

The VCSE's response to the COVID-19 crisis in Northumberland and recovery planning.

This report provides an overview of the response by the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) in the last three months to the COVID-19 crisis in Northumberland and offers recommendations for consideration in the post Covid-19 recovery planning process. It looks at what has been achieved, the impact of this work, and the value of VCSE support moving forward.

Across Northumberland, the VCSE was able to mobilise quickly in response to the emergency and, alongside the rapid response of community volunteers offering support to residents in their local communities, the sector provided the basis on which the County Council could subsequently develop their coordinating role.

Supporting coordination and collaboration

From the outset, **Northumberland CVA** immediately reorganised its work to support the frontline response to the COVID-19 epidemic and by mid-March had published new regularly-updated COVID-19 webpages dedicated to providing essential information and signposting links to support the VCSE and community response groups. The webpages include:

- A community response database of voluntary and community sector organisations, local support groups and local businesses willing to provide help to support local communities. Groups and individuals can add information to this database and users can search by their local area to see what assistance is available.
- Up-to-date news on funding opportunities during the crisis, advice for volunteers and a raft of information and support for the VCSE. This has included governance; employment; communications; data protection; keeping safe, healthy and active during lockdown; and safeguarding. Local news and information and advice from the County Council is also included.
- Advice to groups has continued to be provided by phone and online offering support in accessing funds during the pandemic, governance advice - for example on holding AGM's online, safeguarding, and delivering services during lockdown.
- New safeguarding fact sheets aimed at volunteer groups helping vulnerable people during the pandemic, safeguarding for individual volunteers and business continuity management for the VCSE.
- NCVA COVID-19 Updates and Information Sharing Facebook page set up in March, managed by NCVA to link up all Mutual Aid/Isolation Help Groups and community activists across Northumberland so that they can keep up to date with advice and share information to support them in their activities.
- Data and insight gathering – a brief survey on the impact of COVID-19 sent out to voluntary and community groups in the county in early April and analysis of the

subsequent VONNE regional survey for Northumberland undertaken to better understand the circumstances of the VCSE in the county.

- Regular communications to the VCSE – fortnightly e-bulletins continue to be sent to the sector by NCVA to keep them up to date with COVID-19 national and local policy, funding opportunities, online training provision and local activities. Blog post – 20 things to consider if you want your community response team to continue beyond COVID-19.

North Northumberland Voluntary Forum is working with the **North Northumberland Network** producing a weekly newsletter carrying updates and newsworthy items from national and local government, and network members, all seeking to keep people informed. Northumberland Communities Together staff re-post the newsletter in the north of the county.

Community Action Northumberland (CAN) has been working with Northumberland Fire and Rescue Services, who provided online fire safety training aimed at Warm Hubs and community buildings. This training was recorded and is available online alongside Carbon Monoxide Awareness training. CAN has also provided advice and information for rural communities responding to COVID-19 on their website.

Northumberland Community Bank (NCB) has provided information for Northumberland Communities Together website and connected with Locality Coordinators. NCB have been working with **CELL Big Local** adapting the loans available for start-up businesses, to help support those affected during COVID-19 with a new business not eligible for any government grants or funding. Funds support PPE and building security arrangements.

Bell View, Belford have liaised on a regular basis with Northumberland Communities Together and other COVID 19 Mutual support groups and, in particular, **Berwick Food Bank**, who have donated hundreds of items of surplus food to Bell View for distribution locally. They have received numerous donations of the government food parcels which they have redistributed.

Northumberland Communities Together (NCT) is intended to enhance the work of all our local community and voluntary groups, connecting the most vulnerable in our communities with the support they need, whilst making sure that they are safeguarded and protected. This includes:

- Regular contact with those people in the shielded cohort who need support providing access to a sustainable food supply during their self-isolation, including supplying food parcels to those with limited or no financial means.
- Referrals to community groups to support people in the local community. Funds have been made available to local charities and community organisations that are delivering essential services to vulnerable residents impacted by COVID19, including access to food, medicines and support with well-being.
- **Citizens Advice Northumberland** developing a special referral protocol for NCT so that all clients calling the emergency helpline presenting with a financial, welfare, money or fuel poverty issue have a direct route into CAB advisers.
- **North Northumberland Voluntary Forum**, one of five organisations in the County administering hardship grants which are funded by Bernicia Homes in an arrangement facilitated by NCT.

Providing frontline services

Many VCSE organisations have continued to provide services where possible and for many this has included moving their services online or adapting their services to support the COVID-19 crisis. Below are examples of support being provided across the county. VCSE groups have quickly adapted their services from face to face to providing online and telephone support to ensure that users can still access the support that they need.

