The future we create:

lessons from pandemic volunteering in Wales

WCVA
CGGC

Volunteers from Well Fed project prepare food parcels for shielding and vulnerable people in Flintshire

Front cover: North Wales Wildlife Trust bug hunt in Llangywer Church near Bala

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Preparing to deliver food cooked by volunteer chefs at Women Connect First's Community Cafe in Cardiff

Introduction

Few world events have an effect as profound and wide-spread as a global pandemic. COVID-19 penetrated every facet of society. It brought devastation, tested our resilience, forced us to live and work in different ways: sometimes isolating us, sometimes - bringing us closer together.

March 2020 marked the beginning of a series of changes for the voluntary sector in Wales: from how we operate, through to how we interact with others, how we are perceived, and even – who we are. The rise of mutual aid groups, micro-volunteering, cross-sectoral partnerships, changes in the demographic profile of volunteers, and the shift to digital are only some of the defining features of pandemic volunteering. Two years on, in March 2022, WCVA partnered with Welsh Government and convened a gathering of key stakeholders to take stock of all that happened and what it means for our future.

This report aims to present views and attitudes concerning volunteering in Wales two years on from the first national lockdown, and explore how all sectors can respond to the lessons learned from the pandemic. The report makes comparisons with existing research and makes recommendations for future development and support needs, highlighting opportunities and potential challenges in the near future. ■

Left: The Centre for African Entrepreneurship partnered with FareShare Cymru to deliver supplies to vulnerable households in Swansea

Methodology

This report draws on findings from five comprehensive research projects, eight practice-based volunteering collaborations (see Annex), and the lived experience of 215 attendees who participated in two engagement events in March 2022.

Researchers and representatives from practice-based collaborations were invited to present key findings from their work to a cross-sectoral audience of practitioners. They were then separated into smaller groups and took part in facilitated discussions reflecting on the information presented and their personal experience throughout the pandemic.

To encourage open and honest contributions participants were told that their opinions and experiences would be made anonymous. The results from the sessions were grouped into themes, which were then compared to findings from existing research projects (listed in the Annex). ■

Right: Volunteers from River Dee Community Church deliver activity packs to children during the lockdown

Findings

1. INFRASTRUCTURE AND COLLABORATION

Collaboration is a defining feature of the pandemic – voluntary organisations collaborated with communities, public institutions, the private sector, and each other. This enabled them to deliver help at scale, quickly, and to those who needed it most. Each collaborator brought something different to the table: **voluntary organisations** had the expertise to mobilise volunteers and run an aid campaign, local communities volunteered their time, helped identify needs, and provided an important feedback mechanism, **public institutions** provided funding and signposted individuals in need, **the private sector** donated goods and services.

Collaboration was identified as a lesson and an opportunity in every research project we studied and by nearly everyone we spoke to. In March 2022 we surveyed[1] the attendees at our first engagement event, with 38% stating they still collaborate with others as much as during the peak months of the pandemic and 44% reporting they collaborate with others more now than ever before.

> 'Integrated [Health and Social Care] means communities, voluntary sector, statutory services – everybody sharing the responsibility to recognise opportunities to work together. Shared leadership is vital.'
>
> **COUNTY VOLUNTARY COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE, SOUTH-EAST WALES**

Many emphasised that **building on newly established relationships with the public sector is a priority going forwards.** Participants also reflected on the **beneficial use of a 'wrap-around' approach** where national and local government consulted with existing service providers and community groups on what their role could be, what is already available and where help is needed.

Organisations pointed to a shift in the dynamic – statutory bodies were no longer simply commissioning the voluntary sector to deliver a service, but partnerships with shared leadership were formed, receptive of a friendly challenge and relying on each other's expertise. There was an increased appreciation of **volunteers as a vital, trusted bridge between communities and the public sector.**

[1]Anonymous poll taken at 'Volunteering during the pandemic' online engagement event on 2 March 2022, sample size (N) = 50: WCVA, 2022

Recipients of help were more readily sharing honest feedback with volunteers who were then able to pass it on to statutory bodes and help them adjust services to match community needs. Increased connections within the voluntary sector itself was identified as another positive step towards optimising resources, as it enabled signposting and resulted in a more comprehensive service to the end user.

