



Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) -  
Summary of the Board's Discussion July 2020  
**The Volunteer Response to the Covid-19  
Pandemic**

## Introduction

1. The urgency of the initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic quickly brought the City Council and its voluntary and faith partners together to meet rapidly emerging community needs.
2. As the city moves into what is hoped will be the first phase of recovery from the pandemic, members of the Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board agreed it would be timely to consider an early evaluation of the voluntary sector response during this extraordinary period.
3. The intention was to explore how our organisation and its partners might use the lessons learned from this experience to build resilience, agility and responsiveness in the sector.
4. Members wanted to better understand how partners can work together to meet ongoing and future community needs, as well as seeking assurances that the city is well positioned to respond effectively to any future outbreaks of Covid-19.

## Evidence and Information Considered

5. The Chief Officer for Communities presented a report to the Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board on 9 July 2020.
6. The report set out the work which Leeds City Council, Voluntary Action Leeds and other organisations undertook to respond to community need in the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.
7. The full report can be found [on the committee's calendar page](#) which also includes a link to [the webcast of the meeting](#).

8. The following representatives were in attendance to participate in debate, share their experiences, and to respond to Members' questions and comments.

- **Cllr Debra Coupar**  
Executive Board Member
- **Cllr Helen Hayden**  
Scrutiny Chair, Adults, Health & Active Lifestyles
- **Shaïd Mahmood**  
Chief Officer Communities
- **Martin Dean**  
Area Leader
- **Vic Clarke-Dunn**  
Programme Manager Service Transformation
- **James Woodhead**  
Head of Commissioning Integration
- **Rachael Loftus**  
Head of Regional Partnerships
- **Richard Jackson**  
Voluntary Action Leeds
- **Gary Blake**  
Voluntary Action Leeds
- **Debbie Fawthrop**  
Aireborough Voluntary Services to the Elderly (AVSED)
- **Ailsa Rhodes**  
Older People's Action in the Locality (OPAL)
- **Shanaz Gul**  
Hamara
- **Vicar Richard Dimery**  
Pudsey Parish
- **Bernie Gahan**  
Leeds Mencap

9. During its deliberations the Board acknowledged that discussions would be based upon initial reflections about an unprecedented period of challenge and change, and that the process of evaluation in cooperation with partners will continue to evolve.



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## **Deliberations and Conclusions**

7. Board members were unanimous in their desire to put on record their thanks to Leeds City Council officers and their voluntary and faith partners, for the enormous effort, energy and hard work during the first months of the pandemic.
8. Councillors also reflected upon the wider community and neighbourly activity across the city which complemented the formal operation of volunteer hubs.
9. Voluntary representatives present described the collective pandemic response as “the hardest thing we’ve ever done” but equally said it was “a privilege to have been part of.”

### Strong Existing Relationships

10. The strength of existing relationships between the Council and the voluntary sector was a recurring theme throughout the Board's discussions and it was agreed that this provided a solid foundation upon which to build the emergency pandemic response.
11. One participant explained “we were not just used by the Council, we were true partners.”

**The Board recognises the strength of existing partnerships as an asset for the city, which should be maintained and developed.**

### Introducing New Structures at Pace

12. With the coronavirus lockdown creating a distressing situation for many people, particularly with regard to food and medical provisions, the structures to co-ordinate the voluntary sector response were introduced very quickly.
13. The Council and its partners were faced with a number of logistical challenges during this process. For example, representatives from VAL outlined the challenge of identifying, with little notice, suitable organisations to lead local hubs to provide coverage across all 33 wards.
14. Other challenges included:
  - Faith organisations having difficulty accessing national financial support, creating severe financial pressure.
  - Participants described “vast amounts of information” coming from a range of sources in the first few weeks.
  - There was lack of awareness in some instances of the role of local organisations and the mechanisms for local referrals.
15. Irrespective of these challenges anecdotal and initial comparative evidence suggests Leeds was a national leader in terms of the speed at which it established voluntary arrangements to support the needs of the population.

