



INVESTING IN
COMMUNITIES

#STOKEONTRENTTOGETHER

The Response of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector in Stoke on Trent to the COVID-19 Pandemic
March – Sept 2020



Summary

This report captures information about:

- **The impact of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector's response to the Covid-19 pandemic across Stoke on Trent,**
- **The factors which helped the VCSE Sector to be effective, and**
- **The impact the pandemic is having on the VCSE sector.**

Summary of the VCSE Response to the COVID 19 pandemic

Speed of response

The VCSE Sector responded quickly and effectively to the challenges of the pandemic and facilitated the swift mobilisation of cross-sector, multi-agency working.

The speed of the response, in spite of the financial difficulties faced by many as a result of the pandemic, epitomised the ethos of the sector to act quickly in the face of a crisis and the agile and responsive nature of the organisations that make up the VCSE sector.

Trusted relationships and partnership working

The VCSE response was viable for several key reasons:

- Historical, trusted relationships within communities,
- Well-established local partnerships,
- Emergency support from Local Authorities, The Community Foundation for Staffordshire and other funders making available appropriate resources to facilitate rapid mobilisation of a co-ordinated VCSE sector response.

Needs driven models of response

The VCSE response was effective because it was needs driven and very agile in approach.

People and organisations collaborated and shared best-practice and ideas openly, building on established working relationships between organisations in the area and developing new ones based on areas of need.

The City Council hosted regular Voluntary Sector Emergency Response meetings during the early stages of the pandemic which aided easy collaboration and identification of the current key issues and needs.

VAST (the local VCSE Infrastructure organisation in Stoke on Trent) acted quickly and effectively to provide coordination around the overall VCSE response. This response (Stoke on Trent Together) built on the already established model of our place-based giving scheme, Totally Stoked.



VAST Digital and IT Services were also on hand to quickly develop and build the necessary on-line platform and IT infrastructure to ensure a seamless method of requesting support from the Local Authority and the VCSE sector.

In addition, the Totally Stoked and Vintage Volunteers project teams at VAST shifted to remote working and became part of the overall supporting team for Stoke on Trent Together alongside Local Authority colleagues.

Summary of the Impact of COVID 19 on the VCSE Sector in Stoke on Trent

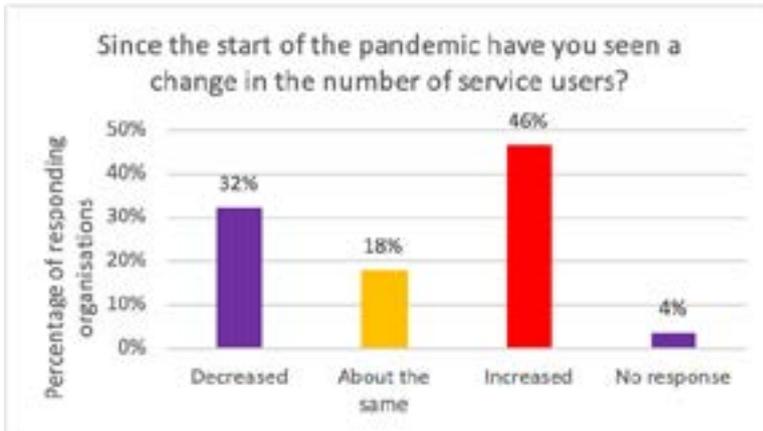
VAST has gathered information from its members, the Stoke on Trent Together online platform, The Voluntary Sector Chief Officers' Group (VSCOG), Dudson Centre tenant organisations and Support Staffordshire member organisations who provided services in Stoke on Trent. From this information (covering March to Sept 2020) key areas of impact emerged:

Demand and Capacity mismatch

The capacity of the VCSE sector to continue providing services and support reduced as staff and volunteers isolated, facilities closed and resources reduced.



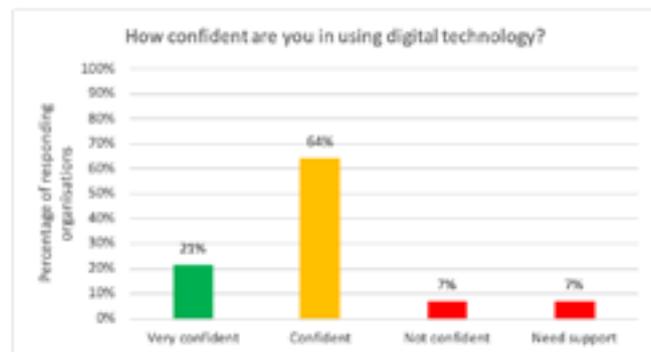
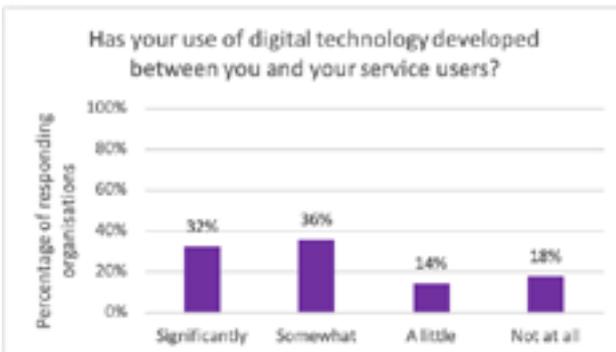
At the same time, demand for many services increased or remained the same with rapid shifts needed to deliver in a new and innovative way (according to over half of the responding organisations).