- **Advice and advocacy.**
 - **Citizens Advice Northumberland** are providing telephone and online enquiry with help-lines staffed Monday to Friday dealing with a large volume of calls. Support includes help to claim Universal Credit, debt and money advice, energy advice and welfare benefits advice.
 - **Healthwatch Northumberland** are providing weekly online forums on different health services so that service users have an opportunity to give their views and raise issues and concerns. They have produced a leaflet of some key statutory and voluntary organisations that have been distributed with food parcels organised by Northumberland Communities Together.
 - **Escape Family Support** are providing one to one support using the telephone and social media
 - **Northumberland Community Bank** have raised awareness about the prevalence of Loan Sharks operating in these unprecedented times through social media and posters for loan shark reporting. It has been operating increased use of online services for members transactions and have introduced a Family Loan enabling a holistic approach to household expenses during lockdown.

- **Supporting mental health.**
 - **Tyneside and Northumberland MIND** are providing a trauma and bereavement intervention counselling service by telephone and advice to manage mental health. They have set up a Facebook Group for anyone struggling to maintain their well-being to provide support.
 - **Cygnus Support** continue to offer counselling and coaching sessions delivered by telephone or video conferencing.
 - **Contact Mental Health** are contacting their elderly users by phone on a regular basis and also by post as some do not have a phone. They are contacting professionals on their behalf and providing counselling over the phone.

- **Food.**
 - **Miners Lamp, Prudhoe** have set up a food distribution programme collecting donated food from supermarkets. Distribution has been through a 'pay as you feel' approach to help those on low incomes or through food banks for those facing food poverty. Food is also delivered to those in need. A free meal service is also being provided. Over a six week period 6 tonnes of food donated by supermarkets which was destined for landfill was moved.
 - **Shilbottle and Hampeth Mutual Aid Group** have also provided 'pay as you feel' pop up stalls in different parts of the village and delivered to people who can't get out to visit the stalls.

- **Fareshare** have been making food deliveries to community groups to support vulnerable people.
 - Volunteers at **village hall 'Warm Hubs'** have been organising food deliveries.
 - **Seahouses phone box food share** and similarly **Alnwick community larder** provide opportunities for residents to get hold of items of food from the local phone box.
 - **Berwick Community Trust's food bank** is open five days a week and just requires a quick phone call to access food. They also offer a delivery service if people are unable or do not want to leave their home.
 - **Upper Coquetdale Community Transport** are delivering shopping weekly to socially isolating elderly and vulnerable households. Their new vehicle is being used for GP and hospital appointments, as originally envisaged, as well as Covid-19 related work.
 - **Full Circle Food Project** continue to maintain and plant up their two community gardens in Ashington so there will be vegetable gardens for the community to make use of when they get back to business. Their Facebook page features recipes that are easy, nutritious and rely on only a few ingredients. They are also working with NCT to deliver food parcels to those in need and to do shopping for those that must isolate.
- **Supporting people in vulnerable situations**
 - **Age UK Northumberland** is making friendship calls, delivering food parcels supported by a number of local partners to ensure parcels get to those in need and providing information and advice over the phone.
 - The **Re:action project** provides elderly people with shopping trips and digital support. A directory of local business and shops for groceries and meal deliveries and key contacts in SE Northumberland has been provided to elderly users who are making good use of it. IT support is provided to individuals over the phone or by email and ideas to keep them occupied during lockdown. A weekly catch up call is also provided to make sure they are safe and well and to ask if they need any support or advice.
 - **The Bridge Project** helps individuals improve their self-confidence, health and well-being, finances and employment skills to move towards a positive outcome e.g. employment, training and has continued to provide quality and invaluable support during lockdown. Bridge workers are supporting unemployed individuals to access much needed financial and mental wellbeing advice and help to access training and job-search from home. Isolated people are connected with Bridge Connectors and Buddies remotely and are being helped to source bespoke volunteering opportunities as we move out of lockdown, helping people to gain that invaluable sense of purpose and hope for their future.
 - **NDAS** are providing phone, email and video support including support for children. A web chat service is provided for a couple of hours, five days a week.
 - **Borderlinks** are keeping people with learning disabilities and autism connected by calling users regularly and being available if users want to call them. Support includes helping them to understand their circumstances, encouraging them to stay connected, problem solving, informing where other services can help and what to do and who to contact in an emergency.

