagement, capacity and capability of the local sector in providing information and advice services, as well as generic and specialist emotional/psychological support is potentially a huge asset to pandemic recovery plans.

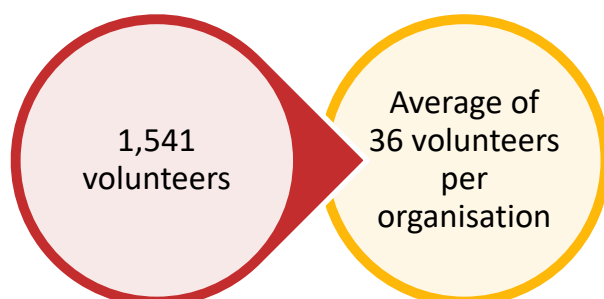


## Services provided



## Volunteer engagement

The level of volunteering across our sample of 43 organisations is extremely healthy with an average of 36 volunteers per organisation.

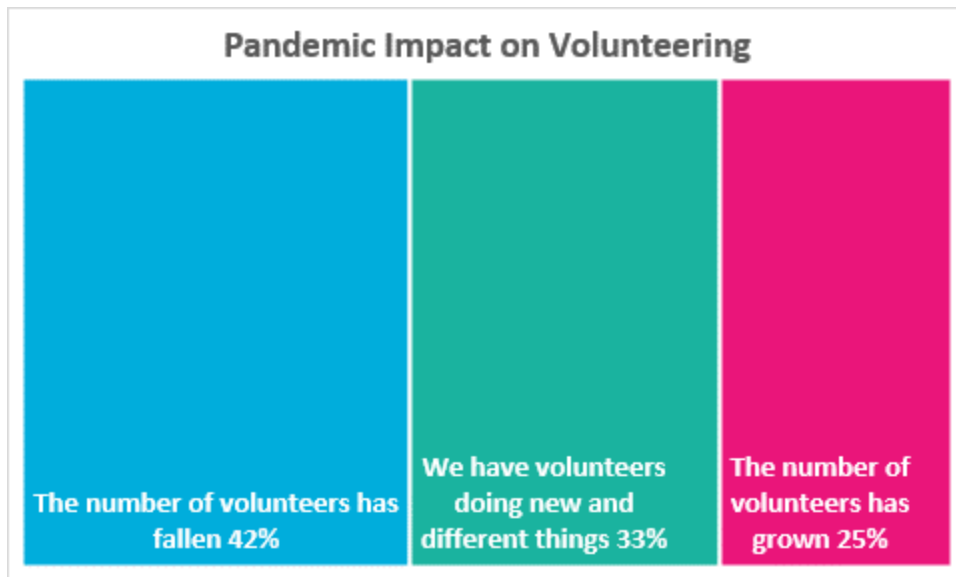


A characteristic of the pandemic has been the recruitment of volunteers to engage in social support across a wide range of activities, and there have been some high-profile and very positive engagement stories.

Dons Local Action was set up in March 2020 and within a year had expanded its initial focus on food poverty to embrace providing laptops for children, furniture and appliances. At the time of writing their web site says they have provided over 150,000 food boxes, 175 furniture and appliances and 1,900 laptops and tablets across Merton, Wandsworth and Kingston.

However, we must remember that not all organisations have experienced growth in volunteer recruitment, and volunteers, just like anyone else, have been at risk of exposure to Covid-19. The picture overall is mixed with some organisations gaining volunteers, some losing them, and some in stasis.

When we asked organisations in our survey about the situation, 42% said the number of volunteers engaged has fallen due to the pandemic. This is more than double the national average in May 2021 (19%) as found in the NCVO NTU research. Meanwhile 33% of organisations told us their volunteers are doing new and different things.



We got a flavour of the complexity of the picture in our workshops and interviews where people told us in more detail about the nuances around volunteering, including:

- Unpaid time contributed by some volunteers has decreased
- Whereas the amount of unpaid time contributed by other volunteers has increased
- The range of activities undertaken by volunteers has reduced for some and grown for others
- Organisations reported a decrease in the intensity of volunteering in 2021
- Volunteering is often now less frequent with shorter time of availability

For those organisations that have seen volunteer growth, providing adequate management and support can be a challenge. Responses on this theme to our survey reflected the complexity of this area.

Here are some of the things people told us:

*“The challenges of COVID have led to increased support needs of the volunteers involved in our organisation which required increased resources for volunteer management and volunteer development and training (especially IT/digital skills)”*

*“We are less keen to engage volunteers in the work we most need help with, as this may involve face-to-face assistance and thus place them at risk, which is not a risk we are willing or can afford to take.” The community response to the pandemic was amazing, we had more volunteers that we needed.”*

*“The community response to the pandemic was amazing, we had more volunteers that we needed.”*

*“Our organisation is not seen as vital; volunteers are choosing to help with Covid related causes.”*

*“Doubled the number of volunteers, without any increase in volunteer management / co-ordination. This has been a strain but delivered with high quality in spite of the challenge. We*

*have been able to rapidly recruit, match and mobilise volunteers to support the most vulnerable residents.”*

The belief that larger established organisations and the Merton Covid-19 Community Response Hub were absorbing volunteering capacity from smaller groups was commonly expressed during the research.

Nationally, NCVO data also highlights the impact the pandemic has had on the profile of volunteers. 31% of the organisations experienced a decrease in the number of older volunteers (50+) actively engaged in their organisation. This decrease has been reported by 18% of the respondents regarding disabled volunteers and 9% for the number of volunteers who identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic. Our Merton research does not provide this level of insight to provide a comparison.

Some key considerations for recovery focused on volunteering in the borough:

- Balancing the short-term increase in volunteering with organisational needs
- Flexibility and adaptability to sustain levels of social action
- Organisations may need to learn new strategies for volunteer recruitment and engagement
- Volunteer wellbeing considerations should be prioritised
- Rethinking volunteering opportunities for the future

Nationally 18 major charities have launched an initiative to support volunteering post pandemic<sup>5</sup>.

## **A collaborative approach to support volunteering could be an important element in Merton’s pandemic recovery plans.**

### **Staffing and the pandemic**

72% of the organisations we surveyed said they had paid staff. This is a huge increase on our finding for previous years (59% 2016 and 56% in 2012).

28% of organisations in our survey said they do not employ staff, leaving us to assume a significant number of volunteer led organisations active in the borough.

