You can ensure Big Issue North vendors survive COVID-19

Monday 23 March, 2020

In the past fortnight, panic surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic has spread across the nation. For the millions of people who cannot work from home, are self-employed or on zero-hours contracts, or cannot afford to live on statutory sick pay, this uncertain time has compounded concerns regarding the danger of the virus for elderly, unwell and immunocompromised people with financial anxieties.

For our vendors, these concerns are magnified. The average Big Issue North vendor earns just £60 per week and many have no other source of income. As selling Big Issue North is a formally recognised form of self-employment, they don't receive paid sick leave. This means that the impact of even one week of poor sales could be almost impossible to bear, and if the pandemic continues for an extended period of time, many could face destitution.

To make matters worse, many of our vendors are particularly vulnerable to the virus. Each year, we see the average age of our vendors increase. While our oldest vendor 15 years ago was 65, our 2019 vendor audit recorded five vendors aged between 61 and 65, one vendor between 66 and 70 and one between 76 and 80. The mortality rate for people in these age groups who have had the virus ranges from 3.6 per cent to 14.8 per cent, compared with just 1.3 per cent for people in their fifties, 0.4 per cent for people in their forties, and 0.2 per cent for younger adults. Furthermore, one in five of our vendors have a long-term illness or disability, and among them, 22 per cent have asthma or COPD and 13 per cent have diabetes – conditions with associated mortality rates of 6.3 per cent and 7.3 per cent respectively.

Particularly worryingly, a third of our vendors are currently homeless – including half of our vendors over the age of 60. This means that they are unable to self-isolate safely and cannot protect themselves from potentially fatal infection. Although only a small percentage of our vendors currently sleep on the streets, many rely on friends and family to keep a roof over their head, and if those friends or relatives are themselves at high risk from the virus, they may find that this accommodation is no longer an option for them in the weeks to come.

These problems are exacerbated by the fact that as the virus spreads, an increasing number of foodbanks and soup kitchens have been forced to close their doors, leaving vendors with nowhere to go for the support they need. A third of the people who sell Big Issue North have relied on a foodbank or soup kitchen at some point in order to survive, and this number may now increase, particularly as foodbanks can also provide toiletries and hygiene products, and those signed up to the Fuel Bank scheme can also offer vouchers for gas and electricity.

As of Monday 23rd March, we have also made the incredibly difficult decision to cease all sale of Big Issue North on the street for the safety of our vendors, leaving our vendors without their source of income and usual support network.

Thankfully, you can help. We have set up a hardship fund for our vendors. This allows us to swiftly help homeless vendors into accommodation, as well as paying for vendors' rent, bills and shopping in the event that they are unable to access a foodbank, or that rent and bills are not frozen by the government.

To donate, please text HARDSHIP to 70970 to give £5, or visit easydonate.org/HARDSHIP to give as much or as little as you can afford.

You can buy a digital copy of each issue for just £2 at issuu.com/bigissuenorth. £1 from each sale will go directly to our hardship fund.

Alternatively, if you prefer print media, you can take out a subscription for three, six or 12 months, with each issue sent directly to your home or business, with no postage or packaging fees. To take out a subscription, go to shop.bigissuenorth.com/category/subscriptions.

As you may have read, we also recently launched a quarterly subscription magazine, The New Issue. Subscriptions cost £40 per year, and all profits go towards supporting our vendors. To find out more, take out a subscription, or buy one or two issues to get a taste of what's on offer, please visit newissue.co.uk.

We also sell a range of merchandise on our online shop, including tote bags, calendars, posters, jewellery and homeware, along with back issues of Big Issue North. Once again, all profits go towards supporting our vendors. To browse the products on offer, visit shop.bigissuenorth.com.

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If you feel you can offer any additional support, you can also get in touch by emailing us at fundraising@bigissueinthenorth.com, or calling us on 0161 848 2430.

Thank you so much for your support.

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