

Suffolk COVID-19 Community Groups Survey

COMMUNITY ACTION SUFFOLK

MAY 2020



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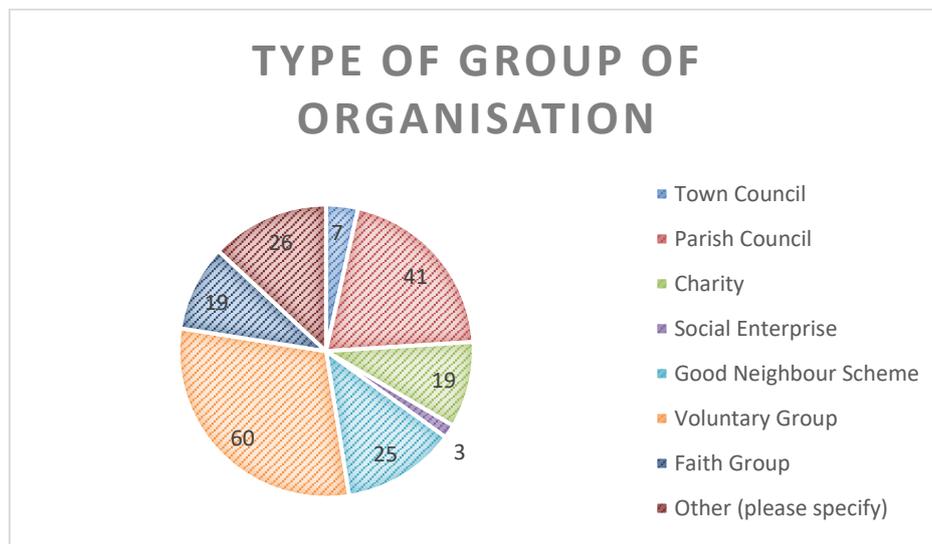
Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen the tremendous response from Suffolk Communities to helping those who have found themselves in the vulnerable category and in need of support to get food supplies and medication. Community Action Suffolk led on a mapping exercise of these groups and have created a database of 1500+ community groups and organisations that are providing a covid-19 response to 436 parishes and towns across the county.

To understand the picture, challenges and needs of the community led and based groups, a survey was sent to the 620 group leaders asking them questions related to the running of their Covid-19 support operation.

165 responses were received, which is a response rate of 27%. The national average for a survey response is between 10-15% and as these groups are busy at present, this was a good response rate.

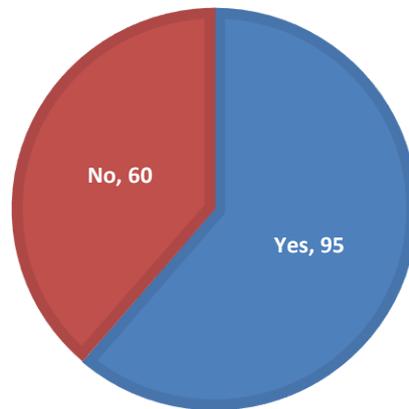
Type of groups responding to the survey and location

The majority described themselves as a Voluntary group (30%) with the next largest group stating they were a Parish Council (20%). 13% which is 25 groups said they were a Good Neighbour Scheme, of which 16 are already part of the CAS led county wide network, meaning that 9 are referring to themselves as a Good Neighbour Scheme.



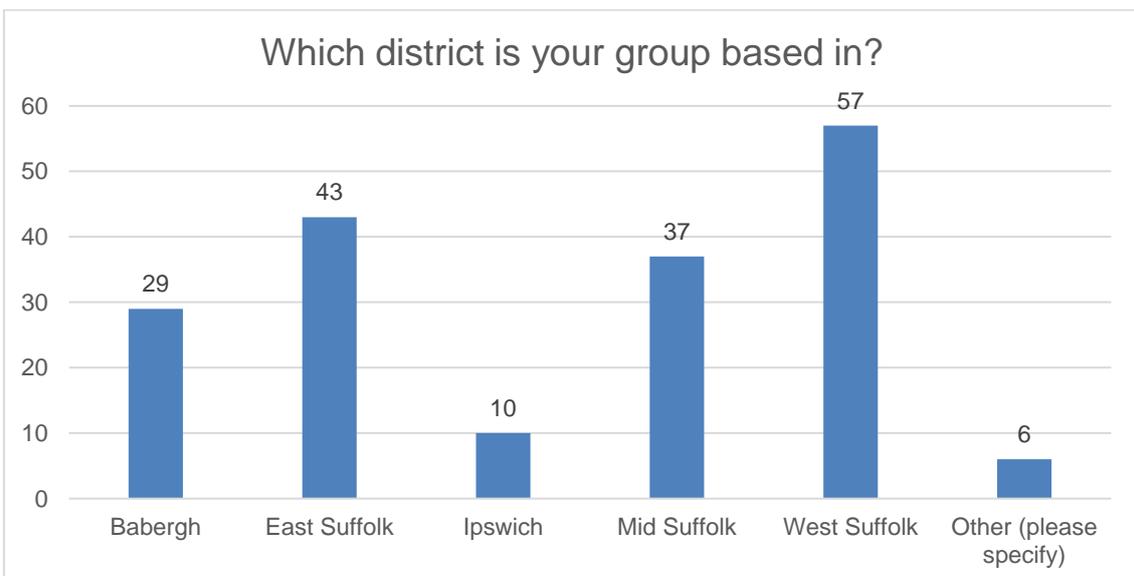
It was expected that many of these groups had been set up specifically to respond to Covid-19 and this was confirmed by 95 groups (61%) saying they had. Some groups said that they had previously tried to set up a Good Neighbour Scheme but community support had at that time been low and some had been fast-tracked to setting up to respond to the crisis. Others said that they had re-purposed their offer to support their local community.

