



CROYDON'S VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR (VCS) THE POST COVID-19 RECOVERY ROLE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Croydon's experience of partnership working during the Covid-19 outbreak has invited a reappraisal of service-provider roles, with particular regard for the agility shown by community-based organisations in responding to urgent needs and their underlying causes.

1.2 Post Covid-19, the need for innovation will remain a priority, with Council budgets being squeezed and established ways of working becoming outmoded. The imperative to find customised solutions to meet new challenges will pose key questions - who can deliver best in the new environment and how will resources need reallocating to secure better outcomes for local residents?

1.3 These questions have informed a growing consensus at Croydon's Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) meetings that a *shifting of resources* is needed in order to apply the Covid-19 lessons to the socio-economic challenges following in its wake. This briefing will be taken to the LSP and the Council/CCG leadership groups convened - one exploring *Collaboration Opportunities*, the other a *Prevention Framework*. The briefing sets out to capture – through a sharing of their experiences and an analysis of the strengths these voluntary and community sector organisations (VCOs) exhibited during lockdown - what it is about them that made for such a dynamic response to the crisis.

1.4 The aim is to inform Croydon's commissioning intentions through an understanding of what does and doesn't work in tackling the root causes of food poverty, social isolation, economic hardship and health inequalities – in all their complexity and interrelatedness. The challenge presented for Commissioners is to find the agility shown by VCOs during the crisis in implementing strategies for change.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 CVA convenes a Chief Executives Support Group that, since lockdown, has been meeting online to share information on organisational responses to the crisis. This briefing was informed by a series of telephone conversations with a selection of frontline VCS service-providers active on the group. It provides a snapshot of their experiences and captures the combination of relationship-building and community connections that has characterised the wider VCS response to Covid-19.

2.2 We asked our VCS partners to consider how their experience of dealing with the immediate problems of food poverty and social isolation will inform how they cope with the demands an economic recession is likely to make on their services. The strengths they identified, that enabled them to respond so quickly during the crisis, reveal VCS ways of working that define the scope for preventative work in, for example, tackling health inequalities. They are summarised here under three headings – the integration of specialist and universal services; a twin-emphasis on self-management and mutual-interest; and general VCS characteristics. But if one reason for the VCS'

effectiveness was needed it can be given in straightforward terms: the focus is always on the people – not the service, the system or the provider.

3. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

3.1 During the crisis, the key VCS characteristics that have stood out include innovation in trying new things, flexibility in working around guidelines and adaptability in using technologies to provide services differently – as well as the agility in responding quickly. Here are some examples:

Croydon Vision - had to use its audio-tools to translate government letters for people with sight-loss before providing a daily shopping service, a telephone service for information and advice, weekly facebook activity-events - *“During a social group call I created a virtual Bedford Hall in my mind. It removed the idea of being alone to feeling connected with others”* - a regular lunch service, a befriending service and home visits to assist people digitally excluded (this *Bricks and Clicks* policy will shape its future response – a contingency of retained services and new, online activities).

Croydon Mencap - in providing people with IT hardware and then tutoring them, has formed new relationships during lockdown with family members. Enhancing their support service, this has taken Croydon Mencap’s family support to another level. The Members of Clubs @ Leslie Park (people with learning disabilities) and their families, have been provided with personalised on-line and regular telephone support by their key support workers during Lockdown. Croydon Mencap is now seeking funding to enable these support staff to continue this close support once Clubs @ Leslie Park re-opens.

Off The Record - set up a series of Young People Webinars with practitioners leading workshop discussions on family relations, insomnia, domestic violence and bereavement, backed up by a Saturday morning phonenumber; their sports psychotherapist has created video clips and other online resources to support young people remain physically active – targeting young refugees and asylum seekers some of whom have had traumas reactivated by the lockdown.

Croydon Drop In (CDI) - are treating the self-isolation that has isolated young people from their peers, disrupted their education and exposed them to parental tensions as an *adverse childhood experience*, using new technologies to deal with more cases of self-harming and suicide ideation.

Crisis - has shown how VCS responsiveness can extend to swift and radical reappraisals of what’s needed. Influenced by the emergency operations to shelter rough sleepers, Crisis is shifting its resources towards a rapid rehousing approach that replaces the short-termism of hostel provision with wrap-around support to end street homelessness.

Age UK - helpline calls went up six-fold during the crisis and with many of these requiring a level1 signposting response team-members were swiftly trained up on the helpline to meet the demand. Showing their adaptability, staff carried out Level2 casework across a range of non-complex issues, connecting people up with specialist partners where necessary.

