



Call for evidence: the potential of civil society

ABOUT WCVA

Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) is the national membership organisation for the voluntary sector in Wales. Our vision is for a future where the third sector and volunteering thrive across Wales, improving wellbeing for all. Our mission is to be a catalyst for positive change by connecting, enabling and influencing.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Law Family Commission on Civil Society's call for evidence on the potential of civil society.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

What would you most like the Law Family Commission on Civil Society to achieve? From your perspective, can you give us examples/recommendations of what would enable civil society to unleash its full potential?

We welcome the Commission's terms of reference, focusing on **the value of civil society**, looking beyond economic value with a greater focus on social capital. It would be useful to put this into the context of shifts – or perhaps what shifts are preferable – in **what we value as society**.

In Wales, many civil society organisations support a shared ambition centred around sustainable development. That was reflected in the wide coalition of civil society organisations that campaigned hard for what is now the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Civil society organisations were involved in debates around the future we want to see through the Wales We Want.

Whether linked to the legislation or not, many people across civil society support the sustainable development principle and working collectively towards improving social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing now and for future generations. If we are to achieve that shift for society, civil society has a huge role to play.

We would welcome **a focus on the longer term**. There is much to draw on historically to demonstrate how the sector contributes fundamentally to our society. There is much to learn from the past year and the way that civil society responded to the pandemic – from grass roots through to national charities adapting at speed.

Civil society will also have much to contribute in the future. It's vital that **civil society can actively shape the society we want** to see. WCVA is the national membership body for voluntary organisations in Wales. As value-led organisations, the voluntary organisations should be part of the decision making on how we shape the future society we want.

The pandemic has forced us to experiment with different ways of doing things and made many of us reflect on what really matters. We would like to see the Commission explore what needs to happen to ensure voluntary organisations play an active role in shaping and delivering better futures for society.

The Better Futures Wales community foresight project aims to provide practical tools to support voluntary organisations in Wales to imagine and shape the futures they want to see.

Looking to the longer term, we can also prepare now for the **different ways in which civil society can contribute to people's future wellbeing** in different ways in the future. We would welcome the Commission considering what those key challenges for society are likely to be and how civil society can provide positive solutions.

There will be immediate, medium and longer-term challenges as a direct consequence of the pandemic (some analysis by [School of International Futures](#)). How might civil society address some of these. Volunteers and voluntary organisations have played important roles in supporting people's health, social care and wider wellbeing through the pandemic (WCVA will shortly be publishing a series of related evidence in June). That ranges from helping neighbours – with a range of wellbeing benefits – to volunteering support through the NHS and through to larger health and social care organisations delivering key services. What can we learn from this for improving health and social care in the longer term?

There are challenges on the horizon directly related to the pandemic, including unemployment and particularly youth unemployment. How can civil society provide solutions to this, minimizing negative impacts on people. How could volunteering continue to provide purpose and support people to grow? How can civil society organisations help prepare people for alternative types of employment? For example, WCVA is working with others around employability and a National Nature Service.

We know there are different challenges and opportunities ahead which may have been accelerated by the pandemic but stem from longer term drivers. For example, climate change, digital and inequalities. How does civil society need to respond and how can we shape solutions? Could there be a much bigger need for the wellbeing benefits that stem from volunteering – social connection and inclusion, personal growth, sense of purpose and feeling appreciated – in a future where the world of work looks very different?

WCVA would welcome the Commission considering what sorts of **relationships** are needed to release the full potential of civil society. What sort of relationships are needed across civil society and between civil society and government, business and citizens.

One of the things we have seen during the pandemic is how much more can be achieved for people's wellbeing when we work more effectively across organizational boundaries – collaborating to make a bigger difference with our collective resources. What wider changes in our systems are needed to encourage those relationships beyond the pandemic? We can also learn from examples why some existing relationships enabled that collaboration and others prevented it.

