



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Between 22nd June and 13th July 2020, Community Works distributed an online survey to learn about how the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector situated within Brighton, Hove, Adur and Worthing, has responded in the initial months of the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 174 VCSE organisations and groups responded to the survey, varied by size and nature. Over half the respondents were from relatively small organisations, with 58% having '0-5 members of staff' and 55% having an income of '£100,000 or less'. 17 organisations employ over 50 people. Over half of the respondents (54%) work with '20 or more' volunteers, and a large number of responses (68%) were from registered charities.

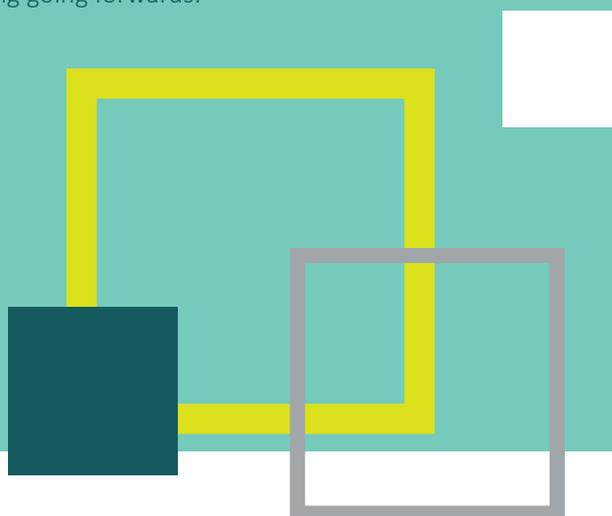
This report documents the findings from the full data set, which included a quantitative analysis of closed questions as well as the collation and thematic analysis of over 600 qualitative comments. Throughout the report, a sample of those comments are cited.

The findings are based on the collective responses of Community Works members encompassing Adur and Worthing and Brighton and Hove. Where there were significant statistical differences between the two areas, these have been highlighted but differences should be treated with an element of caution as the responses in Adur and Worthing are not statistically significant enough to draw conclusions for the whole area in themselves. The qualitative data, case studies and interviews have given us a much broader and richer assessment of what the sectors priorities are across the geographical spread. The accumulated information from these provide a strong indication of the demand for a thirst for support, networking and collaboration opportunities within the sector across Adur and Worthing and Brighton and Hove.

At the time of publishing this report, the Covid-19 pandemic is by no means over. Rather, it remains a constantly shifting and uncertain landscape, whereby the stark implications of the pandemic continue to be felt by individuals and communities, as well as within the wider social and economic context. Thus, the views and experiences of VCSE organisations are likely to shift and evolve in line with this ever-changing context.

However, this report is an ideal opportunity to pause and reflect, both on what the VCSE sector has achieved so far and to consider what has made this response possible. By doing so, the hope is that we can build on, and embed, the lessons that are being learnt and also consider how to ensure that the VCSE sector can continue to support communities and remain strong going forwards.

As a snapshot, we have preserved and used the language used by respondents in their responses. We acknowledge the challenges and importance of language, and especially terminology when talking about diversity, equality and inclusion. How we communicate effectively and appropriately about diversity, equality and inclusion is an ongoing process. We are listening and learning from members and the wider community and encourage people to share their thoughts with us.



HOW DID THE VCSE SECTOR RESPOND?

At the time of completing the survey, nearly all of the respondents (91%) were still providing services, with 69% of organisations dealing with increasing or similar levels of demand to usual¹. However, with the lockdown restrictions in place, and the risks imposed by Covid-19, organisations have had to significantly adapt their provision, including the closure of offices, moving to remote working, and reimagining of the delivery of services.

Over 137 comments were made demonstrating the various ways that VCSE organisations, very rapidly, responded to the needs of their service users and the communities they serve. For example, organisations:

- Adapted the delivery of existing services (e.g. utilising online technology, redeploying staff and volunteers and providing practical support (such as the delivery of food and meals).
- Developed new services to meet new and additional needs.
- Provided essential hardware to service users to mitigate the problems associated with digital exclusion.
- Increased the distribution and accessibility of key public health messages across all communities.
- Worked collaboratively with local, regional and national strategic partners to help shape and inform collective efforts to ensure there was a coordinated, joined up and efficient response.

