

RAPID RESEARCH IN COVID-19 PROGRAMME

Sustaining the Resilience and Wellbeing of Frontline Community-based Care and Support Workers during a Time of Crisis

BACKGROUND

Lockdown and the subsequent social distancing measures associated with COVID-19 has meant staff and volunteers working in a range of third sector community-based care organisations have faced a perfect storm of disruption to their activities. These organisations make vital contributions to the care economy, but we know far less about how they have responded to COVID-19 when compared to the health and social care sectors. This project explores how staff and volunteers in these organisations have been impacted by COVID-19, how they have adapted to changing needs in their communities, and how they have sustained resilience in themselves and their activities.

AIMS

This research answers three key questions:

- What were the experiences of staff and volunteers working in community organisations that support older people during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What help did they need in order to be resilient and stay well during the pandemic?
- What have we learned from living and working during COVID-19 that should be taken forward, in order to provide better support to staff and volunteers in community organisations?

KEY FINDINGS

Relationships between community organisations and statutory services

- Many staff members felt that they had been left to 'fill in the gaps' as statutory services withdrew many of their activities. Such organisations focused on their own services with little collaboration with the community organisations working with them to mitigate the impact of these changes.
- Many struggled to deal with issues that would have been referred on to suddenly unavailable statutory services. A lack of integration in planning responses to the crisis meant community organisations were left to adapt their activities without guidance or support from other services.
- Staff in community organisations felt vulnerable regarding their ability to weather a prolonged crisis. Early efforts to meet the needs of clients frequently proved unsustainable in the longer term as staff and volunteers felt overstretched then overwhelmed. Vulnerabilities in relation to declining fundraising and precarious state financial support also exacerbated these difficulties.

Supporting Resilience, Wellbeing, and Staying Well

- Organisations which actively supported staff members to be open about their difficulties had greatest positive impact on staff's ability to manage their own wellbeing and resilience.
- Resilience among staff required supportive organisational cultures, where staff could mutually support each other throughout the organisation and across managerial hierarchies.
- Staff wellbeing was best supported by a combination of staying in contact with peers and team members within their organisation; active and genuine support from their organisational leadership; and increased flexibility to manage their own working practices.

Lessons for the Future

- Current funding models left staff vulnerable to both increased demands and increased precarity in their services. Organisational resilience should be supported by revising funding models.
- Developing models for closer collaboration & dialogue between organisations and NHS, local government and statutory services is required to avoid such problems in any future crises.
- Post crisis trust will need to be rebuilt between statutory services small, local grassroots organisations. An ecological approach to funding and collaboration between the statutory and third sectors can support this rebuilding of trust.

WHAT DID THE STUDY INVOLVE?

The study used qualitative methods to identify experiences of the pandemic so far among staff and volunteers in community organisations. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel (19 20 915).

The research comprised three work packages (WP).

- WP1: Qualitative interviews with staff/volunteers in community organisations for older people.
- WP2: Two Virtual Action Learning Sets (VALS) with staff in community organisations.
- WP3: Website and resource development.

WP1. Semi Structured Interviews with Staff and Volunteers. The study recruited 24 participants from across Scotland, with interviews held between June and August 2020. Interviews provided insights into the experiences of people across community organisations and initiatives. Each participant took part in a remote, semi-structured interview lasting one hour. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

WP2. Virtual Action Learning Sets with Staff. Staff and volunteers from nine different community organisations were recruited to take part in two Virtual Action Learning Sets (VALS), which met remotely between September and November 2020. A total of nine individuals took part. Each VALS meeting lasted 90-120 minutes and involved VALS members briefly presenting a problem to the group before being questioned about the context, background and assumptions contributing to that problem. Participants then identified steps to address the problem itself. VALS meetings were recorded and reviewed by the project team to capture key semantic information and observations.

WP3. Website and Project Resources. The project created a website and accompanying resources to support staff in their response to the pandemic. Resources were designed to reflect themes developed during WP1 and WP2 for organisations facing similar challenges. Ongoing resources will also be added to this website.

These outputs are available at <https://community.memoryfriendly.org.uk>.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

This report details three major themes derived from the data. These relate to; factors supporting staff resilience; wellbeing and staying well; and impact on support systems and services.

Supporting Resilience during COVID-19

- Despite facing significant challenges, the efforts of community organisation staff during COVID-19 had a profound impact on the extent to which older people felt supported during lockdown, alleviating their experience of social isolation or hardship in the early months of the pandemic.
- Resilience was seen as a group effort where peers who are working towards a shared goal can rely upon one another during times of struggle. Participants were united in their expectation that they would return to previous levels of productivity after COVID-19, with many suggesting that the lessons learned during the pandemic would improve services going forward.
- Staff resilience and wellbeing depended upon the extent to which their organisation made consistent, genuine efforts to support them. Successful methods of supporting staff included: encouraging staff to communicate their struggles; responding to staff empathetically; recognising the need for flexibility; adjusting expectations and encouraging staff to set boundaries on their working practices and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Wellbeing and Staying Well during COVID-19

- There was a significant distinction between the ways in which participants discussed their emotional, physical, or mental wellbeing and the strategies and practices they used to stay well. This is particularly important as it provides an opportunity for organisations to support their clients, by actively encouraging and facilitating their staff.
- Participants who felt accommodated for any reduced performance or increased distress discussed their organisation more favourably and were more likely to feel valued and supported.
- Individual strategies to maintain wellbeing involved engaging in proactive behaviours such as seeking out positive activities, spending time in nature, reaching out to colleagues, working flexibly and engaging in new or established hobbies. The second strategy involved 'restricting' activities, including limiting exposure to stressful or upsetting situations, reducing news intake and reducing time spent on social media. Both strategies had a significant impact on how well staff and volunteers were able to meet the expectations of their organisation.

