



Voluntary Action
Arun & Chichester

**VAAC – Leading in
response to the
changing needs of the
VCSE in Arun and
Chichester**

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VAAC – Leading in response to the changing needs of the VCSE in Arun and Chichester

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic continues to impact people and countries across the world and the UK is putting in place tougher restrictions as we head into 2021. Even with vaccines to treat coronavirus starting to be rolled out, it is likely that we will be living with social distancing restrictions for many months to come. The virus will continue to influence and shape what we do in our everyday and working lives, and there will be a significant lasting impact on our society, economy and collective wellbeing for the foreseeable future.

The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) has been critical in the response to the pandemic in Arun and Chichester and VCSE organisations will continue to play a vital role as we recover and rebuild, with the need to address the deep inequalities and social issues that have become more visible as a result of the COVID 19 crisis. Many charities across Arun and Chichester are part of the frontline for those in need and have adapted their services to ensure they can respond to changing need. The crisis has significantly affected charities with changes to income levels, how they provide their services, how they work with people and their use of volunteers. The sector has shown a willingness to adapt, innovate, and do things differently, strengthening its relationships and partnership working and improving how resources and information are shared.



A key question for the VCSE will be how we can continue to build on these strengths and not return to the ways in which we have always done things. We know that the crisis will have a lasting impact and that a return to pre-COVID business as usual will not be possible. Charities will not be able to immediately replenish their income even if a 'new normal' is established and services and support is, and will be, in greater demand as so many people have been severely affected by the crisis. Organisations are rethinking what they do, how they raise funds and how



they operate with fewer resources.

Since the COVID crisis began, VAAC has been active in listening, learning and talking with our members, partners and different networks to learn what is happening for them and the people they are engaging with. We have been finding out what the needs are that organisations are having to respond to, and learning about the challenges for both individual organisations and the VCSE as a whole. We have been told what support we could provide and have witnessed where the VCSE has been strong and demonstrated best practice in their responses at this time. VAAC is using all of this learning and insight to shape our priorities and set our focus on how to accompany and support the VCSE in the short, medium and longer term.

The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide an overview of how VAAC has adapted its ways of working and responded to the pandemic.
- Provide a snapshot of the current health of the VCSE in Arun and Chichester.
- Highlight the core issues for the VCSE in Arun and Chichester and identify how VAAC can support an ongoing response that meets the needs and opportunities of the sector and communities that we seek to serve.



2. Overview: How VAAC has adapted its ways of working and responded to the pandemic

2.1 VAAC's experience has been similar to other charities and groups in that it has had to significantly change how it works, bringing both challenges and opportunities. When the first lockdown was announced our staff team quickly moved from the office to working at home. We equipped all staff with phones and learnt how to run meetings and training online, through platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.



VAAC General Networking event, December 2020

Special edition - "Good news stories of 2020"

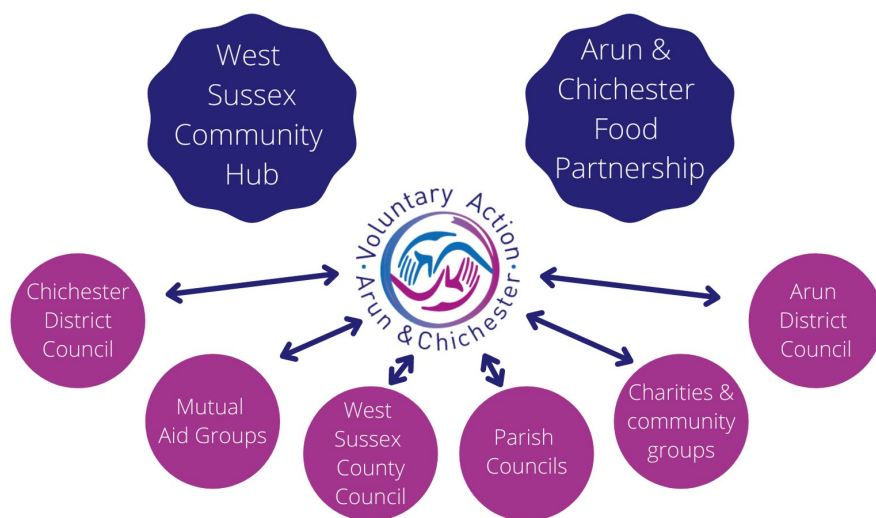
2.2 As a staff team and with our Trustee board, we worked through what this unprecedented situation meant for us as individuals and as an organisation. We looked at the impact on our services and at how we could best support our members through this time. Our staff worked flexibly to carry out work alongside each individual's personal circumstances, talking regularly as a staff team and with our trustees. We took time to socialise together through online quizzes and catch-up chats to sustain morale. Of our two active volunteers, one continued their work and one had to stop. VAAC has remained in regular contact with both volunteers.