In Wales, a number of programmes are now looking at how we can build on that learning to support better relationships in the longer term. This was one of the key recommendations from the [Third Sector Partnership Council](#)'s Recovery report. As well as relationships between different organisations and sectors, we want to explore the relationships between national bodies and local, place-based action.

Finally, we would welcome insights from the Commission on **what this means for people running civil society organisations**. What might people running voluntary organisations need to think about, or adapt, in terms of governance, leadership, securing and using resources sustainably, attracting volunteers, supporting staff wellbeing. If people are to be able to come together voluntarily and make a difference about the issues they are about in the future – what infrastructure and support needs to be in place to enable them to do that?

What can you tell us about the different ways in which your organisation or civil society more generally 'adds value'? Do you think that value is properly understood by the public and by policy makers? If not, why not?

There is no doubt that civil society in Wales adds tremendous value. Our [Voluntary Sector Data Hub](#) shows that:

- There are over 48,500 voluntary organisations in Wales, of which over 6,500 are charities.
- Wales has the highest percentage of micro charities in the UK (53%). A further 33% are small charities.
- Volunteers in Wales contribute a total of 145 million hours annually. This has an estimated value of £1.7bn – estimated to be around 3.1% of Wales' total GDP.
- During the pandemic, over 18,000 volunteers signed up to Volunteering-Wales.net, and thousands more volunteered in other ways, either informally or through other organisations. Preliminary research suggests that around 30% of these people would consider future volunteering opportunities.

The value this voluntary action brings is supported by the requirements of the Third Sector Scheme, a statutory responsibility which sets out 'how Welsh Government propose, in the exercise of their functions, to promote the interests of relevant voluntary organisations'. This has led to the development of a strong third sector infrastructure at both a national and a local level, comprising WCVA at a national level

and 19 County Voluntary Councils at a local level. Together, this partnership is Third Sector Support Wales. This infrastructure supports government initiatives which would benefit from locally-led volunteering, voluntary sector support, and community development.

Over the course of the pandemic, Welsh Government has often praised the voluntary sector and volunteering for its work all across Wales. We believe at a national level, then, that the value of the sector is well understood, although there are barriers that prevent it from reaching its full potential – some of these are discussed below.

What is your experience of the interaction between government (at all levels – national and local) and civil society? Can you tell us of particularly good or bad examples which the Commission should reflect on? What are the conditions that most help or hinder a collaborative relationship between civil society and government?

WCVA, a national body, has a generally positive relationship with Welsh Government, thanks to the Third Sector Scheme, which requires each Minister to meet with the sector biannually.

However, local groups' interactions with government can be more mixed. Capacity is one of the key barriers in preventing these groups' voices being heard effectively by decision-makers. County Voluntary Councils are frequently asked by public bodies to provide a third sector perspective on public sector partnerships or broker appropriate third sector involvement. To demonstrate demand: during 2017-18, Neath Port Talbot CVS facilitated the involvement of the sector in 74 strategic planning/working groups and its Director sat on over 50 key strategic external bodies. CVSC participated in approximately 60+ boards/forums/partnerships/panels and GVS was represented on almost 60 strategic partnerships and joint working groups. This, of course, was all pre-COVID. Although we do not have directly comparable figures from during the pandemic, the sector has certainly been more stretched than ever.

Secure and sustainable funding for sector organisations is also crucial for a stronger relationship between sector and government authorities – we have elaborated more on this in the answer to Q5.

Those local authorities with the strongest relationships with local voluntary sector organisations tend to be those with the most effective compact arrangements. A compact is an overarching mechanism for engaging with the voluntary and community organisations at local level.

Genuine co-productive partnership working is also key for enabling a collaborative relationship between civil society and government. This ensures that all partners are equal and provides a greater sense of ownership from the community regarding the services they receive.

In its 2017 report on [local authority funding of the voluntary sector](#), the Wales Audit Office proposed a checklist for local authorities to help gain clarity on their strategic relationships with the third sector, whether the funding models were appropriate and how they evidence impact of their work with the sector. We thought this a very useful tool, but we are not aware of how many, if any, Local Authorities are making use of it.