Maintaining staffing has been a significant issue during the pandemic with personal factors such as exposure to Covid-19, family and other responsibilities, and organisational factors such as ability to pay wages all playing their part.

We asked organisations with paid staff whether they had had to reduce staff hours, make redundancies and use the Government’s furlough scheme. All three methods were used to a significant degree, with the Government’s furlough scheme being used by almost all.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/major-charities-launch-initiative-support-volunteering-post-covid-19/volunteering/article/1718196>

**redundancy  
used by  
69%**



**reduced  
hours used  
by 88%**



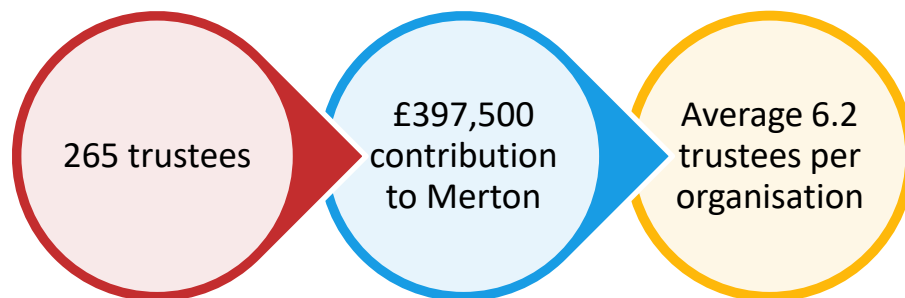
**furlough  
used by  
94%**



## Trustees

We asked survey respondents how many trustees their organisation has and explored governance across all our research methods.

The 43 organisations that provided a numerical answer to this question had between them a total of 265 trustees worth £397,500 of volunteer time to Merton's civil society. This equates to a mean number of trustees per organisation of 6.2.



Although the sample was smaller in this year's survey and included different organisations, it is still notable that the mean number of trustees has reduced by 1 compared to 2016 data.

More social enterprises engaged in the 2021 research, and the most common legal structures for social enterprise do not require the same number or diversity of trustees. This may explain the reduction in the average number of trustees. It is for this very reason many people opt for the social enterprise model - it reduces the pressures associated with trustee recruitment and succession planning.

## Ingredients for recovery

The research has helped identify some key requirements for the VCSE sector to increase in resilience. Having a sector able to bounce back and play an integral part in socio-economic collaborative recovery activity is widely recognised in Merton.

Our engagement has helped identify some capacity and capability requirements:

- Address skills shortage in applying for big funding pots (individually or together)
- Increase knowledge, understanding and interpersonal skills required for collaboration
- Maximise access to and utilisation of technology
- Increase knowledge around charging for online activity
- Increase skills and capacity to raise unrestricted funds
- Support commissioners to change and trust more
- A need for creative approaches to volunteering

## Inclusion and inequality

Individuals and communities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to characteristics such as ethnicity, disability, gender, poverty and pre-existing health inequalities. Add to that financial and digital exclusion, and structural and societal inequalities have become more evident and exposed during the pandemic.

Over 30% of organisations participating in our research were led by, or had a primary beneficiary group, based on characteristics such as ethnicity, disability, long-term health conditions and faith.



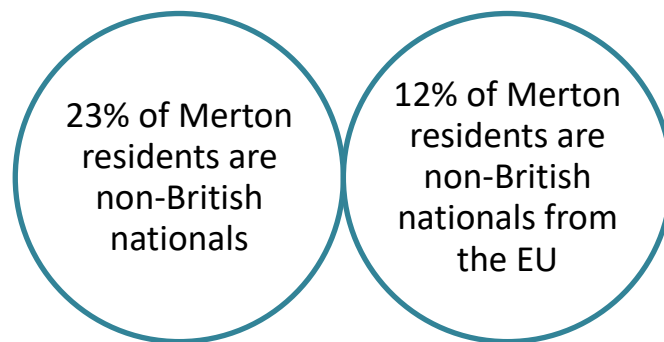
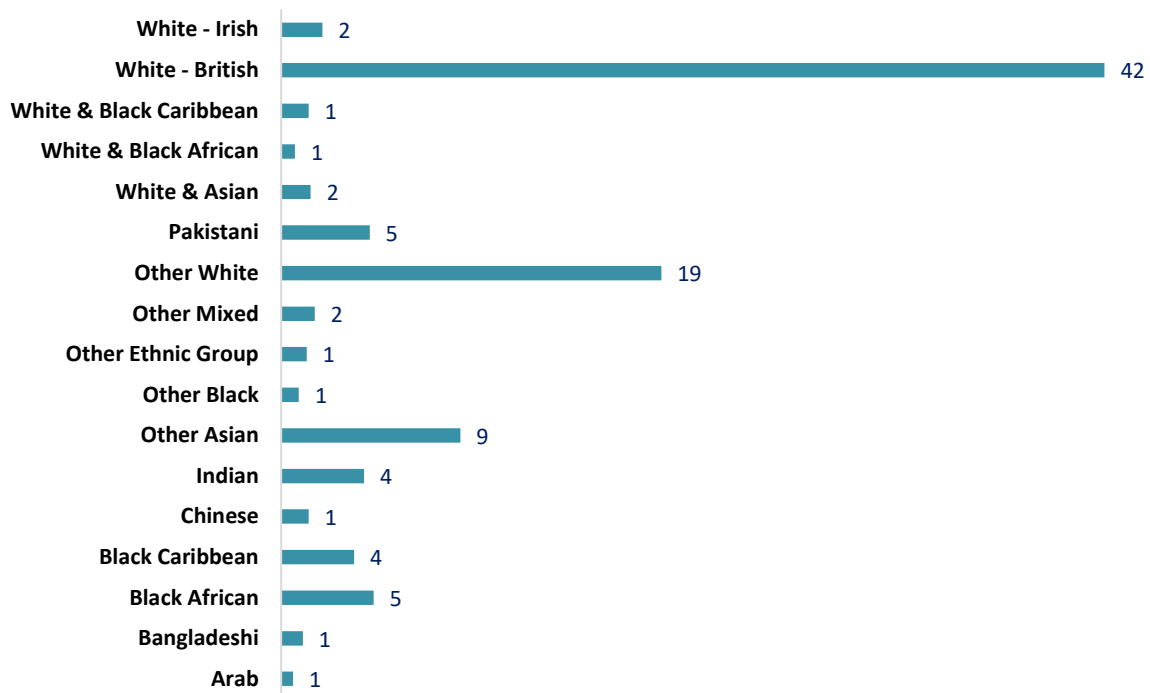
**Over 30% of participating organisations represent Merton's diverse communities**

According to the latest GLA population data<sup>6</sup> of the 224,502 of Merton's projected population 36.9% are Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). However, this figure fails to include white residents who are from other ethnic backgrounds.

