

Voluntary Sector Response to COVID-19



**Mid Sussex Voluntary Action and
Healthwatch West Sussex working together to
support the Voluntary Sector during
Coronavirus pandemic**

July 2020

Introduction

Recognising the tremendous pressure the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) has and is experiencing as a result of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Mid Sussex Voluntary Action (MSVA), and Healthwatch West Sussex (HWWS) are working collaboratively to gather information from VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) leaders about the challenges, experiences, future planning and concerns to understand how, as a sector, we learn from this.

We are also working with Sussex Community Foundation (SCF) who will use the survey information to help plan and shape their funding of grants to best meet VCS needs.

This is a snapshot of the views captured via our online Resilience Survey, completed by 31 organisations operating services across Mid Sussex. The survey consisted of 21 questions (designed in conjunction with sector leaders) to understand the current impact on service provision, staff, volunteers and service users as well as funding and forward planning. The survey was promoted through e-bulletins from MSVA and HWWS.

We heard how VCS leaders responded initially to COVID-19, which was for all a frenzied period of adjustment having to:

- Temporarily close face to face services, and for some changing services to virtual/home based working, from scratch.
- Support staff and volunteers - including reallocating staff to other roles, enabling staff to work from home, furloughing staff, and taking care of volunteers.
- Finding innovative ways to shore up finances and many other operational tasks and decisions.

As the lockdown is now in its twelfth week and restrictions are beginning to ease, many are planning for recovery within ever-changing and at times confusing Government guidance.

The VCS has shown leadership, compassion and kinship, and has been creative in how it has continued to support its volunteers and service users/members.

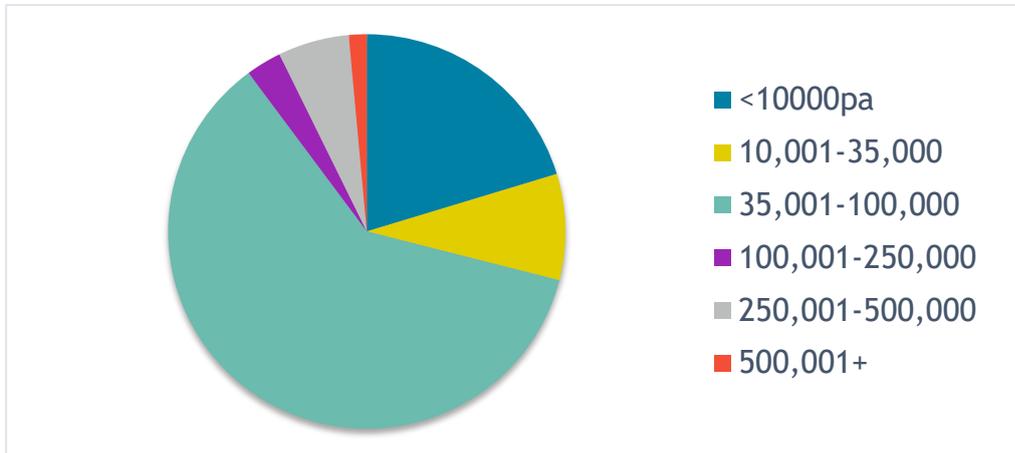


They are the unsung heroes of the COVID-19 crisis along with the many thousands of local people who have supported their communities.



Resilience Survey findings

Over half the organisations who completed the survey were registered charities (58%), with 68% (21) organisations run by volunteers. The range of income for these organisations is:



Service closures

27 (87%) organisations had to close or put on hold their face-to-face service provision, in line with Government guidance.

- We had to close our retail operation and furlough the majority of the staff.
- Temporary closed service to clients.
- Unable to carry out face-to-face meetings - loss of revenue as a consequence.
- No activity due to swimming pool closures.
- Closure of the prison means we had to put on hold most of our work and can't support our vulnerable service users face-to-face in the community.
- Unable to meet, as all members 'shielding'.
- Our workshops closed as located in premises associated with care of elderly.

Four organisations: Burgess Hill Helper Army, Neighbourhood Support, Fun and Breaks West Sussex and Criminion UK continued to provide services, some virtually.



More people are using open spaces.

Support services have moved mainly to remote/virtual support.

Using telephone calls weekly, sending newsletters and postcards to carers and family. Constantly thinking of other ways to interact.

