



Community Action Suffolk

**Suffolk Voluntary Sector
COVID-19 Impact Survey –
New Ways of Working**

June 2020

Community Action Suffolk (CAS) is conducting a regular survey to find out how Covid-19 is affecting the VCSE sector across Suffolk. In each of our surveys since April we have asked VCSE organisations if they have enough money to remain operational. Their responses have changed over time from April when 60% expected to fold in the next 12 months, through to May when the figure reduced to 47%. It seems that confidence is continuing to increase, possibly in line with access to assistance and in June 2020

40% of VCSE Organisations in Suffolk expect to fold in under 12 months due to Covid-19 if help does not arrive.

This, however, still indicates a continued pressure on our sector and one that needs to be addressed quickly.

The survey was open on 5th June and closed on 14th June with 176 respondents participating – this was significantly more than our May survey and in line with responses to our first April survey.

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

Income

In terms of income, the majority of organisations (just over 56%) need <£500 per calendar month to remain operational and just under 31% need up to £2,500 per calendar month. Compared to our April 2020 survey the proportion of organisations identifying a need for additional income has risen – 25% said in April that they did not need any additional income, whereas in June the figure was 18%.

In our June survey 5% of organisations need between £5,001 and £10,000 per calendar month to remain operational – fairly consistent with our earlier April survey when very few identified any need above £5,000 per month. It is still however concerning that 5% (or approx. 317 registered VCSE organisations in Suffolk) need £5-10,000 per month to continue operating.

Funding

53% of organisations expect to access government grants or loans going forward whilst 47% say that they will not. 87% are looking to access <£25,000 with 38% looking for less than £10,000. Our April 2020 survey showed 34.2% said yes and 65.7% said no to accessing Government grants or loans. This change in trend from April to June to a more even split is likely to be a growing realisation of the scale of

work that will be expected from some of our VCSE sector going forward into recovery.

We also asked organisations again to say whether they have a business continuity plan – essentially a plan for the worst case scenario. The response to this question remains steady with 63% not having a plan and 36% indicating that they have a business continuity plan.

Volunteers and Clients

In previous surveys, concerns were focussed around retaining volunteers and tempting clients back to services. These still remain, but the focus of this survey was new ways of working and digital, and there have been positive impacts identified with digital being seen as a lifeline for socially isolated volunteers and for staff being able to keep in touch. This has also revealed a cohort who are neither able, nor particularly willing to use digital services. Issues identified included mental health issues with not being able to meet face to face, the need to engage those not online, and that staff find lack of face to face contact demoralising.

Demand for services during the pandemic

Since the April survey, there has been a continuing reduction in demand for services from some organisations – from a 47% reduction in April, through a 44% reduction in May and now to a 49% reduction in June. This has been mirrored by increases in demand for some organisations in April of 25% to a 20% increase in demand in June. We have assumed that these reductions or increases are from a ‘whole’ starting point/baseline figure. Throughout the surveys, organisations experiencing ‘no change’ has increased from 27% in April, 30% in May to 31% in June. The latter figure may indicate a steadying of demand as lockdown settled into place.

Physical distancing and its impact on ability to deliver services continues to be cited as the biggest issue organisations are facing, with just under 62% saying it was a challenge (similar to previous surveys at 67% and 68%) and identifying it as their biggest barrier to service delivery. Some 53% identified a range of other issues which included reduced income, furloughed staff, and lack of volunteers, among others. Interestingly 35% of ‘other’ identified that government closure orders or similar prevented activities taking place – this was the next highest after physical distancing.

Taking action

Many of those surveyed said they had taken action in response to Covid 19 and have changed the way that they work. Some 24% have run virtual events, over 16% have invested in new IT tools to allow effective homeworking, and 47% have done something else – moving courses and communications on line, ‘embracing zoom’ and combining with other organisations (Parish Council specified) to deliver services.

New Ways of Working

Respondents have identified a variety of ways that they are working differently – doing a lot more online, telephone befriending, using the time during lockdown to bid for funds to improve their facilities. Several mentioned much greater use of Zoom and Whatsapp specifically – overall, much greater use of digital to provide activities such as quizzes and contact. One highlighted that they are printing off leaflets to maintain contact with those who live in a ‘digitally poor’ area.

Looking at some specifics in terms of new ways of working – just over 44% agreed that they have systems and processes in place to allow effective homeworking. Just under 49% are taking full advantage of digital opportunities. However just under 20% disagreed that they were – a sizeable minority. 44% feel that the pandemic will change the way they engage with their users / supporters for the better.

Digital impact

We asked respondents if they had increased their use of digital technology since the pandemic began, and if so, how. Just under 45% have increased expenditure for new software and/or equipment, and 14% anticipated a decrease in future expenditure through efficiency savings. Just under 46% added that other observations including a shortage of technical people to support digital activities, lack of funding to invest in digital, having to rent digital equipment during the pandemic due to having none in-house, and several identified the intent to install better broadband or the need for it due to lack of bandwidth to carry out more digital activities.

Just under 41% expect to increase their digital activities going forward whilst a further 54% will sustain their current level of activity.

Respondents were asked to consider the impact digital technology is having on employee/volunteer job satisfaction. 23% have not considered the impact and provided no further information. Others said that they are planning to engage with employees and volunteers (as well as users). Some have engaged and they range from positive (good to keep in touch, has made staff more resilient using digital) to more negative (trustees not IT literate and unlikely to become so, digital is a tiring way to engage, staff/volunteers lack requisite skills).

Next, respondents were asked what difference the use of digital technology is making to their service users/beneficiaries. Many cited positive impacts – over 50%. However some of these also acknowledged negative impacts among those unable to access digital due to poor connectivity or lack of desire to engage, along with those who engage a lot digitally normally and are now ‘missing the face to face contact and support’. Others cited this reason also. One respondent raised issues around particular app’s being compliant with particular hardware – for sports clubs the ‘Homecourt’ App is used and seems to only be available on Apple devices.

The impact of social distancing and homeworking

The impact of social distancing and homeworking on training was explored and just under 69% have not undertaken any training since social distancing measures were put in place. 14% have undertaken training, but no more than usual, whilst just

under 14% have undertaken more training than they would have done normally. Just under 33% have used webinars to undertake learning or training with 28% using videos.

One big impact on the VCSE sector would appear to have been homeworking – however our survey shows that only 20% had never worked from home before social distancing was put into place. 80% have occasionally, regularly (>5 days per month) or always worked from home. Within the 80% there is a sizeable majority of 37% who say that they always worked from home prior to social distancing.

When asked what other challenges, opportunities, or concerns exist for respondents – many identified the concern that their volunteers and/or clients may be slow returning or may not return at all. Key areas of concern relate to elderly users and volunteers, many of whom do not have a desire to use digital, and who value the social aspects of face to face contact. Many who volunteer do so because they want social contact.

Many feel optimistic that they can come through the pandemic and start operating again. Organisations have identified that new ways of working with remote meetings have offered an opportunity to rethink how they deliver their activities – but acknowledging that some may not continue to participate. Arts/entertainment venues have identified that planning a programme may have a 9 month run in so this is a challenge coming out of lockdown with no clear plan going forward as to when those venues can re-open.