When you add in other ethnic groups, white other and white Irish categories, the diversity profile of the borough changes dramatically. Using this method of calculation, 58% of the borough population are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://data.london.gov.uk/>



A borough with such a diverse population, and one which is experiencing the development of new communities and changes in size of others, requires a flexible, robust, resilient approach which is open to change, fresh ideas and new approaches to engagement. Some of the observations made by participants in our workshops bring some facets to light:

- Long-standing black Caribbean community numbers are falling and those remaining are feeling increasingly marginalised.
- Eastern European population potentially make up 12% of borough residents but since Brexit are feeling increasingly excluded and isolated.
- There is a growing Portuguese population displaced from Stockwell and Vauxhall as a result of rising property prices and welfare benefit reforms.
- The percentage mix of black and Asian communities means there is not large concentrations of people from a single nationality or country of heritage. This characteristic means there is not the concentration of people from many cultural backgrounds to stimulate new community organisations or mutual aid.

Representatives of diverse community led organisations taking part in workshop discussions expressed high levels of frustration and in some instances anger about the levels of exclusion, inequality and lack of recognition they experience.

A number of key issues surfaced during the workshops:

- A perception that the council, police and NHS fail to recognise that equalities groups are not one homogenous cluster of people and that diversity of ethnicity, culture, faith, disability, sexuality and gender should be celebrated and recognised as a strength.
- Some newer communities struggle to know where to go for help as they don't have the benefit of existing community and organisational connections.
- Council systems were described in two workshops as hard to navigate for many residents
- Access to housing, and its suitability and quality was a cross-cutting theme. Housing pressure was identified as a factor that will undermine recovery from the pandemic and further embed inequality.
- Post Brexit, some feel as though EU communities have been pushed aside, abandoned, neglected and no longer included in community engagement in Merton. Not featuring in GLA BAME categories further exaggerated that feeling.
- Many of the black, Asian and other minority ethnic community representatives described a feeling that the culture of good news stories in the borough failed to acknowledge people's lived experience. They described that often statistics are used in meetings to minimise or side-line the experiences of communities. Recognition of what people deal with in their day to day lives was identified as an important ingredient of community cohesion.
- In three workshops, participants described confusion about the role and function of BAME Voice. There was agreement amongst many participants that its focus on promoting cultural heritage was at the expense of enabling the voice and representation of black, Asian and all minority ethnic communities. Some felt the council, VCS and minority communities had differing understanding and expectations of the groups mission and what could be achieved for funding invested.
- Not having effective mechanisms to ensure that the voices of people of colour and other ethnically diverse communities are heard is creating friction and frustration.
- Demographic change impacts the stability of BAME groups and longer standing communities.

The diversity led community organisations feel they have stepped up during the pandemic and began reaching out immediately to support their communities. They felt that the ease at which they got funding from Merton Giving and LCRF for once recognised their value and contribution. Given their focus on complex social issues many smaller charities were already in touch with these groups and communities. Public bodies and larger charities were able to maximise the impact of their own provision by working through these smaller charities.

Many groups described a huge spike in need for their services over the last year across the mix of economic, social and practical help such as accessing food. The poverty experienced by communities was suddenly evident as was the fact that families are often multigenerational, living in overcrowded



households and surviving on low incomes. All these conditions we now recognise accelerate viral transmission.

Many households have low-paid, low-skilled workers with little employment security. Working from home was often not an option, and an inability to work often meant job loss and therefore immediate income loss. There is concern that post-pandemic, a shift to new working practices (from home or hybrid) will continue, reinforcing inequality and disadvantage.

‘We are all in the same storm, but not the same boat’ is how NCVO describes the situation of the pandemic impacting parts of our society differently. It also reflects the fact that historic exclusion and disadvantage can also be a barrier to communities being able to help themselves.

## **“We are all in the same storm, but not in the same boat”**

### **NCVO**

Working together to address inequality, racism and exclusion has never had a greater opportunity than now as part of Merton’s pandemic recovery plans. Creating systemic change addressing some of the issues identified in the 2021 research should form a key part of the joint plans.

## **Partnership, collaboration and co-production**

The research data enabled some comparison with views and experiences in 2012 and 2016. However, two factors have had a significant effect on the usefulness of making comparisons with past surveys.

- The Covid-19 pandemic created upheaval on a level that is widely noted as being unseen since the Second World War. Merton Council, the health sector, the VCS, Merton Connected and others reacted at speed, changing their ways of working, redeploying staff, implementing new delivery models and more. The initial need for action was immediate and has been sustained. Learning curves have been short, and decisions made mid-stream in response to an immediate need. Inevitably, such dramatic circumstances have had significant consequences for the VCS, and the key learning points we bring out are building blocks for the future.
- Last year has been unparalleled and this does impact the efficacy of comparative data. We also note that for both the police and NHS borough-based management and leadership has been replaced with a more regional, cross-borough approach. Inevitably this has led to variance in strategic management, which makes direct comparison with previous surveys challenging.

Our workshops provided valuable insights into the experiences and feelings of organisations, and it suggested some opportunities for future collaboration.

Merton has a long-established and award-winning partnership culture across all sectors and this has always been a matter of civic pride. 53% of organisations in our survey said they deliver services in partnership with other organisations (a fall from the 2016 figure of 67%). In addition, 58% said they thought partnership and collaborative working in Merton is good (a rise from the 2016 figure of 51%)