¹ This was particularly the case for organisations supporting 'older people', 'people living with long term physical and mental health conditions', 'people who misuse alcohol, drugs or other substances', 'homeless people' and 'BAMER communities'.

WHAT IMPACT DID THIS RESPONSE HAVE?

VCSE organisations reflected on the positive impact they have had both on service users as well as local, collective responses. The key message coming through from the hundreds of comments made is that the VCSE sector has helped save lives, reduced loneliness and isolation, and complemented the provision of statutory services, thus preventing the 'system' from becoming overwhelmed with ever increasing need. For example, the sector has contributed to:

- Providing for the basic needs of individuals and communities.
- Increasing the awareness, accessibility, and thus adherence to, public health guidance across all communities.
- Ensuring that the social and emotional needs of the most at risk and the most isolated were actively addressed and taken into account in service design and delivery.
- Increasing community access to Personal and Protective Equipment.
- Ensuring those at risk of digital exclusion were catered for wherever possible.
- Sharing knowledge and intelligence regarding the needs of the most vulnerable community members.
- Supporting cross-sector referral pathways.
- Ensuring there are clear and open lines of communication between sectors.
- Advocating for the needs of the most vulnerable or marginalised communities.

However, despite the positive outcomes set out above, many respondents were acutely aware of the level of need that continues to exist, given the negative impacts that Covid-19 – and thus the unavoidable loss or adaption of services – continues to have on service users. The impact that existing patterns of vulnerability, marginalisation and exclusion have had on people's negative experiences of the pandemic were also widely noted.

WHAT ENABLED THE SECTOR TO RESPOND IN THIS WAY?

The VCSE sector was able to respond rapidly to the needs of individuals and communities throughout the pandemic given its:

- Trusted relationships with and closeness to service users.
- Reach into diverse communities.
- Value-driven approach.
- Committed, passionate and motivated workforce (both paid and voluntary).
- Strong governance, management and leadership structures.

- Sound financial management.
- Strength of existing relationships, and willingness to work in partnership, with statutory partners, funders and other VCSE organisations.
- Relevant, needs-led service provision.

The role that funders and infrastructure have played was also noted, ensuring organisations had access to the right support.

This combination of factors was felt to have contributed to the sector's agility, flexibility, and creativity. They also provided a basis of trust upon which VCSE organisations were able to listen to, identify, and effectively advocate for, the needs of different communities.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO ENSURE THE VCSE REMAINS STRONG AND SUSTAINABLE MOVING FORWARDS?

Alongside the positive stories of adaptation and collaboration, the sector has faced some key challenges, particularly in relation to funding, volunteering and service design. For example, 51% of respondents had experienced a loss in income, 39% have already drawn on reserves, and 44% expect to experience a loss in income over the next financial year. 46% of respondents also noted that their current delivery model was 'significantly' or 'very significantly' at risk. Whilst there was a high degree of confidence regarding the survival of VCSE organisations in the next six months, this confidence level dropped when thinking about the next 12-18 months.

In relation to volunteering, whilst many (68% of respondents) were able to maintain or increase their volunteer base, 30% experienced a decrease. This was often due to the changing nature of volunteering roles (i.e. moving to the provision of virtual support, which was a barrier for some), the suspension and closure of some volunteer led services as well as the vulnerability of some volunteers to the health implications of Covid-19.

Overall, the picture is one of significant change for the VCSE sector. As the implications of Covid-19 continue to unravel, and as contracts and grants move towards end dates, there is thus increasing concern regarding the sector's mid to long-term future.

Within this context, three priorities emerged that can support the VCSE to remain strong and sustainable at a local level and to address wide reaching inequalities:

- Supportive funding structures
- Collaborative working
- Addressing social and structural inequalities

These are explored further:

Supportive funding structures: Over three quarters of respondents called for core, unrestricted funding to ensure they can continue to be agile, flexible and offer creative solutions to meet increasing need. Core funding will provide organisations with the breathing space they need to continue to invest in service redesign, as well as their internal infrastructure, to ensure they remain strong, sustainable and networked organisations. There were a number of suggestions about funding structures as solutions to support collaborative working, namely that:

Funding structures be designed in such a way that the assets and strengths held by smaller, grassroots organisations are acknowledged and included in design and development of solutions.

