



Community Action Suffolk

Suffolk Voluntary Sector COVID-19 Impact Survey

May 2020

Nearly 47% of VCSE Organisations in Suffolk will fold in under 12 months due to Covid-19 if help does not arrive

Most VCSE organisations in Suffolk say Covid-19 is having a negative impact on their ability to meet their objectives – they particularly identify social distancing as a key issue.

Community Action Suffolk (CAS) is conducting a regular survey to find out how Covid-19 is affecting the VCSE sector across Suffolk. CAS's April survey identified that over 60% felt that they would not be operating within 12 months if help was not made available to them at this time. Our May 2020 survey has found that 47% feel that they will not be operating within 12 months, and lack of income as a key concern by respondents. This indicates a continued pressure on our sector and one that needs to be addressed quickly.

The survey was open on 1st May and closed on 10th May with 78 respondents participating – this was significantly less than our April survey and may be due to the increased pressure of delivering in a Covid-19 challenged environment.

Two themes came through the survey which reflected our earlier survey – concerns about income and funding, and concerns about retaining volunteers and clients for services and activities.

Social distancing and its impact on ability to deliver services was cited as the biggest issue they were facing, with 68% saying it was a challenge (similar to the last survey at 67%) and identifying it as their biggest barrier to service delivery. Some 50% identified a range of other issues which included reduced income, furloughed staff, lack of volunteers among others.

Taking action

Many of those surveyed said they had taken action. Some 53% have accessed grants and loans – 22% have accessed local authority grants and loans with just under 20% accessing either government grants or the furlough scheme. Others have accessed business rates relief, Lottery, VAT relief or Suffolk Community Foundation support.

Positive action has been to move services to other channels – many moving organisations are moving their services onto social media, online or telephone support. A number of organisations are using Zoom or Whats App specifically or video conference calls to hold virtual meetings. A number also stated that there had been little if any changes in their service delivery which is encouraging. One

organisation said that they had moved their service delivery to telephone, email, text and video chat and were providing support to other organisations to work from home.

When asked what they funding for, 40% said to pay critical premises bills (slightly up from 37% in April), 28% would use to retain existing staff (a drop from 37% in April), and 40.9% would support new ways of working (an increase from 33.8% in April). The most significant was a new option which was to support core costs – 49% identified this.

Fears of loss of volunteers and income long term

The survey identified longer term fears of the consequences of Covid-19 in terms of volunteers and clients. Several respondents commented on the worry about clients and volunteers not wanting to come back to 'crowded busy places'. There is also a concern that volunteers working from home may disengage – reflected in our April survey – where volunteers like to be a room with others whilst they are volunteering – the social contact and 'feeling managed/supported' is important to them.

Several identified that their long terms plans for expansion and improvement would take a hit.

Others identified that their services need to be delivered face to face – mental health services were highlighted - particularly where they deliver to those with literacy or numeracy issues. Face to face interaction is also important where volunteer advisors are being trained over the usual period of 6 months for that organisation. it was also felt that some services act as social contact as well as their core purpose. Several cited the need for face to face advice as this '...also helps with social isolation...'.

Some respondents suggested the need for better communications between organisations – particularly where plans for changes in delivery are involved – as what one does will affect the service offer of another.

Other issues that several organisations highlighted were the difficulty in getting repairs and improvements done – due to lack of contractors willing to come on site.

Overall the concern about loss of income remains the concern - this is a direct impact of social distancing and the fears that go with it. Many identified this at different stages of the survey along with concerns about how long the situation will last, and how long it will take to get activities restarted again.