



**CUMBERLAND
CITY COUNCIL**

Summary Report

Impact of COVID-19 on Local Organisations

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Summary Report

Topic: How has COVID19 impacted local organisations locally and how has sector has changed as a result?

Background

Council conducted an assessment survey between 26 March 2020 and 10 August 2020 with 87 community sector organisations from across the LGA in order to gauge how COVID-19 was impacting upon their service and their clients/ service users.

The organisations surveyed were from a diverse cross-section of the sector and encompassed large NGOs, volunteer run organisations as well as funded and non-funded services.

Limitations: The short time frame to administer this survey has meant that there were some duplications in information provided by organisations. This duplication has not impacted on the trends identified in this report

What information did we collect?

The information that was collected focused on three key areas:

1. What does your organisation need right now (Goods, services, information etc.)?
2. What services are you currently providing to your clients/ service users?
3. What can council do to support you?

All questions were asked in an open-ended manner. Responses were coded based on theme.

Results from Survey Data

1. Early Results Regarding Community Needs:

Data from early in the survey period highlighted a number of specific needs within the community services sector. As occurs in most emergency situations, those with the least resources and the greatest vulnerability, were impacted most heavily. Service providers reported four groups of groups as being most heavily impacted

Who has needs?

Those individuals and groups cited by community organisations as of highest need include:

- New arrivals and those from new and emerging communities
 - Attributable to limited personal networks and a lack of understanding of where to get support
 - Reduced options for informal work opportunities
 - Housing and financial insecurity due to low income
- International Students
 - Limited personal networks
 - Lack of governmental support, i.e. no access to JobKeeper payments
 - No income due to loss of job as casual labour in service industries
- Older people with limited English (established communities)
 - Lack of access to digital devices
 - Lack of familiarity with technology and limited skills

- Socialisation often through groups and religious community
- Women (esp. those experiencing DV)
 - It was noted by providers that domestic violence is expected to increase due to tensions that can arise from the enforced confinement
 - This includes child protection issues
- People experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness
 - Increase in Housing insecurity for people on TPV/Shev Visas due to loss of employment income and housing insecurity
 - Relationship break downs in shared accommodation for vulnerable community members such as Asylum Seekers with limited financial supports and reduced employment opportunities.
 - Inability to isolate and lack of resources to maintain Covid-19 specific hygiene practices.

What are the needs?

At the beginning...

The most significant issue for service providers was an inability to communicate remotely, with 25% of those surveyed citing this a primary cause of service disruption. Only a small portion of services (7%) indicated that this was due to a lack of access to technology for their clients. The general lack of information and lack of translated material for non-English speakers were issues highlighted by 7% of organisations as a major challenge for their clients.

The next most significant issue reported as a service delivery challenge was the lack of appropriate transport (5%) to services that are still operating in a modified capacity.

Between 4% and 1% of respondents also suggested that misinformation, ineligibility, social isolation, lack of accommodation and 'other' factors also presented challenges to their operations during this period.

Ongoing community needs...

However, overtime needs shifted, and it became clear that there were a number of distinct categories of support required by community organisations and their clients in the prior following the end of lockdown until now. At the beginning of the lockdown period, organisations who were able to continue to provide services reported a very diverse range of client needs. During June of 2020, the organisations reported 21 different categories of need ranging from child protection issues, to transport issues, to online support for school students. However, as time progressed, the needs outlined by community organisations with regard to their clients converged focused on the primary requirements of food, shelter and safety.

Personal safety was a particular concern to many of the providers surveyed. Child protection issues and domestic violence were reported by 66.04% of organisations as one of the primary reasons that people were presenting for support. It's likely that this issue emerged towards the end of the survey period as the effect of prolonged confinement became more evident.

Employment related services and supports, and requests for other forms of financial assistance were also identified by service providers as increasing in incidence. From the data collected, about 34% of services reported clients requesting these services. Given the heavy impact of the restrictions on business that employ large numbers of casual staff, the impending end of government supports and overall economic uncertainty, this is to be expected.

