Capacity Through Crisis (and Beyond)

The Role and Contribution of the VCSE Sector in Sheffield During

the COVID-19 Pandemic

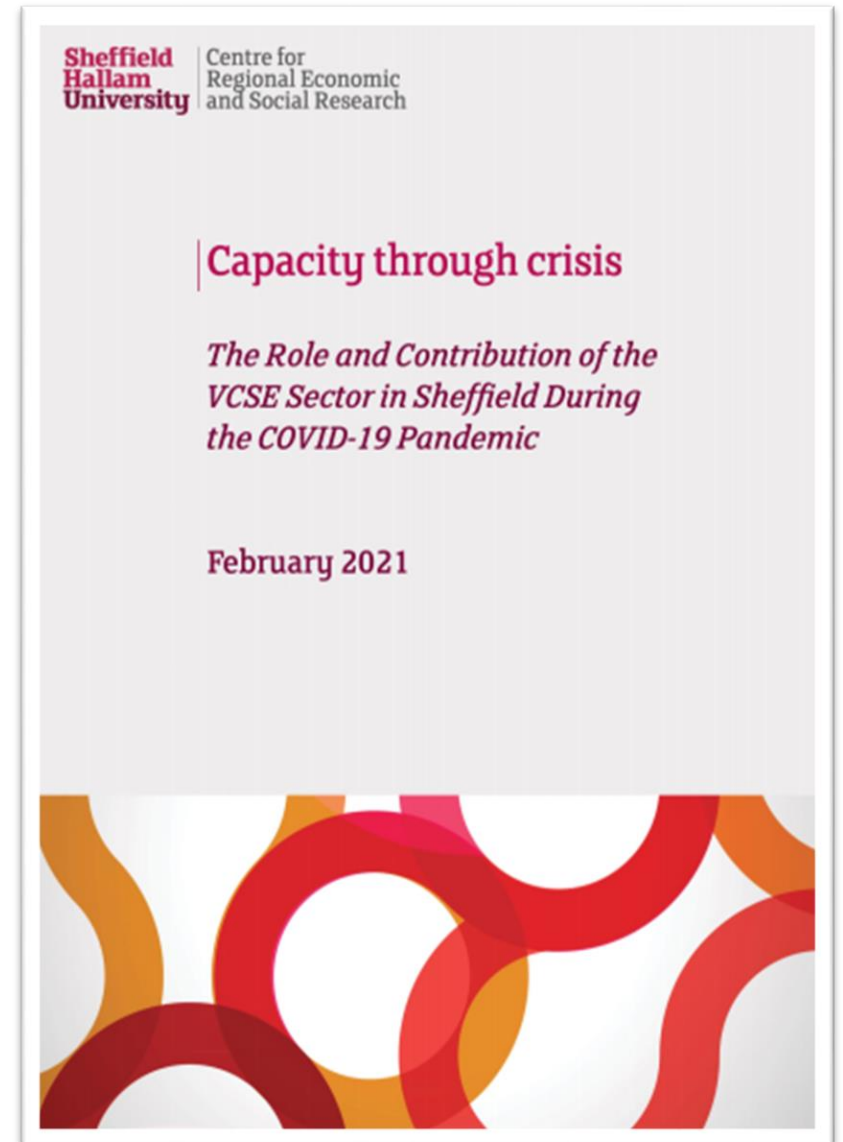**Chris Dayson, Sheffield Hallam University**

14th May 2021

**#capacitythroughcrisis   @CRESR_SHU   @cdayson_shu**

Background to the Research

- Researchers from **Sheffield Hallam University** are working with key partners in Sheffield to:

  – Understand the **value and contribution of the VCSE sector** during the COVID-19 pandemic.

  – Inform policy debates and developments about the future **role of the VCSE sector in the city**

- First report presents findings from the first phase of research with a **VCSE Engagement Panel** (10 participants)

- Explores **how VCSEs supported local communities of place and interest** during the first nine months of the pandemic

Sheffield Hallam University | Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

Capacity through crisis

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February 2021

Three Broad Overlapping Phases to the pandemic

- **Phase 1:** absorbing the shock of lockdown; taking stock of the implications; planning and implementing a response.