Investment in preventative/early intervention services to be prioritised, with a continuing relaxation and flexibility of the 'hoops' organisations need to jump through in order to access funding.

A parity of status to be encouraged to inform funding relationships as a more collaborative process, sharing power in the funding relationship and in the design of solutions to engage those most in need, as one system.

Flexible funding with responsive measurement and evaluation to be built into funding agreements that encourage dynamic development of services using the learning through ongoing delivery².

Flexibilities to funding agreements and relationships are continued in response to reduced outputs or underspend that may arise as a direct impact of the pandemic.

Collaborative working: Throughout the survey findings, the scale and impact of collaborative working across both the VCSE and public sector is highlighted, and there is a palpable willingness for this to continue. However, to build on this progress, and to prevent it from becoming 'tokenistic', respondents called for:

Equitable, trusting relationships underpinned by transparent, open and clear lines of communication.

Involvement by statutory services of VCSE organisations from the start of the planning process, 'to work in a collegiate way, to try new approaches, listen to people'.

Principles to enhance future collaboration: flexibility in delivery and in funding; where and how development happens, in who leads and how they lead, in the ability to allow dynamic change out of shared learning.

Representation and involvement of a variety of communities and organisations in the development of strategic as well as operational models, developing experimental approaches.

Awareness, recognition and respect for each other's strengths and contribution and how the VCSE can bring community voice in different ways.

² <https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/trust-power-and-collaboration/>

Addressing social and structural inequalities: Respondents emphasised the need to tackle entrenched social and structural inequalities and the complexities of need which have been exacerbated by Covid-19. The collective response to the pandemic by the VCSE and statutory services rapidly identified communities, groups and individuals who needed urgent support, saving many lives and easing suffering. However, as demand for services increased, many disadvantaged communities and vulnerable people experienced heightened isolation and disadvantage. Respondents called for all stakeholders to work together to:

Establish a shared purpose between all stakeholders to address social and structural inequalities, aligning priorities through collaboration and flexible funding structures in the face of diminishing resources.

Build on the lessons that are being learnt about the significant consequences of entrenched inequality.

Use the learning to lead stakeholders as one system to examine those areas where people are disadvantaged and excluded or impacted negatively, particularly by the ways in which services and policies are developed and offered.

Include the voices of various interest groups and communities, and of those most impacted by their lived experiences, at an early stage in processes of both co-design of commissioning and co-delivery.

SUMMARY

There is a strong indication that organisations anticipate retaining many of the changes and adaptations they have made to service delivery and working practices, with many anticipating a 'blended' approach to combining new approaches to delivery with traditional ones. However, not all respondents found adaption easy or appropriate for many of their service users. There were also some respondents who did not have such a positive experience of partnership working as others.

As such, it is clear that the sector will need ongoing support from funders, commissioners, government and infrastructure organisations to ensure it can navigate, and remain strong, in this new operating context. This may involve support to:

Continue service delivery and development and support increased and new demand.

Share best practice with regards to service delivery and redesign; managing and delivering online and/or blended services.

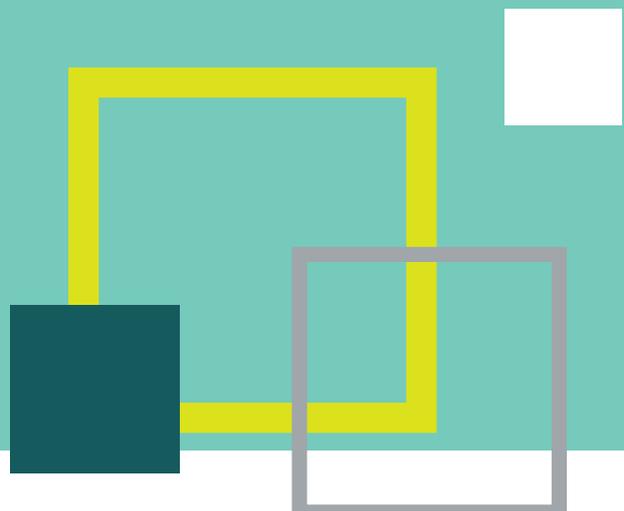
Investment for volunteering programmes.

