

What can voluntary and community organisations in Suffolk do to prepare for Coronavirus?

At this stage, one of the most useful things that organisations can do is to think about how their organisation will cope if a high proportion of their staff or volunteers become ill or unavailable at the same time, and what steps you might take to avoid this happening. Many of these steps involve reducing the time people spend together in order to reduce the chances of Coronavirus spreading between them (and affecting a lot of the people you work with at the same time).

Remember that people may be unable to work even if they have not become ill themselves – it could be, for example, because schools have closed and people need to stay at home to care for their children or grandchildren. You will need to be clear with your employees about what they need to do in these circumstances.

Listed below are a number of potential impacts on the VCSE sector in Suffolk. While this may feel like ‘gloomy’ reading, we are highlighting them here to enable organisations and groups to consider how they may be affected and plan accordingly. Business continuity planning at this time is key. For more information on Business Continuity Planning, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is recommending advice available at <https://charitiesfmgroup.org/business-continuity-management-charities>

Potential impacts of the Coronavirus on VCSE sector organisations in Suffolk

Business Continuity Challenges

Like other sectors, VCSE Sector organisations are likely to face challenges in maintaining their normal services and activities if a high proportion of staff or volunteers are unavailable due to self-isolation, illness, or caring responsibilities. There are a number of challenges unique to a sector with many small organisations and where delivery of many activities depends on volunteers.

It is a sector with many small organisations, each employing only a handful of staff. This means that in many organisations, a single member of staff may be covering many roles (from finance to volunteer management), and so the organisation has a limited ability to continue to shift work between staff and to continue to run if a key staff member is unavailable.

- **Many staff within the VCSE sector work part time**, often in order to fit work around caring responsibilities (for children or adults). These staff may find these caring responsibilities increase (for example, if schools close or statutory sector health and care services become stretched) and so their ability to work, particularly from their normal office base, may be limited.
- **Many volunteers will also have caring responsibilities** and their availability for voluntary work may decrease for the reasons above.
- **This pressure could be eased to some extent if other employers were to offer their staff more flexibility for caring responsibilities** – many staff and volunteers have other

family members who work full time, but could take on some of the informal caring responsibilities if their employer were to offer more flexibility (even on a short term basis). We realise other employers will also face business continuity challenges, but these changes could be as simple as allowing staff to start half an hour late/finish early, take a longer lunch break, work from home to cut down on commuting time or similar. At the moment, we consider there is a danger that the consequences of an increase in informal caring responsibilities may fall disproportionately on smaller VCSE sector organisations that may be less able to cope with it.

- **Many volunteers are older and may be more likely to become seriously ill if they contract Coronavirus.**
- **VCSE organisations often have less resilience to business continuity challenges; In addition to the points above:**

- o Many may have done little thinking or planning around their business continuity, and there is little national guidance for VCSE sector organisations that would not necessarily consider themselves to be “businesses”
- o VCSE organisations are likely to be less able to access supplies (e.g. hand gels) that are in short supply that they use in their day to day business
- o Organisations may not be insured for business interruption, or may find that the virus is not covered anyway (these costs can be very hard to absorb)
- o Some organisations make limited use of digital technology, and are unfamiliar with options for online meetings, teleconferences, etc
- o Many have limited financial reserves (and at least 15% report having no financial reserves) – presenting challenges around sick pay and loss of income (explored in more detail below).

There is a danger that staff and volunteers will want to continue to work/volunteer even when they are feeling ill themselves, as they will be concerned that no one else is able to take on their role; we will be encouraging them not to do so through our networks.

Increased demand for services

Many VCSE sector organisations could face a significant increase in the demand for their services, but no increase in funding.

- Organisations with a high proportion of their income coming from grants tend to operate with an income that is relatively steady, and that it is not directly linked to the number of people using their service.
- This operating model has been a poor fit with previous government grant schemes to support businesses following disasters, which have often required organisations to show a decrease in their income in order to be eligible.
- Many third sector organisations are anticipating that their workload could increase if statutory sector (health and care) services become stretched, or that they will be asked to support the statutory sector more directly (for example, following national coverage of new “NHS Volunteers”). It is not clear to what extent this might be funded if it is not within the scope of existing contracts – and it may place organisations and sector in “competition” for volunteers.

- This “gap” in support has sometimes been filled by grants from appeal funds, but it is not anticipated at this stage that a local or national appeal will be launched around Coronavirus.

Decreased income

Many organisations could expect to see a drop in their income (with some overlap with those seeing an increase in demand for services). This may be more likely to be covered by any government grant scheme for businesses, but we would suggest that any such grant scheme needs to be advertised through VCSE sector networks as well as traditional business networks.

- Many local charities rely on income from fundraising events – gala dinners, sponsored runs, etc – that may be cancelled as Coronavirus concerns rise. It affects a number of the larger, more formal organisations that provide key services – for example, local Hospices.
- Many VCSE sector organisations rely on earned income from events – either as their main activity (e.g. theatres and other arts venues) or less directly (e.g. income from room hire for events) – and again, are likely to see a fall in this income as large events are cancelled.
- Decreased income from investments is a potential challenge for some third sector organisations, and may also decrease the amount of funding available from grant making trusts.

Visit [Funding4Suffolk](#) available through our website to search and browse Suffolk funding opportunities.

Funding targets

Organisations may need to change the way in which they deliver services (for example, providing telephone support rather than a drop-in service), be unable to deliver parts of their normal service, or discover that new services are needed to meet emerging demand. Some organisations have expressed concern that their funders may not be willing to allow flexibility if targets (particularly from contract funding) cannot be met due to Coronavirus restrictions, and they might face financial penalties from the funder as a result (whilst staff costs would remain the same).

Staff welfare

Organisations expressed concern that staff might need to work extra hours to cover the absence of colleagues, that their work might become more stressful (as the service users they work with are becoming extremely anxious about Coronavirus), and it would be more challenging to support staff working remotely.

Concern about vulnerable people

Although not directly a financial impact on the VCSE sector, we are hearing many VCSE sector organisations raise concerns about the impacts of Coronavirus on vulnerable people in Suffolk, particularly those over the age of 70 and those on low incomes. We are aware that similar concerns have had some national coverage. The points raised include:

- Many people on low incomes will struggle to follow current advice on self-isolation – for example, it is relatively easy for many people to remain at home and order food online when slots are available, but it is difficult if you are used to shopping daily in cash, can't use a

debit/credit card (because you are overdrawn) and don't have a fridge, making it difficult to store food.

- People on zero hours contracts are likely to need to work despite illness, and many people are concerned about missing DWP appointments.
- Organisations are not currently clear what discussion or planning is going on around these issues, or how they should raise/escalate such concerns.
- This may have direct impacts on local VCSE sector organisations such as Foodbanks and advice organisations.
- Many organisations who work with vulnerable people, fear that they will not be able to provide their normal level of support (for example, supporting by telephone rather than face to face), and that this may, for example, lead to a deterioration in mental health and an increased demand on statutory sector services (perhaps in the longer term).