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# COVID-19 and the role of Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprises in northern England in responding to the needs of marginalised communities: a qualitative focus group study

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## Abstract

**Background** The Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sector has a crucial role in supporting the health and wellbeing of people who are marginalised or who have multiple complex needs. We aimed to understand perceptions of those working in the sector and examine the short-term, medium-term, and long-term effects of COVID-19 on Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise organisations in northern England as they respond to the needs of marginalised communities. This research formed one component of a regional multiagency Health Inequalities Impact Assessment.

**Methods** We conducted qualitative focus groups with staff and volunteers from five organisations between March and July, 2021, via a video conferencing platform. Eight of nine focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. One focus group was not recorded due to concerns raised over anonymity and safeguarding, but non-ascribed fieldnotes were taken. Focus group transcripts were analysed using framework analysis.

**Findings** One organisation supported children and young people; two organisations supported vulnerable women, young people, and families; one organisation supported refugees and asylum seekers, and one organisation supported disadvantaged individuals to improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Three central themes were identified: the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, adversity, and challenges for vulnerable and marginalised populations; the cost of being flexible, innovative, and agile for Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise staff and volunteers; and the voluntary sector as a lifeline (organisational pride and resilience).

**Interpretation** The considerable expertise, capacity, and resilience of Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise organisations and the crucial role they have in supporting marginalised communities has been clearly shown in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sector therefore has an essential role in the post-COVID levelling-up agenda. The implications of these findings for service provision are that the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sector must be recognised as an integral partner within any effectively functioning local health system and, as such, adequately resourced to safeguard sustainability and to ensure that attempts to involve the sector in addressing the social determinants of health are not jeopardised.

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### Contributors

CS, CB, JH, and SSo conceived this study as part of the wider Health Inequalities Impact Assessment process led and coordinated by CM with support from BJ. SSc led the research process. SSc, VJM, JMW and EB conducted the focus groups and did the analysis with interpretation input from all authors. All authors read and approved the submitted Abstract.

### Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

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