**53% work in  
partnership with  
other organisations**



**58% say partnership  
and collaborative  
working is good**



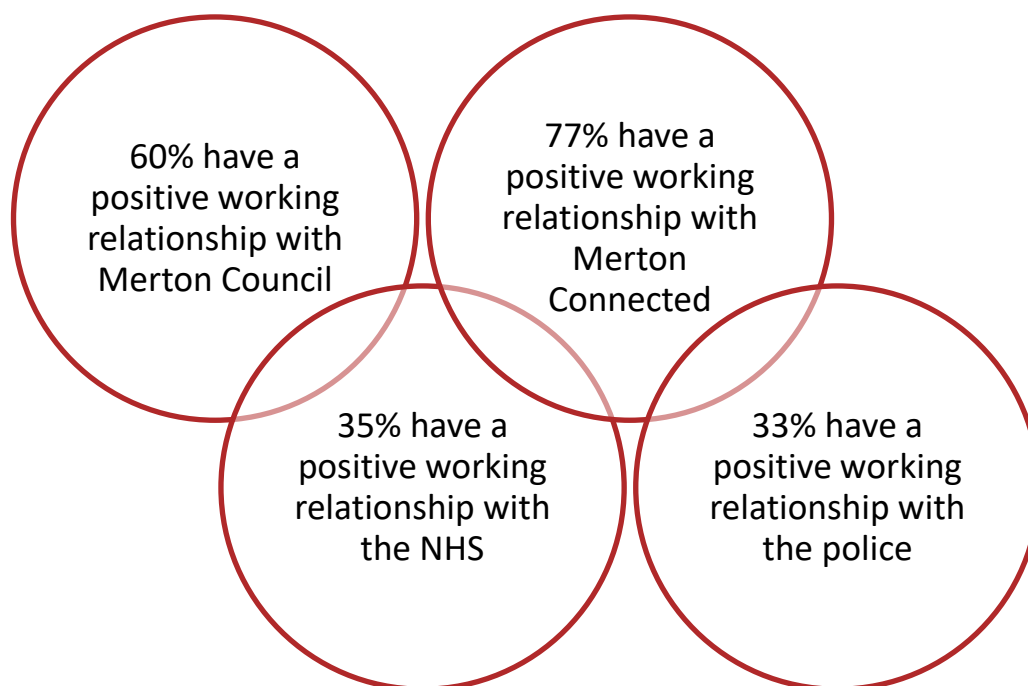
Understanding and implementing co-production widely in Merton is at an early stage. A short explanation with diagrams and examples ensured a common understanding in the engagement workshops. Strength and asset-based approaches are more commonly known in health and social care settings, but in the development and delivery of community services, and in community development more generally, it is much less well known.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) defines co-production as "delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change".

Many councils, including Merton, are evaluating the potential of co-production to achieve better outcomes for residents than those achieved through traditional models of service delivery and social action. The thinking is that by combining the efforts of the public sector, citizens, users, voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations; real positive change can be delivered.

## Collaboration

The research highlighted vastly different experiences of collaboration with the players locally in Merton. The most positive working relationships were seen to be between VCS organisations and Merton Connected.



## Collaboration with Merton Council

In our survey 60% of respondents said they had a positive working relationship with Merton Council. Yet our workshops revealed there were mixed experiences of working with the council. Some of the issues identified that create this mixed experience are:

- A belief that LBM likes working with the same larger groups time after time because this is easy, with established ways of working and known personnel.
- A perceived fragmented and politicised approach within LBM which generates more work for communities and their groups.
- Having LBM officer support and trust makes huge difference to working collaboratively.
- A perception that being politically connected leads to influence and usually also to funding.
- Frustration at having to shout and bombard LBM with offers and ideas in order to be heard.
- Fear of complaining too hard about the lack of recognition and collaboration in case of retribution, total exclusion or funding cuts.
- Lost links and relationships with LBM departments and staff as a result of reorganisations and cuts which has incrementally and negatively impacted established and productive collaboration.

## Collaboration with the NHS

Only 35% of organisations responding to our survey felt they had a positive working relationship with the NHS. In our workshops we learned about several factors which contribute to this result:

- A commonly expressed view that social prescribing expects frontline groups to pick up referrals and demand without receiving any funding support to help this work. All investment goes into link work, and none to the organisations and communities which are contributing to better health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Groups felt that the NHS and council Public Health teams have a focus on community-based prevention activity but fail to understand that this requires long-term investment. Quick returns are not achievable without adequate levels of investment in sector and community capacity.

## Collaboration with the police

33% of groups in our survey said they felt they have a positive working relationship with the police. The context for this result is multi-faceted but contributory factors noted in our workshops were:

- Recent issues around racial inequality.
- Loss of community policing and as a result broken relationships with communities.
- Perceptions of rising prevalence of violent crime, gangs and tensions between communities.
- Little sector engagement to jointly address the issues of violent and visible crime in Mitcham and surrounding areas.

## Wider experience of collaborative working

Data results from our online survey did not truly capture the diversity and intricacy of established collaborations in the borough. Comments to our survey and workshop discussions identified a range of other rewarding collaborations such as:

- Schools and colleges, often outside the borough especially in Sutton.
- Faith sector organisations which engage with lots of collaborative work but which often go unrecognised.
- Work with specialist regional VCS organisations to fill gaps or to utilise expertise.
- Participation in regional funding collaborations where it adds value and efficiency.

## Technical issues

Technical issues that relate to partnership and collaboration are often barriers to participation. Governance, diversity of organisational types, experience and the profile of collaborative activities are characteristics to be acknowledged and managed if collaborative working is to be fruitful. Workshop participants identified a list of key partnership considerations:

- The more partners in a collaboration, the harder it is.

- Project based and volunteer led groups often have no core funding. This impacts on their capacity to engage in partnership meaningfully. It doesn't mean the value of their work for the community is less than larger, better resourced organisations.
- Extreme financial pressure (pandemic linked) for the first time means many groups can't punch above their weight anymore not least because they have no capacity for innovation.
- For smaller and newer groups there are clear gaps in knowledge and experience required to formalise joint working.
- Good governance practice often means larger, more established organisations conduct due diligence on potential partnerships. This often identifies risks that can present when working with smaller, less established groups. It is not the primary object of larger organisations to support others. Trustees therefore often elect to work only with larger groups, deliver all activities themselves rather than outsource, or side-line the role of partners to referral pathways. A significant outcome of this is that available funding is not equally shared across the sector.
- Many groups are less able to demonstrate their impact effectively. There are many reasons for this, including data poverty, poor monitoring and evaluation systems, skill gaps, capacity constraints and underutilisation of technology. These groups are often identified as the weakest links in partnerships, where in fact they may be delivering right on the front line, to a high quality. It's just that the data about their activity is not captured.