HAVE YOU SET UP SPECIFICALLY TO RESPOND TO COVID-19?



West Suffolk had the greater response to the survey with similar responses in other District Council areas that have several rural parishes. 10 groups were operating in the large urban County town of Ipswich at ward or neighbourhood level.

Which district is your group based in?



Volunteers

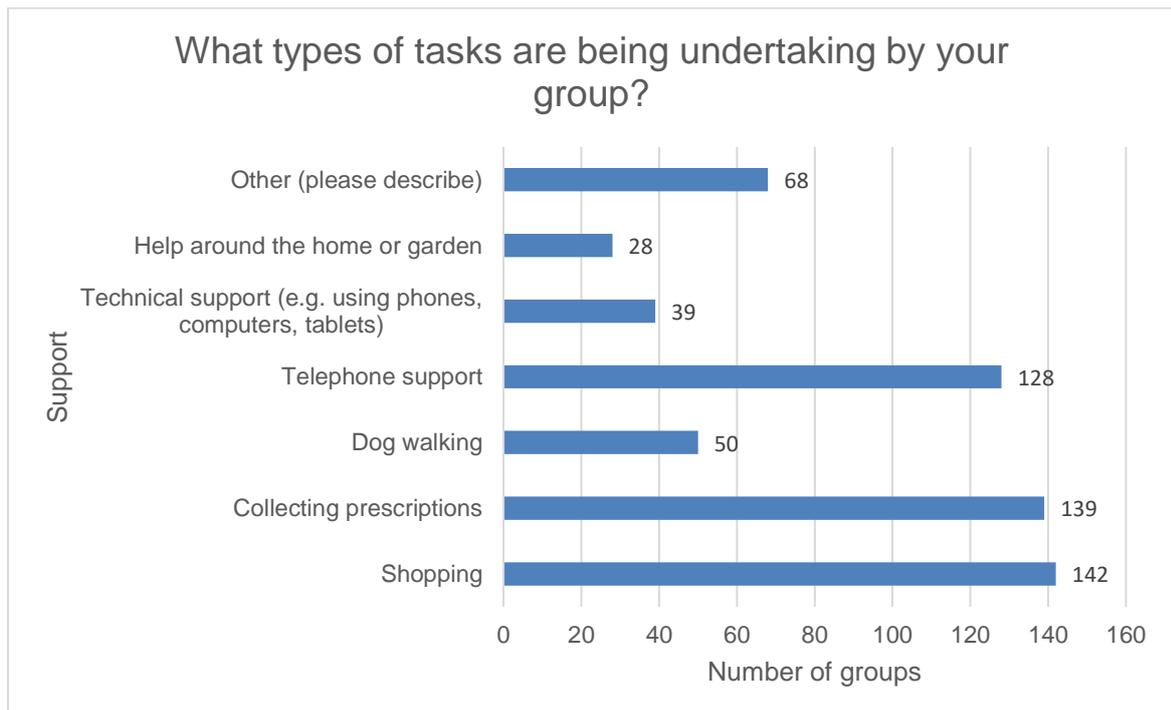
As has been seen nationally it was expected to see large numbers of volunteers involved in these community response groups. 47% of group have less than 20 volunteers whilst 42% have between 21 and 100 volunteers and 16 groups have over 100 volunteers. 21 of these are groups that have set up in response to Covid-19 and are likely to need additional support with managing this new volunteer resource. Additionally, 10 of the new large volunteer groups plan to continue. There is at least one group that has recruited 200 volunteers in the initial weeks and is unable to manage any more despite continuing to receive enquiries from people willing to help.



