

**SEVENOAKS DISTRICT – VOLUNTARY SECTOR BAROMETER SURVEY  
PEOPLE & PLACES ADVISORY COMMITTEE – 30 NOVEMBER 2023**

**Report of:** Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer People & Places

**Status:** For Information

**Also considered by:**

**Key Decision:** No

**Executive Summary:** The cost-of-living crisis has affected individuals and households and the Voluntary Sector Forum were keen to learn more about the impact of rising costs on voluntary sector organisations in the Sevenoaks District. The Voluntary Sector Forum was established to enable voluntary sector organisations to maximise their potential to benefit Sevenoaks District residents so we know how important the health and sustainability of the sector is.

We therefore undertook a third barometer survey in June - July 2023 (the two earlier barometer surveys were undertaken in May and September 2021). This time we aimed to track the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the voluntary and community sector in the Sevenoaks District. This report presents the findings of the survey, and, where possible, compares and contrasts findings with the two barometer surveys from 2021.

**This report supports the Key Aim of:** The Sevenoaks District Community Safety Partnership Plan and Community Plan

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr Lesley Dyball

**Contact Officer(s):** Kelly Webb, Ext. 7474

**Recommendation to People and Places Advisory Committee**

- a) To note the contents of the report

**Recommendation to Cabinet**

## **Introduction and Background**

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the voluntary and community sector both nationally and locally. The cost-of-living crisis is affecting individuals and households and we wanted to learn more about the impact on voluntary sector organisations in the Sevenoaks District.

Sevenoaks District Council established the Sevenoaks District Voluntary Sector Forum in April 2020 as a response to the pandemic. The Forum continues to thrive and these barometer surveys help to more formally outline and then discuss the impact of both COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.

In May 2021 and then again in September of the same year the Forum undertook barometer surveys to quantify the impact of COVID-19.

The Voluntary Sector Forum, chaired by Chris Munday and Julie Philips, agreed to undertake a third barometer survey in June/July 2023, to track the continued impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the voluntary, community sector in the Sevenoaks District. A slightly revised set of questions were agreed with some comparisons and contrasts remaining between this third survey and the earlier two.

The result of this survey provides a sample of the sector's health and the impact of the cost-of-living pressures in the district and provides information for the Council, Kent County Council (KCC) and others including decision makers and potential funders. Appendix 1 is the report that will be circulated for this purpose. Note the use of the VS Forum's newly created logo.

Kent-wide VCSE Chair & Director of Grants and Impact at Kent Community Foundation, Natalie Smith, also added a question (question 16) relating to strategic and infrastructure support. The responses will be used to help inform the delivery of the KCC Infrastructure Fund (see paragraph 10 for more information).

Citizen Space was used for this third survey and was extremely easy to navigate both for the set up and those completing the form. Previously, Survey Monkey had been used.

## **Survey results**

There were 10 responses (the Forum usually has between 12 and 20 organisations regularly attend) as compared to 17 responses for the September 2021 survey and 26 responses for the May 2021 survey.

Whilst similar themes from the May 2021 results remain prevalent, there seems to be emerging the need for the Voluntary Sector Forum to provide the sector with links to support, guidance and training on:

- Demand for services. The demand for many of the services being offered by the voluntary sector has increased as a direct result of the impact of the cost-of-living on the individuals and households.
- Volunteer & staff recruitment and retention.
- Support with leadership development.

- Increase in running costs: there has been an increase in cost of insurance, consumables, venues, energy and staff has impacted significantly with some organisations closing services that are no longer financially viable.
- Fundraising: regular donors from the past have stopped or reduced their regular donations. Competition for funding has increased. The funding available is mainly short-term and this does not support long-term sustainability.

These results and the above areas have been shared with the voluntary sector and will be discussed at a future Forum meeting. We will continue to use the Forum to work on any identified opportunities or challenges.

It should be noted that the Council continues to support the voluntary and community sector in the District through the provision of its Community Grants scheme, the Local Strategic Partnership Community Wellbeing Fund, funding available through the UK Shared Prosperity Funding, Community Safety Partnership grants and Service Level Agreements. The Council regularly shares funding opportunities with the sector and is running two free Funding Information events. More recently, KCC has awarded grants to organisations to deliver Kent-wide initiatives as part of Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Funding. The Forum invited these organisations to present at their September session and links are being forged and developed to help support the District's voluntary sector with mentoring, funding, volunteer and staff retention, business development and training. The answers to all the questions (including the strategic support focused one – question 16 – see paragraph 6 above) have been shared with the Kent-wide VCSE to assist with the development of appropriate support, guidance and training.

