

Key Messages



Two online discussions with the voluntary health sector discusses the impact of COVID-19

VHS is the national intermediary and network for Scotland's voluntary health organisations. Our members comprise national and local health charities, and other voluntary, community and third sector organisations. Through paid staff and volunteers they provide a wide range of direct health, social care and community services and support, often for the most vulnerable of people. Some also conduct research, policy work and campaigning on health related matters.

Following the COVID-19 lock-down and related government measures we wanted to know what the immediate impact was on our member organisations, so that we were better equipped to represent their interests to the Scottish Government, Public Health Scotland and other public sector decision makers. Through an online survey and two online discussion forums we set out to establish the impact COVID-19 was already having on the health and wellbeing of people supported by our members, and on our members' ability and capacity to continue supporting people during the crisis.

You can read the summary research briefing about the online survey results here: <https://bit.ly/2Rrx3P7>

The notes below capture the points raised during the two online (Zoom) discussion forums held on 31st March and 1st April 2020. There were 25 participants overall, from organisations with a wide range of interests, including specific physical conditions such as diabetes and stroke, mental health, health improvement, nutrition, physical activity, spiritual care, social care and support. The agenda was very open and gave a platform to participants to share with others how the pandemic and the lock down were affecting them and the people they support. Points raised are attributed where possible.

Challenges facing our sector and responses

Senscot – Social enterprises are dependent on trade so are extremely concerned about cash flow. They are exploring new ways of working. They have turned to the Third Sector Resilience Fund: its terms and conditions have been very clearly articulated and the communication around this has been very good, but First Port has been overwhelmed with applications. Information about what help will be available through the Supporting Communities Fund and the Wellbeing Fund is needed.

Faith in Older People – the organisation’s primary activities have ceased. Church congregations can no longer offer the same levels of support for elderly people e.g. food shopping, activities, meeting other everyday needs, because many are elderly themselves. More intergenerational volunteering would help. Care homes are under enormous strain and insufficient attention is being paid to them. Care homes typically have very poor digital access and skills, which is exacerbating residents’ loneliness and social isolation during the lock down. Concerned to ensure older people’s spiritual care needs are not ignored.

Cope Scotland – Lots of people are needing help with the small things like changing lightbulbs, changing bedding, food deliveries. Scoping a buddying system of volunteering but are concerned about how to disclosure check new volunteers. Drumchapel normally has a good infrastructure in terms of services and activities, but those who deliver these don’t live locally so there is now a big gap as it is hard to get people together to identify needs and set up support. Existing organisations locally are already overwhelmed.

Versus Arthritis – As a UK organisation they are engaging with national government about the needs of people with arthritis during the pandemic. They have a particular concern about people who have been asked to self-shield and others who have had operations cancelled. They are collating information and learning about this, and will work to feed into national policy making.

Edinburgh Community Health Forum – their members’ face-to-face services have been hardest hit and shut down. Concerned about the impact of this on the very many people who are digitally excluded as the shut-down perpetuates inequalities, especially in those groups that are older, confused, have sensory impairments or dementia. There is a lot of information available through social media but more needs to be done to share information through TV and radio, as the most vulnerable do not use social media. They are asking their members to think about their ‘Plan B’ for when people become really ill.

We Are With You (formerly Addaction) – Facing significant difficulties as approximately 25% of staff have had to self-isolate as they have underlying conditions. They have moved many services online but have a physical presence in all areas apart from Argyll and Bute, as they are working with the NHS and Social Services to deliver food to people. They have bought mobile phones for their most vulnerable service users and are supporting people through daily web-chats. Isolation is a big issue for people. They have also seen a 10-fold increase in usage of their drug and alcohol helpline, Know the Score.

The ALLIANCE (Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland) – Looking at the policy implications of COVID-19, with a current focus on the human rights aspects of the COVID-19 Emergency Bill. Looking to influence this once it comes through the Scottish Parliament. They deploy 30 of the 41 Community Link Workers in Glasgow who are now all working from home and supporting the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership.

Macmillan Cancer Support – All their Glasgow cancer support services are now delivered online or over the phone. They are working with people who may be newly diagnosed or have concerns around cancer and their fear and anxiety is heightened as they cannot get appropriate face-to-face support.

Glasgow Life – They are working to understand how to mobilise non-frontline staff to be able to deliver frontline services and working actively to encourage employer supporting

volunteering. Staff can volunteer to be redeployed into frontline roles. They are urging people to tell them what roles are not being filled and where the gaps are so they can share with their staff who may wish to volunteer in these roles. They are also encouraging staff to register with Volunteer Glasgow. There has been a massive wave in volunteering applications across the city, but many of the roles that will be needed are yet to be developed/rolled out.

Stroke Association– Support people who have had a stroke and their carers. Concerned that many of these are digitally excluded. They are still configuring what their services will look like in the coming weeks and future.

Community Leisure UK – There has been an immediate impact on cashflow and income of their members, who are leisure and/or culture provider organisations (e.g. libraries, sports and leisure centres). Many member organisations only have 3 months' worth of funding left. Trying to help their members with insurance policy interpretation and claims, and with the rules concerning furlough of staff. Can furloughed staff volunteer, for example? A lot of these workforces already have PVG checks in place so some are able to be redeployed to help with social care or school meals provision.

