

# P105 Addressing loneliness and dietary needs during the COVID-19 pandemic: experiences of people living with HIV receiving support from a small HIV support organisation

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## Background

Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations (VCSOs) are vital partners in meeting care and support needs, often as secondary responders in times of crisis, or supporting those whose needs are not met by the State. VCSOs enable many vulnerable people to live fulfilling, independent lives, helping them maintain good health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> People living with HIV are disproportionately impacted by poverty, financial instability, stigma and discrimination; those with complex health needs who were shielding, and had no recourse to public funds, were particularly likely to experience food insecurities during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.<sup>2</sup> At such times, statutory and voluntary HIV services had to reduce their in-person activities, exacerbating these pre-existing disparities.

Pre-pandemic, Lunch Positive (a small HIV support VCSO) provided community, food, friendship and peer-support for people living with or affected by HIV, primarily via a weekly lunch club and monthly supper. This mixed methods impact study explored clients' experiences of the changes in service provision (socially-distanced food collection, doorstep food delivery, befriending service and companionship telephone calls) as the organisation adapted to members' needs during and after lockdowns. It also included a lunch social activity aimed at addressing social isolation and reintegrating people living with HIV back into their community after the UK COVID-19 lockdowns.

## Methods

Using a convergent parallel design,<sup>3</sup> qualitative and quantitative data were collected, to gain a full understanding of the impact of the charity's work to address loneliness and dietary needs of people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was approved by the University of Sussex and funded through the University of Sussex Impact Acceleration Funds.

**Qualitative:** Two facilitated in-person focus groups were held concurrently in June 2021 (after the second lockdown, before all COVID restrictions were lifted). Focus groups lasted 60-90 minutes, with semi-structured interview question guides to structure discussions; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Deductive thematic analysis was conducted using a coding procedure to identify patterns between the groups and emerging themes.

**Quantitative:** A survey was circulated to service users (n=60) at the weekly lunch club in July 2021, eliciting experiences of Lunch Positive's service provision from March 2020 to July 2021. Returned surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics. Activity data for the charity during this period were also recorded.

## Results

### Qualitative:

Nineteen clients gave informed consent and participated in a focus group (n=10 and n=9). The following themes relating to clients' experiences of the pandemic and their engagement with Lunch Positive emerged:

**Pre-lockdown services – Loneliness – Regular food parcels – Telephone companionship calls – Non-judgemental space.**

Pre-lockdown, participants particularly valued peer support and eating together. During the pandemic, some clients experienced food insecurities; some felt disconnected and socially isolated; some stopped working. Clients trusted the organisation to keep them safe (e.g. social distancing), and the volunteers delivering food made them feel valued and connected to their peers. Telephone check-ins helped tackle loneliness and reassured those who were anxious or afraid. These themes are illustrated by the quotes from focus group participants (see below left and below right).

*I was receiving food parcels a few days a week, cooked food and shopping, and we also had someone calling us to see if we were okay and did we need any extra help.*

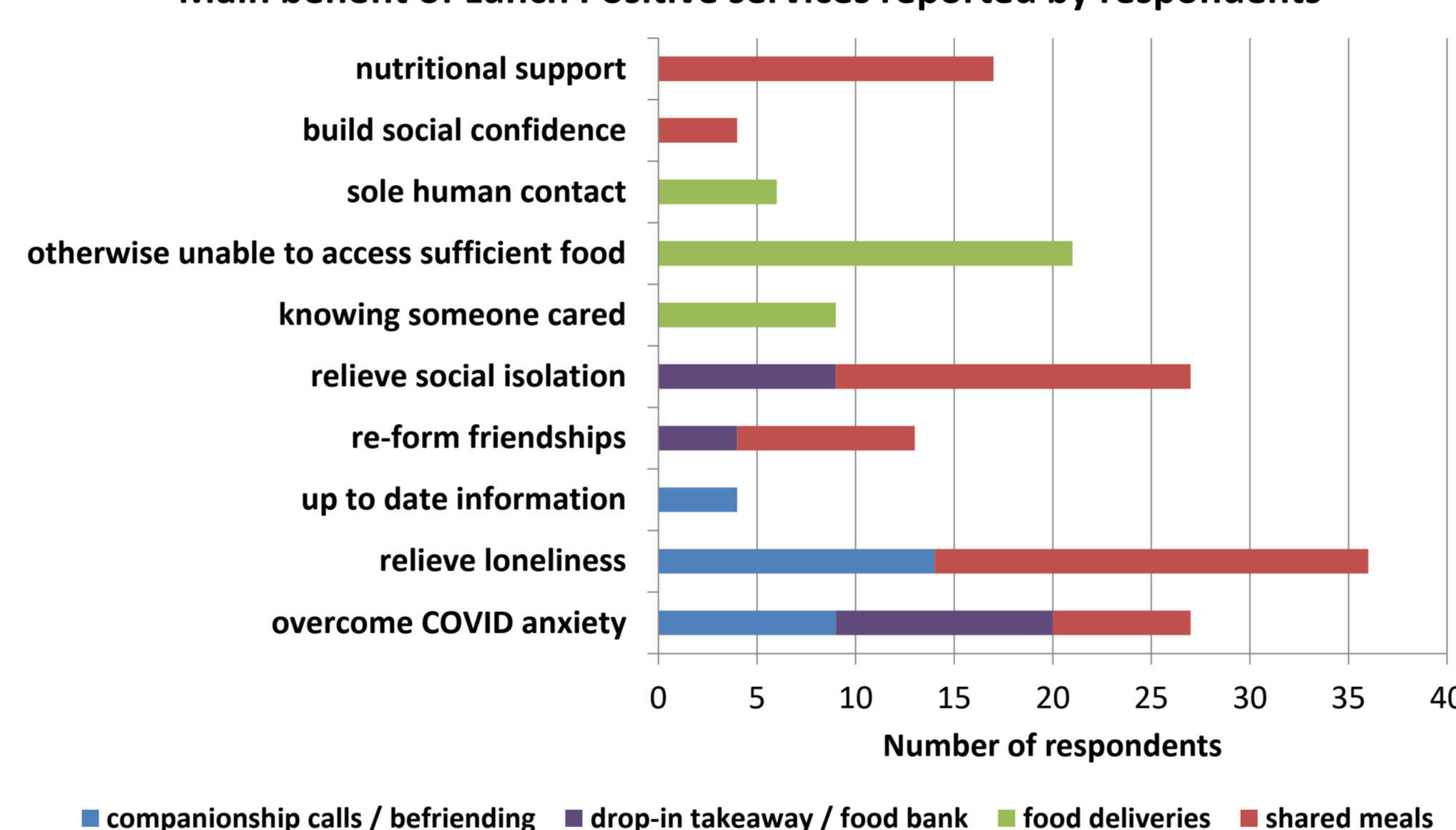
*Some people can come here and pick up some food; it's been very helpful, it's amazing. You have someone; you have help if you need to speak or have a problem. You can go there take some help and the people try and help you all the time.*