2.3 The pandemic led to VAAC increasing its services and staff worked more hours to engage with and support our members. In quarter 1, individual support for groups and organisations increased by 97% compared with the same time the previous year. Of the 114 requests for individualised support, 68% were focussed specifically on responding to COVID. This support included: risk management; GDPR; interpreting government guidelines and identifying how it applied to specific services; crisis funding; the furlough scheme; adapting services to meet client needs; legal and governance; and managing volunteers. 17% of the referrals were from

organisations needing help with identifying sources of funding. In quarter 2, the demand for support levelled out to some extent but there was still an increase of 17% for individualised support. Out of the 88 requests for individualised support, 26% was funding related, and 22% was COVID related.

2.4 VAAC made direct contact with our members, parishes and newly formed groups, such as the Mutual Aid groups. VAAC was part of the West Sussex County Council (WSCC) COVID weekly meetings, and participated in meetings and information sharing with Arun and Chichester District Councils. VAAC collaborated closely on volunteering through the Community hub and facilitating and participating in the Food provision networks in Arun and Chichester.



2.5 The VCSE are well placed to understand the needs of local communities and knowledge of service users has further increased since the beginning of the pandemic. Arun and Chichester Councils have worked with VAAC at the district level to bring in the voluntary sector for a wider perspective and to help support their teams. There are regular conversations with CEO's from the larger organisations to find out how they are adapting and where they have identified new gaps. This partnership working is ongoing and has the aim of supporting the recovery and rebuilding phase together

2.6 In collaboration with Healthwatch, we produced 3 reports which looked at the impact of COVID on VCSE organisations and the wider community and client groups. These reports were informed by a survey that went to the VCSE, to which 44 organisations responded, and in-depth interviews, which were carried out with 32 organisations to capture their experiences and learning at this time. The reports are available on both the VAAC and Healthwatch websites. The reports are supported by in-depth organisational case studies and can be found at the following links: <https://www.vaac.org.uk/news/coronavirus-research>.



2.6 Since moving to remote working we have hosted 24 webinars and events, including our AGM. There have been 341 participants in these events (with some organisations participating in more than one event). The online meetings and events have included: general networking, a CEO forum, a volunteering coordinators forum, fundraising Zoom meetings including a joint session run with Sussex Community Foundation, and training briefings such as looking at Organised Crime and County Lines in partnership with WSCC and 'Life after Lockdown' GDPR policies and compliance.

"It was really good to attend the event and 'see' and talk to other people who are doing the same work as me. I really appreciate the support that VAAC have provided over this year. VAAC have continued to provide excellent resources, training, networking and funding support."

2.7 Communication with the sector and our partners has been more important than ever. We continued to provide information through our weekly e-bulletin, dedicated COVID information on our website, targeted mail and our social media platforms. Our central communication goals were to update the sector on: the different activities that were happening across Arun and Chichester, how the VCSE was responding and adapting, and guidance from trusted sources on steps organisations needed to take to navigate through this time. We promoted crisis funds that groups could apply to through our monthly funding focus and through our weekly e-bulletin.

Getting more information. I have participated in VAAC Zoom calls, Virgin Money webinars and CAF. They are aware of the problems and steps to consider'.

2.8 VCSE organisations have valued connecting with each other and sharing their situations, problem solving techniques and expertise. Regular information about what is happening and changes being made have been hugely appreciated by other providers. Trusted sources of information have been the government, NCVO, VAAC, NACVA and ACEVO and the head offices of membership organisations. Organisations are continuing to have to navigate their way through significant amounts of information on new regulations and to make decisions on what they can do safely.



3. Snapshot of the current health of the VCSE in Arun and Chichester

3.1 The VCSE has been significantly impacted by COVID. Financial stability, solvency and ongoing sustainability are key concerns. Many organisations have predicted being in financial difficulty in 3 to 6 months' time if they are unsuccessful in securing further funding or redefining how they deliver their services. For some charities, the feedback is that it will take years to get back to their pre-COVID position if they continue to do things as they have always done. Some charities report that the losses that have been sustained cannot be absorbed. However for other charities, the furlough scheme has provided some job protection for their staff.



3.2 Some VCSE organisations had to halt some or all aspects of their service provision and it has not yet been possible or viable to restart their activities. Other organisations have seen the demand for their services increasing. The demand for information, advice and direct support has steadily increased from the beginning of the pandemic and will increase again as the various protections come to an end.