The balance of capacity and demand has shifted, and our local organisations are working hard to rebalance the equation and meet the needs of people in Stoke on Trent.

Digital Inclusion

Whilst some organisations and groups moved rapidly to increase use of digital technology, there have been some who found the switch from face-to-face to online activities difficult to manage. As a result, they have struggled to remain in contact with their teams or service users. Organisations have highlighted that reasons for this include lack of technical equipment, appropriate software, skills, support, and confidence with technology.



CORONAVIRUS CASE STUDY

RUFF & RUBY



Ruff & Ruby (RubyGirl featuring Ruff Diamondz) is a registered charity supporting vulnerable children and young people in Stoke-on-Trent.

Under normal circumstances, the Ruff & Ruby Rooms is where the magic happens – based in the Intu Potteries Centre, right in the heart of the city. It's not an office, it's a safe space for youngsters to meet, create, and donate, where there's inspiration, art, and heart. The Ruff & Ruby Rooms were forced to close due to COVID-19 and the closure of the Potteries Centre, immediately cutting off income and reducing the charity's capacity to support their beneficiaries.

Everything changed, and fast. Phone and social media support became the only way to stay in touch with the young people who were regular, and always welcome, visitors to the Ruby Rooms. Virtual support, socially distant acts of kindness and TLC Tubs became the new way to reach out.

The new initiative TLC Tubs are parcels full of creative and comforting items to inspire, and to help look after the mental health and wellbeing of the young minds of Ruff & Ruby. The scheme began as a temporary necessity, borne out of a local need keep young people engaged and supported. The initiative has been worth its weight in gold and the huge amounts of positive feedback means that TLC Tubs are here to stay as part of the VIP (Valued Individual Person) programme.



When the need for support arose, CEO Dawnie Reynolds turned to the #StokeonTrentTogether COVID-19 Support Network to recruit the volunteers the charity desperately needed, and she wasn't disappointed.

"The #StokeonTrentTogether COVID-19 Support Network is a FAB initiative that demonstrates 'unity in the community'" said Dawnie, "it proves how by working together, we can achieve transformation of lives."

Despite the Coronavirus crisis, Ruff & Ruby have managed to do amazing things through the dedication of their staff and volunteers, making sure that the young people in Stoke-on-Trent have had someone to turn to when they've needed them.

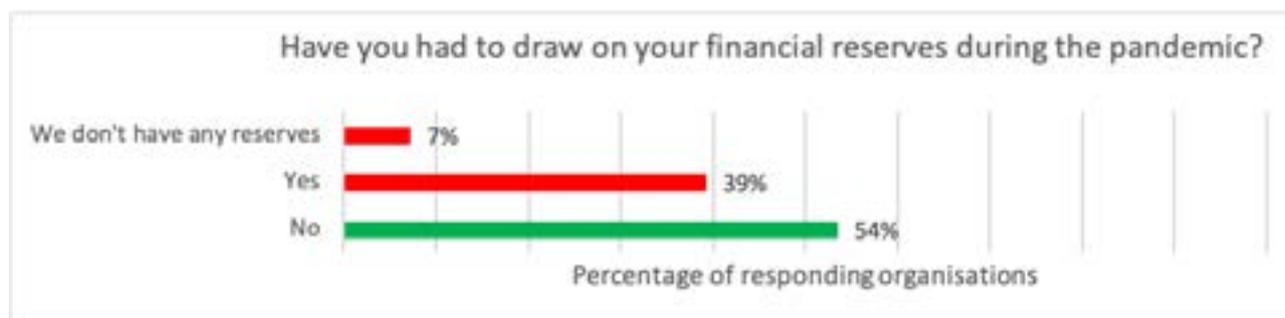
(VAST has secured some COVID 19 emergency funding from [The National Lottery Community Fund](#). Along with partner organisations we aim to close the digital gap for these organisations with our new [Totally Stoked Digital project](#)).



