Report: South Gloucestershire VCSE Covid-19 Response

Report from Dialogue at The Care Forum – Gathering data on how VCSE organisations are experiencing and responding during the Covid-19 pandemic.

the care forum

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Executive Summary

In June and July of 2020, Dialogue at The Care Forum held online focus groups in North Somerset and South Gloucestershire to learn more about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector and how they were responding to it. These focus groups serve a number of purposes – they help to tell the story of VCSE response to Covid-19, highlighting challenges, learning and innovation, and how these focus groups can support in generating insight to guide VCSE support from local authorities and commissioners and to provide insight into strategy and support methods for the sector going forward.

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Key Findings

When analysing the comments in the meetings, there were main five themes that people discussed:

1. Clients or potential clients face difficulty in accessing services, particularly if they are digitally excluded.
2. VCSE organisation face an uncertain time in regards to long term funding.
3. In order to respond to this changing need, organisations need to work in a more holistic and interconnected way.
4. The pandemic has presented the opportunity to adapt and take risks.
5. In this context of change and crisis, there has been a decrease in mental health to staff and service users.

Engagement

- Webinar – 20 participants, and these included representatives from Sirona Care and Health, Southern Brooks Community Partnerships, Age UK South Gloucestershire, DHI South Gloucestershire, Alive!, Alzheimer's Society, Healthwatch South Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire Over 50s Forum, Alive Activities, Vision of West of England, Paul's Place, Alzheimer's Society and other VCSE sector organisations .
- The focus group – we had 20 participants, from across South Gloucestershire Voluntary, Community Sector E. We offered to keep this section anonymous for participants so those attending the Focus groups.
- Number of respondents: 20
- Audience: VCSE organisations across South Gloucestershire

Full Results

When analysing the comments in the meetings, there were seven main themes within which participants discussed the challenges, concerns and opportunities that the Covid-19 pandemic has created in the VCSE sector. Service demand, The difficulty faced by clients in accessing services, particularly if they are not confident with Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Staff and service user wellbeing, Fears of funding and future, Organisations embracing the opportunity to adapt, A desire to work in a more holistic and interconnected way.

An important caveat to the data gathered at this engagement event is that the data pool in which this report is based participation from around 20 participants and thus not fully representative but does provide a valuable insight into the wide range of issues and challenges facing the VCSE sector across South Gloucestershire.

1) Covid-19 Challenges – Adaptation & Response:

a) Service Demand

The most significant challenge we saw for participants was around simultaneously seeing increasing demand even as organisational services were reduced and uncertainty around being able to handle these changes. 40% of participants said this; while 30% said that service demand had reduced and that there were concerns over engaging with service users again as we come out of the current pandemic. This paints a picture of the significant challenges being faced by VCSE organisations in supporting communities during this time and supporting service users to reconnect with their services as things return to normality. Here are some quotes to illustrate:

"I had to furlough 80% of staff but the service demand has increased"

"As memory services are getting back up and running there is a real worry about the backlog of people waiting for post diagnostic support. There has been huge numbers of this in other geographical areas and this could be the case for not just memory services but all of the VCSE sector that support people post diagnosis. This would mean a huge increase in demand for all these services."

"There is a real unknown with how all of our services will be affected by demand as we begin to return to normality"

"We have less people in our groups at present because they are shielding and it is difficult to contact them"

"Service demand has gone down as we have a lot of elderly members who are shielding and are worried by current events"

An interesting point was raised in regard to service demand for new services. This comment stated that it is difficult to evaluate whether the high numbers of service users seen is due to the service being new or because of the current Covid-19 pandemic. This shows potential ambiguity in recording accurate data around service demand for the sector during this current time.

"Our demand has shifted but has coincided with the launch of our social prescribing service and we weren't full capacity when launched and we only got to that well into lockdown. Demand has gone up but is very difficult to know how much as a result of the new service and covid-19"

b) Difficulty for clients to access and engage with new/modified services – phone and online changes

In terms of key challenges faced by organisations during the pandemic, one key theme that emerged was around challenges in adapting services and associated challenges around digital inclusion and accessibility (phone and online services). 50% of our participants agreed that many clients were not confident with online equivalents of physical services and thus ran the risk of their needs being unnoticed and unmet and also would potentially miss out on key pieces of information from the sector.