Number and type of Tasks being completed

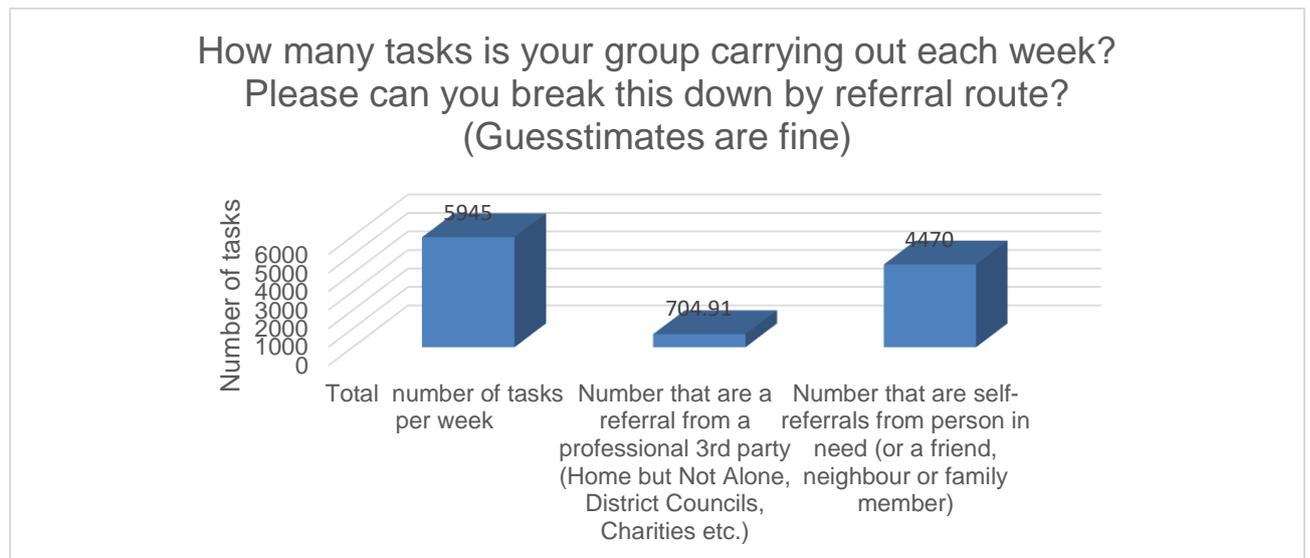
The groups were asked as to the types of tasks that the volunteers were undertaking, with the most common being shopping 86% of all groups and delivering prescriptions 84%. It was surprising to see that 78% are already providing telephone support. In a later question only 34% of groups thought that more befriending / telephone support would be needed which explains why this was quite low if it is already being offered.

39 groups are offering technical support with smartphones and tablets, to enable and encourage people needing support to stay connected while isolating. Other tasks include supporting food banks, making and delivering hot meals to neighbours, dog walking and posting letters.



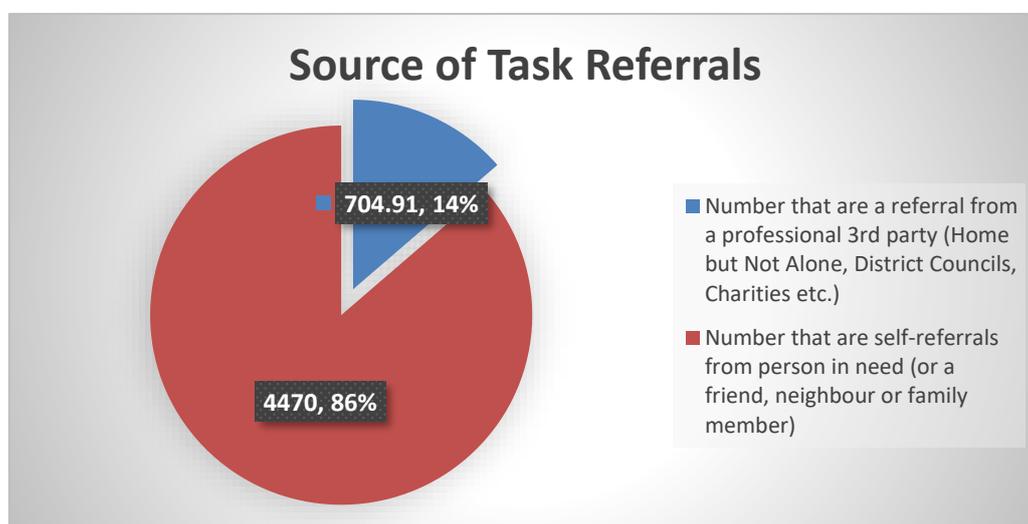
Groups were asked about the number of tasks that they were carrying out each week. As some are not using formal recording systems it was advised that a “guesstimate” would be fine. A staggering almost 6000 tasks per week reported by 164 groups.

