Understanding the implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic for BBC Children in Need grantees

Early Pandemic Period April - May 2020

July 2020

BBC Children in Need

INSIGHT

Understanding the implications of the Covid-19 Pandemic for BBC Children in Need grantees

As the pandemic took hold in March 2020, BBC Children in Need needed to understand the implications for children and young people and the projects we fund to support them (our grantees).

We designed an enquiry framework for gathering insight around Covid-19 to understand:

- The implications of the pandemic on the lives of disadvantaged children and young people.
- How projects were responding to the challenges and changing needs (our grantees).
- How we need to adapt and respond as a funder.

This report summarises the key messages we found out in the April to May 2020 period about how our grantees were responding in the early months of the crisis. A separate report is available around the impact of the pandemic on children and young people supported by the projects we fund.

Throughout this report, we use the term grantee to reflect the projects that are funded by BBC Children in Need. These projects are run by a range of different organisations.

The average value of grants in our portfolio is £63,400. The majority of the organisations that we fund are micro (income of less than £10,000) to medium sized (i.e. income up to £1M turnover per year).

Our approach

We sent a Covid-19 form to all our grantees (3000+) to hear about the implications of Covid-19 and how projects were responding, in their own words. Nearly half our grantees submitted these forms during April and May 2020.

We analysed a sample of more than 300 of these forms and drew on conversations with grantees and networks, and insight from a range of external reports and research. We needed to quickly learn about the fastmoving crisis from our grantees perspectives.

Our focus was on gaining a timely picture of the key issues to inform our immediate response rather than a comprehensive view.

This is a fast changing situation, which has continued to evolve since the point this research reflects. We appreciate there will be different experiences and perspectives we've not explored here, and we are keen to continue to build our understanding as the situation evolves and as we evaluate the impact of our funding at this time.

We have also produced a report on the impact of Covid-19 for children and young people already facing challenges in their lives, who are supported by projects we fund.

How BBC Children in Need grantees are responding

What did early responses by grantees look like?

Grantees were responding to the situation in a variety of ways, such as suspending delivery, increasing or reducing services. Many were adapting their delivery approach.

- Online methods – keeping in touch, delivering one to one & group support sessions, enabling peer support and clubs, posting and sharing ideas for activities and information, signposting & information sharing.
- Resources for activities at home - design and delivery of appropriate resources to enable positive activities at home for play, creativity, education, personal development and physical development.
- Telephone – keeping in touch, individual support, signposting & information sharing.
- Provision of basic essentials – meeting basic needs through delivering food parcels, linking families to food banks.

Whilst most traditional face to face support stopped, there were some exceptions, such as respite for families in crisis, doorstep visits to show a child someone cares and checking on welfare, play-based support for children living in highly challenging situations and emotional support for highly vulnerable children or parents.

Key themes emerging from the way grantees responded

Change and uncertainty - now and in the future: Grantees faced considerable change and uncertainty at a time when many felt children and young people needed them the most. Many faced a range of challenges due to the pandemic, potential financial difficulties, rising or changing demand and disrupted service delivery within government restrictions. Grantees were concerned for how Covid-19 would affect children in the future and many faced difficult decisions about when and how to deliver the best impact for children.

Trusted relationships: Many grantees' responses to the crisis were focused on maintaining relationships and keeping in contact to support through difficult times.

Care & understanding for children and families' needs: Grantees used their understanding and empathy of children and young people's specific needs and additional challenges to inform their approaches.

Creativity: Many grantees found creative ways to adapt support to the specific age and needs of children and young people in the context of lockdown restrictions. Online methods could be less effective for younger aged children, and often alternatives were put in place.

Supporting children and young people within the context of their family: Lockdown meant that support for children and young people was widened to encompass the child's family, providing support in the context of the home and helping to meet essential household needs.