Home-Start Croydon - all volunteer-led face-to-face sessions (i.e. the 1-1 home visiting and group-based support) were paused, with the staff team working from home. Volunteers responded to the lockdown by continuing to support families who are struggling to manage growing tensions by telephone and online (e.g. Zoom, WhatsApp). Volunteers and staff are also now delivering food and toiletry packages and furniture items.

4. SELF-MANAGEMENT AND MUTUAL INTEREST

4.1 With preventative work inviting individuals to take control and responsibility, the relationship-building carried out by specialist VCS staff and experienced volunteers is key. Any hint of prescription by or dependence on the professional is a reverse - the emphasis is on each person plotting and navigating their own pathway to independence. But self-management is not achieved through self-sufficiency alone, with VCOs operating at two levels – both supporting individuals to do things for

themselves and connecting them up to peer-support networks. The mutual interest found in peer-support often results in a coproduction of activities addressing health, employment and community safety concerns. The part VCS service-providers play in this process involves listening and enabling, as part of an asset-based approach that makes the most of people's skills and the community's natural resources.

4.2 Two examples are given below, one tracing self-management, the other mutual interest:

RASASC's therapists, in responding to the post-lockdown incidence of sexual violence, will remain systematic in their use of an empowerment model that requires the woman to make contact, take decisions and make choices; and uncompromising in giving the person-centred approach enough time (one year minimum) to address underlying issues. Specialist staff bring unique insights into the experiences women go through; the strategies needed to find a focus on the underlying issues; and the processes women need to follow in regaining control.

CDI's Young Peoples Participation Group (YPPG) has 13 – 19 year olds with their own WhatsApp group who benefit hugely from the peer support this provides. They play an integral part in CDI's planning and delivery - group members are invited to join the CDI recruitment panels, to have a permanent place on its Board of Trustees and to assist with policy-making and consultation around the charity's strategies. The YPPG takes a lead on CDI's fund-raising activities, most recently at the annual Walk & Talk completing their own 5k Fun Run. The YPPG was responsible for writing and publishing CDI's *I'm Fine* booklet (A Guide for parents/carers about young people's mental health); has continued to meet weekly via a facilitated Zoom session, and is now delivering on an arts project, designing and making their own life story clay pots.

5. SPECIALIST AND UNIVERSAL

5.1 In customising services to the individual, VCOs show flexibility in achieving an integration of specialist and universal services. In combining the clinical with the holistic and the therapeutic with the physically active, VCOs rely on multi-skilled staff-teams to find ways of making their offer work for each individual. This holistic approach has served VCOs well during the crisis in responding flexibly to people's needs:

Croydon Mencap's Active Life service is provided flexibly over the weekend and evenings and designed to provide people with more choice and control by taking a specialist service into normal community facilities offering a range of leisure and other activities. Their integrated service model facilitates a personalised approach, with Croydon Mencap's support for people with learning disabilities extending to benefits advice, activity clubs, peer-support networking and volunteering.

CDI's therapeutic offer is now fully integrated within a health improvement programme using environmental and physical activity – surrounded by advice on benefits, housing and school exclusions, as well as advocacy for asylum-seeking families.

Good Food Matters supports schools to address mental health issues by running activities that enable young people to spend time outside, getting fresh air and growing things.

Music Relief, set up to mentor artistic young people, has created a peer-support group for parents dealing with their children's anxieties, who are also struggling to cope with financial hardship and the pressures of home-working. Its specialism aside, Music Relief's grassroots appeal is built on the empathy and trust both young people and parents feel in relating to the organisation, having built up special rapport with both staff and volunteers. Their wide community connections make grassroots groups like Music Relief accessible to local people and can result in cases of domestic violence and human trafficking (county lines) being opened up.

Age UK moved much of its work onto a digital platform during the crisis, but the blending of its specialities – covering healthy lifestyles, financial advice, falls etc – is based on the culture of adaptability across its staff-team and the experience of volunteers.

Croydon Vision has focussed during lockdown as much on physical and mental health as on eye health - *“A big thank you to all staff and volunteers befriending us, delivering cooked meals, with a desert, and assisting isolated people to get some essential shopping. I feel truly loved and not forgotten!”*

Croydon Hearing has had more contact (by telephone) with its clients than ever before, talking through with people how to do things for themselves in relation to hearing loss, but also spending as much time on isolation, depression and their broader learning needs.

6. VCS SERVICE MODEL

6.1 The twin-emphasis on self-management and mutual interest and its blending of services into an holistic offer is what lends the VCS service model so well to preventative work achieving longer-term outcomes. But putting it into practice requires versatility on the part of VCS staff-teams, empathy and self-experience from volunteers and a deep grounding in partnership working.