The majority of these tasks came from a self-referral or a non-professional. While 14% came from a 3rd party such as Home But Not Alone. The number of self-referrals demonstrates the engagement the groups have had with their local community and how they have managed to promote themselves. Despite this there is a concern from some groups that they may not be reaching all vulnerable people in their community.



It should be noted that whilst the question asked was for the number of tasks per week, some groups responded quite high numbers which have not been verified in all cases. However, one was followed up on after the survey and asked specifically about the number of tasks per week, and responded with the following:

“It’s slowed down a little now but we are still doing around 200 per week, it was 500 per week for the first 3-4 weeks. Many of these are through our regular shoppers and others are new shoppers and medication deliveries (20 per day across all pharmacies). We then also get referrals via ESC from the Home But Not Alone number, district nurses and the community prescribers. Local shops also call us to deliver goods for customers that can’t get out. So we are pretty busy but it has calmed down a little.”



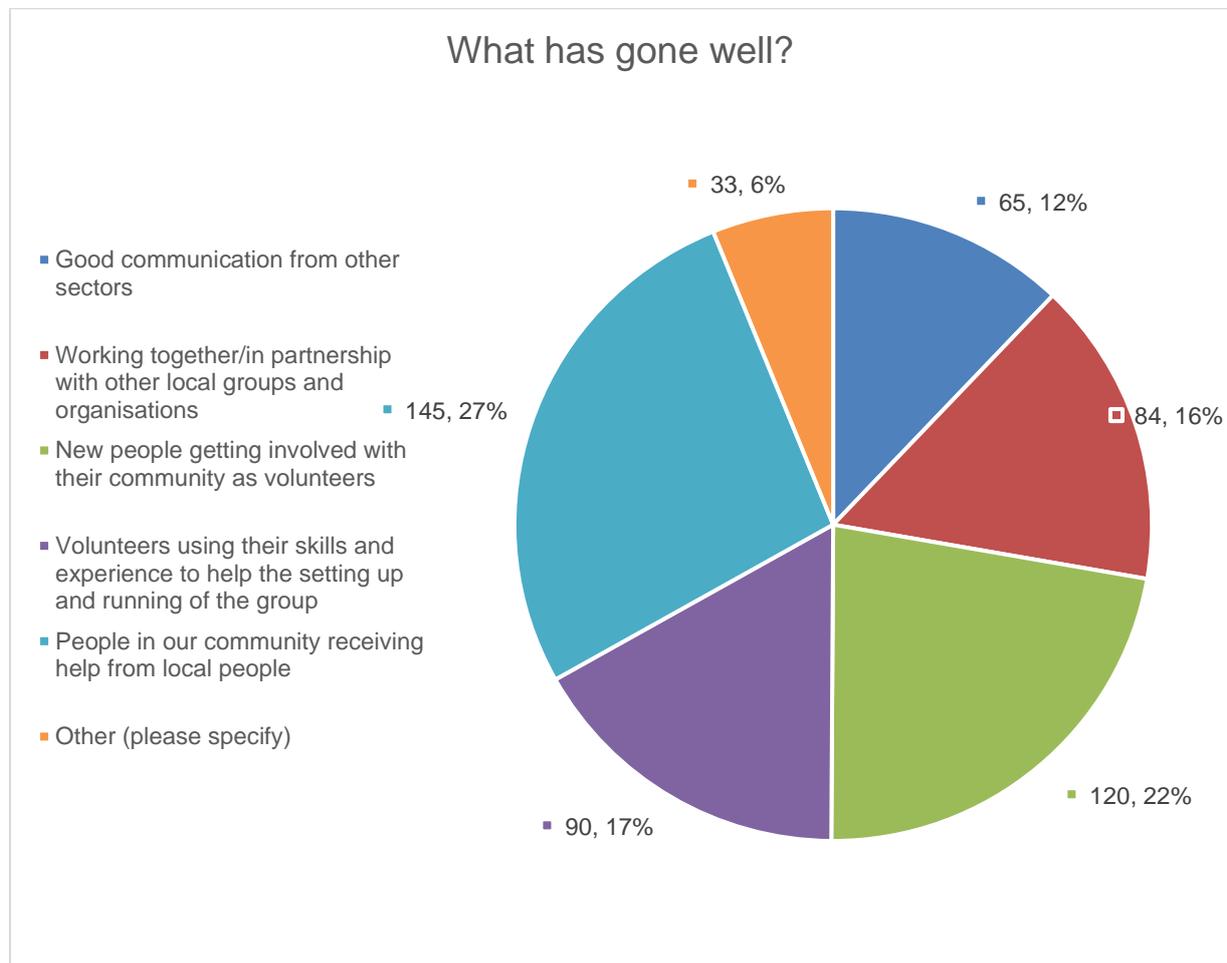
What has gone well?