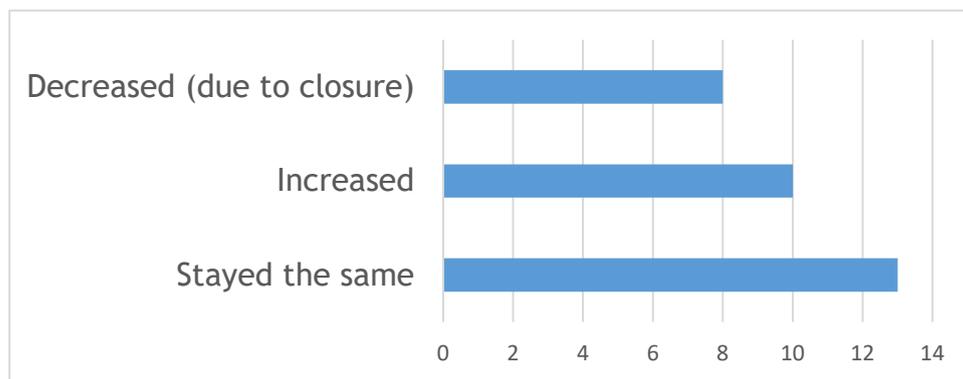
Some of our service users are doing more than one course at a time and more lessons are being sent out at a time to keep them occupied.



The closure of services has meant that 9 organisations had to furlough staff. 22 more had services delivered completely by volunteers, but many volunteers are in the ‘at risk’ category so needed to shield/self-isolate. The number of volunteers supporting organisations pre-COVID ranged from 8 to 625 active volunteers. This number has dropped to between 1-30 active volunteers.

Changes in demand

Demand for services has changed and the current situation is changing rapidly:



Of the organisations that have seen an increase in service provision, it has in some cases been dramatic.

- Neighbourhood Support has seen a 300% increase.
- Harvest UK has seen a rapid increase in the scale of food rescue, redistribution and delivery services - with three new warehouses and an average 18 tonnes a day worth of food being redistributed to charities. Their volunteer team has been strictly limited to abide with social distancing guidance.

Practical challenges

The practical challenges have been numerous:

- Keeping on top of conservation work during the lockdown.
- Trying to run a Youth Club virtually with lack of equipment.
- Difficulties in supporting refugees and vulnerable migrants after face-to-face activities stopped. However, remote support has happened using Zoom, WhatsApp video and phone calls, but with mixed outcomes where participants do not speak much English (overcome in face-to-face activities with shared interpreters).

- Keeping in touch with members who have Aphasia¹ and no technology.
- Restricted attendance in office as working from home is too difficult.
- Provision of 1:1 sessions of emotional listening support to children within primary school has ceased. Even though the schools have been open to vulnerable children, external visitors/organisations like us are not allowed in. We know we won't be allowed into schools until September. We can't provide support to children virtually as they can't use therapeutic play equipment. Most of the children's problems come from within the home; school is a safe place where they can explore their worries, anxieties and experiences.

Impact on Staff, Volunteers and Service Users

The impact of COVID-19 for staff has been the loss of the community and camaraderie of others. Staff have been furloughed and those working remain busy and have adapted well to remote working, but *many miss the office environment*. Many are now working from home and have found there are opportunities to link virtually with volunteers and service users through Zoom, SKPYE, Facebook etc...

While it's also known that for some, virtual working does present accessibility barriers related to health issues, location, technology, isolation etc. most organisations are communicating by phone and post to ensure they're able to stay in touch with volunteers and service users.

We have been told that organisations are being creative and risk assessing the return of staff to the office as well as adapting the space to comply to Government guidance to enable those who are struggling to return to the office environment.

“ For those with limited English accessing online learning and other services; like the bank, benefits or medical services, is very challenging. Volunteers support as best they can use three-way conversations with an interpreter. The lack of face-to-face contact also makes befriending and community integration much more difficult for volunteers and service users. ”

¹ **Aphasia** is an impairment of language, affecting the production or comprehension of speech and the ability to read or write. **Aphasia** is always due to injury to the brain - most commonly from a stroke, particularly in older individuals.