Going digital - mobilisation, exclusion & engagement: Grantees' confidence and knowledge of working safely online varied. Many children and young people faced digital exclusion, including younger ages and particular groups such as asylum seekers and refugees, those experiencing domestic abuse, those living in transient housing or living in poverty. Learning is beginning to emerge around the varied receptiveness to and effectiveness of online approaches and we'll continue to explore this.

Grantees views on what we could do to help

In the early months of the pandemic, grantees suggestions for how BBC Children in Need could further support them centred around:
- Continued flexibility and re-assurance.
- Support with core costs through grant flexibility or additional funding.
- Additional funding for resources and other costs to address emerging and rising needs
- Providing guidance and facilitating. connection to share advice and good practice.

Listening and adapting

Our early insight fed into the design of a range of new grant programmes and more flexible approaches to funding by our grant-making team.

Our key themes are feeding into a range of work across BBC Children in Need in our grant-making processes, fundraising and marketing and evaluating the impact of our Covid-19 response. We will continue to gather insight so we can understand the evolving needs of children and young people and the work being funded to address these issues.

How BBC Children in Need grantees are responding

Many grantees adapted from face-to-face support to mobilising online delivery

Sixty-nine percent of grantees who returned forms had moved/or planned to move to delivering online in the early pandemic period.

Projects used online methods to:
- Keep in touch.
- Continue to enable clubs – supportive communities.
- Deliver one to one and group support sessions.
- Post and share ideas for activities.
- Signpost and share information.

Digital delivery was highest amongst information and advice projects (100%) counselling projects (80%) and befriending/ mentoring (78%). Moving online was least common for refuge projects (31%), holiday projects (40%) and playschemes (50%).

Delivering projects digitally required time, technology, confidence and knowledge, which varied across projects. Support around how to work online with children safely and effectively was a key suggestion for additional support from grantees.

Delivery examples include:
Virtual youth clubs – video calls, online activities e.g. exercise, learning, TV watching parties.

Autism club – group sessions, virtual clubs, social media programme of activities e.g. dance, drama, storytelling, singing, cooking, craft.

LGBT projects – online peer community groups.

Young people rap club – online training sessions to develop creative skills showcase their talents.

Early years projects – nightly bedtime story on Facebook; craft activities using household items; meditation; personalised 'hello' welcome song recorded and sent to each child from an early years disabled children's group.

Bereavement counselling – personal letter to child with activity pack tailored for each individual child to work through online with their counsellor.

Grantees have been designing and distributing resources for children and young people to do at home

Methods of remote delivery that didn't require access to technology and digital skills proved popular during lockdown, particularly distributing resource packs and making telephone calls.

Grantees designed and delivered resources so children and young people had positive activities to do at home. These resources supported children and young people's personal, social and physical development through play, fun, creativity, educational materials and activities. Resources were tailored for the age and needs of children, young people and families.

"**We have sent out 'Play Packs' of games and creative activities that children can use at home. We know that children communicate through play and we need to encourage as much play as possible during this time. Through play they can express their anxieties and worries. Play helps them to make sense of the world around them. We are writing letters and resources to encourage parents to spend time playing with their child and highlighting the importance of this for the child at this time.**"
BBC CiN grantee

Delivery examples include:
Play therapy project – providing play packs tailored to the specific needs of children.

Homework clubs – providing educational packs and worksheets.

Gardening club – providing home gardening kits.

Family support – weekly activities for parents to do with children, upload on social media and discuss on video calls e.g. scrapbooking.

Gypsy, Traveller, Roma project – literacy pack for adults and activities for children.

Parent in prison project – activity packs sent to children with a personalised letter from their father in prison; fathers provided with Easter card packs to make and send to their children.