Resource and finance shortfalls

Organisations have identified the following as direct COVID 19 reasons for financial shortfalls:

- Loss of income, for example from trading that has ceased or reduced, traditional fundraising events or reduced giving
- Increased costs, for example from the costs of rapid adaptations to new ways of working, the requirements for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or additional cleaning and risk management requirements.
- Changes to current grant or contract funding, difficulty accessing the Job retention scheme because they needed staff to be working, not qualifying for the government's rates based grants as charities usually do not pay business rates and the complexity of applying for other discretionary schemes.
- Many grant funders stopped mainstream funding as the priority became funding the response to COVID meaning VCSE organisations suffering a loss of income or increased costs, but not directly responding to the crisis, could not access funds.



Factors which helped the VCSE sector to be effective

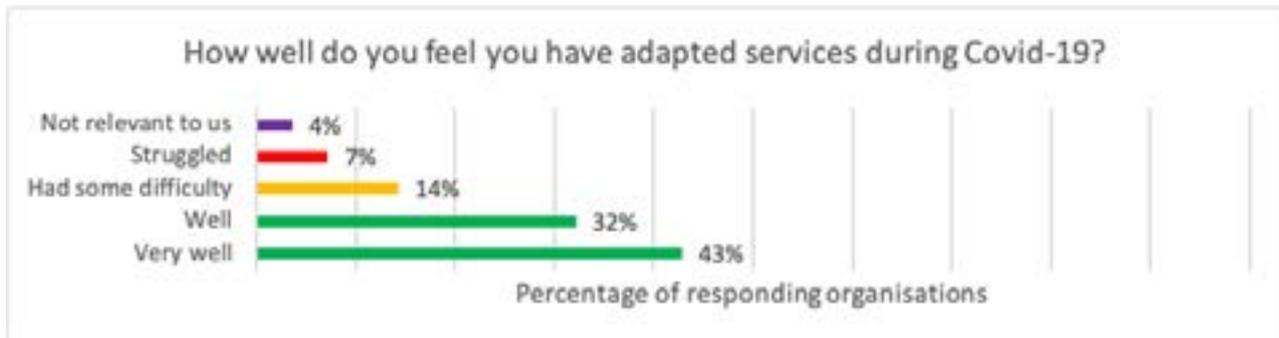
Listening and Connecting

The VCSE sector has always focussed on connecting with people in different ways. This has been a particular strength during this pandemic; providing a point of contact and two-way communication for people who might otherwise be isolated or disadvantaged.

VCSE organisations know their local communities and understand local need and assets. A rapid response can be activated meeting needs at individual, neighbourhood and whole community levels.

The VCSE sector has supported a shift from the one-to-many service approach to a one-to-one, needs-based approach that has been required during the pandemic. This has been achieved (often remotely) even though demand for support has increased while capacity to deliver has decreased.

From surveys in July and September 2020 of VCSE organisations across Stoke on Trent, a common theme of the responses was the rapid activity required to enable homeworking and shift from face to face interactions to alternative methods of delivery to provide support for their client groups.



Organisations quickly identified and implemented solutions tailored to the specific client groups they support. These range from providing telephone-based advice, wellbeing checks and support through to the development of new websites and IT platforms to enable a range of support and learning to continue.

Organisations that work with particular client groups, such as those delivering supported housing or tackling homelessness, have also had to review and adapt working practices to ensure the safety of their staff, volunteers and clients.

Cross Sector Working

In Stoke on Trent, the City Council's swift inclusion of the VCSE sector in the emergency planning (17th March 2020) set the tone. Building bridges rapidly across a previously strained relationship between VCSE and statutory sector agencies enabled focussed and well directed support from VCSE organisations, mobilising services and support much faster than statutory bodies are able to do.

Open lines of communication and simple, effective escalation routes were put in place and maintained throughout the emergency phase leading to fluid partnership working.

This was also true across City and County organisations to enable people to get the help they needed irrespective of which side of a boundary they lived. In particular, the two VCSE Infrastructure organisations ([VAST](#) and [Support Staffordshire](#)) worked together to ensure individuals experienced a boundary-free access to the community-based services they needed.

The role of VAST as a strategic partner was supported and utilised effectively to facilitate organisations, groups and individuals across the community to come together in a coordinated response.

Many of the emergency response network members were involved in strategic work led through the city council and worked in partnership to enable the rapid response required to support the most vulnerable in the city.

VCSE sector support is fully complementary to the Council priorities, Public Health and Primary Care responses and NHS focus on infection management of COVID 19.

Volunteer Management Expertise

The VCSE sector's expertise around managing volunteers enabled much of their community-based, volunteer workforce to be mobilised quickly. Alongside this, organisations were able to adapt their processes quickly to engage large numbers of new volunteers enabling more people to get involved in providing support.