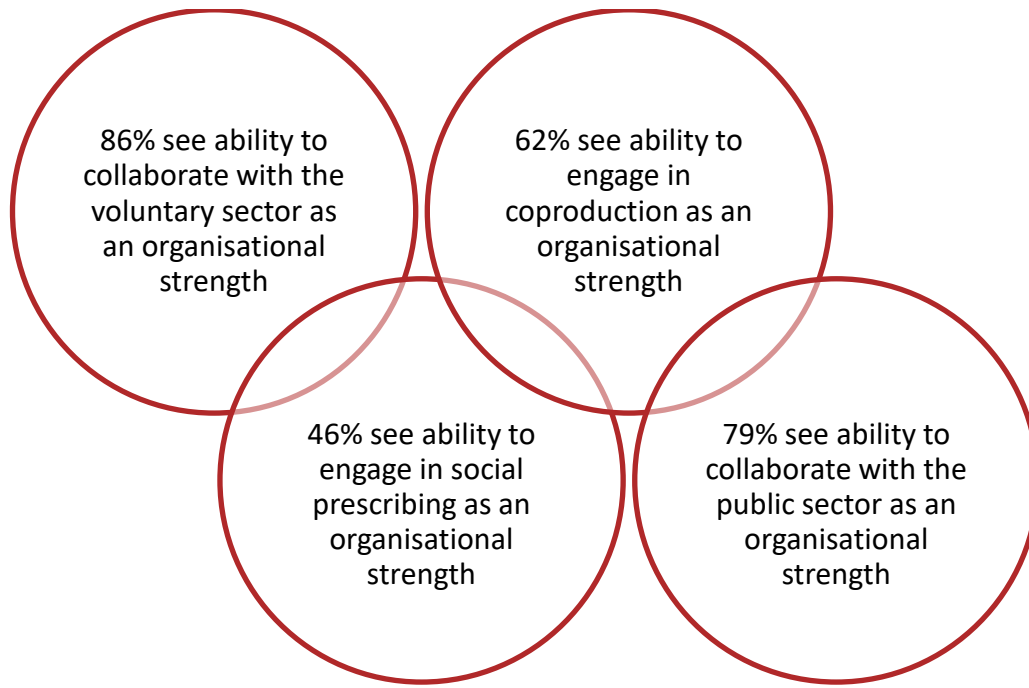
## Power and inequalities

Power dynamics are inescapable when working across sectors and with organisations of very different scales. The 2021 workshops really helped identify some of the key issues and anxieties at play locally. These include:

- A belief that every organisation (regardless of size and experience) knows who they can trust with client referrals based on values, culture, good communication, personal connection and positive joint working experiences.
- A commonly expressed sentiment that the imbalance in the voluntary sector between 4-5 big players and rest of the sector undermines growth and collaboration.
- Many of the smaller and diversity led groups described feeling exploited and patronised by larger groups.
- Established larger organisations feel there is a danger that they will become Council Version 2, fundamentally impacting their independence, flexibility and how other organisations view and interact with them.
- A perception or lived experience that some partnerships in Merton feel like 'cliques', marginalising or excluding some members.

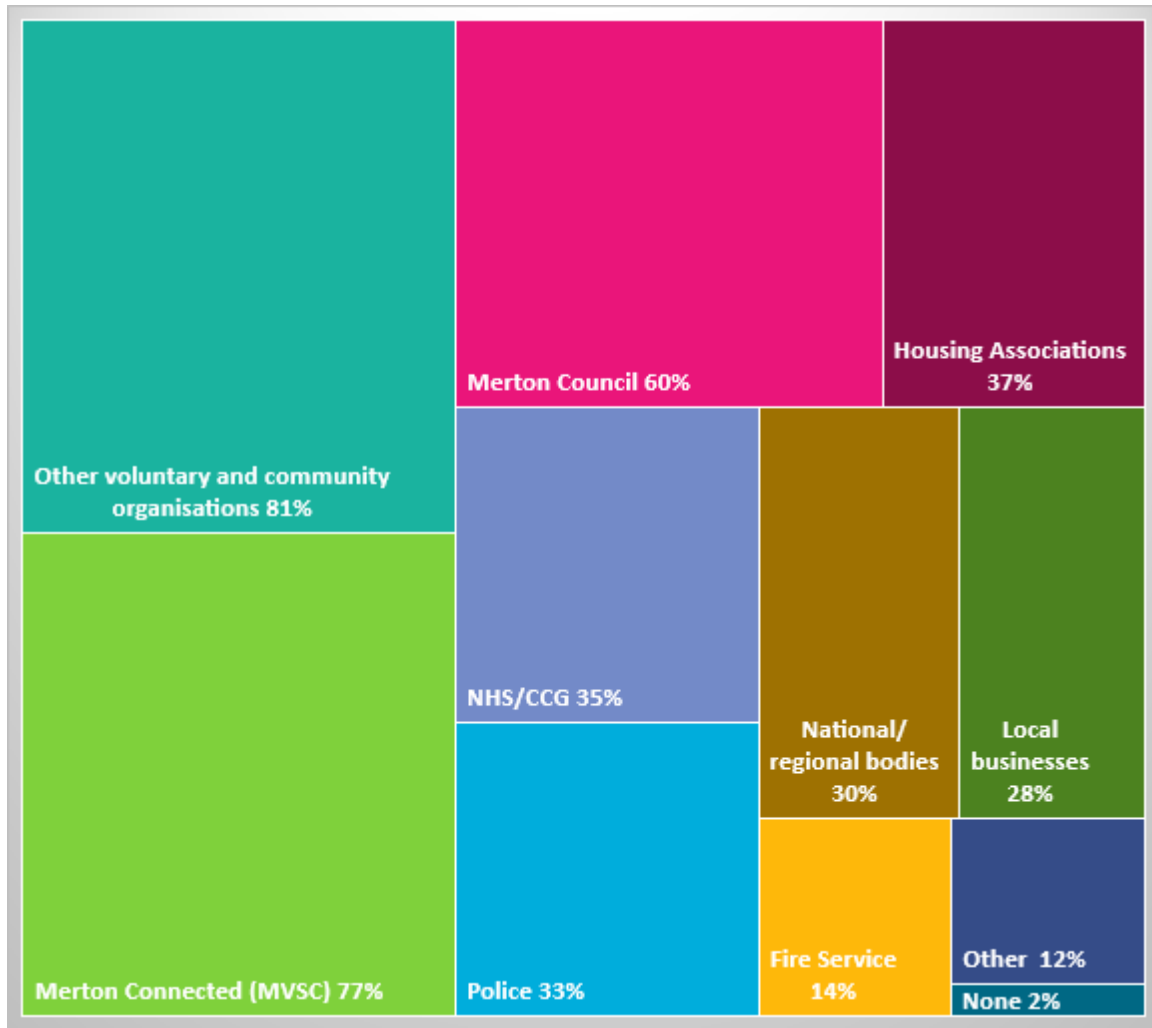
## The value of collaborative working

Despite the many criticisms and reports of difficulties, failings and barriers, many organisations recognise the value of collaboration. Impact, cost-effectiveness, shared learning and maximising the assets and strengths within communities were all identified as benefits of working together. For many groups, their ability to work collaboratively was an indicator of capability.