This highlights the challenges of digital exclusion with certain service user groups. Many participants were particularly concerned about older people. This could potentially create risks to service user health and wellbeing due to limited service access and service quality. The following selection of quotes provides examples of this:

"Care Homes do not have the technology in order for us to connect with our sessions. They are digitally excluded because of factors such as Wi-Fi signal not being good."

"Older people from our perspective are worried about learning new skills such as Zoom and Skype".

"Older people are afraid to use new technology as they are afraid that something may go wrong"

"We have recruited new members to our charity but we are struggling to showcase and demonstrate our work without our face to face meetings with them as they are not engaging with new ways of meetings such as Zoom."

"Increase in referrals but when people are in the service, can they access all the services?"

An interesting caveat to the above was this comment by one participant, about the broader climate – that is, too much information being shared by the sector. This shows the need for

the sector to provide a more accessible simpler approach to sharing updates with service users.

"People who are digitally engaged are being over burdened with information and as an organisation we have tried to simplify and make information accessible for our service users."

Not all participants struggled to engage service users via digital technology. For some there were successes, these were around the number of older people engaging with online services, there is a perception that older people don't engage well with new technologies. The feedback below shows a participant was encouraged by older people engaging in online services when there was perceived to be low uptake. Participants indicated that this was in part due to accessible services and providing support. However there is an important question around who can engage with technology, what support they need, and how to enable it. If we are to continue providing support through these new mechanisms (digital technology, telephone, etc.), which to many organisations may have cost benefits, it is important to think of those service users who might need support. This is something that would beneficial for future research to explore.

 "The teleconferencing service we do now is accessible to everyone and we wish we had started this sooner for people!"

"Our assumptions that older people would not be able to access online support were incorrect, when in fact they have been able to and we have provided lots of support for people to be able to access".

"Getting older people learning the new technology and making best use of it"

c) Staff wellbeing

Another important theme that arose from our engagement as a challenge for organisations during this time was around supporting staff through adapting, new work patterns, training and wellbeing. 40% of participants said that staff in their organisations are finding it difficult to engage with new ways of interaction with colleagues. This has had a detrimental effect on their wellbeing. Here's some quotes to illustrate:

"Our staff have noted that busy days using Zoom and other video systems is exhausting"

"Video communication is very structured and staff have had difficulties having that as only communication with colleagues"

"Staff in our organisation have limited contact to meetings and arranged catch ups can be difficult for staff to make due to work commitments"

There were some successes in how VCSE organisations have supported staff around their wellbeing, these are quoted below. From these comments it shows that a variety of wellbeing support VCSE organisations offer staff is significant and the importance of gathering feedback from staff about what would support them most effectively.

"We sent out a staff wellbeing survey and asked staff what we could do as an organisation to help. The requests and ideas were fed back and implemented by our organisation as well as taking into account not all staff can make static times."

"We tried work socials online such as a tea and cake socials which have had varying success with our staff"

"Our organisation sent out a staff survey on wellbeing around what they could offer us and it influenced their offer to us"

"We have an employee assistance programme to support the wellbeing of staff"

d) Service user wellbeing

During our engagement event it was highlighted that participants had concerns about service user well-being in response to the epidemic. These concerns were varied, ranging from loneliness to domestic violence. Unlike for staff well-being, few systems to address this were reported amongst participants, perhaps due to the complex nature of the concerns. This demonstrates the need for research into addressing these vital issues for VSCE organisations.

"Domestic violence has been an issue and in reporting safeguarding issues"

"Carers stress - some people have not been able to cope and the person they have cared for has had to go into care."

