Preparing for different futures: delivering services 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 28 May 2020 the third discussion forum was held exploring the subject of delivering services in a Covid environment. Over 113 organisations 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) and local authorities.

Resonating with findings from the two previous sessions, 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. Furthermore, the voluntary sector were also furloughing staff.

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.

DELIVERING SERVICES – WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF COVID-19?

All those participating reference having to make significant changes to service provision. It is apparent that these changes have evolved and been prioritised over the lifetime of the pandemic. Changes to the delivery of services have resulted from income (in particular declining income resulting in service restrictions) and from the need to respond to the challenges of Covid-19.

In particular:

- Organisations reported that when lock-down commenced there was an immediate restriction on services, with only those regarded as essential services or emergency response being maintained. Those providing these services report significant increases in demand for services. For instance, PAVO's Community Connectors scheme rose from having an average of 220 referrals a month to 1,632 at the height of the spring 2020 Covid-19 outbreak. This has resulted in redeployment of staff into the service and moving to a seven-day-a-week operation.

- There was an immediate response from the community (PAVS) setting up support within a matter of days. This response should be acknowledged as a significant positive aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a need to grow this without it becoming overly bureaucratic.

- As organisations have started to adjust to social distancing, more services have been re-modelled, delivering remotely primarily through digital technology.

- Location focused services (i.e. museums, arts centres) have found it hard to resume services, with many closing public-facing services completely.

- There are greater occurrences of partnership working. Many organisations reported collaborative working with peer organisations at a level which has been previously unprecedented in order to ensure that the vulnerable were protected. Equally, relaxation in data sharing protocols have contributed to increased partnership working. When reviewing partnership working,

participants also recognised how relationships with public sector partners, in particular local authorities had changed as a result of the pandemic.

- Town Councils have been active working together to support their communities; supporting food banks, delivering pet food, topping up electricity cards.

DELIVERING SERVICES - WHERE COULD THIS LEAD TO LONG TERM CHANGE - BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE?

With social distancing becoming the 'new-normal', change is being imposed upon service delivery through the need to comply with public health requirements and government restrictions. Service delivery needs to be agile to be able to offer the best experience for service-users whilst also responding to potentially different restrictions in relation to Coronavirus. There is a feeling across many organisations that exiting lockdown will be harder than entering lockdown. Entering lockdown was immediate and mandated; whereas organisations are being encouraged to use more of their discretion in terms of designing the services to be delivered as we exit lockdown.

In considering change, organisations have highlighted:

- There has been a focus on moving to digital services. Whilst this has been good, it needs to be recognised that there is still a large cohort of the population who do not share digital equality. This may be a result of their own skills and knowledge or as a result of the availability of resources such as broadband in rural areas. Organisations spoke of how they had also re-energised print newsletters and used the telephone - all of which has been welcomed by service users.

- There is a concern that many of the adaptations to service delivery that were imposed were developed very quickly. These adaptations need to be reviewed to ensure that they are working and that the voice of service-users is considered in planning service design. Concerns were raised about how a move to digital services could be seen as impersonal. However, in response to this was the acknowledgement that any development strategy should be person-centred.

- Voluntary sector organisations providing front line emergency services have met demand through re-deploying staff and working to their maximum capacity. Organisations responded because, given their values, they had to - and not always because they had the resources to. This cannot be sustained with issues for staff wellbeing and financial resources.

- The majority of staff (and volunteers) from organisations have moved to home working. As this extends in time as a working practice, there are further considerations for staff wellbeing. This includes ensuring they have the resources to work safely from home – and wider issues related to their wellbeing and combatting isolation. Preparation for a return to office working also places challenges in terms of financial expenditure, as well responding to the physical constraints of many small offices.

- Relationships with public sector commissioners have changed and many organisations need to review these. The relationships that people had previously are not those that are necessarily needed now.

- There is still significant uncertainty as to how location focused services will re-establish delivery with concerns about staff, service users and audiences linked to these facilities.

DELIVERING SERVICES - WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN WALES?

The voluntary sector in Wales is committed to providing high quality services in Wales. There are a number of implications resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic that need to be considered.

- The move to remote / digital delivery has both benefits and short-fallings in the way that the sector is able to support service-users. Whilst the sector needs to respond to the challenges of Coronavirus, this should not be at the loss of a long-term return to direct working. There is concern that commissioners will see remote / digital delivery as a more financially efficient delivery model in the long-term.

- The increased partnership working that has been seen during the pandemic should be sustained. This may have synergy with potential changes to the structure of the sector as explored in the session on Financial Resilience.

- There are financial considerations, which are not universal across the sector, but need to be considered when delivering services:
  - The costs of adapting services for social distancing
  - The costs of adapting core support function for social distancing
  - Backfilling the costs of services which were funded through voluntary income which is falling
  - Responding to location focused service providers who face challenges to re-commencing activity
- There are suggestions that the sector will revisit its infrastructure requirements, particularly property requirements, in light of the experiences of spring 2020 and the ability for staff to work from home.

DELIVERING SERVICES - 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 services in future.

- When representing the sector to other stakeholders engaged in the Covid-19 response, it is essential that the breadth of the sector, and the services provided, are fully evidenced.
- The sector has a development need to build and share best practice in respect of working in a socially distanced manner. This includes direct delivery to service-users alongside supporting organisations to support the welfare and safety of their own staff.
- The added value that the sector has brought, and continues to bring, to public sector provision needs to be costed and fully communicated to stakeholders and policy planners
- The full costs to the sector of adapting services needs to be identified, and funders approached to meet these costs. Equally commissioners must not be allowed to regard distanced / digital delivery as a value for money cost saving.

- The structure of the sector may change, and infrastructure organisations have a role to play in this (in direct synergy with the findings from Session one - financial resilience)

- Practical information and support on issues such as leases and sale of property needs to be provided as this becomes a more dominant issue for organisations.

- A dedicated programme of work needs to be implemented on the acute needs of location focused services who are still struggling to identify a way to resume operations.