

Our future Wales – WCVA’s response

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteers, community groups and the wider voluntary sector have been integral to supporting people and communities across Wales through the Covid-19 crisis. The speed of response and the ability to reach people in ways that others could not, has been a hallmark of the crisis response.

Collaboration, and our collective ability to make a much bigger difference to people's wellbeing together, has been another.

In the midst of the tragedy and hardships of recent months, we have had to work very differently. This has created opportunities to learn about what does and doesn't work and what could lead to longer term change. The recovery presents a once in a generation opportunity to address the long-term challenges that face our society, as well as the immediate challenges ahead. Voluntary organisations are ambitious to play their full part in creating a better future.

The crisis has led to huge upheaval across the voluntary sector. Some has been positive – rapid innovation, new relationships and shifts in behaviours and opinions that many have been campaigning on for years. Much has been negative – significant loss of income at a time of rising demand, services reduced or closed and worsening outcomes for the most vulnerable people and communities. The crisis will lead to deep and permanent change.

We have set out below our learning from recent months, and our recommendations for how government and the voluntary sector can work together to maximise our collective contribution to future wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

WCVA is the national membership body for the voluntary sector in Wales. In developing this response, we have listened to our members, to the voluntary sector and stakeholders more widely and drawn on a wide range of reports on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the voluntary sector and the people who it serves.

Over the past few months we have had unprecedented contact with our members and the wider sector. Voluntary organisations have spoken to us about the challenges – and opportunities - they have come across. We have gathered evidence and data applications to our [emergency grants and loan schemes](#) (particularly the two Welsh Government funded schemes) and listened through our work with the [Third Sector Partnership Council](#) and [Third Sector Support Wales](#), and through member’s enquiries to us.

We also hosted a series of open, participative events and surveys on [Preparing for Different Futures](#). They covered a range of topics, most of which were selected via twitter polls; sustainable funding, volunteering and community action, service delivery, engagement and influencing, climate change, and the wellbeing economy. Over 260 people participated in the series. We collaborated with WLGA and One Voice Wales and with Business in the Community on two events. We also held a joint webinar with NHS Charities Together. The final report of these sessions summarises the issues raised.

WCVA has been working with a small and diverse group of voluntary sector leaders across Wales to explore how the sector can play its full role in creating a better future. We have published a series of [Better Futures Wales](#) blogs from the group.

WCVA and Welsh Government jointly commissioned a [Future Wellbeing Wales](#) series of think pieces and podcasts exploring opportunities for the sector to create positive change in the context of Brexit and Covid-19. The topics cover climate change, a new economy and transforming health and social care.

We have drawn on all of this work to inform this response.

THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN WALES

The voluntary sector in Wales is a vibrant and diverse sector, which can be hard to categorise:

- The voluntary sector includes registered charities, but also social enterprises, community groups, and recent mutual aid groups.

- Education/training, health, and sport are the largest areas of work for voluntary organisations. However, the sector covers a wide range of areas and activities.

Welsh charities are smaller than their counterparts in England and Scotland:

- 32,000 voluntary organisations, but only 8000 charities.
- The highest percentage of micro charities in the UK (53%). Another 32% are small charities.¹
- Charitable income per head is half what it is in England and Scotland. (approx. £400 per head in Wales and £800 in England and Scotland.) However, this is partly due to the location of registered offices of major charities.

ISSUES (CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES) FOR SOCIETY

This report outlines how to maximise the contribution of voluntary and community action and to Wales' recovery. However, there are a number of longer-term challenges which limit the potential for this maximisation.

Longer-term economic challenges

All parts of the sector expect there to be a recession, and a rise in unemployment and poverty. Many also fear a 'wave' of redundancies when the furlough schemes end. Less resilient communities are more likely to be affected by this, as are people with lower incomes, or from disadvantaged groups.

There is likely to be increase in need for two types of support: direct poverty relief, and employability and skills support. The voluntary sector is effective at reaching people who are more marginalised by society. For the latter, European Funding is likely to end in its current form and there is uncertainty over any replacement.