Impact of COVID-19 on Older People's Support Systems and Services

- Participants reported a sudden shift in the landscape of care and support in the community following the announcement of lockdown on 23rd of March. The character of this change varied across the 13 local authorities the organisations of participating staff were based within, but often included reduced or lost contact with statutory services, loss of access to Allied Health Services such as audiology, podiatry, and dental services, and disrupted contact with local authorities and national organisations. Several participants felt that they were being required to fill a void caused by clients being unable to access statutory services, without access to the resources, funding, knowledge or skills needed to do so.

RAPID RESEARCH IN COVID-19 PROGRAMME

- Community-based organisations changed radically during the pandemic, being forced to move from routine and stable activities to more fluid, flexible and responsive ways of operating. Such changes could be categorised as ‘adaptations’ if existing services were replicated online with as much fidelity as possible, and as ‘transformations’ requiring drastically new modes of operation, or the creation of entirely new activities. Adapted services included shifting from face-to-face social gatherings to remote meetups or telephone befriending. Transformed services replaced face-to-face gatherings with food delivery, laundry services or morale raising activities such as delivering fish-and-chip suppers. However staff were acutely aware that such transformed services were stop-gaps that could only ever partially meet needs and were inferior to the face-to-face relationships built over years, but which were decaying under pandemic conditions.
- Smaller organisations that were able to work in more fluid and responsive ways managed better than larger organisations that were more rigid and rule-bound, at least in the initial stages of the pandemic. Such organisations could be more person-centred in ethos and practice, more active in supporting their staff and responding to their needs and could communicate rapidly across organisational hierarchies. However some smaller organisations also lacked the organisational back-up (e.g. indemnity protection) or specialist knowledge about how to adapt their services when compared to larger and more well-resourced organisations. Some smaller organisations also described their activities being supplanted by larger organisations (such as charities) who had received emergency response funding from the Scottish Government or statutory bodies.
- The rapid shift from face-to-face to remote services introduced logistical and interpersonal challenges. These included; a lack of access to necessary technologies; a need to rapidly develop greater IT literacy to enable working from home or remote engagement with services or insufficient support/training to enable staff and volunteers to perform safely and effectively in their new remote roles, particularly if they provided intensive telephone support. Organisational challenges included lack of co-ordination and resulting repetition of activities between organisations, and absence of pandemic specific support and oversight to the community sector.

WHAT IMPACT COULD THE FINDINGS HAVE?

- These findings highlight an existing person-centred organisational culture within community organisations, as participants who felt more supported and valued were ultimately able to maintain their resilience for longer despite the pressures of the pandemic.
- The findings also emphasise the importance of taking practical, pragmatic steps to address older peoples’ literacy with and access to technology as services increasingly consider maintaining online activities after the pandemic has passed.
- The research has illustrated a gap between community organisations and the wider economy of community-based care during pandemic conditions. Smaller community organisations play a vital role in this economy but have faced significant and in some cases existential challenges during the pandemic. To ensure these organisations can survive the remainder of the pandemic greater communication, dialogue and co-ordination with statutory services provided by the public sector are required. Online methods such as the VALS’s used in this project provide one means through which such dialogues can be created. In an exemplar of such dialogue, the two VALS’s created during this project have chosen to continue to meet beyond the life of the project.

HOW WILL THE OUTCOMES BE DISSEMINATED?

Alongside the project website and resources detailed above, findings will be shared through briefings for practitioners, policymakers and academic journal papers and conferences. Findings will also be disseminated to organisations participating in the research, and to third sector organisations through the network of Third Sector Interfaces (TSI's) as well as through organisations supporting third sector and community organisations such as the Life Changes Trust.

CONCLUSION

This research provides a valuable insight into the lived experience of staff and volunteers who were directly involved with supporting older people during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, our findings highlight the importance of facilitative person-centred organisational cultures, cognisant of the different strategies available to support staff and volunteer wellbeing during times of crisis. Our findings also demonstrate a significant, ongoing decay in the networks which bind small local organisations to national organisations, health and social care and statutory services which support older people in the same geographical area. Indeed, we suspect that these weakened or broken connections will have a direct negative impact on older people in Scotland. If they are not prioritised and addressed in a meaningful way this decay will have a profound impact on community services and relations as we move into the next phases of the pandemic. To repair this decay going forward, statutory agencies should move towards adopting an ecological approach which recognises the specific social, political and economic environment in which the third sector operates.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The study ran from June 1st to November 30th 2020 and received £38596 from the Chief Scientist Office.

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