The main thing that had gone well was people in their community have been able to receive help. With the second key success was new people getting involved with volunteering in their community with 73% of groups stating this as a positive. This has implications for the future of volunteering and is an area that Community Action Suffolk plans to develop. How do we harness this volunteering going forward? How do we support organisations to adapt to new types of volunteers?

Many of the groups told us that volunteers using their skills and experiences has been a positive outcome. Our separate survey to volunteers signed up to the Tribe App told us that that nearly 30% want to use their professional skills and experience to benefit a Suffolk Charity. This is an opportunity that must be built upon.

It also confirmed that being involved with a community group has helped with individual's health and wellbeing *"Significant boost to mental health of people in lockdown, caused by having something constructive and worthwhile to do"*. Working in partnership has been an added benefit particularly with Local Councils, *"We have a strong proactive steering group - a partnership of councillors and residents"*.

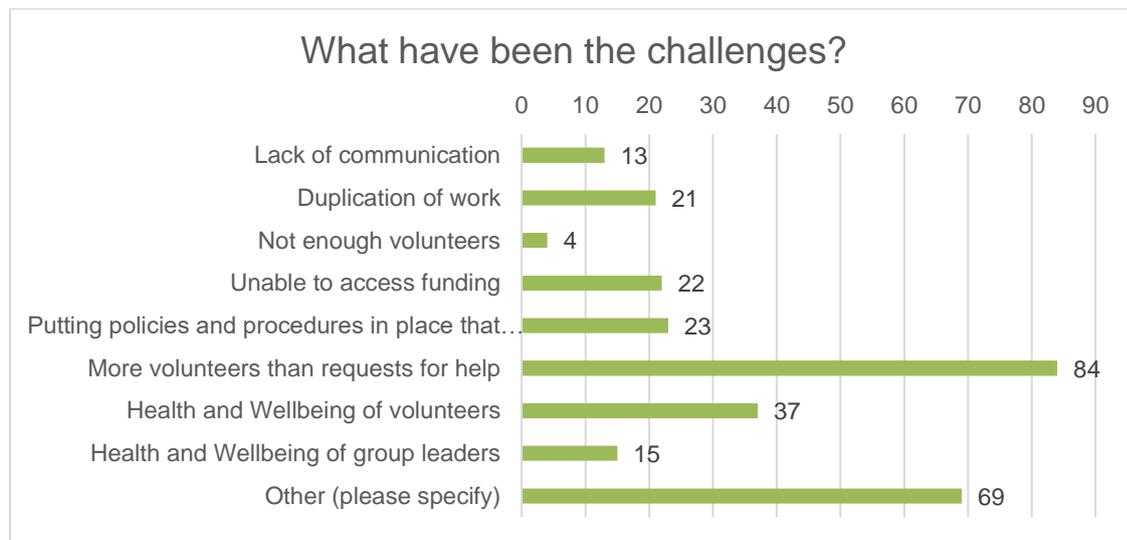
Developing deeper community connections was another positive outcome *"Using this as an opportunity to link volunteers who live near a person needing help so that hopefully ongoing links are established"*.



What have been the challenges?

By far the most common response was there being excessive volunteers to the number of requests for help. 37 of the groups told us that the health and wellbeing of volunteers have been a challenge, whilst 15 said that the health and wellbeing of the group leaders. Some reported volunteers self-isolating or shielding and have family commitments which contributes to challenges but being managed by the groups well.

Most of the groups did not find accessing funding or putting policies and procedures into place challenging. It is unclear whether that is because funding was made available through local Councils, Suffolk Community Foundation or whether funding wasn't required.



Other challenges that leaders told us about include lack of information about groups in neighbouring villages to refer people to, worrying that they are not reaching all members of their community and not being able to use our established volunteers who are over 70 or shielding.

