



Community Action Suffolk

Suffolk Voluntary Sector COVID 19 Impact Survey March 2021

Community Action Suffolk. We help you help others.

Advice and services for voluntary and community organisations across Suffolk.

Registered Charity No 1150501. A company limited by guarantee and registered 08316345.

Community Action Suffolk (CAS) began 2021 by continuing with the regular Covid 19 Impact surveys to find out how the VCSE is being impacted by the Pandemic. A lot has happened since our last Covid-19 Impact Survey Report in November – the November 2020 lockdown, and the post-Christmas lockdown which has continued to impact on our sector and our economy, along with the publication of the Roadmap out of Lockdown, schools re-opening to students, spring around the corner... and

the future is starting to look brighter...

The survey results from November were encouraging and showed how organisations had adapted to the 'new normal' in terms of their working practices and service delivery. The impact of Covid 19 has been severe but has also encouraged the VCSE sector to explore new ways of working and to deliver to a wider group of people in our communities. The most significant factor affecting service delivery continues to be social distancing requirements – this has grown in significance through the pandemic as the limitations imposed by social distancing have become more obvious with the cumulative impact on ability to deliver allied to reduced income for many from fewer beneficiaries.

Our first 2021 survey was undertaken between February and March and looked at the continued impact of the pandemic and how organisations handle the risks that the pandemic has made real. We asked about the use of our organisational healthcheck in this context. We also looked at the need for income to sustain and restart services going forward, as well as capturing more detail about the intentions of the sector in seeking grants from Covid funds.

Our regular surveys are proving to be a litmus test of how our sector is feeling, and it is therefore essential to hear from the VCSE sector to understand how to best serve the needs of our clients, customers, service users, volunteers and staff going forward.

Our survey was opened on 11th February 2021 and closed on 12th March 2021 with **270 respondents** participating. This may suggest a growing confidence in the sector and a keenness to re-engage and move forwards from Covid.

Funding

In each of our surveys since April 2020 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 June 2020 when there was some growing confidence and the figure of those expecting to fold within 12 months had fallen to 40%.

In Summer 2020 we changed the question to ask more directly whether organisations had sufficient funds to remain operational - in November when 63% said they had sufficient funds to continue beyond 12 months. In our March 2021 survey:

64% of VCSE Organisations in Suffolk have sufficient funds to continue beyond 12 months.

This is encouraging as it is a small, continued increase in confidence in the face of another long lockdown.

Demand for services

Since the original April 2020 survey, there has been a continuing reduction in demand for services from some organisations – from a 47% reduction in April 2020, through a 49% reduction in June 2020 and continuing with the March 2021 survey which showed 48% are experiencing falls in demand for services.

There have been increases in demand for some organisations – organisations now anticipate 29% increase going forward from March as we begin to come out of the latest lockdown. However, the Suffolk picture is not necessarily reflected at national level - in early 2021 Pro Bono Economic reported that since the start of the Covid pandemic, charities have experienced a substantial growth in demand for their support. This is possibly a reflection of the large number of small charities that operate in Suffolk, and many responding to our survey are groups that cannot open during lockdown – group activities/village halls/sports facilities etc.

Barriers to re-opening

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

Over 48% of organisations identifying restrictions imposed by Covid 19 (social distancing/isolating), as a major reason for reduced services over the last 3-6 months.

This is a reduction in perception of the impact of social distancing from 94% in our August 2020 survey. **It is also the case that the Covid regulations have not altered that significantly in the past 3-6 months, as the pandemic has been in full swing for almost a year now.**

Other issues identified that impact on delivery of services included:

- reduced income (just under 7% - down from 9% in August 2020)
- lack of staff (just under 3%)

In August, 12% identified a lack of volunteers as an impact on the ability to deliver services – in March 2021 this has fallen to just under 9%, which is however, a slight increase from the November survey where it was just under 7%. It may show that people may feel happier about returning to their volunteer roles during non-national lockdown periods, however as we progress towards the end of our third period of restrictions, and the impact of economic hardship, redundancy and other issues may well impact negatively or positively on people's ability and desire to volunteer.

As a positive note, once Covid restrictions are lifted, many respondents indicated they would be ready and raring to go!

Income impacts and plans to access alternative sources of funding/investment.