Face-to-face delivery continued in some exceptional circumstances

While most grantees stopped face-to-face interactions, there were exceptions. The main reasons for continuing face-to-face support were:

- Respite for children and families in crisis to reduce risks to safety (e.g. disability projects, children in challenging family circumstances).
- Checking a child's welfare and showing a child someone cares (e.g. projects supporting young carers, children with parenting based risk factors).
- Play-based support for children living in highly challenging situations (e.g. children with life-limited illness in hospice, children in rehabilitation centre for mothers with substance misuse issues, domestic violence refuges).
- Emotional support for highly vulnerable children or parents (e.g. children in challenging family circumstances, parenting support project, mothers in refuges/ rehabilitation centre).

Most grantees targeted this type of delivery at the most vulnerable children and young people e.g. a disabled child at risk of going into care, family in crisis, or at specific circumstances, such as, to build new relationships, for older children to drop-in.

Face-to-face support involved park walks, doorstep visits, accessing children via services run from supported accommodation or (re)opening an organisation's own premises.

Various safety precautions were taken to protect staff and children and young people e.g. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), deep cleaning and social distancing.
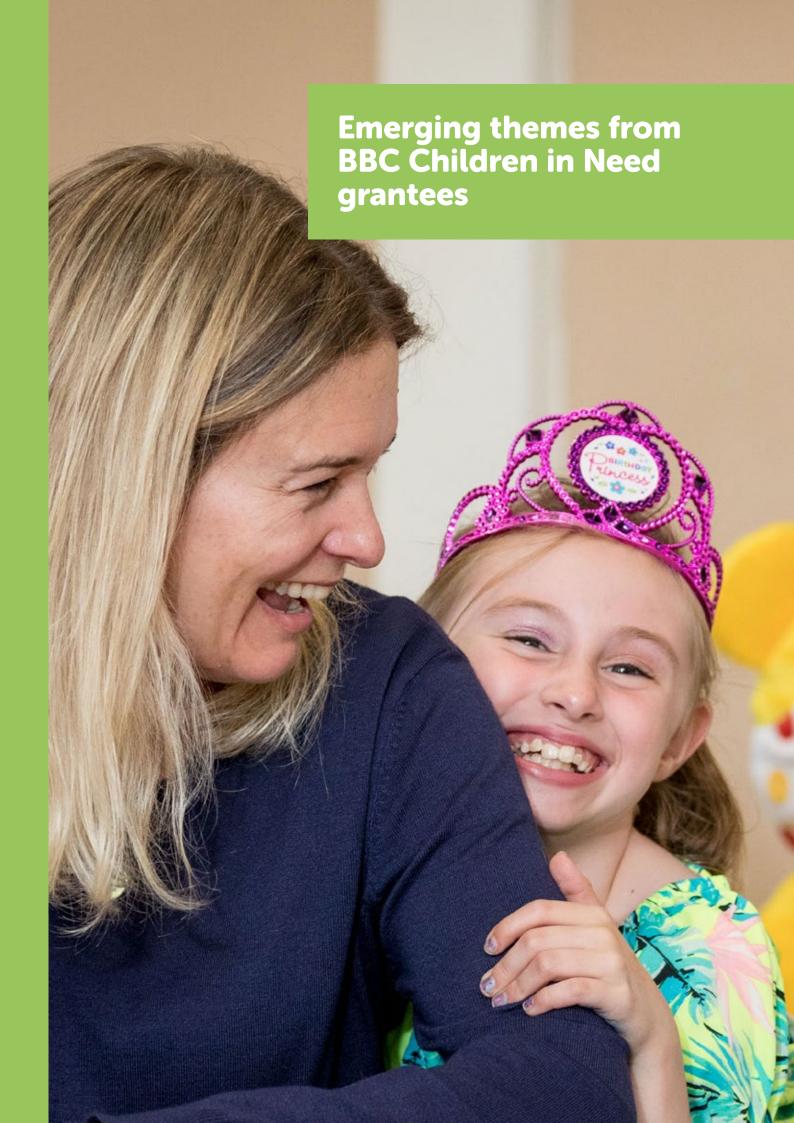
Delivery examples include:

Hospice play project – play team wear full PPE to deliver play sessions for children who are staying at the hospice for emergency respite or end of life care situations.

