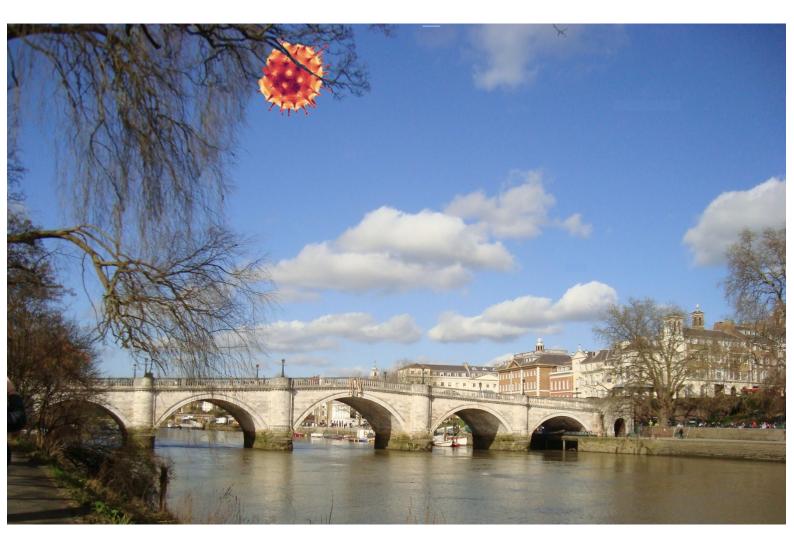# Covid-19: Impact on Voluntary Sector Communications and Engagement

Report Summary and Overview

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RCVS Community Communications and Engagement Survey Summary

We wanted to understand the impact of the coronavirus epidemic and consequent restrictions on the engagement environment. We also wanted to draw out positive learning and understand whether it was possible to mitigate negative impacts. A representative sample of 43 voluntary and community organisations took part in our survey* with an estimated reach of between 8,000 and 15,000 clients or members.

What we found

- Organisation and groups used a wide range of communication methods and continued to represent a very effective way of engaging with a range of residents. This included community members typically seen as hard to reach.
- Activity and work were significantly affected because of effect of the epidemic on members and client engagement.
- Some organisations were adapting to use newer engagement methods such as videoconferencing, however there was potential for broader use.
- Uneven uptake of newer communications and engagement technologies and methods was primarily due to cost and learning barriers. Consequent on this there was a need for investment in equipment and training.
- We found a need to ensure that some of those who use local services and participate in organisations have access to appropriate technology and support to use it, to limit an increasing risk of digital exclusion,
- Non-uniform progress toward adoption of newer communications solutions highlighted a potential for mechanisms to facilitate self-help and mutual learning between organisations and groups, so "levelling up" is supported.
- The Survey confirmed a need to maintain existing engagement, mechanisms even though newer technologies can contribute towards their use.

In summary, the survey demonstrated.

- A global negative effect on organisations and groups resulting from the effect of the epidemic on their communications and engagement.
- The need to invest in equipment and training within the local sector to realise potential benefits that newer communications technology has created.
- Potential for mechanisms to facilitate mutual learning and share good practice
- A need for continued investment in existing methods.
- The strength of the voluntary and community sector as a potential communications and engagement channel for all stakeholders.

Looking forward

- There is a need to use the learning that the epidemic has created to improve the experience of members and clients of organisations or groups.
- It is also important for the voluntary and community sector in Richmond upon Thames to explicitly recognise its role in reaching local people which statutory sector organisations sometimes have difficulty engaging with.

Overview:

Richmond upon Thames has over 8,000 voluntary and community organisations which reach into and impact the lives of most local residents.

Richmond also has high levels of volunteering which is mobilised through the voluntary sector.

In common with other communities, many organisations focus on people who are more vulnerable through health and care needs or inequality, whilst others concentrate on supporting Richmond's physical, cultural and spiritual environment.

There are fewer organisations in the borough specifically focussed on the needs of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic people than many London boroughs. This is due to a lower proportion of the community who identify as BAME than in some boroughs as well as historic reasons.

Why Communications and engagement matter

The ability to communicate and engage effectively with clients, members and other partners is a critical, but sometimes under-recognised component of the success of the Voluntary Sector in Richmond. It supports a range of activity, from maintaining relationships with members and delivering front line services through to managing and coordinating organisations and groups.

New technological infrastructures, particularly fixed line internet and mobile phone networks have evolved rapidly over the last 10 years. This has accelerated development of platforms which use the new infrastructures and which could support communication and engagement by groups and organisations. New platforms have potential to displace older platforms, for example the use of email has largely displaced printed media for some uses.

To meet its' needs the voluntary sector and local groups use varied communications and engagement platforms as well as face to face contact. These include print media, telephone networks, email, social media, web based platforms and video-conferencing.

The Limitations of Technology

The newer technologies and platforms have limitations. They are in a process of evolution and their use creates additional financial and learning implications for organisations/ groups and local residents. In addition, they do not always represent the most effective or appropriate means of communicating and engaging.

There are also risks in investing resources in digital platforms. Not only are they are in a state of evolution and flux, but also their uptake is not universal.