Rapid development of an online portal

The pre-existing [Totally Stoked](#) (place-based giving scheme) partnerships made it easier for the VCSE sector to get going very quickly with a shared online facility.

At the request of the City Council, following an emergency planning meeting on 17th March 2020, VAST produced this bespoke online platform within days, and it went live on 20th March 2020. The platform became the focal point of the Stoke on Trent Together approach.

This successful collaboration between the City Council and VAST was supported by health and care partners, local VCSE organisations, businesses and individuals across the city.

The online platform (<https://corona19.vast.org.uk>) fronted and underpinned a fully collaborative response to the pandemic in Stoke on Trent.

The platform provided a front end into which organisations and individuals could offer support or request help. Behind the scenes a small well-skilled team, working remotely, could match offers of support with requests for help.

The platform also acted as a source of additional help and information for individuals and organisations via:

- weblinks to other trusted sites,
- a directory of support enabling individuals and support agencies to locate assistance proactively, and
- a hub for organisations to promote their volunteering opportunities

6 MONTHS OF STOKE-ON-TRENT COVID-19 SUPPORT NETWORK

#STOKEONTRENTTOGETHER

<p>760 INDIVIDUALS OFFERING SUPPORT</p> 	<p>176 ORGANISATIONS OFFERING SUPPORT</p> 	<p>26,250 PEOPLE HAVE VISITED THE WEBSITE</p> 
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 <p>236 VOLUNTEERS PLACED WITH LOCAL ORGANISATIONS</p>	<p>4,744 FOOD PARCELS DELIVERED</p>  <p><small>THIS IS AN APPROXIMATE FIGURE BASED ON THE AVERAGE</small></p>
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<p>3,694 REQUESTS FOR SUPPORT INCLUDING:</p> 	<p>1,610 REQUESTS FOR FOOD AND SHOPPING</p> 	<p>179 REQUESTS FOR GAS AND ELECTRICITY</p> 	<p>2,552 REQUESTS FOR PRESCRIPTION COLLECTION</p> 
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<p>10,757 HELPLINE CALLS ANSWERED</p> 	<p>76,467 WELFARE CALLS MADE TO RESIDENTS</p> 
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Key Themes that Emerged as the Pandemic Progressed

Food Crisis

Food crisis has taken two forms:

- Local VCSE organisations provided logistical support for those shielding or self-isolating which wrapped around the statutory-led response. A wide, ad hoc network sprang up to support the gaps created resulting, for example, from the breakdown of established neighbourly arrangements when support givers were forced to isolate.
- A more enduring food crisis emerged around the financial challenges facing many across the city. As statutory-led provision started to step down the requirement for support from Foodbanks and local organisations continued and is likely to increase.

Prescription Delivery

Prescription Delivery emerged quickly as a key issue. Whilst we can be proud of the VCSE sector's response to support this, we do not envisage this becoming a mainstream role for the sector. The local pharmaceutical council needs to review its response as, without volunteer support, it is fair to say that pharmacy would not have managed as well as it did.

Loneliness, Isolation and Mental Wellbeing

Providing practical support such as food deliveries gave an insight into wider wellbeing issues emerging and Loneliness, Isolation and Mental Wellbeing came to the fore.

There is a wealth of expertise within the VCSE sector around this agenda and the well-established social prescribing approach enabled organisations to link in partners to wrap support around people.

The previously important role of befriending support has become yet more vital in this period. One organisation alone, [Father Hudson's Care – Young at Heat Project](#), has adapted and scaled up their support taking on over 50 new volunteers to support their work in the first three months of the pandemic.

Volunteering

This period has thrown a huge spotlight on the role and benefits of Volunteering. An unprecedented 750 people in the city came forward in the first 100 days of initial lockdown to offer their help through VAST and the Stoke-on-Trent Together portal.

Volunteer brokerage on this scale has not taken place before and neither has virtual volunteer deployment. However, VAST and the close partnership working across VCSE sector, rose to the challenge. Almost a third of the initial volunteer offers have remained supported within ongoing, longer-term volunteering roles.

Beth Johnson Foundation Volunteer tech buddy project

Beth Johnson Foundation have established a team of volunteer tech buddies. They provide tech support for 12 clients, so far, using step by step support over the telephone.

Help has been offered with things like:

- downloading apps,
- guiding people through logging onto services,
- transfer of files from phone to pc,
- accessing and sharing photos, and
- digital tech, zoom sessions, for people who could log on but who required additional support

The average amount of time spent with each person is 45 minutes.

A project priority was to purchase a zoom account and offer social sessions and themed sessions to all past participants of the Positive Ageing sessions.

