



# Edinburgh Community Health Forum - Key Findings Report

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## Introduction

Edinburgh Community Health Forum (ECHF) aims to be a voice and network for community led organisations that work to reduce health inequalities and improve long term health outcomes in Edinburgh. Its diverse members include third sector organisations working in local neighbourhoods, those that work across the city, and national organisations who deliver work in Edinburgh. The Forum supports members by providing opportunities to meet, exchange best practice and information, to learn together and training on a range of topics.. The Forum engages and responds to local and national policies, strategies and consultations and works in partnership at a strategic level in Edinburgh to address health inequalities.

Matter of Focus is a mission-led company based in Edinburgh. We have worked with ECHF and its members since May 2020 to map, analyse and assess the outcomes that matter to them, the people and populations they care about, and their funders. The initial focus of this work was to understand and track organisations response to the Covid-19 pandemic and members contribution to outcomes in this fast moving and challenging environment. In November 2020 we published a [report](#) about this contribution which highlighted four pillars of support in this period:

1. Emergency interventions to meet urgent need
2. Adaptation of existing services
3. Responsiveness of member organisations
4. A coherent and joined-up offer for communities

Since this initial report was published, Matter of Focus have continued to support ECHF organisations to capture learning and track their progress towards outcomes in this ‘post Covid’ period using our software OutNav. This report draws together key findings on the impact of forum members as they have continued to meet both the lasting effects of the pandemic and new challenges which have emerged. Whilst much of the context of pillars 1 and 2 has changed since this initial report was published, the role of members being responsive to local needs and providing a coherent offer for communities continues to be a key feature of the work of the Forum and its members.

This report was written by Grace Robertson, Senior Evaluation Consultant at Matter of Focus. It is informed by evidence of impact from Forum members’ use of OutNav, and from two learning events with members held in September 2022 and March 2023.

### **The Context for Forum Members in 2022/23**

Members of Edinburgh Community Health Forum met in September 2022 to share learning about the contribution of forum members to outcomes for communities. As part of this session, we discussed the changes to the context for organisations delivering this work post-Covid and to update the context analysis used in past reporting. Many of the key risks and assumptions which influence the ability of forum members to make a difference to individuals and communities are still relevant in 2022. Below is a summary of the key points raised in this discussion.

### **Coming out of Covid**

Members reflected that it has taken a long time for organisations to resume a ‘normal service’ in their activity in the post Covid period. The relaxation and ending of social distancing and other pandemic restrictions in 2022 has enabled organisations to resume face to face work with communities. Members reflected that online working can limit interaction with large groups and make partnership working more challenging. There is still however some uncertainty about planning ahead for future work with certainty about restrictions being brought back in as well as some hesitancy to mix with others from people who use services. There is also a sense that there is less trust in the Government and institutions now than in the past.

In the post-Covid period there is fatigue across the health and social care workforce, a sense that staff have ‘had enough’ and that the sector is losing experienced staff to other professions. Despite the great challenges that Covid-19 brought, members reflected that during this period there was a focus on supporting vulnerable people and mobilising energy and resources towards getting things done that has now retreated.

### **The cost-of-living crisis**

The pressures of the cost of living in 2022 are creating huge challenges for individuals and communities, and it was reflected that there is a lack of a collective mobilised response to this crisis compared to the way Covid was handled – the focus instead is on individual responsibility. There are greater levels of unmet need and demand on the third sector at the same time as organisations themselves struggle to cope with rising costs.

Members felt that this crisis is not prioritised by central government and a concern that austerity and budget cuts will mean there is not enough money in the system for an adequate response. Despite these threats there are community resources available driven by local delivery, including ‘heat and eat’ spaces and emergency funds, which are well placed to mobilise support to the most vulnerable. Local services have good intelligence about people’s needs, particularly when working in partnership.

There was a sense that this crisis may lead to a reduction in stigma for people struggling as there is wider understanding across society. The work of organisations like the Edinburgh Poverty Alliance is helping to reduce stigma and drive a better understanding of the issues affecting people.