"Service users are reporting more commonly isolation and loneliness"

Furthermore there were concerns about the future well-being of service users in regards to anxiety over coming out of lockdown. This shows the need for the VSCE sector to look into ways of supporting these service users in transition back to 'normal life'.

"Learning needed about how we can support people who are shielding and are in fear about Covid-19 about coming out of lockdown"

"We need to demonstrate that people liked the offer of things but fear can be holding them back"

An interesting comment was noted during our event that it is important for the VCSE sector to keep track of the mental health of staff and service users. How this data is recorded is open to dialogue and potential research.

"Keeping a track of mental health with staff and service users across the board to evidence against cuts to funding."

2) Organisational Needs – Moving Forward

a) Fears of funding and the future

The most significant need we saw from participants was around the immediate and long term futures of organisations within the VCSE sector in regards to funding. We saw significant concerns around organisational sustainability due to a lack of clarity on funding after the initial 6 month period of Covid-19. 70% of participants said that lack of clarity around funding raises real concerns. This paints a picture of the significant challenges being faced by VCSE organisations around funding. Here are some quotes to illustrate:

"Funding is a real worry for us as we do not know when care homes are going to be open which is where our income comes from"

"There is a lot of funding around these 6 months around covid-19 response but in the longer term the whole sector has no idea"

"We have seen a continued support from the local authority but there is a concern going forward around funding and changes as a result of Covid-19"

"As an organization we are using our reserves currently and have enough to keep going for roughly around 5 months, the future is very uncertain"

"Commissioners could potentially feel they have evidence to cut vital services based on data in the last 4 months."

An interesting caveat to the above was this comment by one participant from a national organisation perspective about how they are coping outside of contractual funding. Funding via donations is increasingly difficult without members and volunteers to support that function. This shows a wider concern faced nationally by VCSE organisations around reductions in funding from donations.

"We are a national organisation but there are massive change programs going on around the work we do out of our contracts such as fundraising which is increasingly more difficult to do without members and volunteers"

3) Best Practice, Successes & Learning in Response

a) Organisations embracing the opportunity to adapt

In terms of Best Practice, Successes & Learning in Response to Covid-19, one key theme that emerged from this conversation was around the success of remote services for service users of VCSE organisations. 60% of respondents shared successes of new services either based online or via telephone support. This illustrates that there is a clear opportunity for the VCSE sector to build around their services of supporting people by utilising new technologies. These quotes below highlight some of the successes that organisations have seen utilising:

"We are working with large charities to build on the success of our online sessions for older people"

"The virtual work we have been doing with our service users has been really successful and popular"

"We set up a new service, which is volunteer led, called Companion Calls which is for people who wanted a call for a chat, this has proved very valuable for their wellbeing. This was great for some of our volunteers who are shielding themselves during lockdown."

"Very quickly we have learnt that video communication is really invaluable and in certain circumstances we can be a lot more productive."

Interestingly, organisations have shown innovate approaches to difficult situations by repurposing grants as quoted below.

"We were able to repurpose some grants which was helpful for the short term future."

b) A desire to work in a more holistic and interconnected way

During conversations around successes and best practice, participants highlighted the importance of working together. 55% of participants noted that working together within the sector is of significant importance. This indicates the need for a more cohesive approach to sharing of information and more regular contact with peers across the sector. These quotes below illustrate this.

"Coming out of this period we really have to avoid going back into our organisational silos"

"Developing connections within the sector is so important for us all going forward"

"Being involved in the mutual aid groups has been very beneficial for making new contacts within the sector"

"It feels like the VCSE were all in it together during this challenging time which hasn't been the case pre Covid-19"

One interesting piece of feedback made by a participant from discussions was the enhancing of relationships within the sector that has developed and created new communication channels between external partnerships within the sector. This highlights a need and a benefit for more opportunities to communicate with the sector potentially by video communication.

"Relationships have been forged over this time so that meetings aren't required to work together in the future. We have established links and relationships."

Another interesting point made by participants was the support external VCSE organisations have played in regards to professional wellbeing. This shows that a holistic and joined up way of working with external partners was not just a benefit to the people the VCSE Sector serves but to the professionals themselves. This is highlighted in the quotation below.