Research projects[2] found that pre-existing infrastructure and **pre-existing partnerships in a locality are linked to a quicker and more impactful voluntary sector response** during the crisis. This was confirmed by attendees at our engagement events who often credited prior collaborations as a source of trust and familiarity which enabled them to re-commence (or in some instances continue) working together effectively.

Our survey[3] further revealed that **47%** of attendees found national and local volunteering infrastructure 'very important' throughout the pandemic, while **27%** referred to it as 'useful at times'. At the same time, organisations who had managed to form crisis partnerships for the first time warned they are uncertain whether they will be able to continue nurturing inter-organisational and inter-sectoral relationships which were specifically tied to pandemic funding. This shows us that the majority of **the sector benefits from and values the investment of time and resources to forge relationships and build capacity through forward planning and not just at a time of crisis.**

Unfortunately, collaboration was not a reality for all, and some organisations said they found it difficult to work with others. In some instances, it was not clear who to contact in larger structures (eg in a Health Board), in others the lack of awareness of what the voluntary sector can offer was a barrier. It is understandable that statutory services, especially in the health and social care sector, were not always able to dedicate resources to new collaborations – this provides a basis for yet another argument for **strategic capacity-building interventions at times of relative stability.**

A broader question about the capacity of Wales' voluntary sector infrastructure to manage larger volumes of volunteers also emerged. Despite successfully supporting thousands of volunteers throughout the pandemic, there is acute awareness within the voluntary sector that many people's offer of help was not taken up at all. We can speculate that this was due to the very sudden spike of interest in volunteering, or because work still needs doing to enable partnerships. But could this experience be taken as an indication that the sector doesn't have enough resources to support much larger number of volunteers, even if numbers increased steadily? This is an important question to consider as Welsh Government maps out our nation's aspiration, through the Well-being of Future Generations Act, to increase the percentage of people who volunteer.[4]

[2] *Volunteering and wellbeing in the pandemic - Part I: Learning from practice*: WCPP, WLGA, WCVA, 2021. *Lessons from lockdown*: MoVE, 2020

[3] Anonymous poll taken at 'Volunteering during the pandemic' online engagement event on 2 March 2022, sample size (N) = 50: WCVA, 2022

[4] *National indicators and national milestones for Wales*: Welsh Government, 2021

Food delivery volunteer from the Nanny Biscuit project in Flintshire

2. MUTUAL AID, LOCAL ACTION, INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

While formal volunteering played a major role in the COVID-19 response and certain groups such as vaccination centre volunteers were frequently celebrated, informally offering help to our neighbours is perhaps the most recognisable act of philanthropy from the pandemic. Simple gestures like delivering groceries, picking up prescriptions, walking a shielding person's dog or checking in on a neighbour who lives alone all constitute forms of volunteering (activity of public benefit, undertaken freely and not for financial gain)[5]. Due to the spontaneous, unregulated nature of these acts, they became known under many different names, such as **mutual aid, local action, community help, being a good neighbour - all of which are types of informal volunteering.**[6]

It's safe to assume informal volunteering took place in most, if not all, localities across Wales. However, measuring the scale and impact is extremely challenging as participants in those activities may not see themselves as volunteers, seek any form of acknowledgement, or have a desire to engage with the formal voluntary sector. We have analysed the findings from research teams who had the chance to speak to informal volunteering groups and consulted with the sector through engagement events, but it is recognised that **knowledge of informal volunteering practices is incomplete.**

[5] *Volunteering Policy: Supporting Communities, Changing Lives*: Welsh Government, 2015

[6] *The Spectrum of Volunteer Participation*: Eden Project Communities, 2021

One thing everyone agrees on is that **the speed with which local communities responded to the crisis and their adaptability** has been remarkable. The variety of services provided (even in the context of many restrictions) has also been impressive and most importantly – **aligned with the needs of each community.** Volunteer involving organisations can learn from the flexibility of informal volunteering groups, however, formal volunteers and the organisations who deploy them have their own place and purpose in the volunteering ecosystem.