It's been especially hard for family and friend carers, as they have not been able to access respite and have been on *duty*, so to speak, for the whole time, which people describe as 'challenging'. Many volunteers are also 'self-isolating' as they're over 70 years old, believing this to be Government guidance. (A recent [survey](#) by Independent Age found 43% of the respondents were wrongly self-isolating). Many volunteers have been actively supporting their communities for example with shopping or prescription deliveries or befriending locally. This has meant a change in focus for some, but an opportunity to remain actively involved in supporting people.

Staff and volunteers have had to find innovative ways to keep providing support remotely and working cooperatively with other agencies has been especially important. There has been an increase in demand from service users in some areas e.g. neighbourhood action groups, and increased volunteer numbers to support this.

Technology

With so many staff now working from home, use of key technology has become vital to communicate with members. VCS leaders have been embracing technology with members, running meetings across Zoom if they hadn't already been doing so. They are also regularly offering help and support, for example emailing community activities and/or referring parents to the National Girlguiding website for a wider selection of activities.

- Working from home and getting used to technology has been challenging.
- Development of a more interactive website to allow members to post information and organised telephone contact calls on a regular basis to offset loneliness and isolation.
- One part-time staff member who has not been furloughed is maintaining the service (while others have been furloughed) by keeping in close contact with parents giving time and advice, as well as weekly contact with volunteers to ensure the service does not lose any.
- Delivering 1-2-1 and very small group sessions via Zoom to families and supporting them with weekly exercise and activity sheets.

Finance Impact

Respondents expressed real concerns about financial stability and solvency, as unrestricted funds have reduced services since the temporary closure - loss of membership fees, fundraising, venue hire, closure of charity shops, rental funds etc. With little sight of change in the foreseeable future due to continued social distancing, increased costs and alternative ways of working, organisations are extremely worried about their long-term survival.



Groups and charities need access to unrestricted grant funds which can go towards loss of fundraising and trading income.

31 respondents, replied to the question about their organisations' *projected lifespan*, 52% reported futures lasting 6 to 12 months and 48% indefinitely.

| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------|-----------|----|
| 1 month | 0.00% | 0 |
| 3 months | 0.00% | 0 |
| 6 months | 25.81% | 8 |
| 12 months | 25.81% | 8 |
| Indefinitely | 48.39% | 15 |
| TOTAL | | 31 |

This is not surprising if one factors in those with no paid staff, no premises and run solely by volunteers who are in a better financial position than those with those overheads.



Permanent reduction in membership numbers and reduced income due to social distancing measures on resumption with no equivalent cost reduction.

Loss of membership, so loss of subscriptions.

The main challenge has been to balance the costs of running a large listed building while receiving no income from bookings.



However, 18 (60%) of organisations reported not applying for COVID-19 specific grants as they were 'not eligible'. COVID-19 grants have predominantly been to fund COVID-19-related activity. Supporting service users and volunteers virtually did not seem to meet the criteria. Therefore, these grants did not meet the needs of charities who are experiencing financial loss. If they had unrestricted access to grant funds, the pressure would be reduced, and it would mean invaluable services could continue for those in need.

There has been a sea of fundraising cancellations and a loss of fundraising opportunity in the longer term, which is predicted to mean finances are very tight. This is compounded for a number of organisations concerned that funders may pause support because they are unable to deliver the expected service(s). For some, there is a slight breathing space as the next payments are not due until the New Year, but payment will be difficult if some form of 'normal' service is not achieved by the Autumn.



- Our income has dropped from £28k per month to £8k.
- The small offices rented out have kept us afloat until now.

For some there are more practical expenses:

- We've had to stop all services and are having to pay for our ponies' upkeep.
- Bills for licences, equipment needs, etc are still coming in.

The loss of planned fundraising events is having a significant impact for many organisations:

- This crisis will ultimately cost us £80K - £120K in lost income this financial year.
- As a charity, we've had to cancel all our upcoming fundraising activities and events and aren't able to do any real fundraising activities.
- No income from fundraising/events.

It's not known if organisational reserves will be enough to maintain many services in the longer-term, especially in the light of a potential deep economic recession.

Furlough scheme

The furlough scheme has been appreciated by those who've used it, as it has helped to protect organisational reserves. Although the suggested future changes to the scheme - where an organisation will have to pay a higher percentage - may mean reduced hours and redundancies.



