



Preparing for different futures: building on the community response and volunteering session report

CONTEXT

Throughout May and June 2020 WCVA facilitated a programme of on-line discussion forums to gain an understanding of the issues facing the voluntary sector in Wales as a result of Covid-19, the different future possibilities that are emerging and how we can best prepare; by steering towards the future outcomes that the sector wants. This builds on the [initial learning](#) that WCVA published in May 2020.

A series of six sessions each focused on a different topic; ran alongside a wider questionnaire. These were promoted across WCVA's membership and were free to access.

This work focusses on four key questions:

- What has been the impact of Covid-19?
- Where could this lead to long term change - both positive and negative?
- What are the implications for the voluntary sector in Wales?
- What could voluntary organisations, WCVA, government, or other decision-makers do that can help steer us towards a better future?

A summary report was prepared for each session, by [Richard Newton Consulting](#); along with a final report which sought to pull together key themes and actions. The reports will be shared widely with the sector and others.

These reports seek to establish themes and actions rather than create a summary of what was said. They reflect the survey responses and contributions during the events, rather than WCVA or Richard Newton Consulting's positions. We cannot verify if they are wholly accurate or rather people's perceptions.

On 21 May 2020 the second discussion forum was held exploring the subject of building on the community response and volunteering. Over 130 individuals registered to attend - representing a breadth of organisations from the not for profit sector. This included registered charities and community interest companies, along with support organisations including WCVA, County Voluntary Councils (CVCs), local authorities and town and community councils.

Resonating with findings from the previous session on financial resilience, it is clear that the sector's experiences are not universal. The voluntary sector in Wales delivers a vast breadth of services and activities. Some have been directly involved in delivering the emergency response to Covid-19 and facing huge demand for their work; conversely other organisations have found themselves temporarily suspending operations as activities, particularly those that are location focused, became impossible to maintain whilst complying with social distancing.

BUILDING ON THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE AND VOLUNTEERING – WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF COVID-19?

The community emergency response at a grass-roots level has been unprecedented, in terms of both the scale of response and the speed at which it was established. Much of this has been reactive and community led. Town and Community Councils for instance report over 15,000 people volunteering in Wales – and PAVO report over 112 community groups in Powys supporting over 2000 volunteers. Some of these volunteers had already been mobilised as part of the Storm Dennis response.

- The profile of volunteers has changed. In Cardiff the median age of volunteers has been 36 and 45% of volunteers are male. This is an age cohort who have not traditionally engaged with formal volunteering.
- Whilst a significant level of the response was responsive from the community, this resulted in some geographical pockets being under-served with a community response and required more formal intervention with volunteering supported by the CVC and / or Town or Community Councils to ensure a parity of provision.
- Partnership working has improved, and volunteers have played a key role in this – in particular connecting with local businesses (often SMEs) to secure additional support for the vulnerable members in the community.
- Some volunteering opportunities have been suspended during the pandemic, and some volunteers have felt unable to continue volunteering in certain roles. This included location-based volunteering (e.g. volunteering at museums and arts centres) and also volunteers who were in the shielding group who have had to withdraw from face-to-face activities.
- The impact of the roles undertaken by volunteers has been wider than anticipated when the volunteering role was created. For instance, volunteers engaged in supporting the shielding group do far more than ‘picking and carrying’ of supplies; instead they have really connected with people / families to help support the wider wellbeing.
- Officially many people looking to volunteer were signposted to register on Volunteering Wales. Given the grass-roots response, many of the individuals registered on Volunteering Wales did not connect to volunteering opportunities through this channel.
- Many established volunteer groups turned on a six-pence in order to respond to Covid-19. There are concerns that some of these may have been operating outside of their constituted objects. Where groups are unconstituted, there are concerns about the capacity these groups have to meet safeguarding and other regulatory requirements including insurance.

BUILDING ON THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE AND VOLUNTEERING - WHERE COULD THIS LEAD TO LONG TERM CHANGE - BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE?