3.3 Organisations have had to rethink how they work, plan and manage risk, being adaptable to the changing situation to meet the needs of the people they work with. Organisations have had to innovate and think differently during this unprecedented time.

'We permanently used our judgement rather than experience, it was based on what we think rather than what we know.'

3.4 VCSE organisations have embraced the government's guidelines around social distancing and adopting new ways of working to keep staff, volunteers and service users safe but this has increased costs and impacted on service provision. A key focus across the sector will be to continue to provide COVID safe and accessible services where people are: *'completely happy that they are safe and being looked after.'* Linked to this, the sector has massively scaled up its digital capabilities.



Covid secure measures at the Friends of Chichester Hospitals shop



3.5 Over the next year we will start to see more fully the impact of the crisis on the VCSE. We will know more about what the funding landscape will be. Based on early indications we are anticipating a reduction in funds for commissioned services and generally less funding being available.

3.6 VAAC can confirm that within our membership of 460 organisations, 22 have permanently closed. A further 8 organisations are at imminent risk from permanent closure or are temporarily closed. The groups that have closed were predominately small organisations. The main reasons for closure were a lack of funding or the inability to adjust services quickly in a pandemic. Some organisations have shared with us that within the next year they may need to reduce their service provision, make staff redundancies and in some cases close. Closures will have a significant impact on support available for vulnerable people and the services being made available locally. We are also actively in contact with parish councils who are strongly connected with their local community and have supported a number of local initiatives and groups at this time.



4. Core issues for the VCSE in Arun and Chichester and how VAAC can support an ongoing response.

As a result of the pandemic, the VCSE is more aware of the significant inequalities and needs of its service users, with services witnessing increasing demand within an environment where there is less funding available. While the pandemic has been and continues to be extremely difficult and challenging, many VCSE organisations have identified positive learning, strengthened relationships and developed new ways of working. We need to capitalise on the strengths and the learning from this time for the VCSE to recover and thrive by continuing to innovate, adapt and work together. The following section identifies core issues for the VCSE and sets out how VAAC will respond to each issue:

a. Developing service delivery in response to deepening inequalities:

The joint VAAC Healthwatch report, looking at ways of enabling the VCSE to support people beyond the pandemic, highlighted deepening inequalities across several key areas, with hidden needs and new needs arising. The key areas that have been identified include:

- ⇒ **Mental health:** An increase in anxiety and mental health issues across client groups from young to older people, especially amongst those with existing vulnerabilities.
- ⇒ **Loneliness and isolation:** Loneliness and isolation has increased, particularly among older people, those who live alone and have to shield or isolate themselves
- ⇒ **Unemployment and poverty:** Unemployment levels have increased, with job losses due to the pandemic, and poverty affecting a far wider range of people than in normal times.
- ⇒ **Homelessness:** Higher levels of homelessness have been identified with this expected to further increase as the crisis continues.
- ⇒ **Older People:** Older people have become more isolated through this crisis, as a result of the ongoing restrictions on social contact.

The areas above are interlinked and will affect some demographic groups, such as women, more than others.

How VAAC will support our members:

- Staying up to date with the needs, opportunities and challenges across the thematic areas, linking into key strategic partnerships and networks
- Providing opportunities and platforms for groups to speak about their concerns, issues and vulnerabilities as a way of informing decisions on how services are provided
- Mapping the current provision of services and activities with the aim of ensuring that referrals can be made more effectively to a wider range of organisations, providing the most effective means of meeting identified needs
- Undertaking research, mapping and engagement with ethnic minorities in Arun and Chichester to encourage emerging provision
- Enabling service provision by supporting groups to explore new partnerships with similar or complementary organisations.



- Providing information on the services provided by groups and facilitating links between organisations
- Advertising group needs at the Chichester Chamber of Commerce and Arun Business Partnership.
- Providing one to one support and training in processes, policies and procedures.

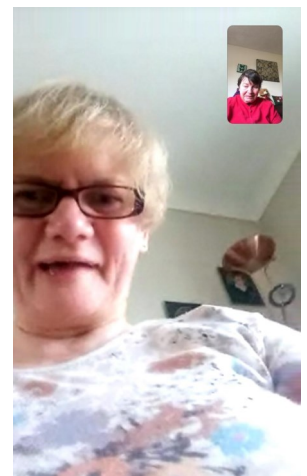
b. Digital inclusion:

Many VCSE organisations have scaled up their digital capabilities, often embracing new technologies such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams working to equip and enable service users to stay connected via the phone or online. These organisations are investing in more training in digital technology and staying up to date as the best way of engaging service users and communities at the current time.

