



**November COVID-19 survey:
Open Responses Introduction and Overview**



Introduction

The November survey gathered further information from charities about the impact that COVID-19 was having on them. The survey included a two part open question

Q8a Earlier you told us about how COVID-19 and the restrictions were affecting your charity. OSCR is very keen to provide the charity sector with an opportunity to share its experiences, frustrations and successes in response to the pandemic.

Please use the text box below to tell us what you have learned and we will share it anonymously with other charity sector support bodies, and the Scottish Government.

Q8b In your view, what should OSCR and charity sector support organisations be doing to help your charity overcome the challenges that it faces because of the pandemic? Are there any other factors that you wish to bring to our attention?

2,548 charities participated in the November survey, of these 1,583 charities completed Q8. Most charities completed both 8a and 8b, others completed one but not the other. This has given a great deal of data but it is messy, partial and fragmented in short sentences, bite size comments and some more substantive responses, covering a broad range of subjects and with a fair amount of crossover in responses between 8a and 8b. The greatest number of open responses referred to financial matters and/or Annual Returns.

There is no one typical charity. They are diverse and individual, and though some have the same purposes, or geographical location or type of income their experiences of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are varied. There is no single narrative here but many thoughts, reactions, comments and things they have learned which have identifiable themes such as finances or how they adapted that are useful to cross cut the data and pull together to show the differences of both the impact and the response of Scottish charities to the pandemic.

We told the charities that 'Your Voice Matters' and this qualitative analysis draws together what charities were saying behind the figures given in the statistical analysis of the survey. A rapid review of the responses was completed to understand what the charities were saying in response to both parts of the Question 8 identifying layers of different subjects and themes.

The aim of this analysis is to help show what was happening behind the statistics in the survey, contribute to an understanding of the COVID-19 impact on the sector and identifying the challenges that are to come, to underline the diversity of the sector and the variation in charities experiences. Specific requests for help and support from OSCR and charity sector supporting organisations and what charities told us they learned have been collated in separate documents and are cross cutting in themselves.

Each of the cross cutting themes combines the responses from both 8a and 8b. Each theme is given as far as possible in the words of the respondents, with extensive use of quotations but without the use of quotation marks as this would disrupt the text. Key points made by multiple charities have in places been drawn into a summary statement. The voices of the charities are also given without interpretation or inclusion of assumptions, consequently there are places where something said may be unclear or leave a gap. The data was anonymised and anywhere within the responses there were identifiable features they have been removed or replaced by generic terms to preserve anonymity. Boxed text are quotations.

Many charities said they found the advice published by OSCR and other charity sector supporting organisations helpful and for most of these updates of the guidance and advice from these sources were sufficient and appreciated at the time of the survey.

However many more had other things to say and the findings attempt to capture a sense of charities experiences, frustrations and successes in response to the pandemic, and in their view what OSCR, charity sector support organisations, Scottish Government, Local Authorities and independent funders should be doing help them overcome the challenges that they were facing in November 2020 and into the future.

Findings documents

The full findings are set out in six separate documents Funding and fundraising, How charities adapted to the pandemic, What charities learned, What charities asked for help with, Places and spaces, and Volunteers and Trustees. There are links to each of these in the Overview of findings below.

Overview of findings

Funding and fundraising

More charities told us about their experiences and worries about income than any other subject. Their experiences were varied across types of income stream and across different sizes and types of charity. The income streams included grants, trading, and fundraising. The most frequent request for help to find funding sources, including a central hub that identified possible and new sources of funding.

Emergency funding

Some charities told us they were grateful and appreciative of the emergency funding that had been made available during the pandemic up to November. It had enabled them to continue to operate, and for some to cover core running costs. Conversely, some charities said they were struggling financially and there was wide spread loss of income across different types and sizes of charity. Some charities' responses said they felt overwhelmed by the information about emergency financial support, finding it complicated and confusing.

Grants

A lot of charities said that grants were too restrictive and did not cover their range of needs. Many ask for a relaxation of funding terms and requirements and that they be allowed and trusted to use their discretion to use the funds as required. Many also ask that funding applications be made simpler and the payments made faster. The adaptation and survival strategies of charities was also creating new and different funding needs. There were requests for OSCR and charity sector supporting organisations to bring this to the attention of grant givers and to work with them to ensure that funding is going where it is most needed.

New grant seekers

There were a lot of charities who told us about seeking funding for the first time to cover loss of income. These charities usually generate their own income but the restrictions were preventing these activities. Mostly they needed to cover core running costs for staff, delivering services, utility bills, buildings costs, rent, communication costs (IT/telephone/Broadband), provision of health and safety equipment and materials (screens/hand sanitiser/PPE/ cleaning), getting accounts done, and restart.

