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 second 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. 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. 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, 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 the interviews, and semi-structured interviews 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 right below).

Quantitative: A brief summary of the organisation’s service provision and activity data, and quotes from the survey of respondents are illustrated in the “Lunch Positive HIV Impact 2020-21” infographic (see below centre).

Methods
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 benefited 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 [n]=27). In addition, 17 people identified aspects of Lunch Positive’s activities that contributed to their ability to cope during lockdown.

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 having home, due to the ongoing risk of COVID-19.

References
2. Pantaleo, M; Martin, K; Fitzpatrick, E; Nixon E; Tweed M; Spigelman AD; Jones M; Darlington M; Whitham J; & Vera JH (2021) ‘I have the strength to get through this using my past experiences with HIV’: Findings from a mixed-method survey of health outcomes, service accessibility, and psychosocial wellbeing among people living with HIV during the COVID-19 pandemic. AIDS Care, 34(7), 821-827. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2019.1975628

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Scan QR code for short Lunch Positive video

Lunch Positive: www.lunchpositive.org 07486 464384 hello@lunchpositive.org