Early years family support project – weekly visits (where feasible) to families' doors keeping two meters apart, but speaking and seeing children.

Respite care for disabled children – re-opened respite care homes admitting one child at a time.

Rehabilitation centre project – had lockdown rota of extended hours using their most experienced staff to continue providing play support for pre school children and babies whilst living in a centre with their mothers who have an addiction to either drugs or alcohol.

Emerging themes from BBC Children in Need grantees

Grantees faced change and uncertainty at a time when children and young people needed them more than ever

March - May 2020 was a period of significant change for BBC CiN grantees due to the pandemic restrictions and uncertainty for when these would lift. These restrictions affected staff and volunteers' capacity to deliver, closures of premises and organisational income streams. Projects' confidence around change appeared to vary, but there was a strong sense of concern and uncertainty for now and the future. Two key aspects to this were:

Uncertainty around funding

- There were mixed experiences with different funding sources, but many funded projects saw or expected to see a reduction in income.
- The drop in income disproportionately affected unrestricted funding which often covers core costs and enables flexibility.
- Accessing furlough funding meant a requirement for funded projects to reduce or close delivery - only 19% - decided to do so.

Increased need and demand

- Grantees felt that children and young people needed their support more than ever due to changing and rising needs.
- Grantees wanted to "be there for children and young people through these difficult times" and to "pick up the pieces" after the pandemic is over.

Grantees told us:

"Our key concern is that many funders we were approaching for core funding have moved to emergency funding and as a result we may struggle to provide services at the end of this crisis and at a time when we will be needed more than ever."

"The sad truth is if we furloughed staff we would have money at the end of this crisis but would have failed our community who need us now more than ever."

"Many organisations are facing extremely difficult situations as our services are still needed we still need to keep caring for children and families but our usual activities and income generation has ground to a halt."

Grantees were concerned for now and the future and faced difficult decisions with how to respond

Grantees faced difficult decisions about the best time and the best way to make the most impact for their service users amidst the uncertainty around funding, when pandemic restrictions would lift and how children, young people and families needs would evolve.

From the early stages, grantees were considering how to balance the challenges of their current situation with their concerns for the future. Some grantees suspended their projects - a difficult decision reflecting a range of factors such as funding, lack of suitable systems or staffing to work through the crisis and the need to maximise impact for children at a later stage.

Grantees told us:

"It's a scary and uncertain time, we know that the need for our services will increase post pandemic and the needs of the young people who are in unsafe and unhappy homes need support now."

"Some of our families are very vulnerable and the biggest concern is how well the children will be able to re-engage with normal activities when the crisis is over. We foresee we will need to do some more intensive work with more groups to help children be ready for pre school and school and to help their social/emotional development which will be effective following weeks/months of social isolation."

"We also foresee a great number of parents suffering with anxiety about re connecting into normal community activities again and that we will need to significantly increase our services to meet the need."

Grantees flagged long-term concerns about:
- How projects can deliver their services within restrictions and with unknown timescales.
- The risks to organisations' financial security or survival.
- The impact of Covid-19 on children and young people in the longer term.
- Regression of outcomes and getting children and young people back to where they were before the pandemic.
- Economic, education and employment prospects.
- The impact of missed opportunities and experiences.
- Increased and deepened emotional wellbeing and mental health issues.
- Increased demand through heightened risk factors (such as domestic violence, poverty, bereavement).

Further information on what grantees told us about the changing needs of children and young people can be found in our report on the impact of Covid-19 for children and young people.

Trusted relationships continued to be a key priority when supporting children and young people through difficult times

In many instances, trusted relationships underpin grantee's approaches to supporting children, young people and their families. These are built over time. These trusted relationships were ever more important in the context of rising isolation and a time of personal crisis for many children and their families.