- **Phase 2:** adapting and adjusting provision in response to needs and circumstances.

- **Phase 3:** putting plans in place to resume core provision; facing up to the long-term effects of the pandemic.
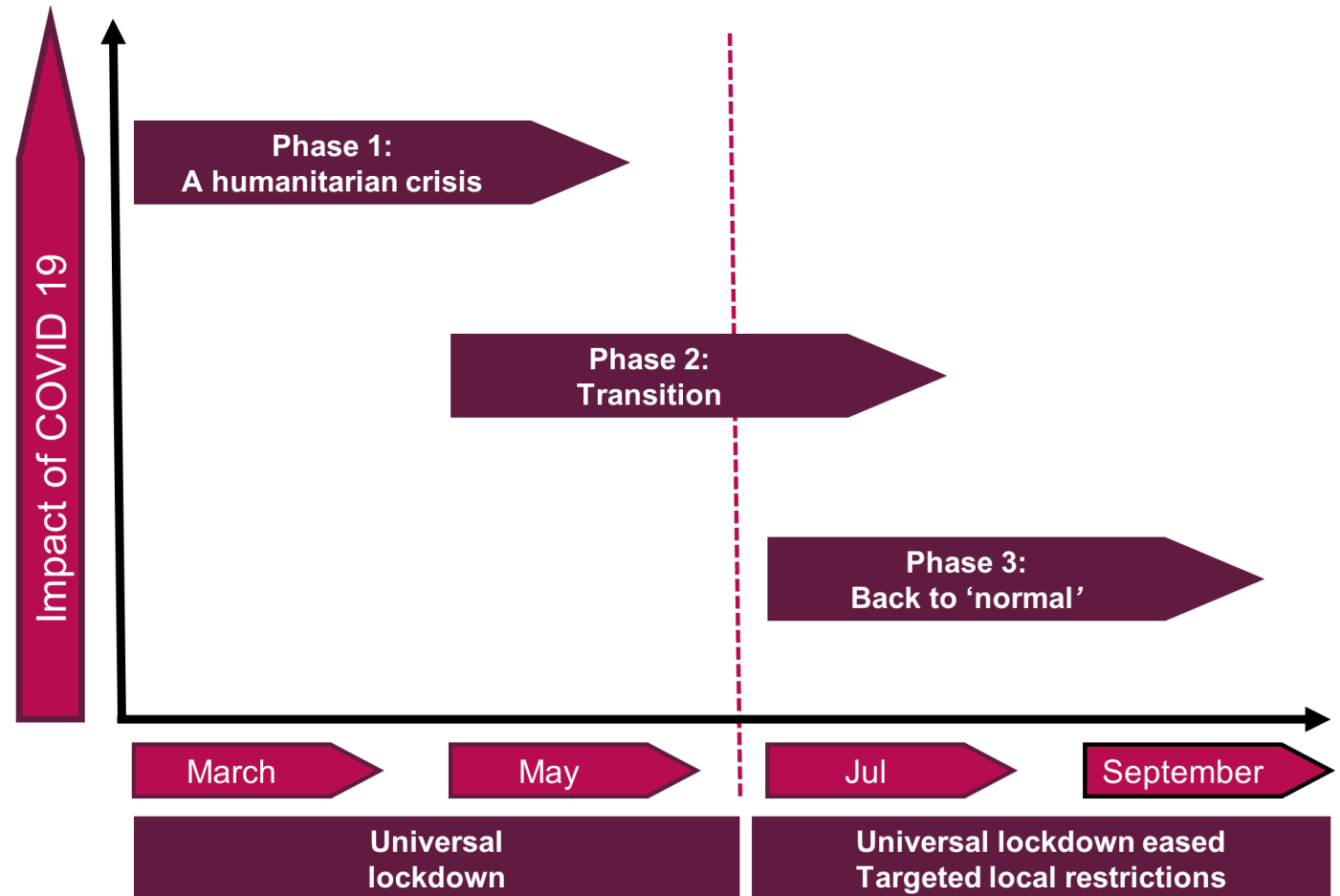
Source: Dayson, C et al (2021). *The 'Value of Small' in a Big Crisis: The distinctive contribution, value and experiences of smaller charities in England and Wales during the COVID 19 pandemic.* Sheffield Hallam University

An Overview of the VCSE Response

- Overall, the VCSE sector in Sheffield responded **swiftly and effectively** to the COVID-19 pandemic through a three-tiered effort:

  - **Informal and neighbourhood groups** offering mutual aid and support such as running errands and neighbourliness, providing help for people where they live.

