

Accessing support

The role of the voluntary
and community sector
during COVID-19

Note: this information is correct as of 2 June 2020

Background

The purpose of this document is to provide councils and their community and voluntary sector partners with a briefing on the role and contribution of the community and voluntary sector and the use of volunteers in local and national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please note that all the information contained in the briefing is correct at the time of writing. However, this is a fast-moving situation so guidance and information may change. We strongly advise checking the Gov.uk website for any changes.

One of the most positive and impressive consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the huge upsurge in the numbers of people volunteering to support vulnerable people who may not have family or friends to rely on. They have signed up in their many thousands to the different national and local initiatives. This brings enormous opportunities to harness and maximise this asset but also some challenges in ensuring that voluntary capacity is used effectively and safely.

In normal circumstances, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) is a vital partner in providing a wide range care and support to enable vulnerable people to live fulfilling and independent lives, and to maintain their health and wellbeing so they do not require the support of statutory health and adult social care services. In responding to COVID-19, the contribution of the VCS and of volunteers is even more crucial.

If adult social care capacity is stretched, there may be a need to reprofile roles so that some functions normally undertaken by a professional paid carer (eg, shopping, collecting prescriptions etc) are undertaken by a trained and checked volunteer. However, there are many personal and social care tasks which should only be undertaken by trained professionals. The Local Government Association (LGA) understands that the Government plans to publish guidance on volunteering in adult social care settings that will consider which roles can be undertaken by volunteers, with sufficient training and clearance.

Local voluntary and community services

Councils across the country are working with their local VCS to signpost local residents who may need support to well-established VCS organisations or to the NHS Volunteer Responders schemes. They are also working with them to adjust services to social distancing requirements, recruit additional volunteers to increase capacity to meet increased demand or replace existing volunteers that are unavailable because they are ill or vulnerable. Councils may prefer to signpost residents to existing VCS than to the many 'mutual aid' and informal neighbourhood networks that have developed directly in response to COVID-19. These unmediated mutual aid arrangements provide a valuable support services for some people, but it is almost certainly more appropriate for them to operate between friends and neighbours who knew each other previously.

In order to support vulnerable people, councils will need to work in partnership with their local VCS and with national initiatives to:

- Map local VCS capability, including the new mutual aid and neighbourhood networks available to provide support, and regularly reassess this through ongoing engagement with the sector in order to identify and address gaps in community

support, including ward councillor intelligence and any local town and parish councils where they exist, as they are likely to provide an additional layer of capacity to support the response.

- Adapt existing VCS support to conform to social distancing requirements and to adapt to emerging need for support, for example, increased need for befriending to continued isolation.
- Develop a shared understanding of the types of support different groups can provide, with a tiered approach depending on skills and expertise, with proper regard to safety and quality of support.
- Consider how their commissioning practices can support the VCS, in terms of payments, contracts, tendering and KPIs. The LGA guidance to commissioners about social care resilience encourages commissioners to be as flexible as possible and to pay quickly. It is already clear that in these exceptional circumstances, authorities may need to procure goods, services and works with extreme urgency, or roll existing contracts over. Authorities are permitted to do this using regulation 32(2)(c) under the Public Contract Regulations 2015. The Government have published Procurement Policy Notes on regulations and payments to ensure service continuity.
- Set out common expectations regarding the requirements for DBS checks for specific roles, training and induction, and safeguarding.

The NHS Volunteer Responders scheme

The NHS, working in partnership with Royal Voluntary Services (RVS) and the Goodsam.app, has established the NHS Volunteer Responders (NHSVRs) scheme. Over 600,000 volunteers are active and ready to provide support to people who are 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and are advised to shield themselves for at least 12 weeks, and other people who are vulnerable due to disability, frailty or pregnancy. It will not replace any local voluntary sector referral mechanisms already established but will complement these and provide support for services that can't access local organisations.

Volunteers are helping with tasks such as delivering medicines from pharmacies; shopping goods; driving people to appointments; bringing them home from hospital and regular phone calls to check they are ok and offer much needed telephone companionship. A wide range of professionals, including GPs, pharmacist, council staff, adult social care providers, police, fire services and charities, can refer vulnerable people for support. From 23 April, the NHSVR was expanded to increase referrals into the programme: Vulnerable people and their families will now be able to directly request help. The scheme is still limited to vulnerable people. This is a positive development, which builds on councils' and the LGA's strong support for the introduction of self-referral. **Referrals should be made via the NHS Volunteer Responders referrers' portal <https://goodsamapp.org/NHSreferral> or by telephone on 0808 196 3382.**

Since its introduction, we have worked closely with the NHS and Government to improve coordination and alignment between national and voluntary volunteering capacity to support vulnerable people. For example, we are working with NHSE to identify a quick and easy way for local partners to share high level data on Clinical Commissioning Groups and local authority level, including the number of NHSVR volunteers available, the level and type of

requests made, and who is making requests. In two-tier areas, the data will be available at district level which can be aggregated at county level. This will assist councils and their partners in the voluntary and community sector gain a more comprehensive idea of voluntary capacity to provide support to vulnerable people in the community.

Originally, each request for help had to be referred separately. The system has now been improved so that referrers to NHSVR support are able to make 'bulk' referrals using the GoodSam app. This means that someone from a council, adult social care provider, pharmacy, GP surgery can refer several requests for support at the same time, rather than having to enter them all individually.