> ‘Mutual aid has always been part of the fabric of communities in Wales. (...) Grassroots groups use digital technologies to mobilise people very, very quickly. That’s a strength in the voluntary sector that we need to uphold and showcase. (...) The challenge is that we don’t know who and what is out there.’
>
> **– COUNTY VOLUNTARY COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE, NORTH-WEST WALES**

Volunteer involving organisations provide regular, predictable services, often with a particular focus or specialisation, and are accountable to funders and trustees to deliver what was promised. In addition, their volunteers go through all necessary checks and training to minimise risks to themselves and others. The defining features of formal volunteering can be both a benefit, in the way described above, and a hindrance, if we compare their flexibility and speed of action to informal volunteers. There is a strong sense in the sector that there is space and need **for both formal and informal volunteers and their efforts can often be complimentary to each other.**

In our survey[7] an equal percentage of practitioners declared they had ‘a lot of involvement with community groups earlier in the pandemic’ and were ‘aware of them but not had much involvement’. This shows us that, in some localities, community groups and the formal voluntary sector worked together to address the crisis, while in others they chose to operate separately. The reasons for that span from lack of capacity, and fear of infringing on each other’s ‘space’, to hesitation to engage with informal volunteers ‘in case something goes wrong’, and community groups preferring to operate separately to avoid bureaucracy.

[7] Anonymous poll taken at ‘Volunteering during the pandemic’ online engagement event on 2 March 2022, sample size (N) = 50: WCVA, 2022

Where partnerships were successful, we learned there has generally been an exchange of expertise and intelligence between the groups. Volunteer involving organisations have provided training for community volunteers, assisted them with DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks, and shared past experiences of delivering similar services, thereby helping them avoid mistakes. Informal volunteers were able to dynamically identify the needs of communities, give feedback on volunteer involving organisations' own offer, and signpost individuals to more specialised formal voluntary sector services where that was necessary.

We found that key factors to ensuring trouble-free collaborations were respect for community groups' independence and proportionate levels of administration within partnerships. In addition, sensitivity with language needs to be exercised. For example, when speaking about the need for 'resilience' and 'community preparedness', we ought to acknowledge communities have faced a multitude of crises in recent years and showed remarkable resilience already. Participants in our events generally felt **there is an opportunity to learn, and a challenge to strike the right balance.** It can be difficult to avoid tension between formal and informal volunteering, but there is a real benefit in drawing on each other's strengths. ■

Right: Participant at one of Coed Lleol's walking and woodland welfare groups in Gwynedd

3. DIGITAL

The rapid shift to using digital technology for nearly all social, professional and personal interactions, made necessary by the pandemic, has led to unparalleled changes to the way the voluntary sector operates. Most participants in our engagement events saw it as a largely positive disruption, but there are challenges and limitations we should be aware of.

Firstly, the need to utilise digital technology for all, or nearly all, admin and managerial processes has led organisations to optimise their management systems and think about the volunteer's 'customer journey' more than ever before. Feedback was welcomed, processes were streamlined, forms were made more intuitive and larger volumes of volunteers could now be managed.

For many organisations this was also true when it came to collaboration with others – in the voluntary, public or private sector. In some instances, agreements were devised and volunteer pools were successfully shared across organisations via digital management systems.[8]

> 'Because we went to a system of online and telephone befriending, rather than in person working, that has made volunteering with us a lot more open to people that would traditionally never have come into us, and I really want to continue with that.'
>
> **HOMELESSNESS CHARITY REPRESENTATIVE**

Delivering services digitally, where possible, has been identified as an effective improvement to the accessibility of volunteering opportunities but also to the accessibility of services for some end users. Practitioners talked about improved accessibility for people with mobility impairments, those with caring responsibilities and individuals in rural areas isolated by limited public transportation.[9] There is **a sense of optimism and aspiration to further utilise purpose-built digital infrastructure to make the sector more effective and inclusive.**

At the same time, improperly utilised digital tools have caused chaos and frustration in some instances, especially early on in the pandemic. Understandably, there was a learning curve and the process was more difficult for organisations and individuals who did not have much prior experience.

[8] Best observed in *Shared volunteering practices in Snowdonia*

[9] Also observed in *Volunteering and wellbeing in the pandemic – Part II: Rapid evidence review:* WCPP, WLGA, WCVA, 2021

Concerns were also raised that **the shift to digital did not improve accessibility for all.** Volunteers and service users who lacked confidence with technology, those who did not have access to suitable devices or reliable broadband connection, and individuals with disabilities such as hearing loss have in some instances been disadvantaged by digital delivery. In addition, digital fatigue and feelings of isolation, especially in young people, were often mentioned.