6.2 The overused words, passion and commitment, are hard to replace in describing staff like those at **Good Food Matters** who explain their response to Covid-19 in simple terms - “We knew that we had to feed people, that if local community groups did not step up families would go hungry.” VCS working conditions are conducive to thinking out of the box and staff who are willing to be flexible, take calculated risks and improvise new ways of working can thrive. The close relationships with people in the community provide the perfect opportunity to listen to beneficiaries and use the learning to make service improvements. **Off The Record**, in planning their post-Covid 19 response, are asking young people directly – what are your priority issues and what support do you think you are going to need? Not knowing, in this respect, acts as a strength – and admitting they don’t know is considered by many a VCS staff-team as the crucial first step in finding customised solutions.

6.3 Where appropriate, volunteers can bring their life experiences into working relationships. For example, the volunteers at **Croydon Vision** have taken the lead since lockdown on their online social groups, building on strong relationships developed over time to invite discussion and peer-support networking on the key challenges Covid-19 has presented for people with sight-loss. One remark made about volunteers - “they never tell me what to do” - captures how volunteers place power with the individual by being creative in trying things out and using discretion to adapt services to suit each person’s needs.

6.4 As we move into the recovery period most VCOs know that in order to cope they will need to cooperate. **Croydon Vision** has been collaborating with partners that it was previously forced into competition with. Collaboration enables VCOs to provide rounded services and a large, household name charity like **Age UK** values partnering grassroots groups in Croydon, recognising this as the best way to extend their community reach and pilot new ways of working. The **Good Food Matters-Revivify** partnership has resulted since lockdown in 250 hot meals every week being distributed through the Fieldway Family Centre, Salvation Army and New Addington Baptist Church.

7. COMMISSIONING

7.1 This briefing has outlined VCS ways of working that, so prominent during the Covid-19 crisis, might inform the resetting of local service models designed for prevention. These nimble, agile and flexible ways of operating recommend themselves to commissioners who may themselves be encouraged to take more risks - by investing in trusted VCS service-providers trying out new

solutions. More adaptable commissioning models may help to sustain services capable of demonstrating the agility and impact shown by Croydon's VCS during the crisis – when overly prescriptive, they stifle the improvisation that has enabled VCOs not only to meet needs quickly but to trial new ways of meeting challenging outcomes.

7.2 In the new climate Commissioners taking a preventative approach will be looking for projects that can be tested, evaluated and, where proven to be effective, upscaled to reach more people. The newly formed Youth Futures Foundation's (YFF) grant-making programme has been designed to *make radical changes that transform lives and lead to lasting impact*. Their commissioning intentions are well captured in the section from the prospectus inviting bids for Development Grants supporting *larger scale delivery and/or external evaluation* on which the YFF works with VCOs *for an initial one – two year period to strengthen the design, delivery, scale and reach of the programme*. The YFF then goes on to conduct a thorough assessment of the VCO's support needs covering:

- *core funding to provide capacity for you to deliver improvements*
- *support to develop a robust theory of change connecting your activities to outcomes*
- *support to collect meaningful data on user-friendly recording systems*
- *peer learning, enabling a journey to independent evaluation*
- *bespoke training and support led by us and partners*

7.3 In resolving that both parties, by the end of the initial period, will reflect on the relationships developed and the progress made before further support is considered, the YFF is taking a longer-term preventative approach to the management of its £90 million investment.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 National attention is focusing on the financial crisis UK charities have been plunged into by the Covid-19 crisis. The squeeze on local government finance and the restrictions on VCS fundraising activity will combine to make generating new income a challenge for the largest charities, not to mention the smaller, grassroots organisations.

8.2 In this context the arrangements made locally for *shifting resources* – to ensure that people's needs are met while preventative solutions are being found – are of crucial significance to VCOs that, in delivering community-led services, can have such a key role to play in tackling health inequalities and mitigating the impact of economic recession.

8.3 This report raises the need for a new Prevention Fund in Croydon. Its purpose would be to support VCS projects that *make radical changes that transform lives and lead to lasting impact*. Project plans, following the YFF model, would pass through a series of stages in being considered initially as pilots and then for longer-term investment. The new Fund will play to the VCS strengths shown to such significant effect during the Covid-19 crisis. Using the learning from Croydon's experience the Fund will support VCOs working in 'nimble' partnerships, without being bound by too rigid a set of contractual dos and don'ts. Equally, the Fund will have an in-built evaluation system agreed from the outset. The emphasis will be on qualitative as much as quantitative evidence, with the working principle being that longer-term investments are made strictly on the basis of demonstrable impact being made by the service on people's lives. These investments will be made through the phased 'shifting of resources' from mainstream budgets.