



# Preparing for different futures: influencing policy 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, by [Richard Newton Consulting](#), along with a final report which sought to pull together key themes and actions. These will

be shared widely with the sector and others - such as funders and policy-makers.

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 4 June 2020 the fourth discussion forum was held exploring the subject of how the ability of the voluntary sector to influence policy has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over 106 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, CVCs and local authorities.

## **INFLUENCING POLICY - WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF COVID-19?**

The extent to which organisations in the voluntary sector seek to influence policy varies. Some organisations exist purely as campaigning and lobbying organisations. Other organisations are service delivery organisations who also choose to engage in influencing activities; however, many organisations do not formally engage in influencing activities, deferring these activities to infrastructure bodies. As with other elements discussed through the Different Futures events, the situation has changed over the lifetime of the pandemic and is likely to continue to change as the pandemic continues.

The ability of the voluntary sector to influence policy has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Access to policy makers has been affected, but the impact is nuanced – with access increasing in some ways and decreasing in others.
- Organisations reported access to government ministers at a political level had increased, as they look for solutions; local organisations also reported increased access to their Members of the Senedd; however, access to officials on issues not immediately related to the crisis has

been harder as officials were redeployed; and, access to opposition parties nationally on issues not directly related to the crisis had decreased.

- Relationships with local authorities and other public bodies were mixed: where there was good partnership working previously, there was close joint working at speed; where relationships were poor, the opposite was true, some PSBs and regional partnerships were meeting more often, others not at all.
- Government have been keen to engage with the voluntary sector as they needed to, they didn't have the direct experience or the access to suggested solutions that the voluntary sector had. As such the sector has demonstrated its value.
- One cancer charity described how policy asks that had seemed aspirational are now seen as essential; some insurmountable barriers now seem possible – whether it be greener transport or community-led action - leaving organisations suddenly needing to reevaluate their influencing priorities.
- Political party manifesto development is unclear in terms of process and timetable to influence and there's concern the timescales needed to influence.
- Those organisations whose remit does not neatly fit into a public service area, instead stretching across more than one service area e.g. the work of Care and Repair, have faced difficulties influencing the breadth of the issues that they face where these don't fit into public service silos.
- Charities reported greater levels of success where influencing activities took place as part of an alliance. Those with established infrastructure and networks reported greater levels of success than those who were new to the influencing arena.
- A number of organisations reported a lack of capacity to influence as their staff had been furloughed or re-deployed.
- The disability and older people's sector both report regression in the way that their communities have been regarded, with conversations moving from a social model of disability to a medical model.

- The moving to digital / remote has had positive impacts for many, whilst further excluding the voices of some.

## **INFLUENCING POLICY - WHERE COULD THIS LEAD TO LONG TERM CHANGE - BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE?**

Covid-19 has not directly changed the way that the sector can influence policy, but it has changed operational practices and priorities that need to be reflected in policy. Additionally, the pivotal role that the sector has played in the emergency response underwrites its position as central to successful service delivery in Wales.

In terms of change:

- Many organisations reported that the community response was days and weeks ahead of the policy response. The community response was often more appropriate at a local level (the content of food boxes, mandated by UK policy was discussed in relation to this). The community response – often hyper-local and unconstituted – needs to be able to inform policy.
- Collective working to influence policy is positive and the sector should retain this.
- There are a number of positive changes in policy that were introduced as a result of Covid-19 which have had benefits. The sector needs to influence in order to hold onto these gains e.g. the £20 increase in Universal Credit.
- There are also changes in wider behaviours from clean air through to shopping locally and taking more exercise. These have societal benefits that will complement the purpose of many voluntary sector organisations; positive behaviour changes need to be sustained.

That said there are some negatives to the present situation:

- The pandemic is forcing government to re-write policy and political parties to re-write manifestos. This creates uncertainty for those in the sector who are seeking to deliver services and influence policy.

- Some organisations have invested significant resource in policy campaigns to improve outcomes for communities across Wales which have not been able to deliver the intended impact, or may now need re-working given the significant change to service-delivery required as a result of the pandemic.

## **INFLUENCING POLICY - WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN WALES?**

In the short term Covid-19 has negatively impacted on the capacity of both the voluntary sector and policy makers to engage in influencing activities. There are already signs that this capacity is broadening to enable engagement in non-Covid-19 topics. However, for the foreseeable future, Covid-19 is going to dominate much of the influencing activity that takes place within the public policy arena.

This presents a real challenge for influencing change for the longer term. Everything is moving incredibly fast and minds are focussed on the immediate. The voluntary sector does not want to lose its ambitions for broader and longer-term change. Political manifestos for 2021 elections will be for the five-year period of government. We need to find ways of recapturing political imagination on to broader issues than the immediate response to the pandemic.

There are opportunities to find new ways to work together across our sector to address the longer-term issues and to focus on the sorts of challenges set out in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

Policy has been adapted and / or created quickly to respond to the immediate needs of the Covid-19 pandemic; these changes need to be fully evaluated to understand what has worked, and what should be regarded as a temporary measure. This evaluation needs to extend beyond the silos of individual service provision; it should explore the wider impact of policy decisions.

We need to recognise that the future is uncertain in terms of future waves of the virus and securing a vaccine; as such policy making and influencing is likely to need to continue to be agile. Policy making could return exclusively to focus on Coronavirus related matters. This would be at the expense of the development of much of the voluntary sector.

It is also essential that, in line with key Welsh Government legislation, we ensure that the voice of service-users is heard in evaluation and reviewing policy. This was not always possible in Spring 2020 given the urgency of the required response, but it is now essential that these views are now captured. Participation needs to be embedded in the new ways we approach policy development and influencing in the sector, including digital.

Finally, to influence effectively, voluntary organisations need to use evidence, including of the sector's own impact. This can be particularly challenging for smaller organisations.

### **INFLUENCING POLICY - 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 actions emerging from the session for WCVA and members to consider and take forward with other stakeholders in order ensure that the sector is best placed to influence policy moving forward.

- ▶ It is essential that the breadth of the sector, and the different levels of influencing activities undertaken by organisations in the sector, is understood.
- ▶ Policy makers at a senior level need to be made aware of the risks to wider service development that will be incurred should policy development remain focused on a Covid-19 response.
- ▶ It is important that we understand the benefits of digital models for engagement and influencing so that we can build on these, but also the negative impacts which exclude some.
- ▶ Voluntary organisations need to develop strong evidence to demonstrate why policy change is needed, as well as demonstrating their own impact
- ▶ Voluntary sector organisations need to be encouraged (and if necessary supported / funded) to evaluate the effectiveness of changes to service delivery, and to ensure that a user voice is included in this work.

- ▶ Mapping positive and negative changes to policy – and (a) collective voice(s) developed to strengthen our ability to keep the positive and end the negative.
- ▶ To support collective work, further mapping needs to take place assessing the collective impact delivered by the sector, re-enforcing the sector's key position in delivering services, and providing intelligence to influence policy.
- ▶ The voluntary sector requires clarity and communications with the political parties in respect of the process and timescales to engaged with manifesto development in light of Covid-19.
- ▶ Whilst many of the immediate changes to policy and service delivery have been focused on a health and social care environment, they have wider implications across areas such as sustainability. This will involve cross working with organisations such as the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales.

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