National surveys underline this*

- 7% of UK households remain without any internet access.
- The most financially vulnerable are particularly excluded:
  (29% live in households without internet access, 12% have fixed-line telephone only, and 2% don't use any form of telephony, preventing access to text messaging, video or even telephone.)
- Internet non-users are disproportionately disabled, women, and aged over 75.

Furthermore, digital technologies require that people have skills and abilities to use them that are not universal

On a national level

- An estimated 1 in 6 adults in England and Northern Ireland have "very poor literacy skills" with approximately
- Approximately 10.7 million people in the UK have limited or zero digital skills,
- Over 79% of all digital exclusion is among those aged 65 and over
- Only 51% of households earning between £6000-10,000 have home internet access compared with 99% of households with an income of over £40,001

<**> see last page for links to some national information on digital exclusion

The Community in Richmond upon Thames

A greater proportion of the community in Richmond upon Thames is advantaged compared with some other London communities. This is so across several measures. That however is only a general picture.

The borough has a high proportion of older people along with inequalities of wealth and areas where there are significant levels of deprivation. These create risks in an epidemic which has been seen to affect marginalised communities and older people disproportionately.

The immediate impact of the Epidemic

The onset of the Coronavirus epidemic presented organisations and groups with a dilemma. Whilst many mobilised to support the most vulnerable in the community, the need to limit social contact disrupted almost all organisations' and groups' engagement with client's members and other partners.

This initially prevented most normal direct work and created a need for those who could use telephone or digital mechanisms, to focus exclusively on those ways of interacting and working. That, in turn, created problems which were felt by most, but not all organisations. The full report provides more detail on the way that groups and organisations were affected.

Where we are now

Development of vaccines and a mass vaccination campaign have created potential for a return of face-to-face engagement during 2021.Allowing for venues to risk assess, reopen and confidence return, this may not happen until summer or later, Limitations may remain, until it is clear that vaccinations reduce risks sufficiently.

Even if, by Autumn, Coronavirus presents no more risk than seasonal influenza, the pandemic has changed people's expectations and the engagement environment through increased use of videoconferencing and other digital technologies.

This in turn has accelerated the evolution of videoconferencing platforms as well as other IT based communications, engagement, and service platforms. That uptake and evolution has helped some people who previously had difficulty accessing or being involved in organisations and groups, to access them, but it is not so for all.

Where to next?

At a national level, the epidemic itself and its management has shone a light on inequalities across the country and the importance of effective communication and engagement to achieve objectives. It has also increased the risk of digital exclusion adding significantly to the tally of inequalities that can affect local communities. This was a pre-exiting trajectory and one that we believe will continue.

There is, a need for organisations to invest time and resource in understanding developments in the use of videoconferencing, other digital methods, and their uptake if they wish to reach the widest range of members or avoid excluding clients.

Organisations and groups vary in their needs, size, and capacity, so this must be approached in a proportionate way.

The epidemic and this survey make the necessity for maintaining older ways of communicating and engaging with members and clients clear. They remain vital

There is a national drift towards "digital where possible" and a risk of digital inequality affecting the members or clients of organisations more broadly. To help to minimise risks to members or clients, organisations could consider providing support where possible. For example, through providing access to affordable equipment and training as well as providing additional support, advocating for those who need that and encouraging statutory sector organisations to do the same.

Lastly, groups and organisations need to recognise their role as an asset to statutory sector stakeholders who wish to connect with a diverse range of people in the local community. Our surveys suggest most people who live in Richmond are likely to be in contact with a voluntary sector organisation at some point in the year

What practical steps are possible right now?

- Develop a strategy to engage with members and clients in a way that is right for your group or organisation and involve members and clients in that work
- Understand how your members and clients can engage and want to engage
- Use a range of methods where you have the capacity to do so
- Try new methods where they could work for your group or organisation.
- Ensure you have access to support if you try new methods
- Ensure your members or clients have support when they need it
- Advocate for clients or members to help minimise systemic digital exclusion
- Talk to other organisations and share learning
- Try to identify funding or funding opportunities where there are costs involved
- Check back with members and clients to understand how they think it is going

Recovery Sentiment

Lastly we wanted to share the results of our later recovery sentiment survey we recently conducted with participating organisations and groups.

There was some optimism, but a significant amount of caution. Slightly under 50% of organisations expect to be back to normal by early summer, a larger number by early Autumn, but half feel it will be late Autumn or 2022.

2. When do you think your group or organisation will be be working at a normal level of activity and engaging with your members and clients normally? (if it already is, please select the first option)

More Details

- 🔵 Before July
- 🟠 Before September
- 🟢 Before December
- 🔴 After December

Thanks

We thank all those who took part in our survey and those who we discussed it with. We hope their contribution will help to support recovery, strengthen local organisations and Richmond's engagement and involvement environment.

(*) Survey conducted using Microsoft Forms using path branching to maximise information generated. Some questions were not mandatory.

(**) links relating to digital exclusion.

- ONS Exploring the UK Digital Divide
- University of Cambridge, Coronavirus, "Pay the wi-fi or feed the children"