“Getting some older folk to ask for help - 'don't want to be a bother' ” “residents who refuse to access the help offered and insist on going out to shop when they are in the vulnerable groups”

There were comments from a few respondents regarding the use of volunteer apps such as Tribe and GoodSam. *“Neither the tribe volunteer nor the GoodSam appear to be working.”* Some said their local response was speedy, responsive and effective and did not need “whizzy tech”. *“Overall the smaller the groups, the faster they were able to mobilise and the safer everyone is because volunteers are either people who are already known to those in need or live close enough that they are sufficiently familiar rather than strangers. The most useful thing we could have been provided with is access to printing and delivery of leaflets.”*

Several told us of the early challenges like accessing food and specific items from supermarkets during the initial period of lockdown that appear now to have been resolved.

Who have you been working with to set up and run your group?

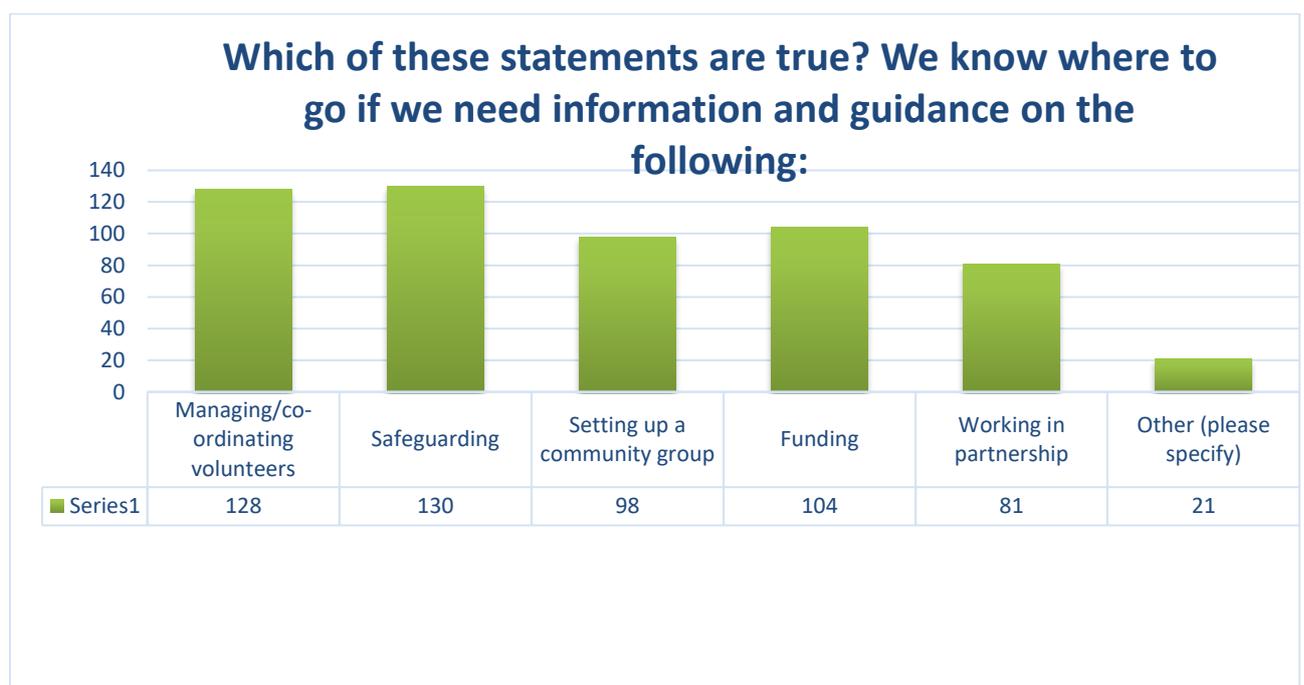
It was encouraging to see that most of the groups linked with their local council. Some 112 groups said they had been working with their town or parish council. Others said they had been working with the medical centre, district council and local assets such as the Neighbourhood Watch, local businesses and the local pub.