Generating income

The impact of restrictions on income generation was widely felt. Many charities said they would usually generate their own income from donations; membership subscriptions; fees for classes and activities; sales from cafes and tickets; trading; fundraising activities; and events. Some charities said there was an urgent need for restrictions to be relaxed, or better still ended, and for clear guidance around fundraising and income generating activities. While some charities were thinking about how they could continue operating other were looking for ways to restart. The needs varied across both types and sizes of charity, but whether they had kept going or had been inactive, in November there were concerns being expressed about the viability of quite a number of charities without the ability to generate income.

[Go to Funding and Fundraising](#)

How charities adapted

Despite the widely felt impact of restrictions most charities across Scotland told us how they adapted in some way to support their beneficiaries and meet the needs of their local communities caused by the pandemic. Probably what people would be most aware of was the way charities adapted to meet the urgent needs for food within their local communities but there were many charities that adapted to the needs of their beneficiaries that were not necessarily visible, or only to a few. The scale of these operations might have varied to some extent by need, location and the ability of charities of different types and sizes but they were unswerving in their commitment to do what they could, and even those who said they were closed or unable to operate found ways of maintaining contact with their beneficiaries.

The most consistent problem and frustration that charities had with restrictions was the lack of clarity in how they applied to their own charity and the frequency with which they changed. Many charities said that the biggest problem was keeping up to date with unpredictable, complex and frequently changing advice. They found decision making was often overturned at the last moment, making changes to comply with social distancing restrictions took planning, time and money that were obsolete before they were used, and it was very difficult to keep up with the guidelines in how to keep people safe while working.

Meeting the needs of their local communities

Some charities became involved in running foodbanks, provided shopping and prescription delivery services, delivered meals to support to people who were isolated, vulnerable or shielding. Other charities also told us they adapted and diversified into new types of community support programmes and projects that had brought charities and communities together by taking action to provide support and maintain communication with people who were isolated, vulnerable or shielding. Some were multitasking whilst others focused on an aspect that they could deliver, for example: offered befriending to the lonely; dog walking; meeting for coffee; doing frequent phone calls to find out how people were coping; supporting people just home from hospital; provided packs of essentials to households; issued 'shopping vouchers' to people in need; held virtual events and activities; provided fresh produce to community larders; adapted coffee shops to provide take away services; gift parcels to those in isolation; and a focus on fuel poverty. Some charities linked up with community groups and other charities to identify needs, plan and deliver this support.

Going online

The single greatest impact of the pandemic and restrictions on almost all charities was going online. They adapted to using online platforms for communication that facilitated the delivery of services, operation of the charity, maintaining contact with beneficiaries, generation of income and providing activities; this change was wide spread though with variable degrees of success. The need to adapt was recognised by many charities across Scotland for two key reasons: as essential to the support, mental health and wellbeing of their beneficiaries, volunteers, staff, trustees and the public; and to ensure the future of their charities.

The extent to which charities found the move to online activities successful was highly varied both between types of charity and between the same types of charity. Some charities found there were limitations or barriers to going online. One of the main issues for charities was the exclusion experienced by some of their beneficiaries. There were several reasons for this including: lack of access to IT equipment; lack of IT skills of charity and/or beneficiaries; poor network connection; inability to meet the cost of connection; and there were some activities that just do not translate easily or well to online platforms.

Many charities told us they used online platforms for trustee/committee/Board meetings and that some found there were additional benefits to this; used various platforms to maintain contact with their beneficiaries; the restrictions also catalysed going online and working from home for some charities; some adapted to generating income online; and some charities said they would continue to use these tools in the future, though there are issues that need to be addressed.

The way that charities adapted was not all about going online or communication. There were others that told us about ways they had adapted spaces for restriction compliant use; the way they worked; met diverse needs; and developed charity facilities.

[Maintaining contact](#)


Although 32% of charities that responded to the November survey told us they were not able to operate or were closed it appears that almost all of them were in fact trying in various ways to maintain contact with their beneficiaries, staff and volunteers even though they could not provide their usual services or activities. Some charities told us about the importance of maintaining communication with their members and/or volunteers. As seen above many charities went online but some found there were limitations and barriers to the use of online platforms. Where this was the case they found other ways to maintain contact including phone calls, text messages, paired walking, emails, letters, cards, newsletters, amateur radio, local radio and TV. There were even occasional benefits, as one charity told us that keeping in touch with each other had made them a stronger group; and another that they would continue to use phone calls to service users after restrictions ceased.

[Go to How charities adapted to the pandemic](#)

[What charities learned](#)

Most of what charities told us they learned relates to how they were able to adapt and operate in the face of the pandemic and the restrictions that were in force, but they also learned things about their charity, their staff, their volunteers, their beneficiaries and their communities.

