



the care forum

Briefing: West of England VCSE Sector Covid-19 Temperature Check

Briefing from Dialogue at The Care Forum – exploring the response of the West of England VCSE Sector to the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic.



dialogue



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Executive Summary

Dialogue is the health and social care insight and engagement service of **The Care Forum**, supporting the West of England VCSE sector. Alongside our partners, we are working to build an evidence base to demonstrate the regional sector's impact, value and role in supporting public health outcomes, regional development and community cohesion at this time.

In April 2020, Dialogue at The Care Forum launched in partnership with the West of England Civil Society Partnership a short survey to understand how voluntary, community and social enterprise (VSCE) organisations in the West of England were responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic. The purpose of this survey was to understand how regional VCSE organisations were responding to the challenges posed by the epidemic, providing a snapshot of the regional sector across key areas such as organisational response, capacity and needs. After running for six weeks (April – May 2020), this report highlights the key trends found and offers a discussion around the learning we can draw from this.

We are immensely thankful to all those who have contributed to this research during these challenging times.

Key Findings

22% of respondents reported that without the support they identified, their organisation risked having to close services.

80% of respondents needed some form of support.

78.3% of respondents remained operational in response to the epidemic.

16.6% of respondents had closed their services for the short-term in response to epidemic.

58.6% of respondents needed financial support, mostly in the medium term.

58% respondents were confident of their organisational sustainability through this period.

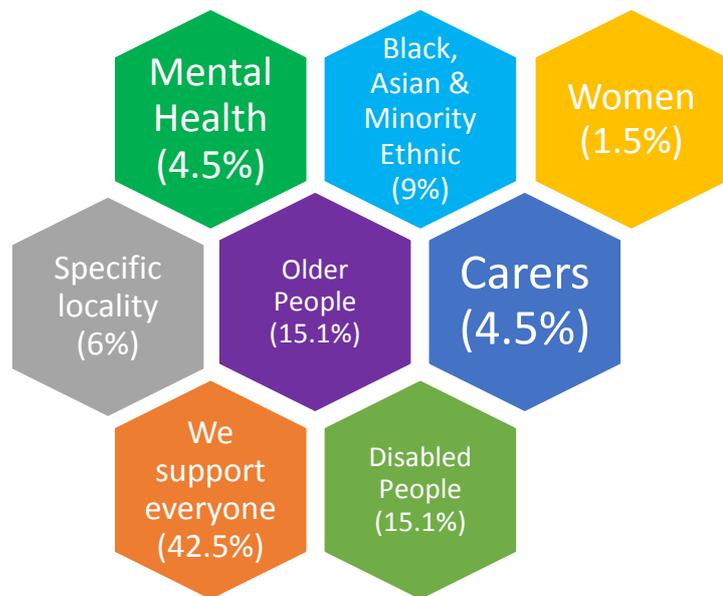
56.6% of respondents reported being able to meet service user demand.

20% of respondents reported they were unsure of what would happen to their organisation in absence of identified support.



Engagement

- Number of respondents: 66
- Time period: 6 weeks from April – May 2020.
- Audience: VCSE organisations coverage across Bristol (73.77%), South Gloucestershire (68.85%), North Somerset (26.23%), Bath & North East Somerset (9.84%) and Wiltshire (3.28%).
- Groups or communities served by respondents include:



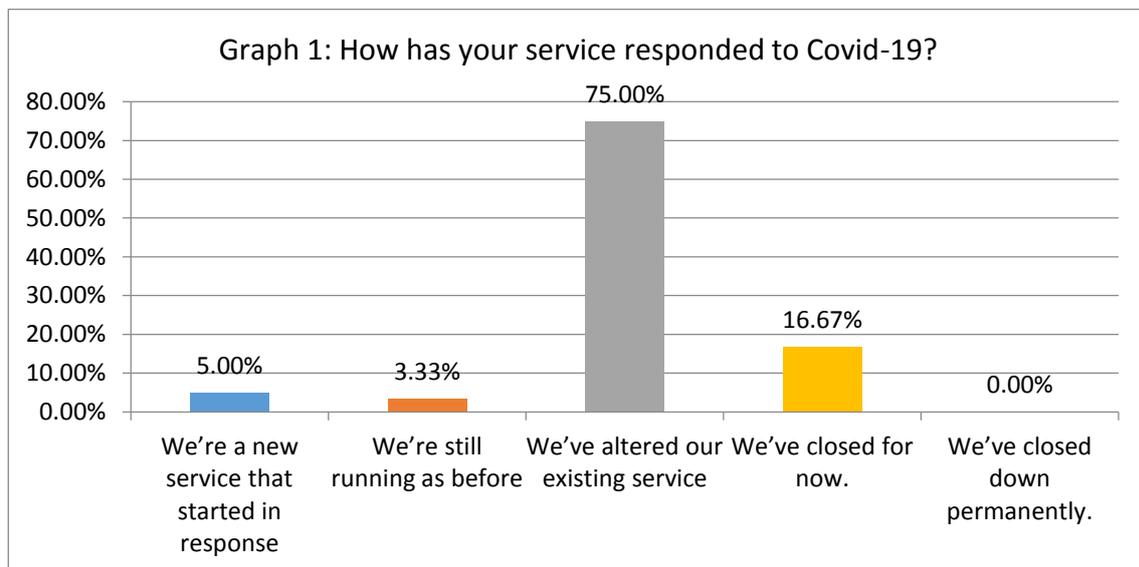


Results

This section examines the key research findings and associated themes found from surveying VCSE organisations in the West of England over the period (April - May 2020). Given the relatively low response rates overall, while we did assess any variations across local authorities, services provided and groups served, no significant variations were found between these attributes. The proceeding sections highlight the key themes that emerge from respondents – in organisational response, capacity and needs – to demonstrate concerns and experiences that were felt across the regional sector.

Organisational Response: In terms of organisational response during this period, the key finding from this research has been that 78.3% of respondents remained operational in some form in response to the epidemic. Of these, the majority (75%) had altered their existing services and only 3.3% were still operating as before the epidemic. Additionally, 5% of respondents were from new services that had started in response to the epidemic (e.g. mutual aid groups, etc.). While at this time 0% of respondents reported closing down permanently, 16.6% had closed their operations for the short-term.

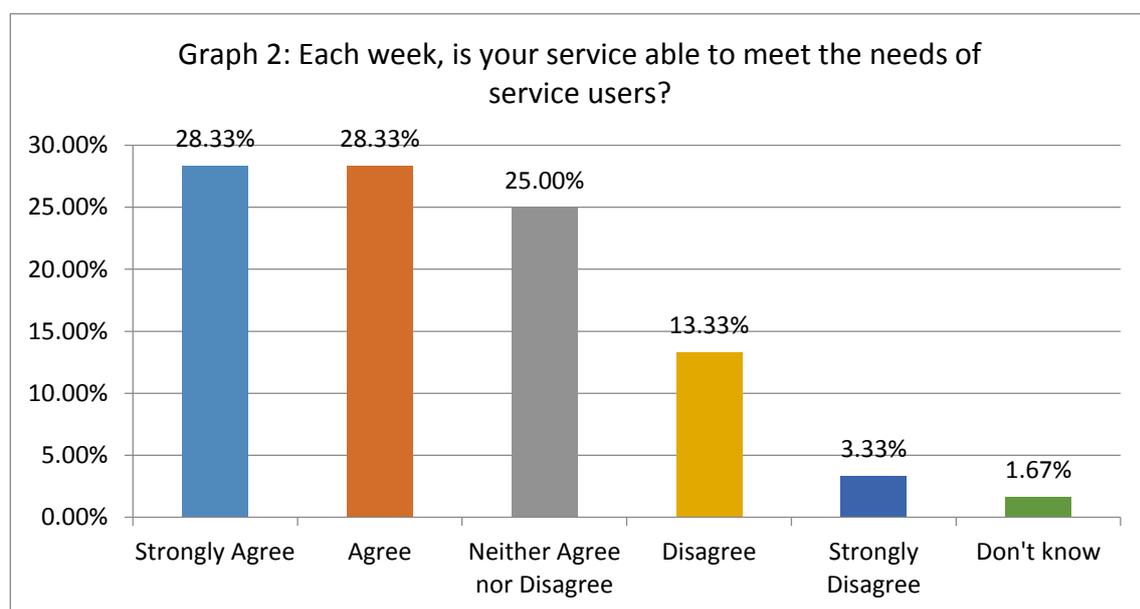
Of those respondents that had continued operating, notably 63.8% had moved staff to homeworking and 25.8% reported having repurposed their traditional service to meet the new demands posed by the epidemic (e.g. delivering prescriptions and food parcels, etc.).