Knowing where to go for information and guidance

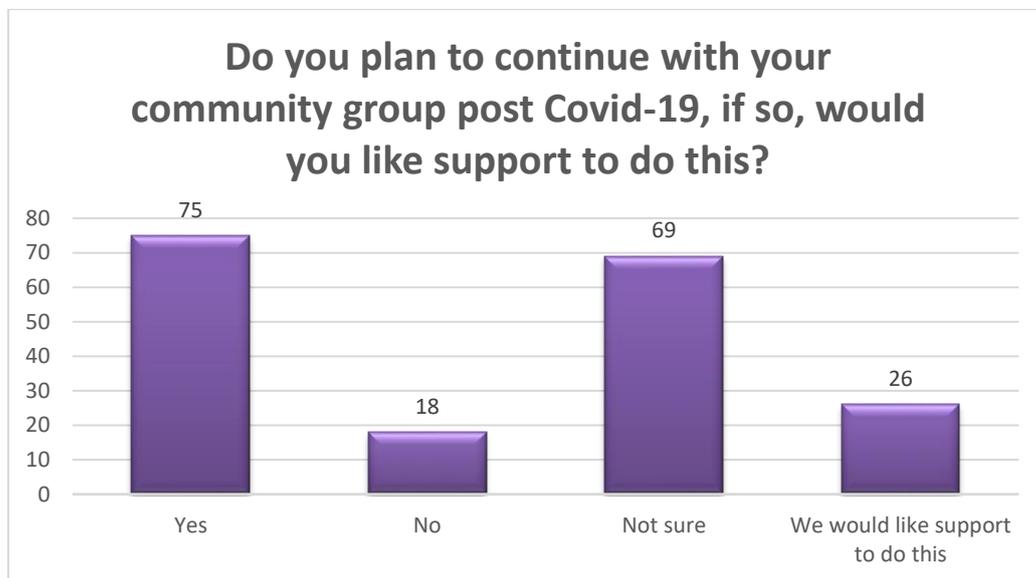
Over half the groups said they knew where to go to access information and guidance on Managing volunteers, Safeguarding, funding and working in partnership. There was acknowledgement for the resources available on the CAS website and support from CAS and Local Authority Officers.

The survey did identify a potential lack of understanding about the need for DBS checks and further information will be sent out to the groups in the next bulletin and signposting to the relevant guidance. *“Conflicting advice about who needs DBS in the original phase; lack of clarity about how to get people onto government/foodbank schemes; no reserves of cash available for those who have run out*



Do groups plan to continue post Covid-19?

45% of the groups said they plan to continue post covid with a further 42% saying they are unsure. 26 groups said they would like support to develop their group to enable them to do this.



Drilling down into the 95 group that were set up specifically to respond to the covid crisis, 30 said they plan to continue, 13 said they don't plan to continue and 51 said they weren't sure. 21 groups indicated they would like support to formalise their group and continue. Community Action Suffolk will contact these to offer the help they need.

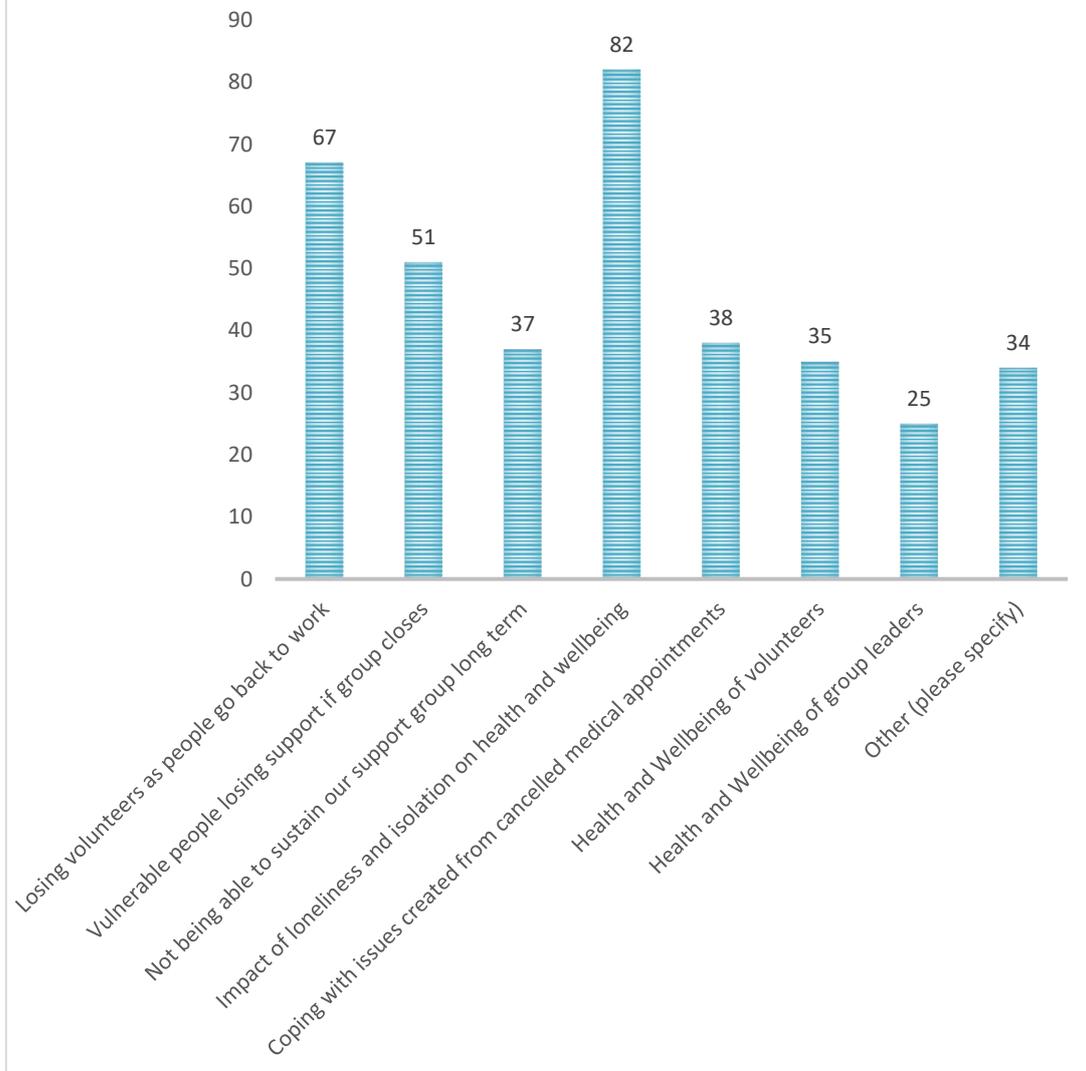
What challenges do you see coming up for your community and community group?