Terrence Higgins Trust – Having daily phone calls with vulnerable clients who may have both HIV alongside other existing conditions. Supplementing this with weekly Zoom meetings for the most isolated. They work closely with NHS boards so are delivering urgent HIV medication. They are also sharing information on HIV and COVID-19.

Eczema Outreach Support – They already provided remote support working from home so the transition organisationally has not been as challenging as for some organisations. Have turned physical events into online and they are using social media to keep in touch with people. The parents and families they support are very anxious about how to manage children's severe skin conditions as treatment plans have been disrupted and access to most dermatological services stopped. They are seeing a big impact on families' mental health and wellbeing, who are also concerned about their children's immune systems.

Waverley Care – people they are working from who are black Africans are confused by government guidance and distressed by employers insisting that they still work, regardless of whether they are essential workers or not. Africans working in the gig economy, on night shifts and in the social care sector feel their employers are putting their health at risk. Asylum seekers need clear and accessible information about what they need to do and what support they can access, as they do not have recourse to public funds. People from these communities feel very isolated, as English is not their first language. The language barrier also makes it hard to support their children with home schooling.

Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland – Concerned about specialist healthcare professionals being redeployed to deal with COVID-19. How will the health care needs of those with existing conditions such as heart disease and lung conditions be met? What is the long-term lung damage caused by COVID-19? Their Scotland Against Coronavirus campaign offers people a range of roles as Kindness Volunteers, e.g. Kindness Callers, Kindness Drivers, and Community and Digital Kindness Supporters.

Reflections from further participants

Digital exclusion

The digital divide is becoming more and more evident, as it is difficult to give remote support if people don't have access to smart phones/mobile devices/computers. With public spaces closed off, people cannot access free public wi-fi. At the same time, some charities have quickly extended the capacity of national helplines in order to continue support, for example the Royal Osteoporosis Society. Calls to the Parkinson's helpline are up by 50%. The RNIB is liaising with the Scottish Government about the need for accessible information for those with sight loss.

Young people and new parents

There is a big gap in terms of young people who are no longer getting the day to day support they would normally access through being at school, and through clubs and activities. *Go! Youth Trust* in Falkirk are providing phones and sim cards to vulnerable young people. Home Start Scotland said there will be 12,500 new parents over the next 12 months who may not be getting/may not get the support that is normally available to expectant and new families.

Drugs and alcohol

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs reported that families/carers of family members who mis-use alcohol and/or drugs are under even more stress than usual, especially if they are now confined to home with such family members. They also have higher risk of contracting Covid-19 due to the non-compliance of such family members with government guidance about leaving home and social distancing. Treatment plans are in disarray.

High risk groups

People with long term conditions like Parkinson's are very worried about access to medication. Some condition specific charities are concerned that those conditions are high risk for Covid19.

Research

Some charities that had had research and/or evaluation programmes underway (including academic research) have had to stop or else try to adapt the research, e.g. online focus groups.

Local responses and TSIs

Local third sector interfaces (TSIs) such as ACVO in Aberdeen are very busy working to connect volunteers with new requirements. There is a lot of informal support taking place across communities already as well as local charities reconfiguring their services to respond, but not enough co-ordination. Duplication of effort/work must be avoided. Falkirk TSI opened a new volunteer centre on 31st March and had 200 volunteering applications in the space of a few hours. Borders TSI has an important role working with the local authority in supporting local community resilience teams. It is expected that Health & Community Partnerships will

provide support lines for those advised by the NHS that they should self-shield. Many unpaid carers are facing greater financial insecurity than normal and are worried how they will care for their loved ones if they have to self-isolate and/or fall ill themselves.

Food and power

Food and power (utilities) are growing issues. Food banks are running out of food: an issue is where to get local intelligence about where food can be accessed. Getting food bank vouchers to people needs to be organised. People have less access to ready cash and fewer options for paying for goods. Rowan Alba supports very vulnerable people with long-standing health issues (e.g. brain damage) due to alcohol and/or drug misuse, who live at home or in hostels and who face difficulties now with access to food, phone credit and power.

Funding and cash flow

Very many third sector organisations face funding and cash flow issues, making medium and long term planning difficult. Loss of fundraising income is one issue, but so are prolonged delays in decision making on the part of annual/core funders such as the Scottish Government. Delays are meaning some organisations are seriously thinking they will need to apply to the Third Sector Resilience Fund, which is intended as a fund of last resort. Organisations need urgently for the Supporting Communities Fund and Wellbeing Fund to be opened to applications. Some organisations are experiencing or expect a 40% to 60% drop in income. Charitable foundation funders are generally proving more supportive and accommodating than statutory funders.

Overall message

The overall message is that our sector has rapidly adapted with energy, compassion, creativity and resourcefulness to meet needs of people and communities, but that enormous challenges remain which are not in our power to resolve. Without adequate and additional funding many organisations will not be able to fully adapt to meet the needs of the people they serve and some at real risk of going under, and at a time when vulnerable people need support more than ever. Participants asked VHS to convey this message to the Scottish Government, and also to emphasise the very real difficulties vulnerable people are facing at a practical level in terms of access to cash, food, power and information/support.



Mansfield Traquair Centre, 15 Mansfield Place, Edinburgh EH3 6BB
0131 474 6189 mail@vhscotland.org.uk www.vhscotland.org.uk @VHSComms

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