Build on the relationships and partnerships that have been essential during this time.

Remain financially sustainable.

Demonstrate and articulate the positive impact and value of services.

Invest in the skills and expertise of its workforce (both paid and voluntary) to enable it to continue to provide high quality, and much needed, support to a diverse range of individuals and communities.



COMMUNITY WORKS – A CALL TO ACTION

The findings presented in this report set out what has been, in many ways, a humanitarian response: a response driven by the need to save lives and protect the most vulnerable in society.

This report provides substantial evidence regarding the essential and vital contribution that VCSE, in its entirety, has made and continues to do so, in providing for people's basic needs and ensuring that the physical and emotional health of individuals across all communities are considered and protected.

It provides examples and feedback that we should use to celebrate the ability of the sector to respond quickly and in new innovative ways to unprecedented challenges, alongside its statutory partners. The variety of organisations that took part in this survey, both in terms of their size and geographical spread, provide Community Works, the VCSE and our statutory sector partners, provides us with rich intelligence to shape our future work.

We recognise that different organisations in a range of locations have experienced the pandemic in a multitude of ways. There is work to do to ensure Community Works listens to all members and includes multiple perspectives when developing our plans.

We call on our partners within the VCSE and across our statutory services to work with us and each other to develop actions that urgently tackle the priorities identified within this report by:

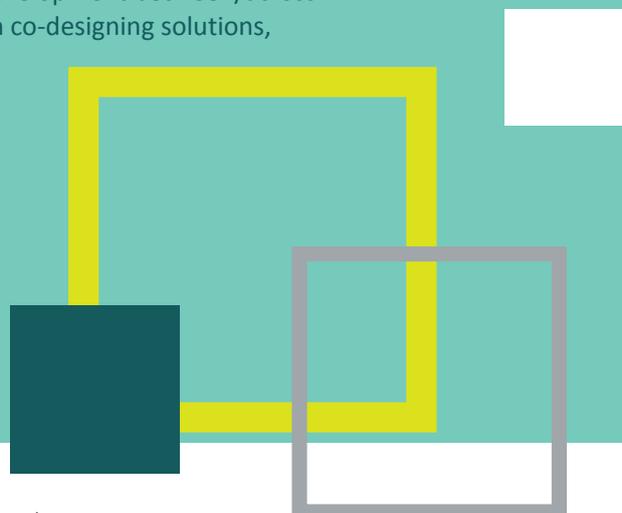
Respecting, celebrating and valuing the contribution of each sector, developing a *'shared sense of purpose to encourage a person-centred approach based on need a or and better understanding between all parties'*³.

Committing to open, honest and transparent dialogue across sectors.

Committing to social justice and equality.

Acknowledging the vital role the VCSE sector has played whilst recognising that the principle that investing in a healthy, vibrant and connected sector is essential.

To support VCSE with continued relationship development between/across sectors to encourage more 'experimentation' in co-designing solutions, pooling resources, co-designing funding/ commissioning processes.



³ Trust, power and collaboration; Human Learning Systems approaches in voluntary and community organisations

Community Works will commit to the following actions in response to the priorities identified by the sector:

Examine and adjust how Community Works operates to ensure our internal and external work programmes prioritise diversity, equality and inclusion.

Review our training and support provision to encompass the areas needed to meet the challenges identified in the report.

Examine our offer around volunteering as it evolves and the provision of support for VCSE and partners in this area.

Continue infrastructure work, supporting and promoting collaboration and partnership working, exploring new ways of working, enhance shared intelligence in the very early stages of planning and co-designing innovative solutions across sectors (all sectors together) and in different geographical locations.

Remain strategically involved locally, regionally and nationally to bring and share learning both within and across the sectors to inform local success.

Work with partners to explore opportunities for creativity in funding models, sustainability and mixed funding economy to support local populations.