Grantees were maintaining relationships by
- Making sure children and young people knew they were still there.
- Keeping in regular contact by telephone, post, online etc.
- Being a support through difficult times with children, young people and parents.

Some grantees were focusing their delivery on relationships. For example grantees working with children and young people living in families with limited parental capacity:
- Were prioritising frequent contact with parents and/or children to provide emotional support and encouragement on the phone (to parents and some children/ young people).

- Were continuing face-to-face contact such as walks, opening centres and conducting 'doorstep checks' of children.

Grantees told us:
"[A boy] didn't want to speak to [his new counsellor] so [she] wrote him a letter. He replied by email. She then sent a grief workbook for teenagers in the post. He is emailing photos of his work. They are, quite quickly, building trust."

"[Young people] see staff as trusted adults who they can talk to about their issues, concerns and worries. We were concerned that they would become more vulnerable and at risk without this support. We as an organisation support hundreds of vulnerable people yearly and knew that we needed to continue to do this, as all those we support including children and young people could have a deterioration in their mental health other wise."

The welfare and interests of children and young people are at the heart of grantees' concerns and delivery

A key theme that the pandemic threw a spotlight on was the foundation that our funded projects are built upon - care for the children and young people they support, an understanding of their needs and a commitment to supporting them.

Children's interests and welfare are in the minds of staff and at the heart of projects, it is unsurprising that this continued as part of their Covid-19 responses.

Many grantees' responses to the crisis showed the high degree to which they
- Understood children, young people and families' specific needs and the additional. challenges they face arising from Covid-19
- Cared for children, young people and families at this time and were determined to support them.

Grantees told us:
"We feel passionately about supporting our children fully through this time, which is and has been very traumatic for them."

"It's helpful for them [children and young people] to know that someone else is thinking of them and caring for them."

Many grantees found creative ways to adapt quickly to the context of Covid-19

The pandemic and associated restrictions of lockdown meant that grantees had to be creative in order to deliver support and activities to children and young people. This meant creating approaches that met the needs of children and young people whilst adhering to rules and guidance.

For some grantees this meant delivering their usual projects online e.g. counselling sessions, dance or sports classes or follow along crafting sessions.

For others this as meant a rethink as not all activities and delivery could be repurposed online. Resource packs were popular and could be developed to address the disadvantages being experienced whilst still being fun.

Whilst online and telephone methods were common across grantees, they were less suitable for younger children. As face-to-face delivery stopped in most instances, grantees had to think creatively for alternative approaches for this age range. These included doorstep visits; writing personal letters; sending gestures that they were thinking about them (such as Easter eggs); providing support via their caregivers and delivering resources and activity packs.

Grantees told us:
"We will offer new activities (weekly or fortnightly), for example, this week we have delivered scrapbooks and colourful collecting buckets, the idea being that the children can be given tasks or things to collect on a walk and put them in the books, and share with other group members via social media. In addition, we have provided magic painting books for younger children. When the group meets over Zoom we can discuss how the activity went, what the children enjoyed and got out of it, and share ideas for future activities. We are sending out 'play a day' ideas of simple activities to do at home through social media."

Grantees widened support out to families and wider household needs during lockdown

Pre-lockdown some grantees were already supporting parents and carers. Many continued to do so through lockdown. Other grantees responded to the crisis by widening support from children and young people to their families – particularly parents and carers. Grantees' support looked at ways to support the child within their home during lockdown.

These responses included:
- Enabling access to basics including food (food parcels, links to food banks).
- Distributing activity resources.
- Emotional and practical support to parents of early years children – an age group that is particularly difficult to reach remotely.
- Help and guidance for parents to support children and young people e.g. physical conditioning and/or speech and language support for disabled children and young people; support about online safety for parents of young people at risk of online exploitation.
- Signposting and information sharing e.g. linking into local services, translated information resources to overcome language barriers.

Grantees told us:
"We have had to change our three outcomes to one single outcome until the pandemic is over: 'To be a listening ear for parents and offer practical advice, signposting and referring to other services during the crisis to reduce the impact the pandemic has on the children'."

