

SCVO briefing on Access to Community Facilities

September 2020

About SCVO

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) is the national membership organisation for the voluntary sector. We champion the sector, provide services, and debate big issues. Along with our community of 2,000+ members, we believe that charities, social enterprises, and voluntary groups make Scotland a better place.

Evidence from this briefing is drawn primarily from a webinar with over 50 participants, hosted by SCVO in September 2020. It is also drawn from discussions with key sector leads in the fields of sport and youth work.

Introduction

Having access to community facilities play an invaluable role for all of us, providing a space for sport, drama, youth support and a whole host of other activities, bringing people together and enriching our lives in numerous and varied ways. As a measure of preventative spend, the importance of community facilities, and by extension the countless voluntary groups and clubs which thrive in them, cannot be underestimated. When community centres are closed down, the negative social impacts which can then arise are well known.

Members have told SCVO of the challenges they are currently facing in delivering their vital services in local community facilities. In order to capture more details of this, we hosted a webinar in September 2020, where over 50 participants joined us for a one and a half hour discussion. The purpose of the webinar was to hear of the challenges in access faced by voluntary organisations and to plot next steps to improve the situation.

This briefing gives a brief overview of the context for this challenge, before detailing the issues we have so far heard from voluntary sector organisations and concluding with outlined proposals for next steps.

Covid-19 and community facilities

SCVO and the wider voluntary sector understands as well as most the complex and unpredictable circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic. It continues to present immediate and challenging health issues which, of course, will require sustained action for the foreseeable future. This has included the closure of community facilities and in this paper SCVO is in no way arguing for a return of business as usual. As always, we would urge our members to take a well-informed and cautious approach to re-opening, ensuring proper risk assessments are carried out and health and safety for everyone is paramount.¹

¹ See, for example, the SCDC and Public Health Scotland online resource for help reopening www.scdc.org.uk/supporting-communities-safely; and SCVO's Third Sector Coronavirus hub for latest information and support <https://scvo.org.uk/support/coronavirus>

That said, it is important to note that whilst we focus on these immediate health issues, the closure of community facilities will contribute to longer term health challenges, including around mental health and wellbeing, keeping active, loneliness and isolation. Alongside this, there are broader societal issues of community cohesion, and ensuring safe and enriching spaces, presented by their continued closure.

Challenges in delivering service in community facilities

Voluntary organisations raised a lot of important issues during our webinar, highlighting how the Covid-19 outbreak has both created, and exacerbated, frustrations in accessing community facilities. A concern for many is that though they are allowed to deliver their services and have the proper procedures in place, they have been locked out of the vital community buildings they need access to in order to actually run things. Some have been told that their access will be greatly restricted, whilst at least one local authority has described buildings as being “decommissioned”. In youth work, for example, Scottish Government guidance is in place for community-based youth work, yet groups have been told that the school estate is out of bounds to them. Decisions have been made on key community assets without community participation.

Many others are frustrated that they have not been able to get answers to their specific queries around restarting the delivery of their services. Organisations are clearly struggling with the lack of detailed national guidance and at feeling locked out of local decision making. There is a contention that guidance for voluntary sector organisations to deliver vital community services has not been given the same push that there has been for guidance in other areas, such as reopening pubs and restaurants. Particularly for smaller clubs and groups, run largely or exclusively by volunteers, there are capacity challenges with locating all the relevant guidance and a request was made at the webinar for all of the necessary information to be in the same document.

A further challenge has been around increasing costs of delivery, not least to ensure proper compliance with health and safety regulations. This has resulted in reduced service delivery, and in some cases the withdrawal of services. There are huge challenges facing many voluntary organisations looking to reopen their services, including minimising risks, public liabilities, and ensuring inclusive access for all. Recognition of the true value of these services should be met with increased support to address these comprehensively.

Some of these challenges, of course, predate the Covid-19 outbreak. Issues around accessing the school estate, for example, is a concern which voluntary organisations have campaigned on for many years. Whilst the covid-19 pandemic has, in many ways, made this discussion more challenging, it has also prompted a societal re-evaluation of work, life and community in 21st century Scotland, and we at SCVO believe that the value placed on community facilities deserves to be central to this examination.

Valuing community facilities

The issue of access to community facilities is, at its heart, a question of what we value within society. It was raised at our webinar that an income generation model for access to sport and leisure facilities and the exclusion of access which that brings runs counter to a push for a wellbeing economy. As part of building back better, greater access to community facilities, and in turn enhanced support to voluntary organisations using these spaces, is vital. Museums and galleries are rightly free, yet members of a community are charged to access their local community facilities to organise events which benefit their

local community. As a consequence many facilities have remained underused for years and we believe this needs to change.

Central to this process is, of course, funding and the voluntary sector well understands the financial challenges facing public bodies, not least local authorities. However, to deliver a wellbeing economy we need to reframe community facilities as vital public services, which must be protected and cherished. As a measure of preventative spend, their contribution is priceless.

The voluntary sector and community facilities

The voluntary sector in Scotland is invaluable in furthering the early intervention and prevention agenda through its role as an enabler, bringing together hundreds of thousands of people on a weekly basis, the vast majority as volunteers, to organise and run sports clubs, dance groups, youth centres and many other vital local activities.

As a key deliverer of vital local services, the voluntary sector plays a pivotal role and deserves to be involved meaningfully in local decision-making affecting communities. There is broad agreement across society that community facilities should be run by local communities but, as this pandemic has shown, we are still a long way off this. This is not a straightforward agenda to realise, but allowing the voluntary sector a bigger role in current local decision making and planning would be a positive start.

Next Steps

Ensuring appropriate access to community facilities, meaningful involvement of voluntary organisations in community planning, and a truer understanding across society of the value of local groups and clubs, is a task far greater than the work of SCVO or any other single organisation. Instead, it requires a dedicated collective effort across each local authority area, from large intermediaries down to local clubs and groups.

To move this agenda forward, participants at the webinar raised various options. There was a push for the sector to demonstrate its impact and the collective value, particularly in terms of contribution to the national performance framework and wellbeing economy. Having infographics and data to show the sheer size of the sector was deemed beneficial.

Secondly, having a forum to have these discussions was also supported as it was felt that these conversations were not currently taking place. Thirdly, getting this message out to the wider public was seen as necessary. One idea put forward for this was on finding a common message on access to community facilities which we can all share for upcoming elections. Other opportunities for influencing were also mentioned, such as joint cross-party working groups.

What SCVO will do

In recognising that many of the issues raised during our webinar relate to local decisions and relationships, we will pass our briefing to colleagues in local third sector interfaces, who will in many cases already be actively involved in pursuing this agenda. We will also make sure that any relevant information we gather will be shared with other voluntary organisations taking this forward.

We will support this work at a national level by working with relevant intermediaries to draw together figures on the number of community groups active across Scotland, which can be used to demonstrate the potential scale and impact of the issue. We will explore national platforms to raise this issue and this will likely include discussions with Scottish Government and COSLA around strengthening collaboration, as well as exploring a joint meeting of relevant MSP cross-party groups.

Finally, we will continue dialogue with voluntary organisations across the country, ensuring that we articulate all the barriers facing voluntary organisations in accessing community facilities, and highlighting examples of good practice in partnership working to address these.

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