Organisational Capacity: In terms of organisational capacity during this period, 56.6% of respondents reported being able to meet service user demand. However, the remaining 43.3% reporting that they were unable or uncertain of meeting service user demand since the start of epidemic. These findings reflect a picture of many organisations seeing significant increases in service user demand as a result of the epidemic, alongside significant concerns about impending demand increases too. We can see these concerns expressed in the following quote:

“There will be even greater demand for the work our business does after this crisis ends... [There will be a]... Tsunami of need that is created by this current enforced social isolation”.



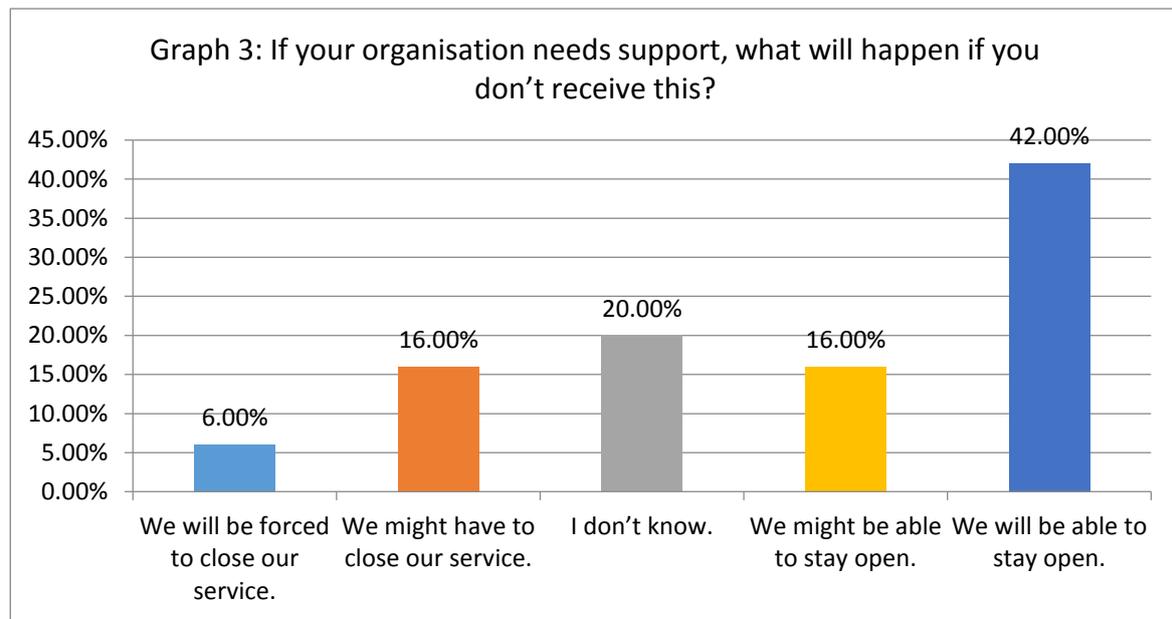
Organisational Needs: In terms of organisational needs, our findings for this period were varied and respondents could indicate multiple needs. Most cited organisational needs included funding (58.6%), followed by partnerships with other organisations (31%), volunteers (24.1%), technology support (24.1%) and supplies and resources (17.2%). Only 20.6% of respondents reported having everything they need at present.