'Digital inclusion is a big challenge for the sector and bringing people online.'

For many organisations, this has not taken away the need for face to face service provision and these organisations stay in contact with clients who are not digitally enabled through physical newsletters, birthday cards and phone calls.

'We also need to bring people together to ensure every one of our members is engaged, including keeping in touch with people who are not internet savvy'.



Apuldram members embracing digital communication

How VAAC will support our members:

- Conduct a Digital Audit for VAAC and update our Digital Strategy
- Invest in digitally upskilling all VAAC staff
- Providing online training to our members
- Staying up to date as the VCSE further explores new technology and uses it to engage communities and service users
- Highlighting projects and funding which will support people in the wider community to positively access technology.

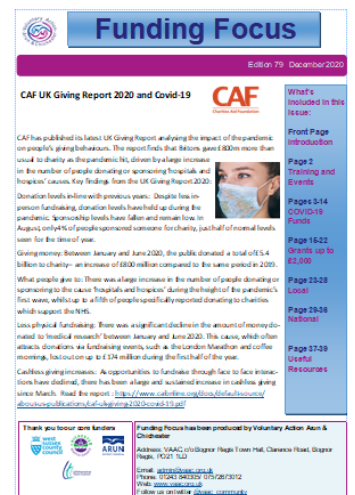
c. Funding

Funding remains a critical issue for the VCSE. Many COVID emergency grants have now come to an end. For smaller charities, fundraising takes a lot of capacity and time alongside the delivery of services. The key issues going forward are what funding is available beyond the short term grants and how organisations can plan ongoing service provision in an environment where there is expected to be less funding available.



How VAAC will support our members:

- Continuing to research and find funding opportunities, and promoting these primarily through the Funding Focus bulletin
- Signposting targeted opportunities to specific groups
- Looking over funding applications and providing feedback on how to strengthen applications
- Continuing to hold funding surgeries
- Supporting groups to carry out online fundraising (gift aid, direct debits, digital channels and marketing)
- Holding online meetings with funders such as Sussex Community Foundation and our members
- Continuing to build relationships with funders and commissioners and promoting the needs and opportunities within the sector.



'I want to say how much VAAC is appreciated with its support and Funding Focus. How it helps local organisations to flourish.'

d. Staff Health and Wellbeing

Staff and volunteers are the VCSE's biggest asset, continuing to provide the bulk of service provision online or by phone from their homes at the current time. Staff and volunteers have been under a lot of pressure due to the competing commitments of work and family life, adapting to the new ways of working, and anxiety about COVID and its impacts. This has led to fatigue and reduced morale for some staff members. It has often been reported that staff have gone above and beyond their remits to meet the needs of their community and service users and continue to do so. In recognition and response to this, organisations have been providing more communication and well-being support for their staff during this time.

'We noted low levels of anxiety amongst many and needed to be mindful as to the impact on our own staff and volunteers.'

'The biggest challenge is keeping up the motivation. We have now assigned people to keep up morale.'



How VAAC will support our members:

- Signposting groups to the Government Job Retention Scheme and appropriate HR support
- Continuing to host the CEO/Senior Leaders Forum to connect organisations across the sector and facilitate mutual support
- Signposting and providing training in staff management
- Promoting information on resources that support positive ways of working and improve mental health and wellbeing.
- Working alongside member groups that specifically support people living with a mental health condition.

e. Partnership working

Organisations have reported how partnerships have strengthened during this crisis with previous barriers being addressed, increased communication, and a willingness to share information and resources. Partnership working is seen as critical for how we address growing inequalities and the challenge of recovering after COVID. The VCSE has the potential to further strengthen how we work in partnership within the sector and across sectors.

'COVID has really given us an opportunity to work together and we need to capitalize on this'.

'Partnerships are a strength across the commercial, voluntary and statutory sector. A strong web of partnerships feed into the culture.'

How VAAC will support our members:

- Establishing local thematic forums or linking into existing forums and with similar organisations to broker 'collaborative partnerships'
- Providing more opportunities for networking, mutual sharing and peer support
- Using different types of media to stay engaged with each other
- Encouraging cross sector partnerships that include the public and VCSE to promote open and honest communication, particularly around what can be done to address priorities and challenges.
- Providing guidance and resources for establishing and sustaining partnerships.





f. Volunteering

During the COVID pandemic, there have been significant new opportunities for volunteering with more people stepping forward to volunteer than ever before, but there have also been significant challenges. Volunteering is a big part of VCSE organisations 'getting back to providing services and increasing resilience' and is a key priority.