Overall, respondents to our survey were asked to rate the quality of their working relationships with ten different types of organisation, and also given space to say they had no positive working relationships. Only 2% said they had no positive working relationships and by far the most popular category with which there was a positive working relationship was other voluntary and community organisations.

## VCS Positive Working Relationships with Stakeholders



## Premises and affordable space

Premises feature consistently in Voluntary Sector Strategies across London as a major issue facing the sector. In Merton, the sector identified it as the second highest challenge after funding.

59% of organisations struggle to source suitable affordable premises, manage buildings or agree terms for secure long-term use.

Property is the second biggest cost and delivery mechanism for mission and service delivery for voluntary and community organisations. The Ethical Property Foundation's annual national VCS property survey results closely reflect the Merton findings.

Many partners in Merton with physical assets utilise them as an income generation tool through lettings and hires. With cuts in funding and increasing demand pressures the average hire charges across all sectors has increased.

Local Authorities have long owned buildings that could serve a commercial purpose. Indeed, they often use commercial structures to advance their core activities of delivering public services, housing and regeneration for the benefit of their citizens.

Research participants recognised churches and housing associations as the most supportive in providing affordable premises.

The pandemic and its associated states of lockdown has decimated the income profile of those organisations that hire, rent or lease space. In some cases, this puts the viability of valued community assets at risk.

Far-reaching changes in working patterns and greater utilisation of technology in service delivery have been triggered by the pandemic. It is uncertain how these changes will resolve post-pandemic. The extent to which more flexible working practice and digital delivery become permanent will impact on the demand and profile of office and service delivery space.

This means the pre-pandemic complexity of solving VCS property challenges now has additional considerations added to the mix. In our workshops groups shared their experience, and some core themes became apparent:

- Access to premises and the variety of lease and tenancy at will arrangements in Merton have been far from consistent or equitable historically.
- Groups reported divergent experiences of using space in Merton libraries. Many couldn't afford the room hire charges, despite the spaces being perfect for their needs. Other groups evidenced libraries kindly allowing them to use the facilities for free. The shared experiences in workshops reinforced perceptions of inequality, lack of fairness and favouritism. The lack of online or digital booking systems for public spaces in libraries was also identified as an issue. It was felt to have two key negative impacts. Firstly, it increases the administrative time for both library staff and hirer. Secondly, libraries are potentially losing income by adopting a booking system that is not user friendly.
- More flexible shared office space may be required in the future, rather than groups having a dedicated office. This will require a cultural and physical shift.
- When income generation from lettings and room hire are an afterthought or additional duty on top of a full workload, quality and customer care frequently suffer. This in turn reduces sales and lowers market value of the product on offer.
- Increase in digital delivery methods creates demand for spaces that can facilitate live streaming, equipment for sound and visual recording, and high-speed broadband. There is an additional need for technical assistance to users of such spaces.
- Community-led and often volunteer delivered activity is being undermined by rental charges across the board. LBM grants are often used to pay rent back to the council, negating the social value and potential.
- The current approach to premises and space that brings communities together is seen as counterproductive, and groups feel that too much money is spent on rent.



**There needs to be a more collaborative approach to shared spaces and maximisation of community use of assets in the borough. Spaces which support inclusion and belonging, safe spaces where people are cared for, can access help, and in many cases get involved in helping others are required to help the sector regain its strength and confidence post pandemic.**

Barriers that prevent schools, faith buildings, public sector organisations, charities and heritage sites maximising their use and potential need to be overcome. These could include:

- Better use of technology to geo-map facilities, market, administer bookings and link to invoicing systems. Especially for schools, the additional administrative and facilitates management burden of managing lettings, does not make it cost effective.
- Better use of technology to reduce staffing costs associated with locking up after events etc. There are technical solutions for the security of the building using modern fob systems which would remove the need for a physical presence at every event.
- Supporting a shared approach to understanding the market for community/VCS use facilities, costing, marketing, managing bookings and invoicing.
- Creating a mutual project to improve the skills, customer care, shared back office facilities management, advice and support to maximise existing assets.

### **Co-production is an achievable goal**

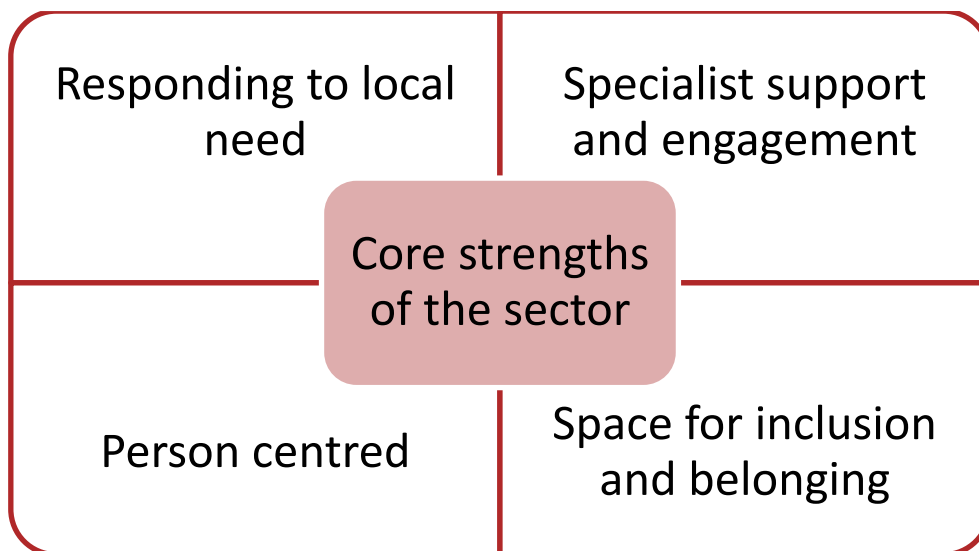
The 2021 research explored coproduction and aspects of greater community control and accountability in making Merton a happy, healthy and rewarding place for everyone. The lack of knowledge, understanding and experience of the principles of co-production and strength-based approaches was evident.