For most respondents, concerns – highlighted in the qualitative feedback provided – about funding were specific to medium term financial pressures. For instance, how to cover staffing and technology costs in the face of present income losses, future uncertainty around grants and funding access, and future funding to support the additional, often unfunded, work being done in response to the epidemic.

When asked about what would happen to their organisations in absence of this support, many respondents demonstrate significant concerns and uncertainty. 22% of respondents said that in absence of the identified support they were concerned that they might or would



have to close services. In addition, 20% of respondents reported that they were unsure of what would happen to their services in absence of identified support. Together, this demonstrates a picture of significant uncertainty about organisational sustainability for the regional VCSE during this time. Only 58% of respondents were confident of their organisational sustainability through this period.



Emerging in the qualitative feedback provided, the key factors contributing to this uncertainty was the lack of clarity on how long this period of low economic activity (due to 'lockdown') would last, and around what funding would be available in the future given pressures on the local authorities, funding organisations, and governments. To meet service user demand in the future, which was expected by most to increase over the coming months, additional funding would be needed. The below quotes highlight these points.

"We will struggle to do more without some input to technology and staffing costs to support our efforts longer term over the next couple of months as this goes on."

"With funders' focus on Coronavirus, it will be extremely difficult to get funding for projects that aren't directly related to it - not now nor in a year's time, and probably for several years".

"Emergency funding to (a) address lost fee income and (b) help us plan and invest in the transformation of services to meet current and emerging needs during in what is likely to be a long lockdown for older people - possibly until there is a vaccine".



Discussion

Our research findings here provide a powerful snapshot (April – May 2020) of the experiences of the West of England VCSE sector in responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic. Through these findings, we can tell a story of the opportunities and challenges we've seen our sector facing during these unprecedented times, and offer some learning for ways to support the sector going forward.

Within this research, there are significant positive lessons and opportunities to be found.

With nearly 80% of respondents continuing to provide services over this period, and the majority (63.8%) of these having moved staff to homeworking with services to be provided online and by phone, the West of England VCSE sector has demonstrated tremendous strength and agility under great adversity; adapting and becoming technologically enabled practically overnight, and continuing to provide services that have been pivotal in supporting local communities during this time. This sort of responsiveness and agility has been seen across the [national sector](#), with 58% of organisations moving to remote working in response to the epidemic.

Yet, our findings here also reveal the intense challenges the regional VCSE sector is facing.

Only 56% of respondents felt able to effectively meet service user demand during this period. The epidemic has posed the twin challenge of simultaneously reducing organisational capacity and increasing service user demand, witnessed nationally across the VCSE sector. For instance, even as we saw [52% of charities](#) having reduced existing or previous levels of service, with a further 12% intending to in the future, this was met with [6 in 10 VCSE](#) organisations witnessing demand increases of more than 25%, and 1 in 4 seeing demand increases of 50% on pre-crisis levels.

At the same time, we found significant uncertainty about organisational sustainability among our respondents. In absence of the support they identified – for most (58.6%), this was medium term financial support – 22% of respondents said that they were concerned that they risked closing services, while an additional 20% of respondents reported that they were unsure of what would happen to their services.

Such high levels of uncertainty about the sustainability regional VCSE organisations can be seen across the national VCSE sector. Recent [reports from CAF](#) show that half of charities are reporting they won't survive more than a year without significant increases in support - in particular, additional income. Meanwhile, a [March 2020 report](#) from the Institute of Fundraising highlighted numerous concerning trends – these include that charities across the country are reporting a projected loss of 48% to their voluntary income, and a third wiped off from their total income; 83% of charities report a need for emergency funding over the coming 3 to 6 months; and 91% of charities have already or expect to have their



cash flow disrupted, with 62% indicating that these would result in reduced charitable activity. It is because of such findings, that the [NCVO \(March 2020\)](#) predicted huge potential losses for the UK VCSE sector, equating to some £4bn for the UK over the 12 weeks of the pandemic from March.