- **Carers Northumberland** are making use of telephone, email, social media to keep in contact with their users providing an information service, telephone support, a virtual carer group on Facebook and remote carer groups using Zoom.
- **Northumberland County of Sanctuary** remain in contact by phone and text with service users in Northumberland and retain a strong daily link with the British Red Cross who are providing telephone advice. They are looking to set up remote language-specific groups to share weekly updates with asylum seekers and refugees.
- **Being Woman** have been putting packs together for families celebrating Eid
- **Alzheimer's Society** are continuing to provide their services remotely. As well as Dementia Adviser and Side by Side Services, anyone registered with them is having a welfare call and they are also providing companion calls to people if they would like these. They are carrying out assessments by telephone and will follow these up with a visit when safe to do so. Their Singing for the Brain groups are now running using 'Ring and Sing'
- **Headway Arts** provide support for Learning Disabled people and are making sure they are keeping connected and providing an online programme. The Stars creative daily online workshops include yoga, dance mindfulness, expressive arts. Information, advice and guidance telephone support is provided for people not online including reinforcing ways of staying safe and providing access to digital support. Online Zoom meetings, tutorials, facilitated group sessions have included help to understand the Covid-19 situation, self- protective measures during isolation, tools for managing stress and support staying safe online. Prepared creative projects and study for groups to do at home are provided including art materials and equipment delivered to homes.
- **Bell View, Belford** supports and helps older people including those most vulnerable and isolated. Before lockdown they delivered over 1000 flyers to households in villages and hamlets across a wide rural area stating the ways in which they and others could help, with clear contact information. It was recently revised with further copies available in shops and newsagents. They have actively involved 20 of 50 volunteers who offered to assist. They registered and collated an active database of over 70 people, who are self-isolating or told to shield, with contact and emergency details should help be needed. From March – June they responded to over 450 differing calls for help and support. They have delivered prescriptions, frozen meals, food parcels, bought and delivered shopping and have covered over 3000 miles during this period. They have set up a new "Friendship Phone Line" which continues to offer reassurance, a listening ear and emotional support / advice. This has connected beneficiaries back with their community, making sure they are not forgotten, creating lasting new friendships with the 12 Volunteers who are ringing round 90 beneficiaries every few days. This fantastic service has already seen an improvement in the mental health and wellbeing of beneficiaries. They also set up a free request and delivery book scheme and jigsaw loan service

Volunteering in response to COVID-19

Numerous volunteer COVID-19 support groups were set up in March across the county to provide a rapid response to the needs of their local community. Details of 41 groups are on

the community response web pages on **Northumberland CVA's** website. These groups shop and distribute food, collect prescriptions and newspapers, deliver food parcels, cook and provide meals to vulnerable residents, In additions some groups have made a point of celebrating the significant birthdays of residents, run competitions e.g. scarecrows and provided music outside care homes and on estates to keep up the spirits of residents. They have also made toiletry bags for NHS staff and carried out street by street food collections. The community spirit and coming together of residents to support their community has been overwhelming using the assets as their disposal to develop and effectively deliver support and in most instances without intervention from statutory or established groups.

Emerging issues

- Some of the COVID-19 support groups have indicated that they want to continue to provide a support service to their community when the pandemic has eased. It is important that groups wanting to become charities are able to access the correct support and guidance to assist them in this task.
- There may be people who volunteered for the first time during the pandemic who have valued this opportunity and are keen to continue to do so in the future. These volunteers need to be made aware of the range of opportunities available beyond their current roles so that they can see how they can get most value from volunteering.
- There has been a lot of pressure and demand on the VCSE to adapt so that they can continue to provide services, which the above examples have shown. However, there are some groups that have not be able to continue due to the requirement for their service to operate face to face, whilst others have potentially struggled with the transition to digital ways of working. There will be a need to identify support needs of these groups and viability post COVID-19.
- Many VCSE organisations, whilst providing whatever support they can during this pandemic, will have lost trading and fundraising income and will be operating with minimal reserves. They will also be competing for short term grant funding during the crisis and are unlikely to have gained access to the government funding for the sector. Other organisations not directly responding to the crisis, with a wider societal contribution and therefore limited in their ability to access COVID-19 grants, but nevertheless providing essential services, will also be concerned about future funding of the sector and whether they will survive.
- Demands for benefit and debt advice, counselling support for those with mental health problems, domestic abuse etc. have increased during the crisis and this is likely to continue as the crisis eases.
- This crisis has heightened the inequalities in our society, with greater support needed to ensure the health and well-being of our communities in the more deprived areas of the county. The impact of digital exclusion has been evident in terms of ability to access support, to assist children's learning and increased loneliness amongst some of our most vulnerable residents. Increased poverty and social isolation across the county have also been consequences.

Recovery Planning

The VCSE in Northumberland is facing significant pressures but it is important that we work together through the recovery to rebuild an effective and sustainable VCSE sector. We need to build on the partnerships developed through this crisis and, using an asset-based approach that the volunteer COVID-19 support groups have so very well demonstrated over recent months, we need to co-design this recovery with communities. Cooperation and collaboration with all sectors working together, statutory, business, voluntary and community will be needed to ensure resilient communities.

- It is essential that the VCSE is represented in all recovery planning arrangements that are being considered by the statutory sector since the VCSE has a vital role to play in contributing their knowledge and experience, and the VCS Assembly is well placed to represent the sector. The sector can help build confidence in communities, address inequalities and support social and economic development e.g. supporting care and prevention and localised employment and training skills and establishing what ongoing support is required in communities.
- Support for additional government financial assistance to the sector is vital so that the diverse range of services which support individuals and communities in need are not lost. Local councils are reliant on the VCSE to deliver services for them so funding will be needed for them to continue to do this. The economic and social impact of the crisis will be long lasting, and many communities will be looking to the VCSE for support at a time when funding for the sector is becoming scarcer.
- All sectors need to work together to support the continuity and resilience of VCSE organisations so they can continue to support our local communities.
- The VCSE should also be involved in future emergency planning to provide a more coordinated and informed response to future crises.