How VAAC will support our members:

- Supporting and promoting the role of volunteers
- Identifying the disappointment felt by some existing and potential new volunteers, rebuilding and reframing the image of volunteering and keeping volunteers engaged
- Continuing to communicate with members to see if they need any new volunteers and advertising these opportunities widely
- Supporting groups to be creative in the roles offered, particularly for the over 70s
- Continuing to hold volunteer coordinator meetings
- Providing one-to-one support and enabling groups to take their volunteer training online
- Partnering with REACH to maximise volunteering in our area.



CDC staff volunteering with Stonepillow

g. Local neighbourhood response and asset based community development

COVID 19 saw the setting up of targeted local groups supporting local areas, including through local mutual aid groups, parish councils, churches and residents groups, and this work is viewed as a big strength that has made more people aware of their local community and local needs.

'People have been responding with food for children over the school holidays. We have seen the community and individuals react in a supportive way to meet needs. A lot of it is naturally occurring. The nature of practical support cannot be underestimated. We need to "appreciate their knowledge and ability to deliver."'



'After much reflection we believe that we live in a very caring community, where the elderly and vulnerable are well known and looked out for by their friends and neighbours. We are aware of local informal residents' groups working to help the needy.'

VAAC has also witnessed several new VCSE organisations stepping in to help vulnerable groups. VAAC recognises and supports local community-driven groups and our role is to offer practical advice and information on governance matters minimising risk for the group and those they serve.

How VAAC will support our members:

- Promoting local neighbourhood responses including facilitating discussions and training in this way of working
- Continuing to provide a space for networking with parish councils to share what people are doing locally, in order to problem solve and encourage local initiatives
- Staying connected with local neighbourhood groups and parish councils
- Providing one to one support for newly emerging groups
- Highlighting and sharing stories of local initiatives
- Facilitating partnership connections where appropriate.



Volunteers at Selsey Community Forum food distribution centre



h. Resilience and Sustainability

As well as the challenges presented, there is the opportunity for the sector to think boldly about coordination, support and development, which could lead to a radical re-envisioning of how the sector can better support itself in a changing environment.

'Sustaining your vision for your organisation – It is time to do your mission with everything you have. Being clear on what you are and offering it well.'



How VAAC will support our members:

- Keeping groups updated on government policy, changing guidance and recommendations
- Supporting groups to reflect on the lessons learnt during the crisis - looking at their strengths, how challenges have been overcome, and what can be done differently
- Helping groups to look at their financial situation, undertake financial modelling and prepare a budget that reflects the current organisational climate. Support with change management.
- Providing training and one to one support in strategic and forward planning
- Advocating on behalf of the VCSE to partners
- Offering governance and trustee support
- Providing links to useful resources and information.



i. Communicating what we do

Prior to the crisis the VCSE was often perceived 'as amateurish'. However, the response to the pandemic has demonstrated that the VSC can respond swiftly and can be strategic at a time when the statutory sector struggled to respond quickly and effectively. Unfortunately, there was feedback that the many different contributions provided by the VCSE during the crisis were not recognised by the wider public and some public sector stakeholders.

With many services moving online and less face to face work taking place, there is not always an awareness of what organisations are doing and what services are available during this time.

'We have to provide a constant awareness of our services. People don't look for services until they need them.'

How VAAC will support our members:

- Providing opportunities for networking and for organisations to share what they are doing
- Providing one to one support and training in how organisations can tell the stories of the people they work with and publicise what they do across different media platforms
- Promoting what organisations are doing and advocating on behalf of the VCSE to partners.



Good news stories from VAAC members in 2020 - VAAC social media campaign

In closing

'In addition to the practical support and learning that COVID has brought, we really need to harness and build into the future. Taking stock of where we are now, where we want to be and how do we get there.'

'The VCSE is "here to give hope'. We are part of the solution to recover and rebuild, addressing the inequalities that exist within our communities. We do not know when it is going to end but the sector will keep going. A reality check is important. Everybody needs to provide encouragement, support and communication, working as collective organisations.'

Our role in the coming months is to continue to enable, support and promote VCSE groups across Arun and Chichester in the ways set out in this report.



Chichester District Foodbank



Selsey Community
Forum Tea party



Apuldrum Easter Hat
Parade

Voluntary Action Arun and Chichester

Website: www.vaac.org.uk

Facebook: www.facebook.com/VAArunChi/

Twitter: www.twitter.com/VAAC_Community

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/vaac

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