

Covid-19 and VCS Organisations in Gloucestershire

A follow-up situation analysis





The pandemic and lockdown have highlighted needs that previously were less pressing, or less visible, or less widespread - and now we are aware of them, it is important that we meet them.



Gloucestershire resident

Executive Summary

In August – September 2020 Barnwood Trust conducted a survey of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations in Gloucestershire. The purpose of this survey was to gather information that could usefully inform funders’ approach to supporting organisations at this time. The survey was designed to capture information about organisations’ financial health, the services they were delivering, their beneficiary groups and any challenges they were experiencing. An analysis of the 83 responses to the survey provides insight into the challenges being experienced by VCS organisations in Gloucestershire six months into the Covid-19 pandemic, and a series of recommendations for funders have been drawn from this intelligence.

The Organisations

The organisations that responded to the survey worked in a total of 44 wards across all six of Gloucestershire’s districts. They included organisations whose beneficiaries all live in a single district, as well as those working countywide. Almost one-fifth of the organisations were working in the most deprived areas of the county. The majority of the organisations reported working with a broad range of individuals (either with multiple beneficiary groups or community-wide), with just over half of respondents (55%) working with disabled people, people with mental health challenges and/or people with long-term conditions to some extent. Half of the organisations (51%) reported working with children, young people and/or families.

Key Findings

Financial challenges and widespread concerns about financial insecurity

Nearly half of the organisations (38) reported that they had **serious concerns** about the **financial resilience** of their organisation, and more than a quarter (24) indicated that they had less than 3 months’ operating costs in their reserves. **Financial challenges** were reported to be **impacting on organisations’ ability to support their beneficiaries**: more than half of the organisations (46) said that with their current financial outlook they could not deliver all of the services they would like to deliver. A lack of staff capacity and the financial implications of putting measures in place to ensure beneficiaries’ safety were cited among the factors that had impacted on organisations’ ability to deliver services.

Changes to the numbers of beneficiaries and the range of beneficiary groups organisations were supporting

Nearly one-fifth (17%) of respondents reported that their organisation's **key beneficiary group(s) had changed** since the pandemic emerged, with all but two of these fourteen organisations stating that they were now supporting a broader range of people.

The majority (70%) of the organisations reported that there had been a **change in the numbers of beneficiaries they were working with**, with a relatively even spread between those who were supporting fewer people (28 organisations) and those who were supporting a greater number of people (30 organisations).



Changes to services being delivered

Almost three-quarters of respondents (72%) indicated that the **key services they provide had changed** since the pandemic emerged. Of these 60 organisations:

- 45 reported that all/some services previously delivered face-to-face were now being delivered remotely.
- 41 reported that new services were being delivered.
- 24 reported that all/some services had ceased.

Over half of these respondents (37) reported making more than one of the above changes to services.

Respondents also reported changes in demand for services, including a growing need to provide support to people with mental health problems, and a number of organisations described adaptations they were making in order to deliver face-to-face services safely.

Unmet needs of beneficiary groups

Over half of the organisations (52%) reported that there are **needs amongst their beneficiary groups that they have not been able to meet**. The reasons given for being unable to meet these needs fell within three groups: due to Covid-19 restrictions; organisational capacity and resources; and issues related to service provision and accessibility.

Just under half (45%) of the responding organisations reported that there were **beneficiaries that they could not currently reach**. Some of the respondents named specific beneficiary groups that were harder to reach, including disabled children and young people; families; and older people.

Additional organisational challenges: the complexity of continuing to deliver services

In the final part of the survey, organisations were asked to provide details of any other significant challenges they were experiencing that had not been covered in earlier parts of the survey. Fifty organisations responded to this question. **Challenges associated with funding or generating income were dominant**. Additional challenges reported included operational challenges, and those associated with uncertainty and constant change, meeting beneficiaries' needs and maintaining staff wellbeing. Many of the challenges outlined highlighted the **complexity of continuing to deliver services** in the current context.



“Uncertainty in general is the biggest challenge at the moment. Planning is very difficult for all our projects and our fundraising.”