"We are finding that we are having to support whole families at the moment and escalate more families to specialist services due to the crisis and the isolation that families are facing."

Digital exclusion was a key issue during lockdown for children, young people and families

Many children and young people faced barriers to going online. Grantees indicated that digital exclusion was more common for certain groups living in extreme poverty (e.g. asylum seekers and refugees) or in more transient living situations (e.g. refuges, hostels).

Barriers to access included
- Access to and affordability of technology - phone, laptop, tablet, Wi-Fi.
- Insufficient technology - reliance on mobile phones.
- Affordability and limits on data/broadband.
- Limited Wi Fi connectivity in an area.

Barriers to online engagement included
- Age - social media legal age, suitability for engaging younger children.
- Accessibility including skills, language and disability accessibility.
- Cultural reasons to not access internet e.g., Orthodox Jewish communities.

Grantees told us:
"Face-to-face sessions have moved online this is the only change, but [young people] are struggling with it. Times and dates have been ad hoc. I have noticed a real decline in many of [young people's] wellbeing. Many are really struggling with the more online approach. They do need extra encouragement to engage. Many would rather take the easy option and just not have the session. Many are becoming more isolated. As they revert back to their old pattern of not going out of the house. There may be long term effects as the situation continues."

Digital delivery was an emerging area of practice that grantees were having to quickly adapt to and learn about

Mobilising to deliver projects digitally required time, systems confidence, and knowledge. This varied across grantees:
- Some grantees did not have the technology, knowledge or confidence required.
- The need for additional support around how to work online with children safely and effectively is a key suggestion from grantees for how BBC Children in Need could provide support e.g. safeguarding and which online platforms to use.
- This appears to be a key area for new and emerging practice around what works and doesn't work for different ages, needs and project types potential for practice sharing and learning as the situation progresses.

Some grantees found some children and young people did not engage as well online:
- Some children and young people were disengaging from support or requested their support was postponed until face-to-face resumes (e.g. counselling, domestic violence support, bereavement support, some accessing youth work).
- Some found it hard to find confidential place to speak at home around sensitive personal topics.

Other grantees were having positive experiences and plan to continue online methods (alongside face-to-face) after restrictions lift. Advantages included:
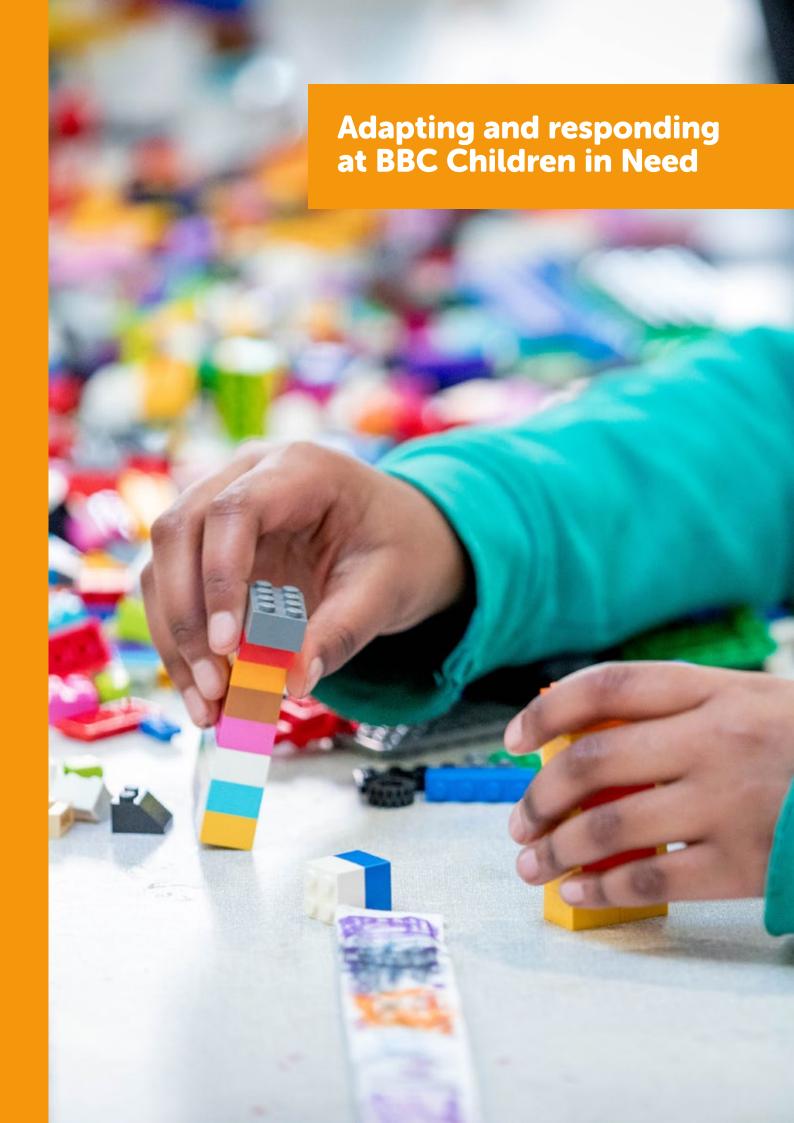- Engaging higher volumes of children and young people than before in a variety of online content and activities.
- Wider engagement with different people due to ease of access hours (e.g. young fathers at an early years project, young people accessing a youth project).
- Some young people were engaging more openly online than before.

