

Summary Report: “Review of the Third Sector Response to COVID-19 in Falkirk”

Introduction

The main report looks at how the local third sector in Falkirk responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. It also looks at the impact this had on Falkirk’s different communities, and on the third sector’s relationship with their partners (including Falkirk Council, NHS Forth Valley, Police Scotland, and other organisations listed on the [Falkirk Council website](#)).

The report explains the “Falkirk approach”, and highlights how this worked well (and why), what lessons were learned, and what needs to change for the future.

Definitions

“Third Sector”:

The “third sector” (sometimes called “the sector”) is a group name for charitable groups and organisations, including:

- charities
- social enterprises
- community groups
- voluntary groups
- volunteers

The “Falkirk approach”:

During the first lockdown in March 2020, most services put in place to help people had to stop their operations; instead, the third sector, communities, local businesses and people worked together to provide access to food, medicines and essential services for the people of Falkirk. They were able to do this because they were already a big part of everyday life in Falkirk, and understood what people needed, and how best to get this to them.

The third sector especially were key in delivering these services, and was supported by Falkirk Council and other partners, who made sure the structures were in place to allow the sector to deliver such a wide and different range of help.

This is referred to as the “Falkirk approach”, or the “enabling approach”, in the main report.

Successes: What Worked Well, And Why

The Third Sector

The report praises the third sector for how quickly the sector acted to support local people at the very start of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, and the focus on “getting things done”. It also covers the sector’s successes:

- Working with Falkirk Council’s Support for People (SfP) team and the Emergency Food Project to get food to people who couldn’t get any.
- Realising there was a difference between people who could not afford food (who might have been struggling with money before the pandemic), and those who could afford food but needed help to get shopping (because they were shielding, for example).
- Changing and updating the support they offered because of this, and offering different support to meet different needs around food (including hot or cooked food, and children’s lunches).
- Creating new services for shopping and prescription collections.
- Working together to make sure that different groups were not giving the same support in the same area; everyone contributed information and resources where needed but did not try to do everything everywhere.
 - Groups offered unused venues, volunteers and transport to others who needed it.
- Keeping their “normal” support services running, but finding ways to do it safely (by offering Zoom groups and telephone calls with volunteers instead of meetings), and creating new ways to help communities when other services had to stop.
- Adapting quickly to technology (including Zoom and social media) to still reach people.

This all helped the sector develop relationships with people in communities, sometimes even reaching a new, bigger audience. It also meant they were able to see what was working, what else was needed, and if there was a local way to help, or if this was a sign of a bigger problem.

Third Sector Interface

As the [third sector interface](#) (TSI) for the entire Falkirk and District area, [CVS Falkirk's](#) job is to support the local third sector to be strong and active. It was the same during the pandemic, whether they were existing groups changing how they helped people, or new groups who were created because of the impact of lockdown.

According to the report, CVS Falkirk “played a critical role” in helping the third sector come together and support communities across Falkirk:

- Volunteering – set up a volunteer centre to help the sector find volunteers from the incredible public response, and to keep in touch with people who wanted to volunteer.
- Funding – helped bring almost £1 million of funding to local groups during the pandemic (including an expenses fund for volunteers).
- Information – set up an online Third Sector Response Forum through Zoom, and an online hub of resources, funding information and support available across Falkirk.

Partners

Partners realised that they had to work differently during the pandemic, and they did – they showed that they trusted the third sector, and CVS Falkirk, to help communities:

- They put support structures in place and worked quickly when their help was needed, but recognised the sector’s relationship with their communities and that they knew what was needed.
- They changed a lot of their processes and ways of working to get resources and funding to the sector as quickly as possible.
- They worked quickly when the sector needed them, including giving extra funding for the Emergency Food Project.
- With the sector, they were an active part in the Co-ordinating Group, which focused on resolving issues with solutions.
- Falkirk Council set up the SFP team, with contribution from the sector around providing information and adding support services to its resources.

These practical changes have made a lot of joint working easier and simpler.

Impact on the Communities

The Falkirk approach, with local groups leading local response, has meant:

- Third sector groups and organisations are stronger.
- Communities are stronger, and they know where and how to get help.
- People are more involved in their communities, and more willing to help others.
- There is a better understanding of what communities, volunteers, and the third sector can do, of their “value”, and how easy it is to get involved.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges and Issues

The report highlights issues and challenges during the Falkirk approach:

- There were lots of different groups and organisations of different sizes and abilities working to help people during the pandemic.
- They all had different ways of working (because they worked in different communities with different needs).
- This all meant it was harder to find answers to common problems, and longer term fixes.
- There was no one network strong enough to pull everyone together on one topic (for example, providing food and solving food poverty).
- Many council buildings were closed due to the pandemic, leaving a lot of third sector groups without places to act as a base.
- There was a lack of information from partners at key stages, especially compared to the third sector.
- As organisations, partners were slower to adapt to technology, which made working together more difficult.
- Moving services and support online has been useful for many people, but it has also highlighted the existing “digital divide”, where people who are not online are possibly left out.
- Many third sector organisations lost income from donations or their shops being closed, but still had to pay costs.

Lessons Learned:

The report suggests that:

- Everyone needs to understand the demand for food – is it because of access, or poverty?
- Partners should look at how they can support the sector better when it comes to finding and helping the most vulnerable people, and learning the best ways to share information.
- Falkirk Council and the other partners should look at and analyse the buildings and other resources used by the sector and

communities, and how they can be used better to support communities.

- There should be a strong network to help joint approaches; partners should look at investing in the support available to the local third sector, so that groups and organisations are stronger individually and together.
- There should be more investment in access to technology for vulnerable people, including people living in poverty.
- Partners should look at ways to make sure third sector organisations have enough funding and income to keep supporting people in future.

According to the report, the third sector's response during the COVID-19 pandemic has proved its value and the value of its volunteers, as well as a strong, pro-active TSI like CVS Falkirk

It has also shown the importance of communities leading local support efforts, and how eager people are to be involved. The report suggests partners should rethink using traditional ways of "community engagement", and look at more community-led activities for the future.

Further Information

The full report, "Review of the Third Sector Response to COVID-19 in Falkirk", is available on the [CVS Falkirk](#) website (linked).