[Beneficiaries](#)

 We learned how important we were and how much of a difference we made to the lives of families when the pandemic struck and our two key programmes were almost halted overnight. It probably took the arrival of the pandemic and for us to take a step back to realise how much of a difference we were making and how these programmes brought such a positive impact on our client group. We are now trying to accommodate a large number of clients who we had arrangements with in 2020 into our 2021 schedule.

Charity operations

💬 We have learned that we can all work from home and save on office costs. We are able to involve more of our partners in meetings to share learning and develop the workforce that supports carers and young carers.

Public benefit

💬 We learned the importance of working within the regulations to deliver some form of experience (we are an environmental education and conservation charity), and the wider wellbeing benefits of us having a presence 'on the ground' in regard to physical and mental wellbeing.

Flexibility

A number of charities told us what they learned about the need for flexibility; and how essential it was in adapting and being able to respond to the pandemic restrictions both within charities and within the sector.

Communication

Several charities shared what they had learned about communication; about the need for and impact of communication on trustees, volunteers, staff, beneficiaries, donors, funders, local authorities and other charities.

Resilience

Some charities shared what they had learned about being resilient in a pandemic: planning, adapting and financial management help, but it also involves people.

Charities also told us what they learned about going online, grant funding and generating income.

[Go to What charities learned](#)

What charities asked for help with

Most of the requests for help specific to OSCR related to the Annual Return, guidance and regulatory processes. Requests for help from OSCR and third sector support organisations included: advice and guidance; linking and sharing; communication; training; and for lobbying and raising awareness around the essential work of charities and the need for immediate and future funding.

Funding and fundraising

The most frequent asks were for help with

- identifying/finding funding sources including new sources of funding
- a central point/hub that identifies possible sources of funding
- making funding applications easier

There were requests for OSCR and charity sector supporting organisations to bring the attention of funders to the adaptation and survival strategies of charities which are creating new and different funding needs, and to work with them to ensure that funding is going where it is most needed.

Linking and networking

A number of charities asked for help with making links and opportunities for networking to share experiences and resources. These included a networking service to help facilitate cross charity cooperation, for example, charities with properties could assist others who need to find alternative venue due to their Local Authority hall being closed or those with kitchens could assist with making meals for local elderly people; or larger charities with greater assets in terms of staffing and technology could be encouraged to support smaller volunteer dependent organisations in the same field.

Advice and guidance

Many charities asked OSCR and third sector support organisations to provide up to date information on restrictions with advice and guidance on how restrictions apply to charities, risk assessment and getting ready to restart.

Some charities asked for advice and guidance to help with risk assessments and understanding health and safety measures for staff/volunteers/users. They asked for guidance on rules and restrictions for charities including building use and management, hosting activities and events, and working with volunteers.

Training

There were many requests from charities for help with training, most were for digital and IT training. These requests included training for online meetings, delivering activities, charity management and technical support. Other requests also asked for help with grant applications.

Raising awareness and lobbying

Charities asked OSCR and third sector support organisations to keep highlighting to Government, Local Authorities and funding bodies that there are many different types and size of charities, some of which had not been able to access funds or grants, and advocate for ongoing sectoral support. They also asked for regular communications from government about funding sources.

They asked for help to lobby and influence government to trust and respect the third sector and communities enough to take care of their community and their buildings; to highlight the value of the third sector and ensure governments are bearing in mind charities often take up the slack in communities where government agencies don't provide a full range of services or support; and the need for the work they do to support individuals and communities, which they have continued to provide during the pandemic.

[Go to What charities asked for help with](#)

Places and spaces: supplementary

There were many responses from charities about the closure of a wide range of buildings and the issues this raised including loss of income, impact on beneficiaries and other charities, and lack of funding which gave rise to this supplementary section to Funding and Fundraising.

Many charities told us their buildings were closed and the reasons given for this were mixed. Some were not closed but their usual user groups were not running sessions/group activities. A few were open but struggled to function due the restrictions. A few were open but their purposes had changed, for example they had become foodbanks, or were using their kitchens to prepare food for vulnerable people. What was consistent was their loss of income and the need to meet core running costs to maintain the usability and the fabric of the building.

[Go to Places and spaces](#)

Volunteers and Trustees: supplementary

Some charities told us about their volunteers and a number told us about their trustees, who are also volunteers. What charities said about their volunteers and trustees was as widely varied as their experiences of adapting, funding, what they learned and their requests for help. This supplementary section is made up of relevant extracts from the main findings documents with the inclusion of specific additional comments from charities about their volunteers and trustees.

Whilst a few charities experienced a big increase in the number of people volunteering others told us that they did not have enough volunteers to operate as usual even when restrictions allowed. They told us about the outstanding contributions of their volunteers to support beneficiaries; and about some of the difficulties that impacted volunteers. Charities also shared some of the things they learned about their volunteers and trustees and their thoughts on what they might do in the future.

[Go to Volunteers and Trustees](#)

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