¹ Micro: less than £10,000, Small: less than £100,000

There is a wider desire to move to a different economic model in the future with a particular emphasis on supporting well-being and sustainability. Wales has a number of policy and legal frameworks to support this, but further focus is needed to ensure consistent levels of input from the voluntary sector into this.

Longer-term health challenges

Reduced number of new diagnoses for a range of conditions mean that these conditions will manifest themselves more severely in the future. There are also a wide range of concerns around the impact of the lockdown/self-isolation/shielding on people's mental health.

Community-based health provision has been boosted by this, including through voluntary sector partnerships with health boards (e.g. prescriptions) and supporting people's well-being. The social value of the community response has been significant.

Pandemic preparedness has been found to be wanting and has demonstrated underlying weaknesses in the health and social care system. COVID-19 is significantly more likely to affect people from BAME backgrounds and exacerbates existing health inequalities.

As well as these longer-term challenges, the voluntary sector will face other longer-term challenges such as climate change and the nature crisis, the growth of digital technology and Artificial Intelligence and their impact on the nature of work, current levels of inequality, and an ageing population. The sector will need to change to adapt to these.

Longer-term environmental challenges

Climate and environmental action has risen up the political agenda in an unprecedented way in the last few years as the scale of the challenge has become clearer. Increasingly, there will be pressure on governments to decarbonise their economy and restore their biodiversity.

The increase in visibility of nature and reductions in air pollution throughout this crisis has demonstrated that this can be achieved. Likewise, people's re-engagement with nature in their local communities present a way for people to engage locally with the nature and climate crises.

Withdrawal from the European Union is both a challenge and an opportunity. Many in the voluntary sector worry about the impact of no longer being bound by EU-wide environmental protections, as well as the potential for weakening of environmental protection through new trade deals. However, there is now the opportunity for greater environmental support through agricultural and procurement policy.

This issue is especially pressing for younger people who have been the driver of recent social action on these issues and are aware of the impact of climate change on their own futures.

MAXIMISING THE CONTRIBUTION OF VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ACTION

This response outlines proposals to maximise the contribution of the voluntary sector to the post-COVID recovery. It looks at a wide range of issues which are essential to allowing the voluntary sector to make the biggest impact possible.

This is not only focussed on support from Welsh Government. Different contributions can be made across society to enable this. The voluntary sector itself needs to develop new approaches to ensure that its contribution is maximised. WCVA, along with Third Sector Support Wales, the Third Sector Partnership Council, and other infrastructure organisations are a powerful resource for real change when we work together, and with government.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We have set our response under three themes. We explore these further and given additional detail under separate chapters. Here we identify a number of core proposals that we believe can maximise the contribution of the sector.

A green and just recovery

- A youth volunteer programme that builds skills and wellbeing, as well as enabling young people to come together and take action on the issues they care about, building on learning from the crisis and existing Welsh Government programmes.
- An immediate voluntary sector-led employability and skills programme, building on current provision that's already active
- Scale up what we have learnt about cross-sector collaboration to release the capacity of the voluntary sector to create a green and just recovery

Empowered communities and people

- Support a Community Wealth programme to build the structures and capacity to empower communities, drawing on lessons from the crisis and alternative finance streams such as Dormant Assets.
- Establish a time-limited Volunteering Action Group to embed learning from Covid-19 as well as current programmes and support the volunteering infrastructure to adapt to new opportunities arising.

A resilient voluntary sector

- Work with the voluntary sector infrastructure to deliver a range of services focussed on resilience and supporting the sector to innovate and adapt in response to significant change and uncertainty.
- Provide financial support to build resilience across the voluntary sector, enable organisations to deliver projects that support a green and just recovery and to manage the significant financial gap facing the sector.

A GREEN AND JUST RECOVERY

There will be a national effort of rebuilding our society and economy following the COVID-19 outbreak. We believe that this should be based around the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Supporting this recovery will be a big challenge for the voluntary sector and each part of it will have contributions to make. Getting all parts of society, across all our communities, involved is critical.

The voluntary sector overwhelmingly believes that the recovery should not be an attempt to restore the system which existed before, but to use this generational opportunity to ensure that economic recovery is green and just; that it includes everyone and keeps us within our environmental limits.