## **Key messages about the impact of forum members**

**What members do:** Members of the Forum deliver a diverse range of services to individuals and communities, including individual emotional and wellbeing support, providing advice and information, skill building classes, workshops and activities to bring people together with others to make new connections. A theme that unites these activity streams is that they are based on the social model of health, and the prevention of ill health, where people are supported to take an active role in their wellbeing and are not passive recipients of services. Following the interruption of their models of support due to pandemic restrictions, organisations have been able to return to in person delivery of their services in the last year. Some organisations have continued to offer programmes of online support in a hybrid model where this has been effective in reaching wider numbers of people; now that restrictions on gathering have been removed there is more freedom to choose the most appropriate format for each situation.

**Who they reach and how they engage:** The communities that member organisations reach fall broadly into two categories; communities of place, and communities of shared experience/interest:

- Organisations embedded in particular locations within Edinburgh have been able to build and maintain trusting relationships within their communities. For many member organisations these have been developed over decades. These relationships mean that organisations are closely connected to the needs and priorities specific to these local areas including resources and services. The trust that they have built over time with their communities mean that they are often more accessible than other services and people are more likely to engage with supports offered.
- Member organisations that focus on communities of shared experience or interest are able to support people to access information and build networks of support through their expertise in particular needs. This includes people who are unpaid carers, ethnic minority communities and LGBT people, who share needs relating to their common experiences.

Member organisations have described a large increase in demand for their services and support following the pandemic, influenced by new challenges of the cost of living crisis and the pressures on and closures of other services available.

**What people learn and gain:** Through their local knowledge and connections, and their expertise in particular topics related to health and wellbeing, member organisations are able to work with people in need of support to gain information and access to a wide range of services. In response to growing challenges with the cost of living crisis, organisations play a vital role in connecting people to support, meeting specific needs around mental health, social isolation, staying warm, finances, and accessing affordable food that people may not otherwise be aware is available to them. This can include signposting to resources available, but often organisations provide more in depth and practical support to break down barriers to services including providing language interpretation and setting up meetings and accompanying people to attend. Supporting people to access available services is not one way, with organisations also using their expertise and influence to raise awareness of how services can be more accessible to the communities they serve, reducing barriers to access from within.

The diverse activities that organisations deliver also give people opportunities to gain new experiences and develop practical skills to improve their health and wellbeing. This has included green activities such as gardening, health walks and physical activity, as well as cooking skills, arts and music, and breaks from their normal routines. Many of these activities are delivered in group settings which bring often isolated people together to make new connections and develop new networks of support. The ability to resume so many of these activities in person has been particularly welcome by member organisations. Organisations have reflected that it is not just about gaining a specific skill, the experience of doing this also gives people feelings of self-worth and confidence. One participant explained the benefits of getting involved with a walking group:

“Main benefits for me have been a new group of friends who have similar memories of Edinburgh of old. A group that has been supportive of each other during happy times and also during life's more difficult occasions.”

**What people do differently:** Member organisations can evidence a range of ways that access to the right services and support enables people and communities to take actions to improve their health and wellbeing. Broad themes across all types of service delivery are that people make connections with others, have more social interactions, are less isolated and make good use of resources in their communities. There is evidence that for some individuals, engagement in member organisations work has led to people moving into volunteering positions and paid work.

By focusing their service delivery on the social model of health where people are active participants in their own wellbeing, there is evidence that this has also reduced burden on overwhelmed clinical services and into more appropriate community support. There is also evidence of sectors working more closely together to provide appropriate and accessible support for example by GPs being present in their communities.