The starting point for creating a new environment for collaboration and coproduction must be awareness raising, learning and exploration.

Participants identified some recent examples of good practice in this field. The coproduction process that underpinned the development of the new Carers Strategy and Autism Strategy both highlighted as inclusive, value driven processes.

In response to the pandemic both Mencap and BAME Voice have conducted community research and reports were presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board in May 2021. These two pieces of work demonstrate the sector's ability to engage and capture the voices and lived experience of seldom heard residents. When respectfully considered alongside public sector data, they add great value and help broaden understanding of individual residents' experiences.

Arising from our engagement events, interviews and contributions to open questions online, we can present a range of factors needed for coproduction to be an achievable goal. When considering these it is important to remember the core strengths of the sector.



**Information, knowledge and awareness**

Shared language and understanding is essential. To deliver this, there need to be sustained opportunities for open dialogue between partners that facilitates learning. The environment must be free from fear of repercussions as a result of sharing lived experience or individual interpretation of the collaborative experience. It's important that people both listen to the perspectives of others and themselves.

Raising awareness of active organisations (all sizes, scale and focus) and their work must be central to collaboration. The following contribution to the research from one of the larger charities in the borough summarising the value of engagement, recognition and positive behaviour captures the sentiment well.

*“How do we know we are not excluding smaller, very creative and potentially impactful groups if we are not reaching out and finding them and making it clear to them how and why they might want to find us, and if we are focused too much on 'defending' our own services rather than working out what is the best service that could be delivered and who are the best partners to do this.”*

Effective communication that includes the sharing of ideas, successes and failures will help formulate approaches and know what's working and what's not.

MVSC (Merton Connected) Involvement meetings were frequently identified as a very good platform on which to build the conversations.

**The value of lived experience**

In our survey, 39% of organisations identified the challenge of influencing local policy and service planning.

Coproduction cannot be solely data driven. There must be mutual understanding of each other's situation, lived experience and frame of reference. Equality of opportunity, respect and

acknowledgement of contributions made were factors identified in our workshops as having a positive contribution to coproduction. Achieving this requires recognising the different capacity pressures of individuals, smaller organisations/enterprises, larger groups and public sector bodies.

More importantly than ever considering the pandemic, it was felt that parity of esteem between mental and physical health needs to be a golden thread running through collaborative work.

### **Trust and shared power**

A fresh approach to collaboration will require new models of governance that redistribute power. This will mean in some instances the council or NHS may have to relinquish power to achieve the desired outcomes.

Our workshop discussions led us to identify some qualities that some felt were lacking. These are essential if coproduction is to be achieved:

- Trust and fairness as core values.
- Flexibility, understanding your partner's priorities.
- Transparency.
- Mutual respect.
- Commitment to equitable division of labour and clarity of roles.
- Buy-in from all levels. It is not enough for the CEO and Directors to agree on principles and how to progress them. This must filter down to all levels and be embraced at operational level too.

### **A whole system approach**

Organisations need to work together, sharing venues and amenities to cut down core costs. It is important to establish professional, open working relationships with clear, understandable remits and proportionate KPIs.

A local system-wide approach across the public sector is required. The NHS and local authority need to be working with aligned policies and frameworks, so that no one aspect of the public sector is in a position to undermine the holistic approach.

The creation of a more circular economy recognising strengths of communities and their organisations would deliver economic and social benefits.

### **Outcome focused**

Coproduction should always be outcome focused. The impact of collaborative effort is greater than going alone. To achieve this there must be a sensible management of expectation, clarity and in some cases the provision of incentives.

### **The value of data**

Demonstrating the value, impact and quality of work delivered by communities and their organisations is a recognised development need. 25% of organisations participating in the research identified demonstrating the impact of their work as a major challenge.

Support is required at two levels: enabling groups to tell their stories in ways that makes sense to them, and building capacity and capability to present this data in formats that support recognition.

## Infrastructure support

Merton Connected wanted to explore the support organisations currently receive and think they will need in the future. The pandemic impact creates more complexity and uncertainty in achieving this goal but it's a starting point for continuing dialogue.

The aim is to use this information to support Merton Connected's strategic and operational planning as well as feed it into the pandemic recovery plans locally.

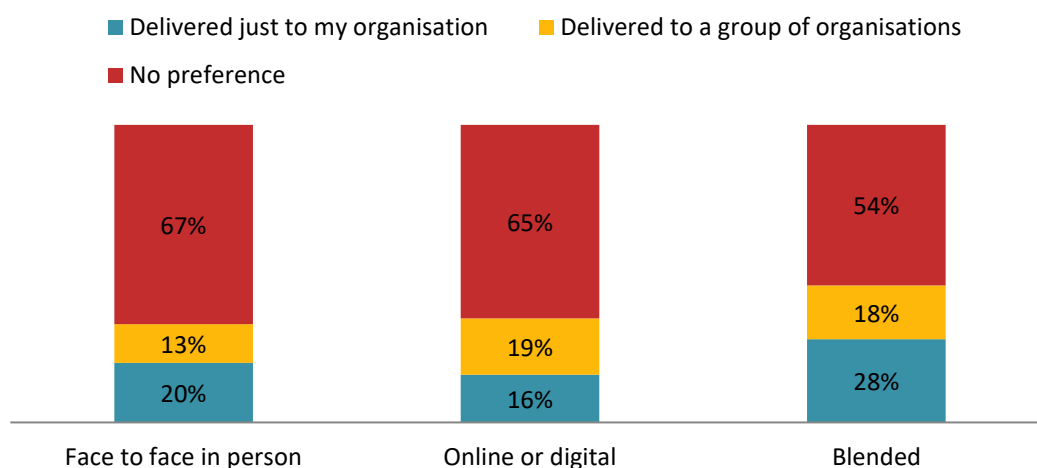
### Delivery by Merton Connected

The pandemic has changed how we communicate, with far greater emphasis on video meetings. Infrastructure support providers have shifted to using digital communications. Many may decide to build on their experience to provide support using digital methods more often than in the past.

We tested the appetite for this, asking in our survey what their preferred way of receiving support would be, now and in the future. We asked for preferences when support is delivered both to the organisation itself, and to a group of organisations.

We found no pronounced preference for either face to face or digital communication regardless of whether support is delivered to the organisation itself or in a group setting, suggesting, perhaps, that it is the quality of support and not the delivery method that matters most.