There will be a small reduction (approx. 1%) over the year, as long as our funders are happy to continue their existing commitment.

We have a cash flow problem with a building to maintain and no income and our investments are at their lowest value ever. We're already making up staff wages to 100%. It's hit us really badly.

£8000 of additional cost per month, therefore a negative impact on our cash reserves.



There is confusion about Government guidance on furloughed staff *I don't know as the Government have talked about staff working part-time and the Government paying the remainder*. Once the 80% payment ceases this will affect one organisation's revenue by *£843 towards 3 part-time staff salaries per month*.

Future risks to income

Several organisations are worried about running out of money before they can begin services and fundraising again or that they'll lose touch with service users and/or experience a reduction in membership due to social distancing. Some are concerned about possible cuts in County Council budgets, less community grants, donations, and uncertainties surrounding income from Trusts and Foundations. In fact, groups providing a one-to-one service and/or are dependent on trading income and large-scale fundraising events are finding the situation particularly difficult.



As a neighbourhood scheme we're able to operate with virtually zero income and expenditure.

No income from service users, all fundraising cancelled and unsure when we'll be able to start, means we have no income.

Burgess Hill Party in the Park has been postponed and this will impact on our income this and next year.

The time it will take to get trading recovery.



Organisations will need time to build up trade again after this prolonged shutdown of face-to-face services, and not being able to offer public events due to current Government recommendations. Some feel their evidence base will have been affected as they'll have *less people complete which will impact on evidence provided to donors etc and will affect future funding.*

Not being able to carry out face-to-face training of new volunteers will also impact on future service delivery.

Lack of local assisted transport for service users to and from a service, when face-to-face activities can return, is a real concern.

Organisations have also shared concern that Trusts and Foundations, possibly reliant on investment income dependent on global markets (that are and may remain volatile) are having to re-budget and close application windows due to excessive demand and limited funds.

The postponement of community fundraising/events over the coming year is also worrying. Time 4 Children was the Haywards Heath Mayor's chosen charity and all the Mayor's fundraising events have been postponed. This means that any anticipated income this year and possibly through to next year will be greatly reduced.



Summary

It has been fantastic how quickly this sector has responded and adapted to the COVID-19 crisis. Many voluntary and community groups have moved from primarily face-to-face services to telephone/virtual ones, or while closed have maintained wellbeing contact with members. This is remarkable as resources are so much more limited for these organisations.

The main area of focus now is sorting out budgets for the year ahead when fundraising activity cannot happen or will be very limited. There is great concern about possible cuts in County Council budgets, less community grants, donations, and uncertainties surrounding Trust and Foundation funding. This presents a very real risk of permanent closure which will leave support gaps. The fear for VCS is that valuable, often hidden, support will not be appreciated until it has gone, and peoples' lives have been negatively impacted.

One point worth reiterating is here is that groups and charities need access to unrestricted grant funds which can go towards loss of fundraising and trading income, to keep them from ceasing to operate, thereby starving those in need in local communities across Mid Sussex.

Mid Sussex Voluntary Action response

MSVA has continued to provide a tailored service to almost 400 local community members including 20 Covid-19 Mutual Aid groups by remote working, providing virtual leadership training, networking and advisory sessions. We have also signposted some 120 volunteers into suitable vacancies since the beginning of lockdown. Nevertheless, this survey shows that some of the smaller groups who depend largely on trading and fundraising events are in a precarious position. There is a real concern about their long-term survival. Currently most organisations will be able to keep going for another six months. MSVA is determined to help groups providing a bedrock of support for some of the most vulnerable people with ways of surviving. A thriving voluntary sector has been crucial during this crisis and will be even more so in the aftermath. With the support of our partners, MSVA is adapting its services accordingly.

Next Steps

Our next collaborative report will be to share the findings from our semi-structured phone interviews with VCS leaders.



Thank you

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all organisations who took the time to complete the survey.