More than half of the groups felt that the impact of loneliness and isolation on the health and wellbeing of those in their community is the biggest challenge going forward. Others saw the loss of volunteers as people return to work.

31% of the groups were concerned about the impact on vulnerable people who would potentially lose the support in their community if their group was to cease.

“A great deal has been put into the first few weeks of supporting people and this is great - so wonderful to see so many people wanting to do this. However, for many disabled people this is going to be an ongoing long term issue. People will pick up their lives but for many shielded/vulnerable people this will go on a lot longer. The support will be even more important then and as the majority of the 'new' volunteers will need to return to work and their lives, the support will dwindle quickly. Groups such as ours will pick up as best we can with the limited resources we have.”

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU SEE COMING UP FOR YOUR COMMUNITY AND GROUP?



What other information did the groups tell us about?

The main theme in this section was the success the groups have had in setting up and how they quickly mobilised volunteers.

“This initiative was set up very quickly. We had an emergency phone number operating within 48 hours of being set up and the first prescriptions and shopping trips were being carried out in the same time frame. We hit the 50 volunteer mark after about 1 week of operating and then 100 after about 3 weeks.”

The message that came out of this survey is the power and action of community in times of need. The groups told how they have worked together as a community, along with partners

from parish councils, faith groups, Local Authority and other voluntary groups. This quote from a group leader describes this community action.

“People are talking to each other while keeping a safe distance, being helpful is now seen as normal, there is a much wider recognition of many of the social problems that have existed for several years. Will we revert back to "old normal" once covid is dealt with? I hope not”

Summary

There is no doubt that Suffolk communities have rallied together and provided an impressive response to Covid-19. Many of the groups have set up quite robust and well-organised groups recruiting and using large numbers volunteers. Others have remained hyper-local using telephone or WhatsApp to communicate with each other and provide the local assistance.

The challenge for Community Development professionals is to support these groups in the way that they would like, providing them the information and guidance to run safe groups, but at the same time enabling neighbourliness and not ‘over-professionalising’ the responsive community action.

Consideration for the challenges that the groups are facing now need to be addressed and support provided; these include excessive volunteers currently, but the concern that volunteers will be lost as people return to work. Whilst few group leaders see their own health and wellbeing as a concern currently, moving forwards they feel this could be and planning should carefully consider how to mitigate this risk.

The overall results from the survey and the hundreds of comments made demonstrate were that the groups are proud of what they have started and achieved in their community. The difference they are making to vulnerable and needy people must not be underestimated.

“This group was set up in response to covid, but we had been talking about forming something like this for a while now, so it was the push we needed to get going”.

“A great deal has been put into the first few weeks of supporting people and this is great - so wonderful to see so many people wanting to do this”.

“We would like a grant at the end of all this to provide a celebration party for all the volunteers as they have been doing an incredible job. The teamwork and the support in the village has been utterly amazing”

“Do people realise the impact of our approach. We have managed to do a huge amount with limited resources. I want our pioneering approach to convert into the future”.

“Thank you for the survey and continued support for all the organisations you are supporting during this current emergency”