*1 Images from Forum Members work with communities.*

**The difference this makes:** At an individual level, ECHF member organisations are able to demonstrate that they are making a difference to people’s wellbeing and reduce the impact of health inequalities, enabling those they engage to make positive changes in their lives and access the right support. Members describe people they have engaged being more emotionally stable, having greater confidence and “more good days”. The challenge for organisations is that the health and well being of many people in Edinburgh is worsening and demand for support is growing. Organisations identify that greater numbers of people are now in need of support due to the impact of the cost of living crisis on their material needs and their wellbeing. This obscures the overall picture of the impact organisations can make to reducing health inequalities; however, they are able to mitigate against the impact of these rising. This raises the question ‘what would happen if these organisations were not here’?

## Key messages about impact of partnership working and the forum

The work of forum member organisations to respond quickly and effectively to meet community needs from the very start of the Covid has demonstrated the capability of the sector and built trust with funding organisations. This has meant that the statutory sector has been quicker to turn to the third sector as an essential source of support. In particular, the Council’s Resilience team involved the Edinburgh third sector from the beginning in their response to the Ukrainian war to meet the challenge of supporting refugees arriving in the city. The Forum has established a reputation as a ‘safe pair of hands’ to act as a broker and distribute funds to respond to



challenges through its role as a community anchor organisation, working with the Supporting Communities Fund and Scottish Community Development Centre. Forum member organisations also report that confidence in their work by funders has increased and they are more able to secure funding for their work.

A key feature of member organisations ability to respond is that they are embedded within local communities and listen to the priorities and needs of the people they serve, without holding other agendas. Coupled with a 'can do' mentality, organisations are able to use flexibility and creativity to respond to local needs rapidly. This way of working existed before the Covid pandemic, however organisations confidence to take action has increased based on this experience. Understanding of local need is enhanced by forum members connections with other networks and local forums which identify gaps within local services and statutory provision. Members have reflected that this relationship and collaboration with local networks and with the ECHF creates opportunities for joint working that would not exist otherwise. One very recent example of such an opportunity has been the Food Poverty Network, where collective activity has enabled organisations to act more quickly and with the added security of working together in partnership.

By engaging with ECHF organisations gain opportunities to test out ideas about new ways of working in a safe space and to gain support from their peers. ECHF has also been able to address gaps in staff training and development for organisations that they would not have capacity to undertake separately, for example by running Mental Health and Suicide First Aid Training.

### **What the Forum and its members need now**

Forum members identified that its main strength is in increasing the capacity of organisations. This can be addressed by training and development opportunities as described above, but also in fostering trust and genuine collaboration between organisations. Members identified the importance of a non-competitive funding environment for their work to be effective, and the Forum has a role to play in this by creating opportunities for partnership working.

An example of how members test out new ways of working within the Forum is the potential role of organisations acting as a supporter or anchor organisation for small community groups and projects. This innovative approach to building community capacity will generate useful learning that the Forum can foster and share.

As described above, the work of forum members to raise the profile of the third sector is leading to positive benefits for funding and statutory sector relationships. Members see a role for the ECHF to continue raising this profile, in particular to highlight the need for continued investment. Member organisations are clear that the loss of the third sector in Edinburgh would have a huge negative impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, which would result in increasing pressures on the NHS; ECHF can support key stakeholders to hear and understand this message so that the sector is valued. One example of key messages the Forum can raise is the particular challenges facing organisations around staff terms and conditions; as in other sectors, staff are requesting pay rises to offset the increases in the cost of living faced by everyone. As a result, if more of an organisation's funding is being allocated to staff costs, there

inevitably will be less available for service delivery at a time when more and more people need the local services. The Forum can enable members to work together to find collective solutions to challenges like this and raise these messages with councillors and politicians.

## Conclusion

Member organisations are embedded in their communities and are able to provide practical solutions to a wide range of needs which has made them well placed to continue meeting the shifting challenges of this post-Covid period. These relationships mean organisations are closely connected to local needs and priorities, enabling them to respond in agile and creative ways to the priorities of their beneficiaries. This is enhanced by opportunities to meet, learn, and work together that are facilitated through the Edinburgh Community Health Forum. The work of the Forum and its Members is a core part of the way the city responds to challenges and works towards better lives for its residents, which is needed now more than ever.