Community Action Suffolk

Suffolk Voluntary Sector COVID 19 Impact Survey – Moving Forward from Covid 19

November 2020

Community Action Suffolk (CAS) has continued to conduct regular surveys during the Covid 19 pandemic to find out how the VCSE is being impacted by the Pandemic. This time we are looking at social investment and the sectors approach to this given the likely lack of public sector funds going forward due to the impact of Covid, and the likely increased competition for other sources of funding. We also exploring the issue of digital skills in the context of the need for increased online delivery of services.

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. In June it appeared that there was some growing confidence, possibly in line with access to support when the figure of those expecting to fold within 12 months had fallen to 40%. In August, we adjusted the question to ask more directly about expectations of remaining operational. We repeated this question in November and:

63% of VCSE Organisations in Suffolk have sufficient funds to continue beyond 12 months.

There is a continued pressure on our sector that needs to be addressed quickly as 36% (65 VCSE organisations) indicate that they need additional income to remain operational.

The November survey showed a consistent view that has followed through our surveys of some organisations experiencing a 28% increase in demand for services but 51% experiencing falls in demand for services. This is interesting as a recent November 2020 survey carried out by Pro Bono Economics with the Institute of Fundraising and Charity Finance Group showed that 63% of charities are experiencing an increase in demand. We will be specifically exploring the nature of the charities responding (as well as the wider range of VCSE organisations who normally respond to our surveys) as this may reflect a bias nationally towards larger charities as opposed to Suffolk where we have many smaller charities (and VCSE organisations) – watch this space!

Our survey was opened on 4th November and closed on 2nd December with **182 respondents** participating – this was slightly fewer than our August survey and in line with responses to our first April survey.

Several themes emerged from the survey – concerns about income, funding, and reduced services –

80% have had to reduce their services in the last 3-6 months

although 76% are confident around their ability to fulfil normal levels of support to service users over the next 3-6 months.

Funding

60% of organisations have, or plan to, access government grants or loans during the pandemic period – our last survey indicated that 58% were expecting to or had accessed such support.

We also asked organisations again to say whether they have a business continuity plan – essentially a plan for the worst-case scenario that identifies key risks and how to mitigate them. The response to this question has changed with just over 47% now having a plan (an increase from June 2020 where 36% had a plan). Just under 53% do not have a plan – a drop from 62% in our August survey which is encouraging in these challenging times. Just over 54% plan to develop or refresh one in the next 12 months, and just under 46% have no plans to develop or refresh a business resilience plan. This is an encouraging picture given the context of the pandemic, and unexpected things that can happen. The figure of 54% includes those who plan to refresh their existing plan so is again encouraging as it may indicate a more focused view approach to business planning. Our survey results have remained relatively stable until this November survey so it would be reasonable to assume that with more time due to pressure from the Pandemic potentially easing the importance of resilience planning is being recognized. This is important as it is about planning for the unexpected and the significant impact that this can have on a VCSE organisations operation.

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 49% reduction in June and continuing with an anticipated reduction of 45%. This has been mirrored by increases in demand for some organisations in April of 25%, a 20% increase in demand in June and now an anticipated 29% increase going forward. This mirrors anecdotal evidence from the Suffolk VCSE Leaders group – some members feel that once furloughing ends, and redundancies materialise then demand will increase for VCSE sector support. We have assumed that these reductions or increases are from a ‘whole’ starting point/baseline figure.

Social distancing and its impact on ability to deliver services continues to be cited as the biggest issue organisations are facing, with

Just over 80% of organisations identifying restrictions (social distancing/isolating) as a major

reason for reduced services over the last 3-6 months.

This is a reduction from 94% in our August survey, but still higher than previous surveys at 67% and 68% (albeit the question was 'If you have been unable to fulfil your normal level of support to service users at this time, please indicate why this is?'). Other issues which included reduced income (just under 8% - down from 9% in August) and lack of staff (2%), were relatively insignificant in comparison. In August, 12% identified a lack of volunteers as an impact on the ability to deliver services – in November this has fallen to just under 7% which is encouraging as it shows that people may feel happier about returning to their volunteer roles. We need to keep an eye on this as we progress through our second period of restrictions, and the impact of economic hardship, redundancy and other issues which may well impact negatively or positively on people's ability and desire to volunteer.

Support from Social Investment

The ability of the public sector to support our sector going forward is a growing concern – particularly given the recent Comprehensive Spending Review from Central Government. Therefore, we felt that beginning to explore the sector's views of alternative support mechanisms was appropriate.

In our November survey we asked whether organisations had, or planned to, access any of the grants and loans that are available from Social Investment to help through this period. 17% have or plan to access support from social investment whilst just under 83% have no plans to access help through this route. We asked what level of investment organisations had accessed/planned to access – just under 45% were looking for less than £10,000 of investment, with 41% looking for £10-25,000 of investment. 105 were looking for £25-50,000. This shows that there is work to be done with social investors who often offer much higher levels of investment.

We then explored the reasons for lack of take up of social investment – just under 30% had concerns about loans/borrowing in an uncertain climate, and just over 25% had concerns with borrowing per se. 36% have trustees who are not supportive of borrowing or loan finance.

Just over 34% do not have enough information on social investment/loan finance to decide

Use of remote, digital, or online means to support users or supporters

In previous surveys we have looked at the impact of the need to use digital and online methods of delivery on our sector – staff and volunteers. In this survey we wanted to look specifically at skills and what support organisations might need.

We found that:

52% of organisations are delivering digitally during lockdown

43% have not been able to provide services remotely, online or digitally – the majority of those responding are registered charities including CIO's. We may need to explore the reasons for the 43% not being able to provide services remotely given the increased pressure to do this from the public sector who are one of our key partners in service delivery. We then explored whether volunteers or staff have the skills and desire to deliver services remotely/digitally or online. The results have identified some areas of concern for our sector going forward in the context of Covid and its aftermath.

40% of our sector has the desire and ability to deliver services online. Just under 32% have the ability but do not feel that remote delivery is appropriate for their users. A further 11% do have the desire but not the skills to deliver online or digitally. Just under 17% do not have the desire or skills to deliver online, remotely, or digitally.

The concerns are that out of the 182 respondents, 20 do not have skills – if we pro-rata this up to our total sector in Suffolk (6,342 registered organisations plus between 9,513 and 14,587 informal organisations (from State of the Sector 2019) we find that we have between 690 and 1,605 organisations who need skills enhancement to enable them to deliver fully to their beneficiaries.