## Results in detail

Set out below are the results for each question. Where the question was also asked in the May 2021 and/or September 2021 Barometer Survey, all answers are included for comparison purposes. The questions are grouped by theme:

- Objectives – Questions 1 and 2
- Financial Position – Questions 3 to 5
- Impact on Services – Questions 6 to 8
- Key Issues – Questions 9 to 15
- Strategic Support – Question 16
- VS Forum – Questions 17 to 20
- AOB – Question 21

### Objectives – Questions 1 & 2

**Question 1:** What impact has the rising cost of living had on how you can achieve your organisation's objectives? Please note that the earlier two surveys in May and September 2021 asked: What impact did COVID-19 have on your ability to meet your objectives?)

	May 2021	September 2021	June/July 2023
No Impact	7.69%	11.76%	10%

Moderate Impact	23.08%	23.53%	60%
Significant Impact	69.23%	64.71%	30%

**What impact has the rising cost of living had on how you can achieve your organisation's objectives?**

- Harder to retain staff. More residents in need and struggling to pay rent and fees.
- We are seeing a reduction in the success of grant applications, and also a reduction in the number of grant applications we can apply for as more funders are asking for applications that focus on the cost of living.
- Existing funding rates frozen at best but the costs of delivering the service continue to increase and demand continues to rise significantly.
- We are winning a smaller proportion of funding bids. If we are successful we are securing part-success which doesn't always help us deliver. Competition for funds has increased. We are seeing increased costs of delivering services. In fact we have had to close services that are now no longer viable due to increases in consumables, energy, labour.
- Regular donors from the past have either stopped or reduced their regular giving to ad hoc.
- Fewer appropriate grants - focus is much more on specifics to do with costs of living.
- We are having to work far harder to recruit volunteers and raise funds.
- More competition for funding pots. Short term funding does not support long term sustainability. The demand for our services has risen.
- The rise in cost of living has impacted everything we do, with people having to be more careful than ever about spending funds and considering whether parents would be able to afford particular activities

**Question 2:** Are you able to meet your objectives set for 2023/24? (Earlier two surveys asked: Are you able to meet your objectives set for 2021?)

	May 2021	September 2021	June/July 2023
Yes	42.31%	70.59%	70%
No	15.35%	29.41%	10%
Other	42.31%	Option Not Provided	20%

**Financial Position - Questions 3 to 5**

**Question 3:** What was your financial position between September 2021 and now (June/July 2023)?

	Financial Position Pre COVID-19	Financial Position March to	Financial Position October 2020	Financial Position May 2021 to	Financial Position between

	(Asked May 2021)	September 2020 (Asked May 2021)	to May 2021 (Asked May 2021)	September 2021 (Asked September 2021)	September 2021 and June/July 2023
Healthy	50%	34.62%	30.77%	52.94%	20%
Moderate	46.15%	61.54%	57.69%	41.18%	40%
Poor	3.85%	3.85%	7.69%	5.88%	20%
Other	0%	0%	3.85%	Option Not Provided	20% no answer

**Question 4:** How have rising costs impacted your organisation meeting your core costs (e.g. rising utility, rent and staffing costs)?

- Significantly higher utility costs
- Much higher staff costs
- Much higher maintenance and development costs
- Increase in venue rents
- Forced to look elsewhere to obtain additional funding to meet increased costs.
- We are using reserves to cover deficits.
- Volunteer turnover is higher as volunteers cannot give a much time or need to find paid employment.

**Question 5:** What impact has the cost of living had on your ability to raise income through fundraising and grants?

No impact	20%
Moderate impact	50%
Significant impact	30%

**Please share examples and confirm that you would be willing to talk about these as part of a future Voluntary Sector Forum:**

- We have restarted our Fundraising works as a result of the increase in costs.
- There is still funding available and we were recently successful in our bid for funds to replace all our computers/IT - this has in turn made us much more efficient and better able to cope with the rising demand for our services. We were able to approach new funders and access short-term funding for very specific projects: covering the start-up cost of our online service; the cost of supplying singing masks for the return to in-person sessions.
- We have managed to get some Lottery Funding to combat loneliness and isolation to run a valuable new project during lock down which was of great benefit.
- Labour costs higher, competition greater, funders offering part-funding, funders focussed on lots of short term initiatives which doesn't help sustainability. Less public funding so fewer donations.
- Trusts and foundations application have gone through the roof in terms of applicants. e.g. one trust has informed us that they have funding for 20 applications and receive 400- 500 applications.
- There is more competition for funds from other organisations, which may be seen as providing more fundamental services.