For those experiencing the highest levels of vulnerability, an inability to access enough food due to financial stress, restrictions on movement, or lack of information was reported. Requests for food related support like vouchers, hampers and household essentials were reported by 20.75% of organisations as primary driver for seeking assistance. It is anticipated that this need may rise in coming months when some of the financial supports that are currently in place are reduced.

2. What services are you providing?

In the early stages of the survey, over half of organisations indicated that they were no longer offering services to the community. This is unsurprising given that many local community organisations offer group activities that are designed to improve social networks and enhance community connectedness. Other group activities ceased normal operations including after-school and recreational activities for children, educational support for students, religious services, as well as multiple information sessions for seniors, new arrivals and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. While some organisations pivoted and began to offer face to face groups online via Zoom, Skype and other platforms, this strategy has only been employed by a minority of organisations and has its own challenges like access to resources and language barriers.

Some organisations pivoted to the provision of 'essential services' only. This is to be expected given that, of those surveyed in June 2020, 33% of services had enquiries about food related support, 43% had enquiries about housing related matters and 55% had enquiries about financial assistance including employment support, COVID-19 government grants, income subsidies and EAPA vouchers. However, it is of note that many people could not access some or any of these supports despite making enquiries about them. This suggests that the early stages of lockdown and the associated restrictions were busy for community organisations, despite many being unable to offer their full suite of services.

3. How can Council help you?

As many community organisations halted services completely, it is unsurprising that approximately half of all providers indicated that they do not require assistance from Cumberland City Council with service delivery or in communicating their available services. Organisations that would like assistance from Council, indicated that general information sharing within local networks was the most requested service, followed by a request for updates on Council activities.

- Information on various topics, including
 - Health warnings and hotspot notifications
 - Restrictions and safety guidance
 - Sanitation protocols of council
 - How to access government support, testing and other health services
 - Requests for information in community languages were high

As was also noted at the CaLD COVID-19 Summit convened by the Local Government Multicultural Network, health information was particularly sought after by communities that have lower levels of English literacy. Some CaLD communities relied on information about COVID-19 sourced from their countries of origin. The reliability of such information could not be verified and, in most instances, was not relevant to the Australian situation. As a result, the communication of information from reputable sources to community members was a challenging task. For small community organisations unfamiliar with health communication, this was even more difficult.

As was noted at the LGMN COVID Summit, after lockdown was lifted, the nature of requests for support being made to council changed. While there was still a significant appetite for detailed and

accurate information, a number of new requests were also being made. Community organisations were interested in complying with COVID-19 restrictions while getting back to 'business as usual'. As a result, there were enquires about venues and community centres. Specifically, those surveyed were asking about large venues and about how council was applying COVID safe practices in their community centres. There was also interest in how council might be able to offer venues to groups with high needs.

Other request for support were in regard to financial support to community groups, including the possibility of applying to receive specific COVID Grants in Cumberland and how council might assist by funding organisations who have had to alter their service structure, office spaces and method of delivery in order to continue operations.

There were also requests for connections and links to other services for food and financial assistance directly to their clients. In such instances, services created networks and were referred to other community groups in the local are who could meet their needs. This demonstrates that organisations have been adaptive and resourceful.

Conclusion:

As would be expected during this period of unprecedented tumult, the needs of local organisations and their clients changed over time. During the first stages of lockdown community organisations reported as diverse range of needs from within their client group. However, over a period of about three months, the organisations surveyed began to report a converging set of needs. These were the primary necessities for existence; food, shelter and safety. This demonstrates that community members within Cumberland do not feel 'entitled' to services or expect access to luxuries. Instead, it shows that during periods of extreme stress and uncertainty, people need to survive and get by.

Community organisations worked diligently to pivot their services towards COVID safe operations, and offer additional supports, where they were able to do so. In instances where providers were not able to continue operations, this was usually attributed to a lack of resources, lack of information or the nature of the services being delivered, i.e. social groups for the elderly were stopped in many cases.

As restrictions continue to be loosened in New South Wales, there is greater desire for community members to come back together to support each other through this difficult time. It is recognised that community members have been stressed by isolation, however there is also an acknowledgement that only through observing COVID safe protocols that council will be able to support communities to recover. This means ensuring that proper hygiene practices are followed in community centres and assisting organisations to support their clients by connecting them with other groups who may be able to do so.



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