  - **Community level support through the COVID-19 hub network** of established VCSEs which became the 'go to' places for support and escalation of concerns. Provided virtual check-ins, emotional support, and advice and guidance.

  - **City level coordination** which enabled the VCSE sector to contribute effectively to city wide planning and decisions, highlighting the needs of vulnerable people.

- Ensured that **thousands of people across the city received essential support** during the pandemic that they might not otherwise have received.

How VCSE 'resilience' enabled this response

Three types of capacity provide the **foundations for an effective response to and recovery from major shocks**: we saw this in the VCSE pandemic response

Adaptive Capacity

Absorptive Capacity

Transformative Capacity
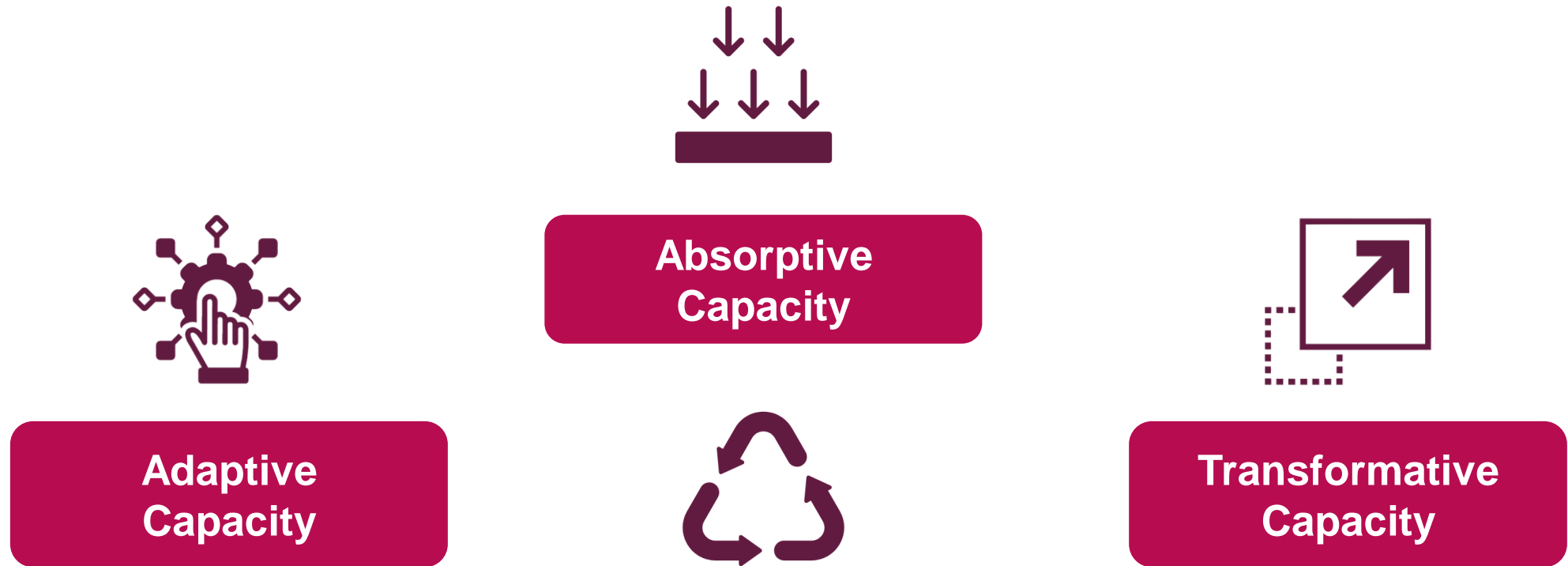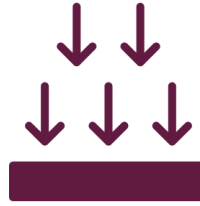
Absorptive Capacity