Our combined research findings for the region, alongside such national reports, reveal the uncertainty and risk caused by income streams across the VCSE sector being suppressed due to the epidemic.

The graphic below shows us income by source for different sizes of VCSE organisations, where the two largest income sources for all VCSE organisations are from the public and the government.

Breakdown of income by source and size of organisation, 2017/18 (%)



Source: NCVO, Charity Commission • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Helping to explain the uncertainty and risk we’ve found in this research, we can see that the major sources of income for UK VCSE organisations – public contributions, the government – are being suppressed, alongside reductions in other sources too (e.g. higher competition for grant opportunities, etc.).

In terms of public contributions, 41% of the public have experienced a decrease to their disposable income, 45% are concerned about future security and in response charitable giving has begun to decline – 30% have given in June, [compared to 32% last year](#). For charities this amounts to significant declines. [Recent reports](#) show that at the end of April, 53% of charities had seen charitable donations decline since the start of the crisis.

At the same time, we’re seeing intense pressure on local and central governments. In April councils in England were predicted to see a [£5bn shortfall](#) as a result of the epidemic. Meanwhile, the costs for central government are [rapidly mounting](#), predicted at over £300bn for the 2020/21 financial year. In the face of such losses, we’re already seeing local authorities consider [future of funding](#). If local authorities don’t receive significant support from central government to shore up the deficits created by the epidemic, then cuts to local services may be significant, with long lasting impacts on our local communities. While statutory services (e.g. social care, schools, etc.) may have some protection from these declines, the holistic nature of support required for individuals may mean any losses to non-



statutory services (e.g. arts, culture, parks, equalities, etc.) may have significant impacts on the broader outcomes of the health and social care system.

For many parts of the country this swathe of public goods – of which the VCSE sector plays a leading part – has already been largely dismantled as a result of the previous decade of fiscal retrenchment. But in the West of England, our VCSE sector has, in varying degrees, continued to thrive, providing a thick web of vital community support, and particularly in response to the epidemic, has been utterly pivotal in supporting communities across the region.

Yet, concerns about what we could lose should be high.

New rounds of grant initiatives provide an important lifeline. Celebrity campaigns on specific issues can be valuable. However, the West of England VCSE sector is clear. Without its flexibility and reach into local communities where other services struggle, the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic might've turned out far worse. Mechanisms need to be developed to offer the sector the financial security it needs for longer term sustainability – only by doing so can we enable our regional VCSE organisations to continue empowering local communities, delivering vital services, and supporting staff wellbeing long into the future.

Next Steps & Further Research

This survey has had a narrow focus – in effect, to check the mood of the regional VCSE sector, particularly around how organisations are responding to the epidemic and their present concerns. However, what it has shown is that we're going through a period of significant and far-reaching change and uncertainty.

More research needs to be developed to better understand the impacts of the epidemic on the capacity and needs of the sector, as the picture that's emerging is complex. Likewise, questions remain about – for instance - the *quality* impact of moving service provision online. Finally, deeper analysis needs to be extended to better scoping the recovery phase for the sector.

Only by providing answers across such areas can we offer the opportunity for VCSE organisations across the region to demonstrate the impact of the epidemic on their organisations, to show the value they've offered during this time, and to highlight their clear needs going forward.

If you or your organisation is interested in working together to develop a similar piece of research, please get in touch with The Care Forum's research team:

research@thecareforum.org.uk



About Dialogue & The Care Forum

[Dialogue](#) is the health and social care insight and engagement service for The Care Forum, supporting the West of England VCSE sector.

[The Care Forum](#) is an independent voluntary and community infrastructure organisation, supporting the health and social care system across the West of England for over 20 years.