Participants made **a strong case for a hybrid approach to learning and service delivery in the future.** Digital exclusion, fatigue and different ways of processing information were seen as the main drivers for a blended approach to ensure nobody is left behind. ■

Right: The Arches in Powys provided a telephone support service during the pandemic

4. BUREAUCRACY AND FLEXIBILITY

Much like the shift to digital, the pandemic provided an opportunity for, or rather, demanded, a reduction in bureaucracy. In light of the widespread, urgent need across communities (eg food and prescription deliveries), volunteer involving organisations and the public sector had to undertake an emergency review of their administrative practices. The public sector removed red tape that was making collaboration with the voluntary sector difficult, funders offered small pots of quick, flexible funding with minimal bureaucratic requirements[10], volunteer involving organisations stripped down and expedited their registration and induction processes. As a result, timely response to the crisis was made possible but an important lesson can be taken as well: **we now know we can do things differently**.

> ‘The breakdown of the barriers caused by bureaucracy is a key feature of the pandemic for us. I am glad to say some of that has been maintained beyond the COVID period, especially in our work with the Health Board. An element of trust has been built, and it’s the same with the Local Authority.’
>
> **COUNTY VOLUNTARY COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE, NORTH-WEST WALES**

Volunteer involving organisations shared that **reduced bureaucracy made volunteering more attractive and accessible** for community groups and individuals, with many considering further opportunities to reduce bureaucracy in order to replicate the positive outcomes already observed. Precautions need to be taken to ensure that volunteers’ safety and wellbeing, the safeguarding of vulnerable individuals, and financial accountability are not compromised as we reform our bureaucratic procedures – this was a strong message from participants in our events. The sector is really concerned with making changes the right way – guided by thorough consideration of any risks and consequences accompanying new processes.

At the same time, there is a worry that funders and public bodies may go back to their standard procedures as the pandemic subsides, which would hinder the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of a long-term systemic change.[11] **Institutional flexibility and streamlining processes should not be seen solely as a crisis response, but as a lesson on how to make administrative procedures proportionate to the activity in any circumstance.** ■

[10] *Sustainable funding for the third sector: 2021 Update*: WCVA, 2021

[11] Concern also outlined in *Models and Frameworks for Coordinating Community Responses During COVID-19*: MoVE, 2020

5. MARKETING, RECRUITMENT AND CHANGING LANDSCAPES

The **volunteering landscape has changed**:

- Public awareness of the sector's importance has risen
- Digital management and delivery are more prominent than ever
- There is a spotlight on informal volunteering
- The notions of mutuality and personal and community wellbeing benefits for volunteers themselves are widely discussed
- New types of volunteers are getting involved, while some of the traditional cohorts are more difficult to reach

In the past two years, the fast-paced nature of operation prevented the sector from considering the changes in detail and carefully crafting development strategies for the future. As the pandemic subsides, many organisations perceive that the interest as well as availability of volunteers has decreased, and they find recruitment and retention challenging. In this context, participants in our events eagerly engaged in discussions on how the sector can adapt to this new environment. These are their conclusions:

a. An overarching need for a wider range of volunteering opportunities was identified. Whether we talk about highlights from the pandemic such as micro volunteering and digital roles, or the more 'classic' offer of structured, in-person tasks, **not planning for just one type of volunteer is crucially important**. Widening our offer of opportunities widens our pool of potential volunteers and ensures our operations don't come to a halt abruptly when external circumstances change (eg shielding advice from government).

b. **Understanding what motivates people to volunteer is key**. In a broad sense, 'doing good' is a motivation for many, but what stands behind it? Some volunteers want to do good because they feel they have a rare skill or talent or are in a unique position to help. Others are natural problem-solvers and volunteer as a response to simply learning about a problem. Individuals can also be motivated by a desire to 'do their part' for the community and increase wellbeing for all. A dormant passion for volunteering exists in a lot of people who do not begin volunteering until 'they've been asked'.

These are only some of the motivations directly linked to 'doing good'. In addition, we ought to consider individuals volunteering to gain or enhance skills and employability, to form social connections, get fit, fill their time, give a good example to their children, etc.