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|---|---|
| <p>Age Concern Hassocks & District Better Breathing Company Burgess Hill Helper Army Burgess Hill Shed Criminon UK Cuckfield Stroke Communication Group (a Voluntary Group of the Stroke Association Dame Vera Lynn Children's Charity Disability Access - East Grinstead Area East Park Riding for the Disabled Forest Row Village Hall Friends of Burgess Hill Green Circle Network Fun and Breaks West Sussex Girlguiding Sussex Central county Good Neighbours CARE Grenestede Talking News</p> | <p>Hope in the Valley Riding for Disabled Group Lingfield & Dormansland Meals on Wheels Lindfield Arts Festival Mid Downs Radio Mid Sussex Marlins Swimming Club Mid Sussex Wood Recycling Neighbourhood Support Park Center Ladies Group Refugees Welcome Crawley Sussex Pathways The Escape Youth The Monday Group Time 4 Children UK Harvest West Sussex Mediation Service World's End Association</p> |
|---|---|

Appendix one: Voluntary Sector Resilience Survey Questions

1. **Your name**
Name of organisation
Your role
2. **Organisation Structure (tick all that apply)**
Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)
Community Interest Company (CIC)
Company limited by Guarantee
Company limited by Shares
A Mutual Society
Registered Charity
Group or unincorporated association
Don't know
Other (please specify)
3. **Annual Turnover**
Less than £10,000
£10,000 - £35,000
£35,000 - £100,000
£100,000- £250,000
£250,000 - £500,000
£500,000 - £1m
More than £1m
4. How many full time equivalent (fte) staff do you have?
5. How many staff have you furloughed?
6. How will your revenue be affected once the 80% payment ceases?
7. What have been the practical challenges, as an organisation, you have had to deal with due to COVID 19?
8. How has this impacted on staff, volunteers and service users?
9. How many volunteers did you have in January 2020?



10. How many of these volunteers are currently volunteering?
11. How has the demand for your service changed?
Increased
Stayed the same
Decreased
12. Have you had to close/put on hold all or part of your service?
Yes / No
13. If you are maintaining a service how has it changed?
14. What are the top 3 areas of service delivery that are most at risk?
15. If the current situation continues how many months do you expect you can continue to be financially sustainable?
1 month
3 months
6 months
12 months
Indefinitely
16. What are the top 3 income streams (trusts, trading, donations, community fundraising...) most at risk?
17. What are the possible risks to your income in the medium term?
18. Have you applied for the various COVID 19 support grants?
If yes which ones?
How successful was the application?
19. What are the key areas of support that you think is needed?
 - a) as an organisation
 - b) for the overall voluntary sector
20. Have you begun forward planning for the organisation once the lock down eases?
Yes / No
21. Other information specific to your organisation.





Sussex Community Foundation is a local charity that provides funding for grassroots charities and community groups across Sussex. It offers a bespoke service for donors - individuals, families, companies and charitable trusts - helping them to support the causes they care about in the local community. The Foundation is also building an endowment fund to provide sustainable funding for local communities.

In March 2020, the Foundation launched the Sussex Crisis Fund to provide immediate help to charities helping those most affected by Coronavirus. This was complemented by funds from the National Emergencies Trust. At the time of publication of this report, the Sussex Crisis Fund had given out £1.2m in grants across Sussex. Learn more on www.sussexingiving.org.uk

The Foundation thanks Mid Sussex Voluntary Action and Healthwatch West Sussex for undertaking this research which will be invaluable in the next phase of the Sussex Crisis Fund. The voice of local communities must be central to all our work in the months to come.



Mid-Sussex Voluntary Action

Supporting community action across Mid Sussex

Admin Hub: Delmon House, 36-38 Church Road, Burgess Hill, RH15 9AE

General Enquiries: 01444 258102

Registered charity number: 1158780

Talk to us

If you have questions about the content of this update, please either call 0300 012 0122 or email cheryl.berry@healthwatchwestsussex.co.uk

How this insight will be used?

We recognise that all health and care services are under pressure at this time and have had to adapt their ways of working. We will share this report with the local NHS, local Government and other providers to help them understand where things are working well and services are adapting to meet peoples' needs, and to help them identify any gaps.

For help, advice and information or to share your experience

We are the independent champion for people who use health and social care services. We're here to find out what matters to people and help make sure their views shape the support they need.

We also help people find the information they need about health, care and community and voluntary health and care support services in West Sussex.



Here to help you on the next step of your
health and social care journey

We have the power to make sure that the Government and those in charge of services hear people's voices. As well as seeking the public's views ourselves, we also encourage services to involve people in decisions that affect them.



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