We need solutions that are integrated and respond to multiple opportunities connecting across different parts of our sector, and with others, to make a bigger difference together. In this time of challenging resources, integrated solutions are needed that can address big societal challenges, short- and long-term. It will also demand collaboration and governance models to support that.

All parts of Wales' society will be pulling together to make sure the recovery is effective and is green and just for Wales and beyond. The voluntary sector will be working with the public and private sectors to make a bigger difference together.

VOLUNTARY ACTION FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The COVID-19 outbreak was a public health crisis and it will take a huge effort to restore our national health to the levels it was before – let alone to improve it beyond those levels. Likewise, the crisis has shown how much more we can do in our communities to relieve the pressure on the NHS. Many people have been supported by community groups and registered charities throughout this crisis or found their local community spaces to be an important part of maintaining their own well-being.

[Transforming health and social care services](#) will need to rely on the preventative role the sector has to play in activities that are not part of the formal health service, but evidence improvements to health and wellbeing.

The voluntary sector includes diversity of groups bringing together citizen voices, particularly of vulnerable groups

Voluntary and community organisations can be a crucial part of the health service in the future. Welsh Government and health boards should:

- Roll-out substantial (and sustained) preventive and social prescribing programmes across every health board area, moving on from piecemeal projects and drawing on lessons on what worked well in the covid-19 crisis response.
- Involve community groups and charities of all sizes in preventative healthcare and social prescribing. This must include the planning as well as the delivery stage.
- Explore a ‘natural health service’ which links local conservation with health and well-being and uses outside space to support well-being, working with voluntary groups to do so.
- Improve the amount of procurement which goes to social value organisations, as required by the Social Services and Wellbeing Act.
- Develop Wales-wide guidance for safeguarding in a preventative and social prescribing context.

VOLUNTARY ACTION FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND NATURE

In the last few years, the public has been demanding action from politicians on climate change and the nature emergency. Climate change is already highlighted as shared priority by TSPC and should be embedded in the economic response.

The recovery gives Welsh Government a real chance to respond to that demand with [concrete action](#). As a result of a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in this recovery, we can make sure that climate and nature action is delivered across Wales.

Throughout the pandemic, many in Wales have reconnected with nature in their local community and we have a resurgence of the presence of nature as air pollution and human activity reduced. Public reaction to these trends shows that people in Wales are deeply proud of, and committed to, local nature. We must put nature and climate at the heart of our recovery.

The Welsh Government must support this green recovery by:

- Ensuring funding for environmental and nature projects in the recovery programmes. This includes Welsh Government's external advisory group in recovery led by the Counsel General through to sector focused recovery groups.
- Strengthening the space for the voluntary sector within the policy development process. The TSSW and TSPC networks can play an essential role in linking the grassroots, community-based response to national policy and enabling knowledge transfer.
- Supporting the climate and conservation activity that takes place at a local level as a crucial part of the response to the climate and nature emergencies.
- Working to engage the emerging community leaders in climate change and sustain the community response. This will include releasing the power of community and voluntary sector led solutions, drawing on their assets and integrating this into the levers being developed within Wellbeing Economy/ Foundational Economy – including procurement. That includes building on different financial models, drawing on Social Investment Cymru and other models for social enterprise.
- Supporting a 'hearts and minds' exercise to develop an understanding across the sector of how organisations can have an impact of climate change whilst delivering their primary purpose.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND VOLUNTARY ACTION

Young people are [expected](#) to be especially badly affected by the recession – with education disrupted and youth unemployment rates likely to be higher than for the rest of the population. There is a real danger that an unfair recovery will exacerbate intergenerational inequalities and potentially create a 'lost' generation. The voluntary sector can play a role in providing opportunity for young people, which also tackles key issues about which young people are concerned.

Evaluations suggest that youth volunteering programmes have been effective in building social capital and overall volunteering programmes particularly strong on outcomes around employability and skills and improving mental health.

Welsh Government can support opportunity for young people by working with the voluntary sector to:

- Establish a youth volunteering programme, with young people in the lead, focussing on tackling big issues such as climate change and the nature crisis, mental health, and intergeneration links. This would build on, and support opportunities that already exist in these areas. Young people should be in the lead to contribute their own solutions to these big issues.