New Areas of Focus

Some key themes have emerged that form part of our planning to enable the VCSE sector to continue to respond into the recovery phase.

Digital Inclusion

Digital Inclusion has emerged as a key theme and requirement.

Local VCSE organisations have identified the imperative of switching some services to digital and online to the benefit of their service users. They understand the digital needs and potential exclusion this may create for individuals and some organisations are addressing this through the introduction of volunteer tech buddies and telephone support.

In addition, groups have flagged their organisational needs around digital resources and use of technology to support their teams and engage their service users online.

This needs-based shout-out has given rise to Totally Stoked Digital. This is a partnership project launched in October 2020. It brings together VCSE organisations and local businesses to provide technical skills, resources and support to those VCSE organisations who are experiencing digital exclusion and separation from their clients, partners and communities.

The aim is to provide a range of support from enabling committee members to come together to plan and run their organisation or hold Annual General Meetings virtually through to supporting organisations to adapt their services to virtual platforms.

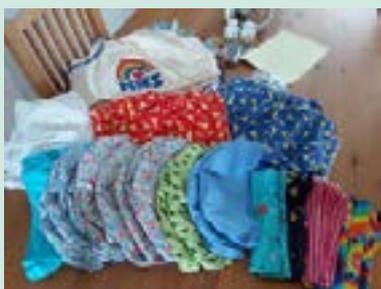
In addition to the cost implications across the whole city of both capital (laptops and smart phones) and revenue (broadband and phone contracts), there remains an access issue for those without fast broadband or mobile signal.

CORONAVIRUS CASE STUDY

SCRUBS 4 STOKE



Scrubs, hats and headbands from Scrubs for Stoke The enormous amount of pressure that Coronavirus has put on the NHS has been immense. Despite the controversy around the shortages of PPE and the fear of the NHS being overwhelmed by COVID patients, we are now beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel.



The huge influx of patients into our local hospitals meant that staff were overstretched, working flat-out to care for those fighting COVID-19. This led to a significant shortage of scrubs for staff. Enter, Scrubs for Stoke.

The dedicated team of volunteers at Scrubs for Stoke devoted their free time to make scrubs, wash bags hairbands and hats for staff working at the Royal Stoke University Hospital and County Hospital in Stafford.

The Community Foundation for Staffordshire awarded Scrubs for Stoke enough funds to cover materials and equipment to make thousands of scrubs and other items for our local NHS heroes. Up to the end of May, Scrubs for Stoke had made more than 5,000 scrubs, almost 10,000 wash bags and nearly 7,000 headbands, not to mention the mask bands, theatre caps and hearts*.



I just wanted to say a massive thank you, I work in itu at Royal Stoke and this evening on ym shift I wore a beautiful scrubs from yourself. And being a chunkier girl, with bigger thighs I definitely don't enjoy wearing scrubs with the chub rub being Horrific but it's safe to say finishing the shift lovely my elasticated, pull tie waist band and no chub rub and the cool patterns was amazing and added extra fun needed to finish the shift!!!

Thank you so much, we're forever greatful 🥰🥰🥰🥰🥰



Local support for Scrubs for Stoke has been incredible, earning a personal thank you from local MP Jonathan Gullis, and a letter of thanks from the Prime Minister. Scrubs for Stoke are just another example of the amazing things VCSE groups have been doing to support the NHS during the Coronavirus crisis.

*figures from Scrubs for Stoke Facebook

Renewed and Increased Volunteering

We are building on the momentum around Volunteering locally and responding to the national request to develop an Integrated Care System (ICS) approach. (For the Stoke on Trent VCSE sector, this means being part of a Staffordshire county-wide, partnership approach).

With partner organisations across the city and county, we are developing plans to support resilience within the VCSE sector, embed best practice and cross-sector learning. The aim is for volunteering to become a key driver of wellbeing and community resilience across our county system.

There is a recognised need to match people appropriately with volunteering opportunities. Each person has a different reason for offering their commitment to a volunteering role and this must be respected and nurtured for the mutual benefit of both individual and organisation.

Recruiting and retaining volunteers is a specialism that can be well coordinated through a core team within the community it serves.

VAST is working alongside Stoke-on-Trent City Council to continue the work of Stoke on Trent Together and to develop a robust volunteering offer and easy-to-access portal so that volunteering becomes inclusive and accessible to all.

VAST and its established [Vintage Volunteers](#) project also continue to support many individuals into volunteering roles. They are helping volunteers to find the role that suits them best and provide regular updates, information and a support network for the volunteers.

In addition, VAST provide training and support for local VCSE organisations; making sure they can work responsibly and effectively with new or increased number of volunteers.