#### Preferred way of accessing support from Merton Connected



### Future support requirements

In our survey we asked a specific survey question about the support organisations would like to receive from Merton Connected and LBM over the next 18 months to enable them to be able to continue delivering services. We also explored this issue in more depth in our workshops and one to one interviews.

We identified several very specific areas where support was requested, as well as a number of more general policy and practice areas. These include:

### **Fundraising**

- Help applying for Merton Giving funds
- Access to partnership funding and information about what is being delivered in borough to prevent doubling up
- More core funding especially during the recovery
- Specific funding for the BAME communities (including white minority communities)
- Bid writing workshops with do's and don'ts

### **Strategy, planning, operational**

- Digital Awareness training and support
- Inclusive Covid-19 recovery strategy that reduces wider health inequalities
- Training opportunities, policy templates and guidance
- Data/trends information to support planning and development
- Insights into LBM thinking
- Advice and/or training, e.g. I.T., data protection, and working with vulnerable children and adults
- Contribute to our strategic planning so we can align our business plan
- Subsidised rental for space in Vestry Hall

### **General**

- Merton Connected must act independently and be more relevant to non-service-oriented community groups
- Lobbying collectively and across the country to force the government to treat partners in the not for profit sector as professional equals, not inferior, cheap, stopgap alternatives and finally convince people that having volunteers doesn't mean that everything can be done for free.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Conducting the State of the Sector research again in 2021, in the middle of a pandemic and exploring co-production potential; raised far more issues than previous projects. We could have ended this report with double the recommendations than presented below but concluded this was unmanageable and counterproductive.

Some of the findings have already been recognised by partners and in some cases work to address them is well underway. Merton is planning for recovery and doing so in an inclusive way.

Overall, Merton is a positive environment for voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. Most organisations retain the positive outlook identified in previous research, despite the huge challenges of the last eighteen months.

Factors such as ten years of austerity, the pandemic and changing demographics are now impacting the sector and the borough's communities. Issues of inequality, fairness and exclusion were raised more than in 2012 and 2016.

The pandemic has accelerated change and the need for strategic and operational review across the public, private and voluntary sector. The ability of organisations and communities to respond to change is very much dictated by their capacity and capability. The smallest, community-based and volunteer-led finding it hardest.

The pandemic has truly evidenced the potential and capacity across Merton's communities. Mutual aid supported by public sector bodies has made a huge difference in the borough. Without this coordinated effort and local action many more vulnerable people would have gone without essentials such as food. Many have been saved from isolation, loneliness and greater mental health challenges than would have been the case. It is vital the social action evidenced does not creep back into the woodwork as we emerge from the pandemic. Methods of engagement and the ability to provide flexible volunteering opportunities is going to be essential.

There is no escaping the mental and physical toll on trustees, employees, volunteers and service users across the VCS and partner agencies. Enduring such a long period of uncertainty, emergency response, increased demand and requirements for constant change in delivery methods and interventions is impacting now and can only get worse before it gets better.

The pandemic response has highlighted the value of smaller community groups and their ability to engage and support the borough's diverse communities. The research has highlighted the need to refresh engagement mechanisms in the borough to enhance the voice of often marginalised communities, hit hardest by the pandemic. The role of small community groups in delivering this change needs careful consideration.

Organisations of all sizes described the impact of the pandemic on their immediate operations and future sustainability. There needs to be financial and infrastructure support for the VCS to ensure the survival of valuable community assets in the short, medium and longer term. Support could be delivered in blended approaches – both physical and online delivery now widely recognised.

Premises have always been a challenge for the VCS and this research highlighted it once again. Coproduction is potentially undermined if the VCS, especially smaller groups cannot access affordable spaces to deliver activities.

Digital exclusion for communities and the VCS has been a massive issue throughout the last eighteen months. A fair and inclusive recovery from the pandemic is going to rely heavily on ensuring that no one is left behind as transformation embraces more and more digital delivery. Equally smaller voluntary organisations need support to ensure they have the hardware, finance and capability to truly embrace opportunities digital offers. Having a borough that is connected, inclusive, innovative and cost effective can only be achieved through equitable access and use of technology.

**Merton Connected** wants to see the boroughs' people, diverse communities, organisations, partnerships and resources connected to ensure the maximum impact for the London Borough of Merton.

## Recommendations

1. Build the capacity and capability of Merton's small, volunteer and community led organisations
2. Develop new approach to engagement, support and recognition of small and diversity-led groups to maximise their potential
3. Address community concerns around crime, housing and inclusion in order to reduce the potential for inequality undermining effective collaboration
4. Support organisations to rethink volunteering, creating a more diverse and flexible range of opportunities
5. Focus on the mental wellbeing and recovery of people in the VCS as well as service users
6. Develop a new cross sector approach to maximising the physical assets in the borough to support social action and community-led solutions
7. Share skills, expertise and good practice around coproduction to increase engagement
8. Establish a funding pot to resource recovery and address increased pressures and instability caused by the pandemic in the medium term
9. Enhance digital inclusion and service delivery

## Appendix 1 – Participating Organisations

6th Mitcham Brownies and Guides  
African Educational Cultural Health Organisation (AECHO)  
Age UK Merton  
Anonymous online entry  
AOPM - communities for Youth Justice  
APCMH Merton and Sutton  
Association for Polish Family  
Attic Theatre Company  
Avanti Mental Well-Being CIC  
BAME VOICE  
Carers Support Merton  
Christian CARE Association  
Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth  
Commonside Community Development Trust  
Ethnic Minority Centre  
Faith in Action  
Focus 4 1 CIC  
Friends in St Helier  
Home-Start Merton  
Jigsaw4u  
Merton Centre for Independent Living  
**Merton Community Transport**  
Merton Connected (MVSC)  
Merton Growbaby  
Merton Mencap  
Merton Vision  
Mitcham Cricket Green Community & Heritage  
Moat Homes  
**Muslim women of Merton and Shine Surrey**  
Raynes Park Bereavement Service  
Sherwood Park Hall CIC  
SMCA  
SMCA  
Somali Community CIC  
South West London Law Centres  
Springfield Advice & Law Centre  
St. Marks Church Mitcham  
The Salvation Army, Raynes Park  
Thinking Works  
Tooting and Mitcham Community Sports Club Ltd  
Turning Point Academy  
Veterans Voices (UK)



Wandle Industrial Museum  
Wimbledon Civic Theatre Trust  
Wimbledon District Woodcraft Folk  
Wimbledon Foodbank  
Workshop 305 CIC