The pandemic saw an unprecedented interest in volunteering, and this allowed us to study the motivations of a much wider section of society. We now need to utilise this knowledge to **create and market opportunities to fit the individual**. Participants suggested that making opportunities as flexible as possible was one way of doing this, as well as asking volunteers what their skills and interests are in order to create custom opportunities instead of only advertising set roles. This has also been described as a way of keeping pandemic volunteers engaged after the need for their initial role diminishes or their circumstances change.

> ‘The social side has really come to the fore. We have groups that have made friendships working together, it’s a lovely community. (...) That is very hard to measure, but it’s great when you get the feedback. It can be a major selling point. We can’t go back to the old model of “do this because it’s a good thing and you have the time to do it”, we should be saying “do this - this is going to help you, it’s going to help us, it’s going to help everybody, but, hey, you are going to grow through this too”.’
>
> **NATIONAL FOOD REDISTRIBUTION CHARITY REPRESENTATIVE**

Personal wellbeing and improved social connection[12], until now a comparatively under-explored benefit of volunteering, should be used as a unique selling point. At a time when loneliness affects so many[13], the sector has both an opportunity to help combat worrying rates of social isolation and to create **a new paradigm for volunteering as a solution to a problem for the volunteer**.

Social prescribing is not a new concept, but public awareness and the recent personal experience of forming social connections through helping others can be harnessed to market volunteering in a new way, influence government policy, and secure future funding.

The raised profile of volunteering should also be used to **tap into different volunteering markets**. Employer-supported and student volunteering can be increased through popularising volunteering as a source of personal and professional development and as a team building exercise. In addition, it is a good time to emphasise the role of community volunteering as one of the few Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) incentives not directly tied to a profit motive and call on the private sector to demonstrate their commitment to the philanthropic arm of CSR.

[12] See *Volunteering and wellbeing during the Coronavirus pandemic*: WCPP, 2021

[13] *The role of communities and the use of technology in mitigating loneliness during the Coronavirus pandemic*: WCPP, 2021

While there is an excitement around new possibilities, practitioners have warned that **the sense of common purpose we experienced during the pandemic has been a draw for many new volunteers and an important enabler of collaboration**. As the pandemic subsides, the attention of individuals, organisations and government disperses to many competing priorities.

The **feelings of burnout** experienced by pandemic volunteers present an additional challenge. Meanwhile, pre-pandemic cohorts of volunteers are more difficult to reach than anticipated – some still feeling nervous to get out, others having lost confidence, physical ability, or simply found different activities with which to fill their time.

Older volunteers are a particular area of concern in the new volunteering landscape. Traditionally a substantial part of the volunteering pool for many Welsh organisations, older volunteers have not been able to take part in many volunteering opportunities throughout the pandemic. Government shielding advice has kept older people and those with disabilities and long-term health conditions at home. But even after government restrictions were lifted, upper age limits for opportunities issued by some volunteer involving organisations and public bodies were still in place with the view of mitigating health risks.

If the practice persists, and with pension age continuing to increase, newer generations may be unable to volunteer in retirement. **The sector needs to construct a careful balance between risk-reduction policies and ensuring equal opportunities**. A strong message from our engagement events was that no one should be left behind and care needs to be taken to make opportunities inclusive and attractive to pre-pandemic, pandemic and new cohorts of volunteers. ■

6. POLICY AND FUNDING

The positive attitude towards the voluntary sector, underpinned by the Third Sector Partnership Council (TSPC)[14] and Welsh Government's *Volunteering Policy: supporting communities, changing lives (2015)*[15], is widely seen as a vital part of the successful integration of the sector in the response to the crisis. It resulted in timely and wide-reaching aid getting where it was most needed.

Participants suggested that lessons from the pandemic provide the basis for building an even more enabling environment through the **creation of frameworks for the future**. They argued that many local and regional partnerships were formed but that some local actors were probably left behind, and there was likely duplication of work, especially in terms of planning services, scoping needs and forecasting. The sector saw **an opportunity in peer-to-peer learning post-pandemic** and the development of best practice principles which could be applied to future emergencies.

Some voluntary organisations also shared that, even in cases where there was successful joint working with local authorities, there was a sense that public sector staff were not sure if they were 'supposed to be' working with community volunteers and did not feel they had a clear mandate to collaborate.