VCSE collaborative networks

Although still ill-defined, or perhaps undefinable, there has emerged, during the crisis, a desire and a role for VCSE organisations that act locally in a very collaborative and broad manner.

Working, learning and sharing together as a local network, and supported by a good infrastructure organisation, VCSE groups have been more than the sum of their parts.

VAST is working with these informal network arrangements, with the Voluntary Sector Chief Officers Group (VSCOG) and with the Stoke Collaborative Network to further explore this way of working outside of crisis.

CORONAVIRUS CASE STUDY

SALTBOX



Saltbox have helped to support and care for vulnerable people in Stoke-on-Trent for more than 30 years.



The Saltbox Restart and Care-Link projects saw a massive increase in demand since the COVID-19 outbreak, where more and more vulnerable and homeless people needed support in many different ways. Thanks to significant funding from the Community Foundation for Staffordshire, Saltbox were able to increase their operations to ensure that those who needed help got it, when they needed it, including emergency food packages, prescription deliveries, and telephone befriending.

The Restart project, which supports the homeless or those at risk of homelessness, have been gifting books, DVDs, art materials, nail care kits and puzzle books to help clients cope with being in lockdown. These gifts, although small, have been a blessing to some, helping to improve mental health and wellbeing.

“Cheers to Matt from Restart. Had a nice chat when you popped round and the book you bought for me was spot on and a great choice. I nearly bought it once but didn’t have enough cash!”

In Saltbox’s campaign to end loneliness, the Care-Link project works hard to reduce the effects of isolation and ‘needs assessment’ calls were able to determine where support was needed the most. Chatty Café’s went digital, VE celebrations went postal and for the more personal touch, volunteers delivered emotional wellbeing packs and bunches of flowers.

“I can’t thank CareLink enough. All staff and volunteers are the only reason I’m here. They care for me so much and I know if I ever need help you will always be there.”



Originally a faith-based charity providing Christian Support to local faith groups, Saltbox’s vision has developed with a wide range of care initiatives to support vulnerable adults and those in need. Although COVID-19 has severely impacted service delivery, the new and adapted service model continues to support vulnerable people right across the city.

The Challenges and Impact on the Stoke on Trent VCSE Sector Overview

VAST approached the Voluntary Sector Chief Officers Group (VSCOG) and our tenants at The Dudson Centre to request their feedback on the impact in activity and financial stability as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak.

VSCOG is a network of approximately thirty key voluntary sector organisations working to support the residents of Stoke in Trent and North Staffordshire.

With short notice, over half the organisations were able to reply with information on their current activity, the financial implications and, where applicable, their feedback on the best possible deployment of the funds they receive from Stoke on Trent City Council.

In addition, we worked with Support Staffordshire (our equivalent VCSE infrastructure organisation in the county) to glean feedback from other VCSE organisations who had Stoke on Trent included within their area of operation.

We have drawn out some common themes from the responses.

Demand and capacity mismatch

The VCSE sector's capacity reduced as staff and volunteers had to shield or self-isolate whilst others were adapting to new ways of working.

While parts of the Staffordshire system (ICS) experienced reduced demand, such as Urgent Care portals, demand on the VCSE sector increased rapidly. As well as finding new ways to support existing clients, referrals from partners increased and escalating needs were identified.

This pattern is predicted to continue and demand will continue to rise as the social and economic impact of the pandemic continues; affecting the poor and disadvantaged the most.

The Financial and Resource Impact of the Pandemic on the VCSE sector

Loss of income

Some organisations had an immediate reduction of income, particularly those that deliver chargeable services as a means of income generation such as training or room hire. Others are predicting a considerable loss in the ability to generate income and predict a reduction in fundraising and charitable donations as people become less financially secure.

Trading income generation for VCSE sector organisations stopped overnight along with traditional fund-raising events. It is worth noting that these are the very forms of income that the sector has been hard pressed by government to expand in recent years as they were seen as being more sustainable than traditional grants and public funding.

Income from regular sources dropped significantly for many of our organisations with almost 40% having to draw on reserves to cover costs.

Furlough, Grant funding and Government schemes

The furlough scheme, important to some, was irrelevant to many VCSE organisations who could not send staff home whilst demand sky-rocketed.

Grant funding bodies closed their traditional schemes and many diverted funds to supporting the emergency response.

Emergency grant funding has provided valuable resources for many in the sector (three-quarters of the organisations responding to our survey received some emergency grant funding). However, those organisations unable to adapt to emergency activity are left in a precarious position.

Some organisations have expressed concern about the ability to progress regular funding applications as grant giving organisations paused their application processes to focus on the immediate crisis or to re-evaluate their funding priorities.

In addition, rates-based grants and other government funding available to small businesses have, in most cases, been ill-designed or are inaccessible to charities (who in many cases do not pay business rates).