We would also recommend all local government partners sign up for the [National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales](#), as endorsed by Welsh Government.

What role can, or should, civil society play in delivering the government's ambition to 'level up' the country? What investment or support does civil society need to do this effectively?

There are questions in Wales about some of the UK Government's recently-announced community funds, particularly around how priority areas were decided upon, and also whether these funds impinge on the devolution agreement, given that UK Government could award funding to projects that operate in devolved areas of work without engagement with Welsh Government.

Overlooking these questions, what the voluntary sector needs most to ensure long-term benefit to the people and communities it serves, is long-term, sustainable funding. WCVA and the sector have been in discussions with Welsh Government highlighting the problems that single-year funding cycles can cause – in brief, insecure funding means services consistently face an uncertain future, leading to service users being unsure that they services they rely on will be available week in, week out. This issue also leads to a lack of security for staff, with short-term contracts predominating, often resulting in it being difficult for organisations to hire or retain workers. Secure funding leads to secure services, and it is this investment that civil society most needs to perform its work effectively.

Addressing this has been agreed as a priority for the Welsh Government's Third Sector Partnership Council Funding and Compliance sub-committee's work in the coming government term.

What is your experience of the interaction between businesses and civil society? Can you tell us of particularly good or bad examples which the Commission should reflect on? What are the conditions that most help or hinder a collaborative relationship between civil society and the private sector?

Procurement practices are perhaps that which can most help or hinder a collaborative relationship between civil society and the private sector. Public bodies need to make their procurement practices suitable so as not to exclude smaller, local businesses from tendering. Social businesses are not looking for special treatment from the private sector, simply a recognition of the value they add.

How can civil society make most effective use of volunteers' time and what support is needed to do so? If you currently work with volunteers, will how you work with volunteers change over the 2020s?

There are a number of ways civil society could make more effective use of volunteers' time. These include:

- Better planning ahead for how volunteers can be part of future emergency response. This includes both new, spontaneous volunteers who want to help and also organisations that represent a complete infrastructure of fully-trained volunteers with specialist expertise.
- Systems of shared recruitment and training processes to enable volunteers to move between organisations more easily, either to gain wider experience or in response to local need.
- Good local infrastructure to underpin volunteering, enable good practice and connectivity between different organisations and sectors.
- Better national understanding of the breadth of volunteering in terms of e.g. cultural context (informal/formal), sphere of activity and reasons for volunteering.
- Some national agreed approaches to evaluation – and what demonstrates the 'value' of volunteering.
- Investment in volunteering leadership.
- Improvements to the Volunteering Wales website that enable volunteer recruitment, management and monitoring/reporting for a wide variety of organisations and contexts.
- Proportionate approach to risk management, which minimises unnecessary bureaucracy.
- Longer term funding arrangements.

If you are a civil society organisation, what are the main constraints on your 'productivity' currently? If funding wasn't an issue, what would you invest in to help you maximise your impact?

Whilst we have not tended to use the language of productivity, one of the key constraints WCVA experiences and which our members highlight is the short-term nature of funding cycles, as discussed in Q5. This constrains to plan and invest for the longer term. Time and resource is focused on meeting short term needs and it is much harder to achieve longer term goals.

Collaborating with other organisations allows us to make a bigger difference with our collective resources. Where relationships or systems make this more difficult, that constrains our impact. The pandemic has helped to reveal what limits or supports that collaboration. That can range from organizational culture, approaches by funders through to approaches to procurement and commissioning.

Can you point us towards data, research or insights from past work or other countries that will help us better understand the scale of the challenges facing civil society or develop potential solutions?

WCVA's [Voluntary Sector Data Hub](#) contains data on voluntary sector organisations in Wales, their activity, volunteering demographics, charitable funding and more.

We also recommend WCVA's reports on [future trends](#) and [future scenarios](#) for the voluntary sector in Wales.

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