Key Messages

VHS Members Meet Up: What price health? The Cost-of-Living Crisis, Health and the Third Sector

Thursday 13th October 2022

This is an anonymised note of the Members Meet Up to ensure attendees felt able to speak openly about the challenges they are facing. This was an online meeting at which 30 people from a range of third sector organisations participated. Some members shared particularly worrying accounts of how the cost of living was impacting the people they support and their own organisation. There were concerns about how organisations were going to keep up with demand for support and about the detrimental impact these challenges were going to have on people's health.

Claire Stevens, Voluntary Health Scotland, began by recognising the context for organisations and people having just come through a pandemic and now facing a very challenging cost of living crisis. She asked attendees how this this crisis was likely going to exacerbate the health inequalities they work to mitigate.

At the meeting we heard initially from:

- Toni Groundwater, Head of External Engagement, Families Outside
- Jennifer Forsyth, Policy and Evidence Manager, Obesity Action Scotland

Healthy Food: Jennifer Forsyth outlined the significant inequalities that existed in the availability and affordability of healthy food. Worryingly, the inflationary pressure on food is rising and there is a big gap between the cost of healthier food and non-healthy food. Some staple foods increased in price by 13.1% in the year to August 2022. Food Foundation data showed that the average cost of healthy food was £8.51 per 1,000kcal, compared to £3.25 for less healthy foods. It also showed that the poorest fifth of households in the UK would need to spend just under half of their disposable income on food to meet the EatWell recommendations for a healthy diet, compared to just 11% for the richest fifth. Rates of obesity were increasing, and indications show there was an impact on healthy weight and obesity during the pandemic while we don't yet know the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. This rise has an impact on rates of non-communicable diseases and health outcomes. Jennifer highlighted the Non-Communicable Disease Alliance campaign to restrict price promotions of unhealthy foods and the pushback it has received from the food and drink industry which argue it is inappropriate to implement this during a cost-of-living crisis. Jennifer explained the evidence did not support this and conversely these price promotions increased spend on food. Research from the Money Advice Service had shown that price promotions cause individuals to spend an average of £1,300 per year more than they intended to spend. She noted there was a high level of public support for the Non-Communicable Disease Alliance measures in their polling.

We heard the SNAP (Scotland's National Action Plan for Human Rights) Leadership Panel was currently working on actions related to the cost-of-living and food. Members were encouraged to engage with this.

Poverty and Prison: Toni Groundwater discussed research on the financial implications for families impacted by imprisonment. It showed the justice system was driving people into poverty and the major health inequalities faced by people in prison. She explained Families

Outside have always heard from families concerned and worried about their family members in prison but increasingly they were seeking support for finances. The financial burden of imprisonment on families is significant, some families are spending more than half their earnings supporting someone in prison. The costs fall disproportionately on women supporting people in prison and supporting people after prison. Toni highlighted remand was on average costing families £300 a month and supporting someone in prison approximately £180 a month. The report she referenced will be launched shortly.

Wider discussion:

- **Impact Assessment:** We heard Public Health Scotland (PHS) was carrying out a health impact assessment on the cost-of-living crisis. The Scottish Government had asked them to do this, looking at how rising inflation was likely to affect health. PHS held a stakeholder workshop to engage with the third sector on how the cost of living was impacting people on the ground. The impact assessment was expected to have quite high-level recommendations but government also wanted to look at how they can support organisations. The main audience for the assessment was the Scottish Government, but there's hope the follow-up will be practical actions directed to different audiences including the third sector. Members made a plea for resources for the third sector without unnecessary red tape to enable them to develop solutions with communities as was seen during the pandemic. We heard about the need for training and commitment to follow up on health impact assessments for them to have any real impact. It can't be a tick box that then sits on the shelf.
- **Wider Impacts:** The focus of the conversation was on how the third sector could support people's health, but attendees also felt there were much wider challenges beyond health like how the cost of living was impacting educational attainment. For example, how will children have clean clothes for school if parents can't afford to dry them. It was highlighted that some families can't charge the iPads provided by schools.
- **Third Sector:** There was concern about how long the third sector would be able to keep sucking up these issues and recognition the cost of living was impacting charities and their employees too. Members highlighted the need for parity between the third sector workforce and public sector workforce. There was a discussion on the sustainability of organisations relying on short-term small grants funding. Charities that provided transportation also faced particular challenges in their fuel running costs. They were concerned about supporting staff this winter along with the people who rely on their services.
- **Community Action:** We heard about the work Ayr United was doing to support local families, such as pre-paid food pantry vouchers. Football clubs were well placed to mitigate the impacts of the cost-of-living especially in the most deprived areas as they were so embedded in communities. We heard the clubs' community arms were well placed to reach out to people who might otherwise not be reached.
- **Third Sector Interfaces**: The role of TSIs during the cost-of-living crisis was discussed. Clackmannanshire TSI had a food officer, multiple food initiations and community link workers all working on these issues. They were increasingly seeing relationship problems in families in addition to issues accessing food due to the cost-of-living. There were particular concerns about problem debt and benefit take-up. It was noted the Scottish Government's Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund was open for applications through the Third Sector Interfaces. This is the second year of the funding and it is focused on supporting small, grassroots community based initiatives that promote and develop good mental health and wellbeing.
- **Standard of Living**: There was an important discussion about support going beyond basic survival and the importance of people having an adequate standard of living. Families should be able to socialise, go to the cinema and participate in our communities. Losing these activities will have a detrimental impact on health and social

isolation. Research was highlighted from Nourish Scotland on what families need to have a dignified life including things like buying a birthday cake or having a pizza night.

- **Additional Costs:** The significant additional energy cost for people with disabilities running their aids and adaptations, computers and phones was highlighted. There was a petition in Westminster for an immediate look at the energy costs for these families and calls for an increase in benefits.
- **Mental Health:** Members acknowledged this crisis would impact people's mental health, RNIB were running emergency mental health consultations to support people. This illustrated the kind of shift third sector organisations were making to mitigate against these increasing challenges.
- **Cancer:** We discussed the impact on the cost-of-living for families with a cancer diagnosis. Many of the benefit supports don't kick in immediately and cancer patients often need extra food and heat to keep themselves as healthy as possible during diagnosis.
- **Isolation:** We heard Handicabs were seeing people even more isolated now than during the pandemic due to the cost of living. People were surviving rather than living.
- **Cash Poor:** There was a discussion about people who were asset rich but cash poor. Even in affluent areas, families or older people with big homes can't heat their homes. The Eric Liddell Centre had been hearing anecdotally that people were coming to their wellbeing lunches for the food this month but would be coming for the heat next month.
- **Collaboration**: There were suggestions that the third sector should also link with the fire service as they visit homes to carry out fire safety visits and identify people who may be struggling with their health and/or need help.
- **Power Outages**: One member organisation was making contingency plans for potential power outages through the winter. They were working on ensure people were registered on priority service lists and making sure companies were aware of vulnerable households. They highlighted the challenges for their service users if there were power outages and for themselves as an organisation.
- **Food and Warm Banks**: The use of food banks, pet food banks and warm banks were highlighted throughout. We heard referrals had almost doubled for a specific food bank in Dundee.
- **Providers:** One member spoke about the challenges facing providers who want to support organisations trying to mitigate the cost-of-living crisis.

For more information please contact our Policy & Engagement Lead, Kimberley: *kimberley.somerside@vhscotland.org.uk*

vhs
voluntary health scotland

18 York Place, Edinburgh, EH1 3EP
0131 474 6189 mail@vhscotland.org.uk www.vhscotland.org.uk @VHSComms

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