- Finding appropriate specific grants is harder.
- Local businesses have either ceased trading or are finding things more challenging so cannot support local charities in the same way.

**Impact on Services – Questions 6 to 8**

**Question 6:** To what extent have you modified your services because of the increase in cost of living (since September 2021)?

	To what extent have you already adapted your services because of COVID-19? (Asked in May 2021)	To what extent have you modified your services because of the ease of restrictions (since April 2021)?	To what extent have you modified your services because of the increase in cost of living (since September 2021)?
Not at all	3.85%	5.88%	50%
Made moderate changes	30.77%	41.18%	40%
Made significant changes	57.69%	52.94%	10%
Other	7.69%	Option Not Provided	Option Not Provided

**Please tell us about the main adaptations you have made:**

- Our core model gives us the flexibility to easily reduce/increase services as funding allows. We have seen an increase in families seeking access for support and have increased grant applications/fundraising to help cover costs to keep up with demand. This also allows us to easily reduce costs during more quiet times so that funds are not wasted when we have a quiet week.
- Focussed on 2 key areas of delivery and closed specific services.
- It is not appropriate to impact our disabled participants - we have to absorb the costs and generate more funds ourselves to ensure we can continue to provide the levels of opportunities we can in the timeframes we have.
- The demand for our services is increasing so adaptations have focussed on how we control or mitigate costs. We reviewed our building with landlord to look at works to improve insulation and reduce heating costs. We installed VOIP to reduce telephone costs.
- Reduced hours that helpline is open.
- Now only have part-time staff.

**Question 7:** In the period since September 2021 with the increase of cost of living what demand on your service have you experienced?

	In the period since April 2021, when restrictions have eased, what demand on your service have you experienced?	In the period since September 2021 with the increase of cost of living what demand on your service have you experienced?
A decrease	17.85%	0%
About the same	35.29%	40%
An increase	47.06%	60%

**Question 8:** What is the expected demand on your services over the next 12 months?

	May 2021	September 2021	June/July 2023
A decrease	0%	0%	0%
About the same	19.23%	29.41%	20%
An increase	80.77%	70.59%	80%
N/A	0%	Option Not Provided	Option Not Provided

**Key Issues – Questions 9 to 15**

**Question 9:** Have you found that your clients have changed what they are looking for and wanting from your service?

	September 2021	June/July 2023
Yes	23.53%	50%
No	76.47%	50%

**Please state examples.**

- Not sure about the connection, but I feel we are seeing more complex cases and seeing younger infants.
- Many more people desperately looking for ways to increase their income - more benefit checks requested and more demand for help to apply for non means tested disability benefits as a way to increase income.
- We are receiving more crisis calls from people in mental distress. We have seen significant deterioration in mental health resulting in increased suicide attempts,

suicide ideation, anti-social behaviour and increased substance abuse as well as increases in safeguarding issues.

- Service users are still seeking emotional support and key issues remain the same but heightened due to the impact of the cost of living.

**Question 10:** Where service users' needs have changed what impact has this had on your organisation in terms of new issues to address?

	September 2021	June/July 2023
No Impact	50.00%	20%
Moderate Impact	42.86%	60%
Significant Impact	7.14%	0%
Not Applicable	Option not provided	20%

Please state examples particularly those that you would be willing to share at a future Voluntary Sector Forum.

- We have started a listening service for families that need additional support as they transition to becoming a new family.
- We fund children whose parents cannot pay any or all of the cost and the higher the cost, the more children fall into the category. This clearly has an impact on what we can plan.

**Question 11:** What has been the impact of cost of living on the digital exclusion of your clients? (Note the September 2021 survey asked What has been the impact of COVID-19 on the digital exclusion of your clients?)

	September 2021	June/July 2023
No impact	25%	60%
Moderate impact	25%	30%
Significant impact	50%	0%
Not Answered		10%

**Question 12:** Has there been a change in the number of people who volunteer for your organisation in the last 12 months'?

	May 2021	September 2021	June/July 2023
Decreased	53.85%	52.94%	40%
Stayed the same	34.62%	35.29%	30%
Increased	11.54%	11.76%	30%

**Question 13:** As a leader/manager within your organisation, what has been the impact of recent months on your own mental wellbeing?