Gloucestershire resident

Recommendations

The findings indicate that funders could do the following to support VCS organisations at this time:

1

Fund groups and places rather than projects

Funding groups and places, rather than projects, would enable VCS organisations to use their expertise and knowledge to determine how to utilise funds in an area. Projects by their nature tend to offer short-term solutions and narrow project briefs can restrict the ability of organisations and groups to utilise their expertise in shaping their approach.

The survey identified widespread challenges being encountered by VCS organisations, such as financial issues, but that these were being experienced in different ways and combinations. Funding groups and places rather than projects recognises both the diversity of challenges being experienced and the capacity within organisations to identify useful and relevant solutions.

2

Offer core funding and flexibility

Voluntary and Community Sector organisations play a crucial role in supporting a range of beneficiary groups across the county and have adapted their activities and services in an agile way to respond to the pandemic. At the same time, organisations reported that the financial instability in the sector is one factor impacting on the range of services they are able to deliver. This is also a time when there are additional costs for some organisations to deliver services in a Covid secure way, whether providing remote or face-to-face support, or delivering both.

Offering core funding to VCS organisations, along with flexibility in how funds are utilised to meet changing needs, enables organisations to provide relevant and timely support during

the crisis. This may also include recognising that there are fewer outputs from funding at this time, due to increased costs in providing Covid secure services. Almost half of the survey respondents also reported that there were beneficiary groups they could not currently reach. Offering core and flexible funding would support VCS organisations to develop their work to engage with groups who it has become harder to reach in the current context.

Similarly, simplifying funding application processes and minimising waiting times for communicating decisions about funding can support VCS organisations to be more agile as the situation changes.

3

Support the development and sustainability of VCS organisations to enable them to keep supporting beneficiaries

The survey findings indicate that responding to the pandemic has required VCS organisations to adapt their ways of working and to respond to new beneficiary needs at a time when many are also experiencing barriers to fundraising or generating income due to the conditions brought around by Covid-19. In addition, uncertainty and constant change was reported to be making planning more difficult, and the need for continual planning was highlighted.

Supporting the development and sustainability of VCS organisations in areas such as strategic planning, diversifying income generation, and IT upskilling may help them to weather current challenges. Such support may be non-financial, for example, sharing professional expertise across and within sectors. It may also include committing to providing long-term funding to help organisations plan strategically, an area that survey participants reported having limited resources but additional need for.

The majority of survey participants reported that the services they provide and/or the beneficiary groups they engaged with had

changed since the start of the pandemic.

Developing networks and sharing learning within the VCS sector and relevant external bodies may help support organisations who are adapting to providing new services or supporting new beneficiary groups. Supporting these relationships to form at a local level may also further enable VCS organisations to signpost individuals to other services, when they are aware of particular needs they cannot meet.

Growing the capacity of VCS organisations to collect impact data about their services, whether by providing funds and/or specialist guidance on this, also has the potential to contribute to their sustainability. This may be particularly relevant to organisations providing new services or supporting new beneficiary groups and may be of utility in informing their strategic decision-making as the pandemic evolves and conditions change. Reflecting on data already being collected can help ensure it is of utility to both organisations and funders, as well as ensuring it is practical to collect in the current circumstances.



Our income has decreased hugely - but it is costing more to deliver our activities due to restrictions and public caution.

Gloucestershire resident

4

Provide funding to support staff wellbeing

Making funds available to support staff wellbeing, as well as funds for organisational development and sustainability, would promote the resilience of VCS organisations to provide ongoing support to beneficiary groups during the current crisis and beyond. For example, this may include a 2% add on to grants awarded to fund extra support for staff.

A number of the survey participants reported that a lack of, or reduction in, staff capacity had impacted on their ability to deliver services. Supporting staff wellbeing may help minimise the impact of a decrease in staff capacity on services provided by these organisations.

“Although we have been successful in obtaining grants to support the projects we are delivering, it is the core funding that is needed to support the vital services we provide for the local community.”

Gloucestershire resident