"Most of my staff are furloughed but my partnership working with external partners in the VCSE Sector has become my support network."

c) Successes

Another important theme that arose from discussions was around the successes organisations have experience since the beginning of the pandemic.

Orgnisations are receiving positive feedback to new innovate ways of connecting with their service users.

"We had some lovely feedback from a service user about our virtual singing for the brain sessions saying their dog also loved singing for the brain."

Another thought provoking comment from a participant was the overall benefit to the environment as the sector is home based and not using transport to travel.

"The nature of lockdown means a positive impact on the environment with people using transport a lot less as more meetings are online"

A final interesting note was the success of building capacity within service users. The comment below highlights this.

"We have been working with the people benefiting from our food boxes. One of the concerns was not building dependency on that and how we can support them to access things like benefits. We are also encouraging our staff to be more curious and don't just treat what is presenting."

Discussion

Our findings during this engagement provide an interesting and impactful insight into the experiences of the South Gloucestershire VCSE sector in responding and adapting to the challenges the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created. Through these findings, we can highlight opportunities and challenges we've seen our sector facing during these unprecedented times. We can also generate insight to guide VCSE support from local authorities and commissioners and to provide insight into strategy and support methods for the sector going forward.

The VCSE sector has demonstrated some clear agility and innovation in response to the pandemic. This has been done by utilising digital and online technology which has had successes in engaging with all demographics of people at very tight time frame. It is important to be mindful that without a robust support system for people who aren't connected to these new ways of working i.e. no access to internet, there could be a group left behind and unable to engage with services. This raises questions about the effectiveness of these new online services for the wider demographic of service users across south Gloucestershire.

There has also been some positive examples of new sector-wide relationships developing which has been the platform to share and work together on new and innovative ideas. These vary from professional relationships being developed to reduce the need of regular meetings to co-produce pieces of work. There was also some great support in working together to benefit the wellbeing of fellow VCSE professionals.

More fundamentally, there are big challenges for the VCSE sector at present, particularly around the future. Funding was a topic that flowed across all conversations during our engagement event, many participants were deeply concerned around what funding will be available as we recover from the covid-19 pandemic. Services have changed and there could be risk in VCSE organisations being victims of their own success by providing these new services that are, at a glance more cost effective. There is a concern that future funding will reflect the agility and innovation that VCSE services have shown.

Such high levels of uncertainty about the sustainability of VSCE organisations can be seen across the national VCSE landscape. 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. This was reflected in our responses from a South Gloucestershire participants. There is a real need for the VCSE sector to gain reassurances from their commissioners and funders about plans for the long term future of the sector.

Within this research, there are significant positive lessons and opportunities to be found for the Voluntary sector in adapting to the Covid-19 pandemic however, there are also many challenges that are faced.

This research demonstrates that the Covid-19 pandemic has presented many challenges for the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector however it also highlights significant positive lessons which could be used in the future to great effect.

Next Steps & Further Research

This engagement was an opportunity to gain some valuable insight into how VCSE organisations are responding to covid-19. This has shown a real concern and uncertainty for the sector to which there is no 'quick fix'.

It is vitally important that research is continually undertaken in the sector to demonstrate the need and support needed moving forwards.

If you or your organisation is interested in working together to develop a similar piece of research, please get in touch with our research team: research@thecareforum.org.uk

About The Care Forum and Dialogue

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.

Dialogue is the health and social care *insight* and *engagement* service of The Care Forum, supporting the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector across the West of England.

Our work performs to key functions.

First, we develop *insight* through research and engagement to enhance knowledge and understanding within the sector, improve best practise in service delivery, and develop strategy to promote the longer term sustainability of the regional VCSE sector.

Second, we work to improve *engagement*, inclusion and collaboration within the regional VSCE sector and between VCSE organisations and commissioners – enabling VCSE organisations to have influence on strategic planning and service delivery, and ensuring health and social care services are effective, connected, and informed.