The ability to 'soak-up' and 'take stock of' the initial 'shock' brought on by a crisis

- Enabled VCSEs to responded effectively to the 'shock' of lockdown

- Working out how to provide support under the new restrictions

- Continuing to identify and respond to the pressing needs of vulnerable communities

Adaptive Capacity

The ability to learn and combine experience and knowledge to adjust responses to continue operating

- Enabled VCSEs to adjust their provision as the pandemic progressed through different waves

- Develop innovative ways to provide support as new needs emerged and the circumstances in which the operated changed.

- Areas of need where VCSEs were most active were arguably where public sector was less visible:

Physical Activity | Social Isolation | Domestic Violence | Mental Health | Food Insecurity

Transformative Capacity

The ability to create a fundamentally new system when events, structures or processes mean that the existing system becomes untenable

- Essential for a social and economic recovery that enables the city 'build back better'

- The VCSE sector could play a transformative role but there are a number of barriers to this:

  - When and how they will be able to operate 'as normal' again (and what will normal look like?)

  - Their ability to collaborate

  - Their funding and sustainability

  - The need for a more equal relationship with the public sector and other city partners

Further evidence of a sector under pressure

- Recapping SYCF research:

  - **Increasing demand:** 38 per cent of VCSEs reported increase in demand

  - **Service delivery challenges:** 90 per cent of VCSEs had to close or put-on hold all or part of their services, meaning new approaches had to be developed.

  - **Greater fragility:** 75 per cent of VCSEs anticipated at least some reduction in income during 2020-21; 23 per cent expected a reduction of more than 50 per cent

- Local data mirrored by national studies (NCVO/NTU/SHU, 2020):

  - 38 per cent of VCSEs **expect their financial position to deteriorate**

  - 80 per cent expect COVID-19 to have a moderate or significant **negative impact on delivering their objectives** next year

  - 14 per cent reported being quite likely or very **likely that their organisation would no longer be operating** next year

Resilience as a framework for shaping VCSE contribution to social and economic recovery

Our findings raise questions about how to foster **local ecosystems of providers** capable of **absorbing**, **adapting** and contributing to **transformational change**?

1. How to ensure that VCSEs in Sheffield have the **absorptive** and **adaptive capacity** to **respond to crises** of different scales and types in the future?

2. How to harness the **transformative capacity** of VCSEs to contribute fully to the social and economic recovery of the city?

3. How to ensure there is **a more equal relationship between VCSEs and the public sector** moving forward?

4. What role should **other partners in the city play** (i.e. private sector, anchor institutions) in supporting VCSE resilience?

Factors that contribute to VCSE resilience during the pandemic

Some common themes around the **enablers** and **barriers** of 'resilient' VCSEs and an effective response...provide focus for future development

#1

Financial Resources
Sufficient and flexible funding from a range of sources

#2

Human Resources
Staff and volunteers going 'above and beyond'

#3

Digital Readiness & Inclusion
VCSEs and service users able to engage online/remotely

#4

Understanding Needs
VCSEs long term embeddedness in vulnerable communities

#5

Leadership
Individual and collaborative approaches to shaping the response

A final reflection - time to think outside of the box?

The levelling-up agenda seems certain to prioritise capital investment in physical infrastructure

What if...

... small proportions of capital investment are ringfenced – through a **'community infrastructure levy'** - to be spent on local VCSE resilience and development?

Next steps

- Study continues until **July 2021**

- **May-June:** revisiting the VCSE Engagement Panel plus key stakeholder interviews

- Foci: **shaping future policy**

  - VCSE contribution to **social and economic recovery**: opportunities and challenges

  - Balancing **precarious resources** and **rising community needs**

  - Improving **VCSE-public sector relationships**

  - Bringing wider stakeholders onboard to **broaden engagement and accountability**

  - Enhancing **equity** for communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic

Download the report:

https://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/capacity-through-crisis-VCSE-sheffield-covid.pdf

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