This could have a cross-cutting effect on the recovery by improving youth employment and skills, increasing social capital, bringing people together to improve tolerance and equality, promoting the mental wellbeing of participants and empowering communities.

A NEW ECONOMY: SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

It is now widely expected that a recession will follow the COVID-19 pandemic. WCVA recognises the need to support employability and skills for jobs of the future, including green jobs.

Many parts of Wales have also traditionally had lower levels of economic output than the rest of Wales. With a significant reduction in the number of jobs in the economy, the sector expects an emphasis on skills and employability, as well as job creation.

Less resilient communities are more likely to be affected by this, as are people with lower incomes or from disadvantaged groups.

There is likely to be an increase in need for two types of support: direct poverty relief and employability and skills support. The voluntary sector is effective at reaching people who are more marginalised by society. The voluntary sector can contribute to supporting skills and employability for jobs of the future, including green jobs.

Bringing people back into work will be a major task of every government in the next five-to-ten years. The voluntary sector has a proven capacity for working with communities and individuals who are further from the labour market and ensuring that a quality service is available to everyone.

Some of the funding for future employability and skills work should be reserved for the voluntary sector to ensure this. In particular, Welsh Government should:

- Support the development of community and voluntary sector-led employability programmes, building on current provision that already exists.
- Commit that a proportion of the overall skills and employability budget should be ringfenced for harder-to-reach groups, with an acknowledgement that voluntary sector agencies are a key part of achieving this.
- Ensure that apprenticeships and similar programmes of work recruit from the full diversity of Wales' communities and are accessible to voluntary sector employers.

A NEW ECONOMY: SOCIAL BUSINESSES

The recession that will follow this coronavirus pandemic will not impact every community equally. The most deprived communities will be hit the hardest. Welsh Government should make sure efforts to boost the economy include mechanisms to ensure that communities across Wales see their economies supported. Social businesses are a key way to do this.

The [Welsh Doughnut 2020](#) is a framework for environmental sustainability and social justice, drawn up to ensure that Wales' future development can be guaranteed a basic social floor to everyone, whilst also living within our environmental limits. It was drawn together by a wide coalition of voluntary sector organisation and should form a significant part of Welsh Government's approach to economic development.

We also recognise the importance of cross-sector working. Integration and collaboration are key to sustainable development.

Building on their work on the Foundational Economy, Welsh Government should support local social enterprises and local communities to become drivers of [local economies](#). They can do this by:

- Recognising the economic impact that the voluntary sector makes in communities across Wales. For example, approximately 938,000 volunteers contribute 145 million hours each year, worth £1.7bn². This is equivalent to around 3.1% of Wales' GDP
- Implement a Social Enterprise Action Plan, based on the recent [vision for Social Enterprise](#).
- Develop a wider range of alternative finances, such as social investment and endowment funding or support organisations to move to a more varied funding model.
- Build on the establishment of the Foundational Economy Challenge Fund Community of Practice³ to bring people together across the sector/ sectors to collaborate and learn.

² Calculated using gross average hourly wage for full-time workers in Wales in 2019, which is £13.53.

³ The contract for this was awarded to Cynnal Cymru, which part of the WCVA family of charities.

EMPOWERED PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

Throughout the crisis, communities have come together to look after each other and to support each other's wellbeing. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated the power of people coming together voluntarily to create local solutions and help each other.

Many people have re-engaged with their communities, especially with local nature spots and community facilities. Others have re-engaged with their communities due to local community groups responding swiftly and effectively to COVID-19. What is clear is that communities, and community action, have been central to people's welfare and wellbeing during this crisis.

There has been a renewed interest in volunteering, whether formally or as part of spontaneous community action. Over 18,000 signed up to [Volunteering Wales](#), many more have volunteered for national voluntary efforts, and mutual aid groups have sprung up across Wales.

Whilst many of these efforts were a specific to the coronavirus pandemic, it is clear that, with the right support, communities can help each other out with local action in the longer-term. However, this will require support from Welsh Government, starting with the principle that empowering communities is the most effective way to improve wellbeing in communities. In the context of the right national policies which tackle the big issues facing Wales today, communities can promote wellbeing through empowerment.