*I was shielding, but because of the way that the Friday lunch club was set up I felt comfortable to be able to step out, knowing ... everything that was happening here that the volunteers were doing to make it [safe]. There was a little while where we were able to still have the sit-down lunch, or coming in just for the takeaways. It gave something to get you through ... you knew where you were within the week...*

*...at the time when it did seem particularly bad, and you wondered whether any kind of normality was ever going to return, having been coming along to Lunch Positive for many years, it was not easy, to begin with. But, there was that hope of normality returning at some point. Certainly seeing the way that Lunch Positive were doing everything they could within the restrictions to try and maintain that, both for myself and for everyone, was encouraging.*

*When I came to this country I was nervous about meeting new people, and volunteered here to try to break away from that sense of fear, being new and not knowing where to start and just isolating myself at home because I didn't know anyone, and it helped a lot. And when COVID came around, I put back into my box. I was upset about every day, everybody; not here, but just everybody around me, that I wouldn't get out of the box that I put myself back in. But somebody from Lunch Positive came by to the house and gave me a package of food everyday. I took it and was grateful to see someone and to know someone cares you know. I said to myself, I want to come back and volunteer so I can get the positive I had before back in my life. New wave happened, it was hard, I'm not back in my box, I'm still trying to get back on track with the group as well. I volunteered to help because I'm old now. I'm happy to be old, but obviously in the future, I won't be here; I mean I won't be here in life, I've lived a good life, and they've helped me.*

Main benefit of Lunch Positive services reported by respondents



### Quantitative:

A brief summary of the organisation's service provision and activity data, and quotes from the survey of members are illustrated in the "Lunch Positive HIV Impact 2020-21" infographic (see below centre). 32 people returned surveys: 30 of them had attended the lunch club/other shared meal; 29 had received food deliveries; 26 had used the drop-in takeaway (when lockdown restrictions did not permit shared meals) and food bank; 18 had benefitted from telephone companionship calls and/or the befriending service. The main benefit of each of the services that respondents had received is shown in the bar chart (see left) [n=27]. In addition, 17 people identified aspects of Lunch Positive's activities that contributed to their ability to cope during lockdown.

## Lunch Positive HIV IMPACT 2020-21



*For example, when I was delivering my meals and ... after Christmas, one person looked at me and said thank you for not letting us down. I just turned around, smiled and said you're welcome. I turned around and went, oh God, this person has really appreciated seeing someone, I was so overwhelmed by joy.*

*Sometimes you just at home alone, sometimes you don't have anyone to talk to whatsoever. You come out to obviously meet people... sometimes you don't know which day [it] is or whatever and it's like you know there is Lunch Positive. Just go there and have fun and speak with nice people, whatever. Sometimes you don't come because you need something, but you come because you're feeling so you can speak whatever you want about, it's very good Lunch Positive have this.*

*Most people we come here, we meet, we sit at the table, eat together, and we start sharing ideas.*

*For me, work gave me that connectivity and feeling of belonging and being part of society and giving to society and receiving from being with people and helping people. During lockdown, I retired. The last several months being here, Lunch Positive is the service that's given me the most support and has helped with loneliness*

## Conclusion

During the pandemic Lunch Positive helped address stigma, food insecurities and social isolation experienced by people living with HIV. Participants appreciated the mission and commitment to people living with HIV, and how welcoming and supportive the service is. Limitations of this study included the focus groups being held in-person, when many vulnerable people still had concerns about leaving home, due to the ongoing risk of COVID-19.

## References

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## Acknowledgements

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