Left: Participant taking part in one of Innovate Trust's wellbeing sessions in Cardiff

[14] Third Sector Partnership Council: Welsh Government, 15 January 2019 (accessed 9 October 2022)

[15] *Volunteering Policy: Supporting Communities, Changing Lives:* Welsh Government, 2015

Senior leaders and decision-makers need to have a good understanding of and create an enabling environment for partnerships.

Participants urged that collaborative ways of working with the voluntary sector and community volunteers, especially in emergencies, should be built into local strategies and, when the time comes, encouraged by senior leadership in local authorities. At the time of consulting, British Red Cross had already received funding through Volunteering Wales Strategic Grants for the creation of a 'Framework for co-ordination of volunteers in emergency response situations'.[16] This was a welcomed development and attendees expressed enthusiasm to get involved in the consultation stages.

Volunteer passporting[17] was another topic of discussion in the realm of pooling resources. Participants suggested **national training standards could be co-produced and accreditations made transferrable between organisations**. It was argued that part of the difficulty in deploying volunteers where they are most needed at a time of emergency, including between organisations, lies in the necessity to go through each organisation's own training programme, even if the new opportunity is really similar to their current role.

Aside from emergencies, the repetitive nature of basic training was identified as a deterrent for volunteers who may want to trial a role in a different environment or location, thus limiting opportunities for knowledge and skills exchange between organisations. A strong emphasis was put on care being taken not to compromise the quality and comprehensiveness of training and background checks if a national passporting programme does get developed.

Some participants argued that the success of the individual schemes we explored was rooted in the smaller scale and really strong common ground that partners had. The interest in a national passporting programme is not universal, but the majority view is that there are clear benefits to seeking opportunities to develop shared training standards and volunteering pools, even if that is limited to particular projects, localities, or sub-sectors.

> 'A national standard of checks and training, such as DBS and GDPR, will give flexibility to volunteers and enable them to participate in more opportunities.'
>
> **NATIONAL WILDLIFE CONSERVATION CHARITY REPRESENTATIVE**

[16] *Framework for Co-ordination of Volunteers in Emergency Response Situations (Wales):* British Red Cross and Richard Newton Consulting, 2022

[17] See also *Swansea Bay Volunteer Passport Project Report*: Plumridge Training & Finance, 2021

Throughout the pandemic, **a novel approach to funding enabled quick reaction and encouraged collaboration**. Funders were receptive to repurposing funds that had already been awarded, projects being paused, and even to applications for additional funding outside of typical cycles to help expand high demand services.

They were also more comfortable with taking risks by funding innovative projects and multi-partner, cross-sectoral partnerships. Partnerships were, in fact, often encouraged by funders, creating a new, collaborative atmosphere in the traditionally notoriously competitive funding environment. The Volunteering Wales Strategic Grant[18] was introduced at a good time to harness the partnerships developed throughout the pandemic and develop frameworks for future collaboration. The grant programme continues running and stands as an example of an innovative funding model retained post-pandemic.

Small pots of flexible and easily accessible funding were an invaluable help to community groups all across the country. Reduced funding bureaucracy also played a big role, enabling timely receipt of funds and freeing up time that volunteer involving organisation staff and community volunteers would have otherwise spent on filling lengthy applications. Similar to the wider point about bureaucracy, the key message from our engagement events in regards to funding was to **make the processes and requirements proportionate to the size and purpose of the grants advertised**.

Thinking about the future, participants stressed the **need for both core, long-term funding and small pots of flexible project funding**. Core funding supports the recruitment, training and management of an engaged volunteer base, comprehensive and continuous evaluation of needs and opportunities in the organisation's area of work, builds capacity for strategising and forging strong connections with local stakeholders. Flexible funding can then be used to address emergencies, expand existing services, pilot new ideas, diversify the volunteering opportunities offer, or tap into new 'markets' for recruitment.