Voluntary and community organisations have enabled the public sector to deliver a more effective response as much as the other way around. (This has been ours and others' experience.) A UK-wide [New Local Government Network](#) survey highlighted that an overwhelming majority of council chiefs (96 per cent) say that the contribution of community groups to their councils' COVID-19 efforts has been 'significant' or 'very significant'.

The voluntary sector needs to address key gaps in diversity, inclusion and equality. The sector's work has not always ensured that people from different backgrounds can volunteer and get involved in their communities (whether of place or interest) on the issues that are important to them

COMMUNITY ACTION

Developing community capacity and social infrastructure are key to sustaining and developing the community response and improving local people's wellbeing. This is particularly true for poorer areas.

Welsh Government must invest in the infrastructure to ensure that community action is viable. This includes:

- Developing a community wealth programme to support voluntary groups in communities facing multiple deprivation and a lack of local facilities, in order to develop community capacity in a manner decided by local organisations. This could be funded by UK Government's proposed dormant assets scheme.
- Put in place measures to sustain the volunteer and community response, working across community based voluntary organisations, Third Sector Support Wales and town and community councils. A sustained response will require a shift towards an enabling governance model is likely to need funding with a place-based focus. WCVA's [Empowering Communities](#) project identified a number of key issues which included; being clear about the role of place in development, focussing on asset-based development, and valuing both social capital and community anchor organisations.
- Working with County Voluntary Councils and other bodies to ensure that the skills and staff are in place to support community organisations, including mutual aid groups.
- Overhauling its policy on community assets using Asset Based Community Development approaches and supporting communities to acquire and develop these assets, led by local groups.

VOLUNTEERING

Wales has a golden opportunity to sustain this surge in volunteering thanks to a pre-existing, Wales-wide volunteering infrastructure, as well as closely-knit communities with a history of mutual support.

We also know that volunteering provides benefits, not just for voluntary organisations and people who receive services, but also for volunteers⁴.

Volunteering should also be a key part of responding to the big challenges of today and tomorrow - economic changes; the nature and climate crises; increased expectations of health and social care, and an ageing population. Our proposals on a youth volunteering programme are outlined in chapter 1.

The [nature of volunteering is also changing](#) and there is a need for infrastructure to respond to support that, bridging both formal and informal volunteering. The crisis has also helped reach out to different types of volunteer; for example, 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. There has also been a rise in volunteering for unconstituted groups.

Welsh Government can empower voluntary organisations by:

- Establishing an independent Volunteering Action Group specifically to apply lessons learned from lockdown and embed good practice to maximise the potential of volunteering, as well as further develop the volunteering infrastructure.
- Investing in the volunteering ‘infrastructure’ – both platforms and people – that will enable the diversity of people to contribute through volunteering in ways that are safe and rewarding.
- Supporting this infrastructure to be accessible to a wider range of cohorts and approaches to volunteering, modelling the responses seen to COVID-19.
- Implementing Action 32 of the **Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care** by commissioning ‘a programme of work to understand the contribution of volunteers and carers [to the NHS and care provision] to inform future workforce plans. This should consider volunteering outside formal NHS structures in ways which supports public health.’

⁴ For example, see recent evaluations of the Volunteering Wales Grant and Youth Volunteering as well as recent UKRS report on volunteering to Welsh Government.

A RESILIENT VOUNTARY SECTOR

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the voluntary sector in a way that no-one would have expected earlier this year. The sector has faced a sea-change in the way it operates and a monumental drop in its income – all while demand has continued to rise. Over the next few years, there is an expectation that the voluntary sector will change enormously – and not necessarily in a positive way.

Many of these trends existed before the pandemic but have been exacerbated by it. However, the voluntary sector needs to prepare for the future it will face in the longer term – both for its own independent work and to support Welsh Government's priorities. The more resilient the voluntary sector, the more it can support keeping the public sector resilient.

ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

The pandemic has highlighted the central role that voluntary and community organisations have in responding to the immediate crisis (and crises of this nature generally), alongside public and private sector partners.

Both the voluntary sector and its partners have benefited from this engagement. It has often led to the voluntary sector being able to reflect the views of its services users into pandemic planning, and to the public sector enabling the voluntary sector to deliver more effectively.