Universally there is a desire to sustain the levels of community response that have been experienced; to sustain it we need to understand what empowered it. There are clear reports of people motivated to volunteer by the panic of Covid-19. Additionally, it is reported that many were attracted to a hyper-place focus of helping their own community. There are questions as to whether the changes to the age profile of volunteers were due to the immediate, but temporary, changes to the labour market, particularly due to furlough and home working. Will the need that drives the motivation to volunteer be sustained?

Of note:

- Some of the volunteer groups are now constituting. We need to ensure that, where groups want to formalise their governance, impartial support is available to them including an understanding of the longer-term commitment of this.
- It is critical that volunteers, and those they support, are appropriately safeguarded. There is clearly a balance to reach in respect of enabling any community response to feel organic and responsive to local needs; rather than formulated, regulated and controlled by external bodies.
- Public bodies have highlighted the important role that volunteering has played in delivering against Wellbeing plans (and other priorities). This is valuable if this response sustains - but it needs to be measured whilst respecting that many of these volunteers do not want to feel over-managed. This also impacts on how wider volunteering activity in Wales is measured and reported.

BUILDING ON THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE AND VOLUNTEERING - WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN WALES?

Ultimately Wales could see a refocus in how volunteer activity. There is a risk that many volunteers could feel unable to return to their substantive roles, whilst there is a once in a lifetime opportunity to engage with new volunteers. There also may be change in volunteer motivations with many of the newer

volunteers wishing to engage in hyper-local community focused volunteering, rather than linking with traditional volunteering opportunities.

In particular:

- Volunteering roles will need to be reviewed in the light of social distancing. Not only do volunteering roles have to be safe, the volunteer has to feel safe to be able to return. As society returns to a 'new normal' we have to understand:
 - How to ensure social distancing is mainstreamed into all volunteering opportunities and accompanying training.
 - How volunteering can be extended to the Shielding group. Some organisations report using digital technology for these groups to deliver certain activities whilst self-isolating e.g. advice and advocacy. Whilst having benefits to the wider community, this can also be key in reducing the isolation experienced by these individuals.
 - How can volunteering return to location-based settings (i.e. museums, arts centres, charity retail) and does this require a change in in the demographics of the existing volunteer base i.e. if the existing volunteer base is in the majority formed by those from vulnerable categories.
- Volunteering roles during the Covid-19 response have involved more than just providing time and this has been valued by organisations. There are reports of Town and Community Councils supporting with the purchase of birthday hampers for children, and topping up energy meters. This has a resource requirement beyond the facilitation of the actual volunteering.
- The profile of those volunteering has changed – but can this be sustained? As people return to work, is there a way that they can engage their professional / vocational skills within their local communities.

BUILDING ON THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE AND VOLUNTEERING - WHAT COULD VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS, WCVA, GOVERNMENT, OR OTHER DECISION-MAKERS DO THAT CAN HELP STEER US TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE?

There are a number of ideas for action emerging from the session for WCVA and members to consider with other stakeholders in order to offer the best possible basis to build on the community response and volunteering.

- ▶ When representing the sector to other stakeholders engaged in the Covid-19 response, it is essential that the breadth of the sector, and the different roles undertaken by volunteers are fully evidenced. This should include a mapping of the challenges faced by different sector cohorts which can be shared with wider stakeholders to help inform decisions about service planning.
- ▶ Guidance and best practice advice about safeguarding volunteers needs to be developed and circulated to enable volunteering to continue in a Covid-19 affected Wales. This includes protecting, yet engaging, those classified as 'vulnerable' in relation to Covid-19, as well as supporting the development of, and preparation for, volunteering in socially distanced roles.
- ▶ Wider guidance needs to be established in respect of the wider regulatory requirements that volunteer action groups face (including health and safety) and how these can be fulfilled effectively, and perhaps collectively.
- ▶ It is evident that Town and Community Councils have played a key role in the community response. Not all areas are served by these. A mapping exercise needs to highlight inequalities in provision.
- ▶ We need a mechanism to fully understand the motivation for volunteering and engaging in a community response - and how this can be sustained. In particular, this needs to look at the drivers behind volunteering on a hyper-local basis and the views of volunteers in terms of engagement with, and reporting to, infrastructure bodies.
- ▶ The role of infra-structure bodies needs to be reviewed in respect of recruiting and reporting volunteers in light of the above.

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