There is a concern in the sector that as emergency funding runs out the effects of the pandemic linger, resulting in burned out volunteers, unceasingly high service demand, and no extra funding. **It is vital there is a continuous provision of a diverse portfolio of grants enabling the sector to play its part in the nation's recovery and into the future.** ■

[18] Volunteering Wales Grants Scheme: WCVA (accessed 9 October 2022)

Conclusions and recommendations

The past two years have been marked by loss and turmoil deeply felt by individuals and communities across Wales, and the world. The loss of life, income, stability and social connection has resulted in unprecedented demand and pressure on voluntary sector services. Lockdowns have necessitated frequent and rapid changes to the way we work. Burnout has spread across staff and volunteers. Despite that, 69% of the participants we surveyed[19] felt that the pandemic has brought more positives than negatives to the working practices of the voluntary sector.

> ‘Volunteering has become absolutely mainstream within our society and I, for one, am determined not to lose the momentum and the gains that we made (during the pandemic).’
>
> **ELUNED MORGAN MS, MINISTER FOR HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES (GOFOD3, JUNE 2021)**

At a time of great need, the sector delivered. Communities came together and volunteering became widely recognised. Partnerships and collaborations were formed and solidified, funders put more trust in us, other sectors saw us in a new light and with a new appreciation for what we can bring to the table. Our limits were tested, our ways of working changed, we learned lessons, we started thinking in new ways. Despite the many challenges lying ahead, the optimism and ‘can-do’ nature of the voluntary sector remains our true strength.

Evidence from practice and research suggests the voluntary sector in Wales (with an emphasis on the huge contribution of community volunteers) was able to respond competently to the COVID-19 crisis. Now we brace for the aftermath, preparing to take our place in the recovery effort. This will be a long road, but the lessons we have learned can help us along the way.

[19] Anonymous poll taken at ‘Volunteering during the pandemic’ online engagement event on 2 March 2022, sample size (N) = 50: WCVA, 2022

1. ADEQUATELY RESOURCE COLLABORATION

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Government and other funders must ensure that voluntary sector infrastructure, volunteer involving organisations, local authorities and community groups have access to sufficient funding, which enables them to dedicate staff resource to forging partnerships and developing common crisis-response strategies.

We should continue **collaborating** on all levels and lean on each other's expertise. **The public, private and voluntary sectors and communities need to work together to achieve recovery and sustain resilience into the future.** Risk is an integral part of collaboration. We should be open to calculated risk-taking which enables us to innovate, experiment and resolve long-standing problems.

Strong partnerships are built over time and require the investment of staff resource to sustain. **Building trust, familiarity and understanding when collaboration is optional pays off in the face of crisis, when it becomes inevitable.** Being able to lean on existing frameworks that support voluntary action at a time of crisis ensures volunteers are deployed quickly and their skills are utilised optimally. The voluntary sector infrastructure plays a pivotal role in promoting and enabling partnerships across the country.

The voluntary sector infrastructure, alongside volunteer involving organisations, local authorities and community groups need to have access to sufficient funding to ensure staff resource can be dedicated to connecting with others and strategising together. Programmes, such as the Volunteering Wales Strategic Grant Scheme[20], represent a new, bold enabler of collaboration and have already resulted in the production of a new framework for co-ordination of volunteers in emergencies.[21]

[20] Volunteering Wales Grants Scheme: WCVA (accessed 9 October 2022). Examples of projects funded through the first round of the scheme can be found here

[21] *Framework for Co-ordination of Volunteers in Emergency Response Situations (Wales)*: British Red Cross and Richard Newton Consulting, 2022

2. SUPPORT INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Volunteering infrastructure organisations must make resources and support more accessible to informal groups and volunteers.

The scale and impact of **informal volunteering** during the pandemic have been staggering and a source of inspiration for formal institutions. Where the voluntary and public sectors collaborated with community groups it has generally been mutually beneficial.

Informal volunteers acted as an important link to communities, provided timely indicators of need and honest feedback on statutory and voluntary sector services, in return they received guidance, training and resources. Informal volunteers are typically not interested in becoming part of a formal structure and adapting to our more rigid way of working. Their strength is in their adaptability and speed of action. **The voluntary sector ought not to look at assimilating them but collaborating with and learning from community volunteers, whilst offering a helping hand.**

Right: Taking out the sheep at Swansea Community Farm

3. CONTINUE EXPLORING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

RECOMMENDATION 3:

The voluntary sector should continue to explore and develop purpose made digital tools to make volunteering opportunities more accessible and straightforward for potential volunteers.