The role of national voluntary organisations

Councils will already have strong links with their local VCS networks, potentially through local community and voluntary services such as the relevant Community Foundation and the British Red Cross as local coordinating and funding bodies for the sector.¹ Many national and local VCS organisations have launched individual initiatives relating to COVID-19, some of which are specific to individual conditions. There is not a definitive national list but NCVO,² the British Red Cross,³ NAVCA⁴ and Volunteering Matters⁵ and the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership⁶ are endeavouring to broker information about needs and offers of support. At a local level, the VCS will need to work closely with their council in order to coordinate intelligence about where help may be needed, the voluntary resources available and to deploy help and support to where it is most needed.

Local neighbourhood and mutual aid groups

COVID Mutual Aid UK is a group of volunteers supporting local community groups organising mutual aid across the UK. Their focus is on providing resources and connecting people to their nearest local groups, volunteers and those in need. In many areas, they have mapped the streets and neighbourhoods where self-organising local neighbourhood groups – often covering a single street or estate – have been set up. This will provide a helpful resource for local councils and the wider VCS in identifying areas without local neighbourhood areas so that they can offer additional support.

Volunteers and safeguarding

Councils and local partners will also want to work together to assure themselves that safeguarding roles and responsibilities across children and adults are being met, alongside how best to work with people who may lack capacity. This should include consideration of the increased risks of financial abuse and scams in the current climate. Any new volunteers will need to be made aware of their responsibilities and also how to report any concerns they may have. Any unsupervised work with children or adults at risk of harm will need to be in line with established checks and procedures.

¹ <https://www.ukcommunityfoundations.org/>

² <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/practical-support/information/coronavirus>

³ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/uk-emergency-response/coronavirus>

⁴ <https://navca.org.uk/>

⁵ <https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/>

⁶ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/uk-emergency-response/voluntary-and-community-sector-emergencies-partnership>

As well as ensuring that safeguarding considerations with regard to volunteers are met, all volunteers will need training and information on how to identify and refer any safeguarding concerns they may have in their contact with vulnerable people. Safeguarding Adults Boards and Children's Safeguarding Partnerships clearly provide pre-existing statutory arrangements for local decision making in these areas if required.

Emergency Placement Scheme (EPS)

More formally, the Emergency Coronavirus Act includes provision to introduce the Emergency Volunteer Scheme (now referred to as the Emergency Placement Scheme), which entitles employees to take unpaid leave of blocks of up to four weeks in a 16-week period to volunteer in skilled healthcare and adult social care positions in health and social care settings. Volunteers will need to be certified by councils and national health bodies that they will fill a post for a specific period of time and that they have the appropriate skills and clearances to fulfil the role, as well as that the correct indemnities are in place for the volunteer to cover the volunteer in a particular placement. Certifying bodies will issue a certificate to confirm that a placement has been found, the duration and the official start date of the placement. Volunteers can be reimbursed for their placement by Government.

It is important to note that the provisions relating to the EPS have not yet been triggered. The LGA understands that the Government has no immediate plans to implement these provisions. Nevertheless, the LGA is working with the Government to develop a 'light-touch' certification process and to ensure that any additional burdens on councils are adequately resourced.

Guidance on volunteering and managing volunteers

There is a wide range of resources, guidance and tools available to support councils to work effectively with national and local VCS and in the use of volunteers.

GOV.UK: Coronavirus - How to help safely. Government advice on staying safe while supporting others during the pandemic.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-how-to-help-safely--2>

NCVO Volunteering and coronavirus: How you can help. NCVO guidance on supporting others during the Covid-19 pandemic.

<https://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering/i-want-to-volunteer/volunteering-coronavirus>

NCVO Coronavirus: Involving volunteers. NCVO guidance on involving volunteers in your work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

<https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/coronavirus/involving-volunteers>

GOV.UK: How to find volunteering opportunities

<https://www.gov.uk/government/get-involved/take-part/volunteer>

GOV.UK: Volunteer placements, rights and expenses

<https://www.gov.uk/volunteering>

NHS Health Education England has developed a Covid-19 e-learning programme and the resources are freely available to colleagues working in the NHS, independent sector, and social care. (Follow the link, then select 'Resources for Volunteers Supporting Health & Social Care', then 'Volunteer Learning Passport' – there are a range of topics, including Safeguarding Adults / Safeguarding Children.)

<https://portal.e-lfh.org.uk/Component/Details/604722>

One Minute Guide: Safeguarding Adults for Coronavirus Volunteers, Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, April 2020

<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Safeguarding%20for%20Volunteers.pdf>

Safeguarding Awareness for Volunteers video produced by Waltham Forest Council

for basic information: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHQG8CJROhU&feature=youtu.be>

The Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board (NSAB) has produced a short guidance document to support professionals when a person is not following the guidelines on social distancing or self-isolating and an advice note for volunteers on making safeguarding adults part of volunteering tasks:

<https://www.norfolksafeguardingadultsboard.info/assets/COVID-19/COVID-19-NSAB-MATERIAL/COVID19-Proc-for-Prof-When-Person-Not-Following-Social-Dist-or-Self-Isol-Guidancev2.pdf>

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