Increase in costs

Many organisations have incurred unexpected costs because of the changes in working practices.

A large proportion of the responses cite expenditure on personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning protocols, IT and infrastructure costs to enable homeworking or new ways of supporting and keeping in contact with clients. It is anticipated that this will persist for the foreseeable future for those organisations supporting vulnerable and older people.

Re-deployment of statutory funding

Of those that currently have funding through Stoke on Trent City Council, most have already considered, agreed and implemented suitable refocusing of service provision to ensure key services continue.

Organisations have, in some cases, already redeployed staff and resources to best respond to the needs of the client group while others are currently monitoring and assessing this and would welcome working with commissioners to discuss further.

Overall estimates of financial impact

Many of the organisations are not yet able to predict the full financial impact of this outbreak as much of this depends on the shift in restrictions and any support which may become available in the future to combat specific issues.

Of the 18 organisations who were able to provide an estimate of the financial impact the average loss of income was almost £12,000 per month.

In addition, an average of £350 per month additional expenditure is being incurred with one off costs of £975 on average to enable remote working. These figures do not consider any cost savings or emergency funding that may be available.

If this monthly amount is extrapolated over registered charities operating in Stoke-on-Trent with reported income of between £25,000 and £10,000,000 this could represent a loss of income of approximately £1,300,000 per month.

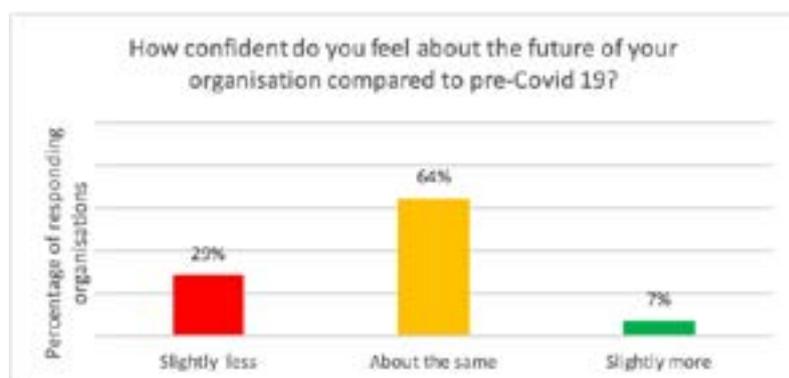
Resource-heavy model of service:

Supporting people one-to-one rather than in groups is more intensive and resource heavy. For those organisations using this model of service delivery it takes significantly more time and they have been unable to deliver the same outcomes in the same cost envelope.

This is further compounded where organisations have dual run some one-to-one support alongside a return to some socially distanced group support.

Building Resilience through Recovery and Restoration

The local VCSE sector response to the COVID 19 pandemic has demonstrated its ability to adapt its approach rapidly in response to need. The response was supported by the statutory bodies across the system but was made more effective by the flexibility and speed with which the sector can act. The VCSE sector, at its heart, aims to support people when they need it.



At the time of publishing, there remains retained confidence in our local VCSE sector. Worryingly however, 29% of the organisations felt less confident about their future and it seems possible that “... we risk losing some brilliant and essential organisations if we do not act deliberately and quickly to create a support structure for local

communities” (Kruger, D. 2020) .

VCSE services need to be nurtured, celebrated, and resourced. Now will be an excellent time to build the VCSE infrastructure to support and enhance the very obvious community assets that have come to the fore through the pandemic crisis.

The VCSE sector will need significant ongoing investment to improve the capacity of groups, organisations and communities to meet the anticipated increase in local needs. In particular, we anticipate increased demand on hardship programmes, more people of all ages requiring emotional and mental health support, families facing crises, alongside issues of staff and volunteer burnout and financial and economic uncertainty across the community and VCSE sector.

The capacity to maximise the impact of neighbourhood support, kindness and compassion within communities and people stepping up to volunteering challenges needs to be developed. This can be achieved with a strategic relationship, where the VCSE sector is an equal partner in decision making and funding is provided for local services and society development.

The VCSE sector faces significant threats to resourcing and organisations have identified that continued cross-sector approaches will be needed to enable sustainability solutions to emerge.

In September 2020 Danny Kruger published his proposals to sustain the community spirit we saw during the lockdown ([Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant](#)). The Prime Minister's response to this report was: "We have seen tremendous levels of voluntary action by private citizens, and of innovation and partnership between the public, private and social sectors. These are critical elements of the social model we want to see for the recovery, and into the future." Continuation of this fantastic response will require adequate sustained resourcing which has not always been forthcoming for the sector historically.