Respondents were asked whether they have or plan to access any of the grants and loans that the government is providing to help them through this period. 56% indicated that they had or planned to.

When asked how much additional income they anticipated needing per month to remain operational

92% indicated they needed less than £10,000

to remain operational, showing that perhaps a programme of small grants, would be of real benefit to VCSE organisations to help get them back up and running once lockdown restrictions are lifted.

Just under 40% of organisations are considering new activities including online to generate additional income. Others are looking at scaling up trading activities and crowd funding.

When asked whether respondents envisaged reducing the staff / volunteer levels at the time

82% said they did NOT envisage reduced staff or volunteer levels.

Awareness and use of the CAS Healthcheck

53% of respondents are aware of the Community Action Suffolk Healthcheck. The CAS Healthcheck is an online tool for Trustees and staff to assess the internal processes of their organisation. It aims to help determine whether the correct policies and procedures in place, whilst adhering to 'Best Practice'. For further information and to undertake your own healthcheck, please click [here](#).

Respondents were then asked about their interest in using the Healthcheck and what areas of support would be of interest to them. The majority (just over 39%) are interested in support in relation to finance and fundraising, with 35% wanting support to work in partnership with other organisations, and 33% wanting help with local knowledge and networking. Just under 27% want support with policies and procedure, and over 24% want support with governance and leadership.

One respondent wrote under "other"

“we have been in contact with CAS during lockdown and they have helped with Policies and Guidance immensely”

Use of digital and need for digital skills/access to broadband.

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 continue to look at skills and support organisations might need.

We found that 53% of organisations are delivering digitally during lockdown, whilst 47% have been unable to provide their services remotely, online, or digitally.

In the November survey, it was suggested that we may need to explore the reasons for the then 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. It was felt to be an appropriate time to investigate the types of organisations that indicated this. This 43% response in November 2020 has increased to 47% in this March 2021 survey.

The 47% who indicated they were unable to deliver their services digitally were primarily (53%) from venue managers who have been forced to close during the various lockdowns. Other organisations who indicated that they could not provide their services remotely were services and activities where social distancing and other restrictions precluded the activities from going ahead (for example sporting activities, neighbourly support provisions and practical services that required hands on support, etc.).

In the November survey, we explored whether volunteers or staff have the skills and desire to deliver services remotely/digitally or online. The results then identified some areas of concern for our sector going forward in the context of Covid and its aftermath.

40% of respondents in November 2020, and 41% in this survey have the skills and desire to deliver services remotely, digitally, or online. In November 2020, just under 32%, and in this survey 29% said they had the ability but did not feel that remote delivery was appropriate for their users. In November, a further 11% said they did have the desire but not the skills to deliver online or digitally, whilst in this survey this figure had dropped to 7% of respondents. In November, just under 17% stated they did not have the desire or skills to deliver online, remotely, or digitally, and this figure has increased in this survey to almost 23%.

In the previous (November) survey, there had been concern raised about the number of respondents who indicated that they did not have the desire or skills to deliver online, remotely, or digitally.

With this survey, a further question was posed to query whether the respondent or their clients have sufficient digital access (broadband/equipment such as laptops and tablets/money to pay

for connectivity) to enable the respondent and/or clients to use online services, access training, access local social networks. We had a range of responses:

Just under 14% cannot access due to cost – this may be due to poor broadband necessitating access via mobile or satellite which is very expensive, or poor choice of packages.

Just under 16% have a poor broadband connection. It is hoped that the Governments recently announced Project Gigabit scheme will address this although it could take up to 10 years to complete deployment to all the most remote rural areas, and a few premises may not get full fibre, but 5G or new satellite broadband instead.

Over 18% have a lack of appropriate equipment to engage effectively with digital. And a further 13% lack digital skills.

We have also taken some comments and reproduced them below to highlight the issues around digital access:

“Remote meetings are not always successful due to intermittent connectivity problems.”

“Many of our clients are digitally excluded which in turn limits the amount of support we can provide. Some support can be given by phone, but for a small number there is almost nothing we can do at this time.”

“We have provided tablets for some of our folks who did not have equipment, and this has helped us get more of our regular visitors involved in our weekly sessions. I think it's helped people feel proud of their new-found digital skills and made us all realise that we can learn and grow even during challenging times.”

“We feel some of our participants are at a disadvantage due to lack of funding for digital devices or internet access.”