### Local Leadership Meeting Local Need

16. The Board concluded that the experience of the pandemic reinforced the importance of place based leadership. Delivering bespoke solutions



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- through local partners better enabled support services to respond to the needs of individual communities.
17. This included being able to tailor food provision to meet varied cultural and dietary needs, as well as responding to family size. In Leeds local services ensured an effective response in this regard.
18. In contrast, the quality and targeted delivery of food within the national programme of food parcels was reported to be inconsistent. Significantly, the system unable to accommodate variations in dietary requirements even where medically required by shielding individuals. The evidence from the experience in Leeds suggests that in the event of a future outbreak central support would be more effectively delivered via locally established routes.
19. Representatives from the voluntary sector drew attention to the effectiveness of allowing their organisations to “do what they needed to do” to meet the needs of the communities they were best placed to understand. They welcomed the support for a “bottom up” approach to the response effort from the Council.
20. Voluntary organisations also acknowledged the speed at which funding was directed by the Council into the Covid-19 response. While not removing the extreme financial pressure the organisations found themselves under, having a commitment to a degree of support at the outset of lockdown gave them the confidence to deliver support services more rapidly.

21. Members were advised that service delivery through trusted local organisations – be they statutory or third sector – appeared to play an important role in ensuring support was accessed and accepted within communities.
22. The locally led approach resulted in stronger and wider relationships developing across the voluntary sector. This was a trend participants reported they would like to continue to develop.

**Local place based leadership resulted in better outcomes for communities and should be central to any future model of co-ordinated voluntary arrangements.**

**The CV19 response has resulted in voluntary networks evolving, strengthening and expanding. The Board regards this as a huge asset for the city.**

#### Scale of the Volunteer Response

23. The volume of volunteers engaging with the response effort was of national significance. Approximately 8,000 people signed up to express interest in volunteering in Leeds.
24. The Board noted the importance of maintaining levels of engagement in volunteering to support ongoing need.
25. The local engagement with volunteering reflected a level of community spirit that should be celebrated. However, the scale of the response also presented a



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challenges for organisations attempting to manage those expressions of interest.

26. Ensuring systems are in place to assist partners in responding to large scale volunteer engagement would be, in the view of the Board, a significant tool to reduce pressure on organisations in the case of a future outbreak.

**Options should be explored to assist with the management of large scale volunteer engagement to relieve pressure on organisations in the event of a future outbreak.**

**Local volunteers should be retained and developed.**

#### Understanding Activity within the Structure

27. While much of the discussion focused on Tier 2 community care volunteers, the meeting did consider Tier 1 and Tier 3 activity. For example, the Board explored the way in which the Council's Business Support centre had facilitated the confirmation of the DBS status of 485 volunteers in order to enable them to undertake tasks such as transporting people to urgent medical appointments, enter people's homes or collect pensions or prescriptions.
28. Members were advised that the Council played an important role in co-ordinating infrastructure to support various initiatives such as producing identification badges for volunteers.
29. Members discussed the proportion of volunteers that had been supplied to other organisations and had assisted in

programmes such as the Age UK Hospital to Home scheme, Forward Leeds and the Leeds & York Partnership Foundation Trust.

30. The Board explored the neighbourliness cited as central to the successful provision of informal volunteering throughout the city, and noted the guidance and support provided to those engaging in this activity through channels such as social media blogs.
31. Particular attention was given to the local response to food provision. The local structures set up were highlighted as an example of real achievement, given the partnership work involved and the way in which volunteers and re-deployed council officers came together to make the system work effectively.

#### Transitioning from Emergency Support

32. A key concern for the Board was the transition period for many organisations from the levels of support being provided at the peak of the response, often outside an organisation's traditional area of expertise, to a situation where at least some of those organisations can move back to focusing on core activity.
33. However, it was acknowledged that there remain high levels of demand for ongoing support. The pandemic response has also revealed additional, often complex, support needs amongst individuals who were not previously accessing services. Such cases often involve mental health referrals.