The VCSE sector in Stoke on Trent can be proud of its response to the Covid-19 pandemic through its commitment to the people of the city, its innovative approach to tackling the problems raised during the pandemic and its demonstration of partnership working.

CORONAVIRUS CASE STUDY

GINGERBREAD CENTRE



Homeless families and teenage parents often have the most complex lives and needs which can sometimes result in little resilience. Most of the time, these families and parents can find life extremely hard, for more than 40 years, Gingerbread has been supporting families like these in Stoke-on-Trent.

Residents at both the Rothsay Court and Catherine Court centres had been working hard on a better life, one with more stability and more security. Then social distancing, and the subsequent lockdown, began.

To say that these families have been adversely affected by the Coronavirus pandemic is an understatement. Not only have they lost all face-to-face social contact, limited digital access means that they have also lost vital support from their peers, family, and friends.

The bumps in the road

When it became apparent that COVID-19 wasn't just a simple 'flu-like' virus, and it wasn't going to leave as quickly as it arrived, Gingerbread had to think about the safety of the people around them. All social groups and external meetings were stopped, and hygiene measures were increased across the board.

As the pandemic began making its way across the country, Wendy Hocking, Gingerbread's CEO, put the welfare of the centre's residents, staff, and volunteers first. Those with underlying health conditions were asked to work from home if they could, and to remain at home if remote working wasn't possible. "We didn't wait for them to receive the 'shielding' letter," said Wendy, "We just wanted to keep them safe."

The challenges kept coming; major PPE shortages, an increasing need (and rapidly increasing costs) for home working equipment, the cancellation of fundraising events, and then finding that the Job Retention Scheme wasn't an option due to receiving public funding.

Every Cloud....

"When lockdown commenced, we immediately minimised staff into the residential buildings and put a hold on visitors" Staff could no longer provide the face-to-face support that residents had come to rely on.

Thanks to a grant from the Community Foundation for Staffordshire, Gingerbread were able to provide mobile phones and tablets for both residents and staff so that no-one was completely alone. This also helped residents to access online advice, guidance, and important updates, and to keep in touch with others via social media. Texts, phone calls and video calls replaced the much-needed support for the Gingerbread families, and the activity groups to keep children entertained and engaged were replaced with regular deliveries of activity packs.

"We have found that texting has worked well" said Wendy, "and some residents have opened up more during a phone call, talking about things that they may have found more difficult face-to-face."



Mental health support was needed now, more than ever, and thanks to the Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce, Gingerbread staff received the necessary training to increase the support they could provide not only for their residents, but for themselves and each other.

Gingerbread's appeals saw huge amounts of donations of essential items from vital PPE to food parcels, to baby food and sanitary items, all from generous supporters, local voluntary organisations, and private-sector businesses.

Early June saw Gingerbread, along with two other North Staffordshire homeless charities, secure their share of £130,000 of Government funding to continue supporting homeless families and teenage parents in the city.

Even fundraising was still an option. 'A Night under the Stars,' a camp-at-home fundraiser where supporters had a camping experience in their garden, just for one night, donating what they would have paid in pitch fees to support vulnerable families.

What does the future hold?

There are huge benefits of remote working and virtual meetings, better communication, and increased productivity, but for Gingerbread, it's showed just how much more can be done working this way.

The success of the text and telephone, resident support sessions have allowed more people to open up about their lives, paving the way for a better life with more resilience, stability and security, improving the lives for the Gingerbread families.

Glossary of terms

Infrastructure Organisation (VCSE)	An organisation providing representation, support and advice to the local VCSE sector
Integrated Care System (ICS)	A partnership that brings together providers and commissioners of NHS services across a geographical area with local authorities and other local partners (including VCSE), to plan and integrate care collectively to meet the needs of their population. An Integrated Care System typically covers a population of 3 to 5 million people. There are currently 42 defined ICS areas in England of which Staffordshire & Stoke on Trent is one.
Support Staffordshire	The VCSE Infrastructure organisation providing support for Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations across Staffordshire.
System	Refers to an Integrated Care System (ICS), its geographical area or population.
Urgent Care portal	The place someone can access health care without the need for an appointment. Examples include, Accident & Emergency departments, 999 services, 111 calls and online services, healthcare walk-in centres, minor injuries units.
VAST	The VCSE infrastructure organisation providing support for Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations across Stoke on Trent and North Staffordshire.
VCSE	Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise. Sometimes referred to as Third Sector or not-for-profit.
Vintage Volunteers	A volunteer brokerage project hosted by VAST. Individuals over 50 years of age who are offering time and skills on a voluntary basis are matched with VCSE organisations in Stoke on Trent and North Staffordshire. The aim of the project is to reduce isolation and loneliness and to create a more diverse volunteering offer.