However, this collaboration has been variable across Wales. There are examples of excellent collaboration within and across sectors. We must take this opportunity to learn and strengthen this collaboration and to make sure it is universal.

Welsh Government can do this by:

- Developing policy to move the Welsh public sector towards being an enabling state for communities.
- Putting citizen voice at the centre of service planning and policy development by embedding tried-and-tested participatory approaches to citizen engagement, such as citizens' assemblies, co-production

approaches and participatory budgeting. Specific attention should be paid to including marginalised groups within this, including young people and people from BAME backgrounds.

- Re-considering its role and approach to funding and commissioning, and its approach to supporting community-led responses, after learning from best practice in engagement by regional and local public sector bodies.
- Ensure the voice of the voluntary sector is heard in future discussions around social partnership.

Digital technology

Voluntary organisations have switched to getting digital services online at incredible speed to respond to the crisis. Whether that's Eisteddfodau moving online, cultural organisations providing entertainment and culture online, health groups reaching out to beneficiaries or mutual aid groups using social media.

However, the last few months have highlighted the extent of the digital divide and digital exclusion. This includes the digital skills within the voluntary sector as well as amongst the people with whom the sector works. Age, poverty and race are key indicators for being digitally excluded.

There is a question around the quality of face-to-face services when they are delivered digitally, including language (and cultural) barriers to effective digital engagement. However, some organisations have used digital services to reach new audiences, so it can have a positive effect.

The voluntary sector is also fearful about commissioners/funders wanting to move to digital without appreciating that it could be a poorer service or wanting dual provision but without a concomitant funding increase.

This switch to digital can have an important impact on the way charities run themselves. But it can also change the way they deliver services to the people they work with. Sadly, there is a real risk that some groups in our society will be excluded from digital services – those on low incomes, older people and

people who don't speak English or Welsh, for example. There is also a worry that digital services are not as high-quality as face-to-face services.

So that we can gain the benefits of the digital services, Welsh Government should:

- Expand its programmes for digital inclusion, including for both greater high-speed coverage and improving digital skills amongst marginalised sections of the population.
- Develop a programme to support cheap access to credit for digital equipment for people who need it in order to secure work, training, or access to services.
- Issue guidance to voluntary sector commissioners preventing the switch to digital if this will lead to lower quality provision or expectations of dual provision for the same cost.

There is also a role for the voluntary sector infrastructure in supporting this agenda. Welsh Government should work with voluntary sector infrastructure organisations to support increasing digital capacity within the sector so that any future digital delivery can be improved.

Resilience of the voluntary sector

The sector is experiencing significant financial losses, whilst also seeing increases in demand for the services it provides. UK-wide, charities are estimated to lose 24% to their total income for the year, which would mean a £12.4bn loss of income if the average were applied to the sector as a whole. In Wales this would be approx. £620m. There will also be a longer-term impact of these financial losses on the sector and, ultimately, wider society as a whole.

Welsh Government support has not necessarily matched the equivalent support provided the UK Government to services in England (especially those targeted at frontline services).

There is a significant likelihood of charity closures, or mergers. For larger organisations, reductions in funding may not mean closure, but will mean having to reduce their work with people. A wide range of charities are already making significant numbers of staff redundant.

Welsh Government has also indicated that it anticipated the involvement of the voluntary sector in recovery. Every area of the recovery can be supported by the voluntary sector. However, this will come at a time when the sector's resources are significantly strained. There is a pressing need for Welsh Government to consider how it will support the voluntary sector's work on this recovery.

The sector will need to adapt service delivery and organisational models, as well as improve its' skills and financial resilience. This will require innovation on behalf of the sector, as well as support from Welsh Government. This support should include:

- Support the proposed extension of the dormant assets scheme in order to release more funding to Wales, and that this funding be used to increase the levels of endowed funding.
- Extending the Third Sector Resilience Fund to support the sector to increase resilience. Financial support needs to adapt to changing demand, which includes staving off potential challenges later on.
- Developing a Voluntary Sector Recovery Fund to support organisations to contribute to contribute to a green and just recovery.
- Support infrastructure services to build resilience, including governance, digital services, diversifying income and alternative finance.