Grantees told us:

"Overall we are 'meeting' for more time than we would normally. We did say group video sessions would be for an hour, but in reality they more like two - the young people are enjoying them! Not all of our members are comfortable with meeting like this so we have been careful to stay in touch in other ways."

"We are now delivering virtual Drop in sessions for young people... We have had really positive feedback about these sessions. It has given young people an opportunity to talk, discuss issues and play games that we have planned."

"The uptake has been fantastic and more families are joining each week. [Video conference] groups keep the families engaged, stay connected to each other and allow signposting and ideas for activities to do in the home with children. The families are given a challenge each week to try at home with their children to encourage positive interactions and each [online] session ends with a "rhymetime" with the children. The volunteers take part as well as staff so the families get a chance to see the people they know."

Adapting and responding at BBC Children in Need

Grantees needed flexibility, additional funding and opportunities to share practice to enable them to meet the challenges of Covid-19

Early suggestions from grantees for how BBC Children in Need could provide additional support centred around the need for:

Continued flexibility and re-assurance

- Open and flexible approach to grant funding usage, including permitting using funds differently to meet vital, additional needs of children arising from Covid-19.
- Flexibility in terms of grant requirements, e.g. timings and targets.

Support with core costs through grant flexibility or additional funding

- Core organisational costs were a key concern early on to enable organisations to stay open and to survive for the future.

Additional funding for resources and other costs to address emerging and rising needs, including

- Digital equipment for both children and young people and organisations themselves.
- Resources to support activities in children and young people's homes.
- Meeting an anticipated rise in demand for services or evolving needs of children and young people, especially mental health & wellbeing.
- Providing guidance and facilitating connection to share advice and good practice.
- Particularly to build knowledge and confidence to deliver services online safely and effectively for children and young people.

Listening and adapting at BBC Children in Need

Our early insight helped inform the grant making response of BBC Children in Need. Since the pandemic began, we have responded in a number of ways including:

- Additional grant programmes to support new and existing grantees through this period.
- Taking a more flexible approach to grant management, including the funding of organisational costs for emergency responses.
- Undertaking more individual and collective conversations with the sector, young people and grantees to share resources, discuss experiences, challenges and ways forward.

We will be evaluating the impact of these funding responses at a later stage, as well as continuing to track the evolving situation arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.