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34. Voluntary organisations anticipate further referrals in the autumn as financial support schemes such as the furlough programme and mortgage holidays cease, and the effects on the economy are not clearly known. One voluntary representative said their organisation anticipated higher levels of demand for two years, with particular advice likely to be required around employment.

35. Autumn will also see many volunteers returning to work and increasing numbers of re-deployed Council staff returning to their substantive posts, thereby reducing capacity in the system to meet demand.

36. There is therefore a balance to be found which enables the city to sustainably meet the needs of its most vulnerable citizens whilst also supporting voluntary organisations to focus on their

core activity.

37. In considering the need for long-term sustainable funding it was noted that the Council is also awaiting clarity over future Government funding. However if full Government funding is not available the Board recommended that the Council should assess where the additional funding could come from to maintain this valuable and possibly essential service to our residents.

#### Shopping Services

38. Shopping services were a central function for many voluntary organisations involved in the pandemic response.

39. A number of representatives identified national challenges with arrangements for priority online shopping deliveries. For example, national advice to use online shopping where possible combined with a confusing process for registration for priority status led to a large proportion of people not being able to access online delivery slots. In Leeds only 40% of those advised to register have done so. As a result many people who could otherwise have been self-sufficient in terms of food provision found themselves reliant on alternative, locally provided services.

40. The Board welcomed the fact that regular feedback has been provided to Government about these concerns.

41. Another issue raised was an inconsistency with pre-paid vouchers. Some organisations reported no problems. However, another described

**Voluntary partners must continue to be supported by the council as they transition from a position of emergency response to a sustainable model of service delivery.**

**Complex needs, especially around mental health have been revealed through the Covid-19 response effort and should be reflected in plans for future locality based support.**

**The Council needs to develop a policy to determine how they might fund these voluntary arrangements in the current financial situation where they may need to prioritise certain expenditures over others.**

**The success of the current voluntary arrangement is dependent on funding being devolved from the Council and the importance of ensuring the funding is made available is essential.**



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adopting the relatively high risk strategy of paying for shopping and then seeking reimbursement from service users due to ongoing problems.

**The Board supports ongoing dialogue with Central Government to ensure that if access to online shopping for certain groups of residents is to be maintained in any future spike, then this is prioritised.**

**It might be worthwhile the Council engaging with local supermarkets directly to ensure they understand the flexibilities that may be necessary to meet any future pandemic. They can in turn ensure that their Head Offices are aware of the flexibilities that each store needs to have based on current demand and need that became apparent throughout the pandemic.**

#### Emotional Impact for Workers

42. The Board appreciated the frank accounts of those present in recounting the personal experience of the pandemic response. This was a sustained period of pressure, often involving very long hours, dealing with vulnerable people with some very complex needs. In addition the areas of highest demand were communities where lockdown compounded challenging issues associated with persistent long-term deprivation and inequality.

43. "No-one could have work harder or tried harder" said one representative. Another described their impact on staff of seeing service users with whom they had

worked closely pre- pandemic falling ill and in a number of instances dying.

44. Members highlighted the wellbeing of those involved in the sector as a priority and suggested that securing the right transition arrangements in the recovery period would be an important part of helping to support staff and volunteers to adopt increasingly sustainable working arrangements going forward.

**The health and wellbeing of those working in the voluntary sector must be a priority for the Council and its partners as they work to establish a more sustainable model of co-ordinated voluntary arrangements in Leeds.**

#### Working with Central Government

45. Board members expressed concern about the levels of engagement with central government and the risk of 'unintended consequences' where discussion had not taken place with local leaders before the issuing of national advice.

46. While it was noted that voluntary sector representatives had been able to exert some influence in relation to a number of policy announcements, organisations described "working around central systems not with them" in order to coordinate activity locally.

47. In preparing for future outbreaks the Board recommended reiterating the importance of effective dialogue with Government to share 'lessons learned' with a view to jointly improving outcomes in the event of another lockdown.



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**Dialogue with central government should emphasise the importance of facilitating locally delivered solutions to meet community needs wherever possible.**

**The Board would like to re-visit this topic in November 2020.**

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