	September 2021	June/July 2023
No Impact	23.53%	20%
Moderate Impact	58.82%	60%
Significant Impact	17.65%	20%

**Please share with us if you are able to meet your own emotional and physical wellbeing AND any examples of how you do this that you would be prepared to talk about at a future Voluntary Sector Forum.**

- As part of our work, staff and volunteers have the opportunity to receive supervision regularly and as needed.
- Increased workloads and increased risks across the organisation which include clinical risk, reputational risk, financial risk and the risk of closure. This has resulted in stress/anxiety attacks, anxiety and loss of confidence.
- I absorb the pressures and extra work so my volunteer team can get on with their specific tasks using their area of expertise. It has increased my workload and reduced time to devote to my own family which they regularly comment on. With everyone a volunteer it is not appropriate to require more of those who do not offer to assist or answer pleas for additional help with certain tasks or on specific days.
- We need more volunteers. Without them I find I do more and this is having a significant impact on my personal life. Seeing friends and other hobbies have significantly reduced

**Question 14:** Have you seen any concerns for the wellbeing of your staff and volunteers relating to the increase in the cost of living? Please share examples, for example, increased pressure of work, pressure on their own household finances, recruitment and retention etc.

- More pressure on staff. Staff under greater pressure in their own finances. Very difficult to recruit and match expected salaries.

- Volunteers want to help clients - difficult for them if they are unable to help as there is so little that can be done for many clients struggling to manage on a very low income.
- Challenges around whether they can afford to carry on working due to the increased cost of child care, fuel, food.
- Increased pressure on their time and availability. They are all under similar pressures from cost of living and its impact not only on them but on their family and some require support in the same way we support our service users.
- Pressure on volunteers to secure paid employment.

**Question 15:** Have you seen any concerns for the wellbeing of your service users, relating to the increase in the cost of living?

Yes	80%
No	20%

**Please share examples, particularly those that you feel may affect community cohesion.**

- Really just a general concern over the costs related to having a new baby, going back to work earlier than planned etc.
- Many clients struggling to manage to balance their budgets due to the increased cost of living. Some staff have shown reluctance to come in to the office preferring to work from home. Where we can we have accommodated that.
- Increase in substance/alcohol use.
- Individuals have raised concerns about travel costs particularly those having to use taxis everywhere and therefore they have cut back on activities, seeing friends and potentially not taking part in the extra activities we may be running and inviting people to.
- Heat or eat
- People are worried every day about everyday things. They seem to have no peace in terms of what's coming next.
- We've had families with no heating in the winter and two families where the mum ended up in hospital over the Christmas period as a direct result of poverty. One where the house was too cold and the baby ended up in hospital and the other collapsed after weeks on a very small amount of daily food.

**Strategic Support – Question 16**

**Question 16:** What are the main priority areas for your organisation/group in terms of strategic support?

- Diversifying income

- Robust financial practice
- Recruiting new volunteers to help meet rising demand as well as finding additional sources of income to help fund both increased costs and increased demand.

**VS Forum – Questions 17 to 20**

**Question 17:** How would you rate the Voluntary Sector Forum?

Not useful	0%
Sometimes useful	30%
Useful	50%
Extremely useful	20%

**Please share examples:**

- Sharing ideas with others who have already gone through a situation or circumstance you are facing is invaluable - reinventing the wheel is not healthy or helpful, particularly with everyone challenged on time. If we are truly focussed on enabling the best opportunities and support for those in our communities then the synergies from shared discussion and ideas must be taken advantage of. The Forum provides a focussed time to do this, as well as learning about things each person may not have come across or had time to read up about, try etc.
- It is interesting to see what is happening around and about, but most of the services relate to adults of various sorts and so Scouts are a bit out on a limb.
- I have not attended a meeting yet however the information coming from the meeting is useful

**Question 18:** Is a monthly Voluntary Sector Forum sufficient?

Yes	90%
No	10%

**If you answered 'No' how often would you like to have the Forum?**

- It's hard to say as its unclear what practical value is gained in terms of increased collaboration and sharing of best practice.

**Question 19:** What would you like to see more of in the Voluntary Sector Forum?

- Tackling issues together, not just presentations and updates from other organisation but working on system solutions.

- More focus on the key issues that are common and clear challenges in the voluntary sector e.g. tackling the decline of formal volunteering, Volunteer Retention.
- More outside expert speakers
- Co-operation between the charities

**Question 20:** What would you like to see less of in the Voluntary Sector Forum?

No answers submitted.

**AOB – Question 21**

**Question 21:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

- Thank you to those who run the Forum and engage with different organisations to open up a wealth of contacts and ideas to those able to participate on the Forum

## **Key Implications**

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

None

Financial implications

None

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Net Zero Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment

Wellbeing

Conclusion

To note the report

**Appendices**

Appendix A - VS Forum Barometer Survey

**Sarah Robson**

**Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer – People & Places**