Digital technology is our friend – we should continue utilising it to streamline processes, facilitate collaborations, and offer more flexible volunteering opportunities. However, we should take great care not to leave those who may not have access or the skills behind.

We also ought not forget the benefits of in-person interaction for all involved. **A hybrid approach with both online and in-person training, services and volunteering opportunities will enable us to be inclusive and welcoming to the widest possible audience.** We will eagerly follow the implementation of Welsh Government's Digital Strategy for Wales[22].

Meanwhile, the voluntary sector must continue exploring purpose-made digital tools, such as the Volunteering Wales website[23], and engaging with programmes like Newid[24], to make opportunities accessible and maximise our impact.

The remodelling of the Volunteering Wales website's interface is a big step in the right direction for volunteering infrastructure. At the same time, funding made available through the Volunteering Wales Strategic Grants Scheme[25] enabled Age Cymru and Cymdeithas Eryri Snowdonia Society[26] to showcase how innovative use of technology can streamline processes and further facilitate collaboration in the sector.

[22] Digital Strategy for Wales: Welsh Government, 23 March 2021 (accessed 9 October 2022)

[23] Volunteering Wales is the national digital platform for advertising and browsing volunteering opportunities in Wales (accessed 14 October 2022)

[24] Newid: digital for the third sector is a programme of digital skills development and support for the voluntary sector in Wales (accessed 14 October 2022)

[25] Volunteering Wales Grants Scheme: WCVA (accessed 19 October 2022)

[26] Volunteering Wales Grants Scheme – strategic grants awards 2021/22: WCVA (accessed on 19 October 2022)

4. REDUCE BUREAUCRACY

RECOMMENDATION 4:

The voluntary sector, public bodies, and funders should learn from the progress we have all made during the pandemic and continue regularly reviewing administrative procedures.

We should all be seeking to **reduce bureaucracy**, not just as a crisis measure, but to optimise our everyday work. The voluntary sector, public bodies, and funders should learn from the progress we have all made during the pandemic and continue regularly reviewing administrative procedures.

Administration proportionate to the activity makes volunteering opportunities attractive to more people, intra and inter-sectoral collaborations more accessible and funding more timely.

5. ADAPT TO THE NEW VOLUNTARY SECTOR LANDSCAPE

RECOMMENDATION 5:

The voluntary sector landscape has changed irreversibly. Voluntary sector organisations need to think about and do things differently. Government and funders must invest in activities enabling new types of volunteering and collaborations.

The **voluntary sector landscape has changed** – all sectors need to adapt to it. The pandemic has brought in new types of volunteers and necessitated the transformation of many 'traditional' volunteering roles. Prospective volunteers now have an expectation of flexibility and versatility for the roles offered, and the sector needs to continue delivering options to sustain the wider set of individuals we were able to attract during the pandemic.

The sector is in danger – with high incidence of staff and volunteer burnout, continuously high demand for services, and reduced funding. Volunteering recruitment and retention is a pressing issue **– thorough understanding of what motivates volunteers, emphasis on the wellbeing benefits for all involved, and capitalising on the raised profile of volunteering to engage the private sector will all be part of the solution.** However, **targeted investment in the sector to help address high service demands will also be needed.**

6. BUILD FRAMEWORKS FOR THE FUTURE

RECOMMENDATION 6:

The Volunteering Cross-Sectoral Leadership Group must embed the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic into their work reviewing Welsh Government's volunteering policy. Volunteering must be on the agenda of senior leaders across all sectors in Wales and run as a 'golden thread' through Welsh public policy.

All of the experiences we have had and the progress we have made in the face of adversity should not go to waste. **Lessons from cross-sectoral collaboration, shared training and recruitment practices, connections with community groups, and response to crises should be used to build frameworks for the future.**

Funders should continue offering small pots of flexible funding that encourage innovation and collaboration, alongside core funding opportunities.

Volunteering should be on the agenda of senior leaders across sectors in Wales. We will only be able to implement the lessons we've learned from the pandemic if there is buy-in across all levels of operation and **a clear mandate to build an enabling environment and seek opportunities to promote volunteering, collaborate and create opportunities for volunteers to get involved.**

Right: Volunteers in the biodiversity garden at Llandudno Museum

Annex

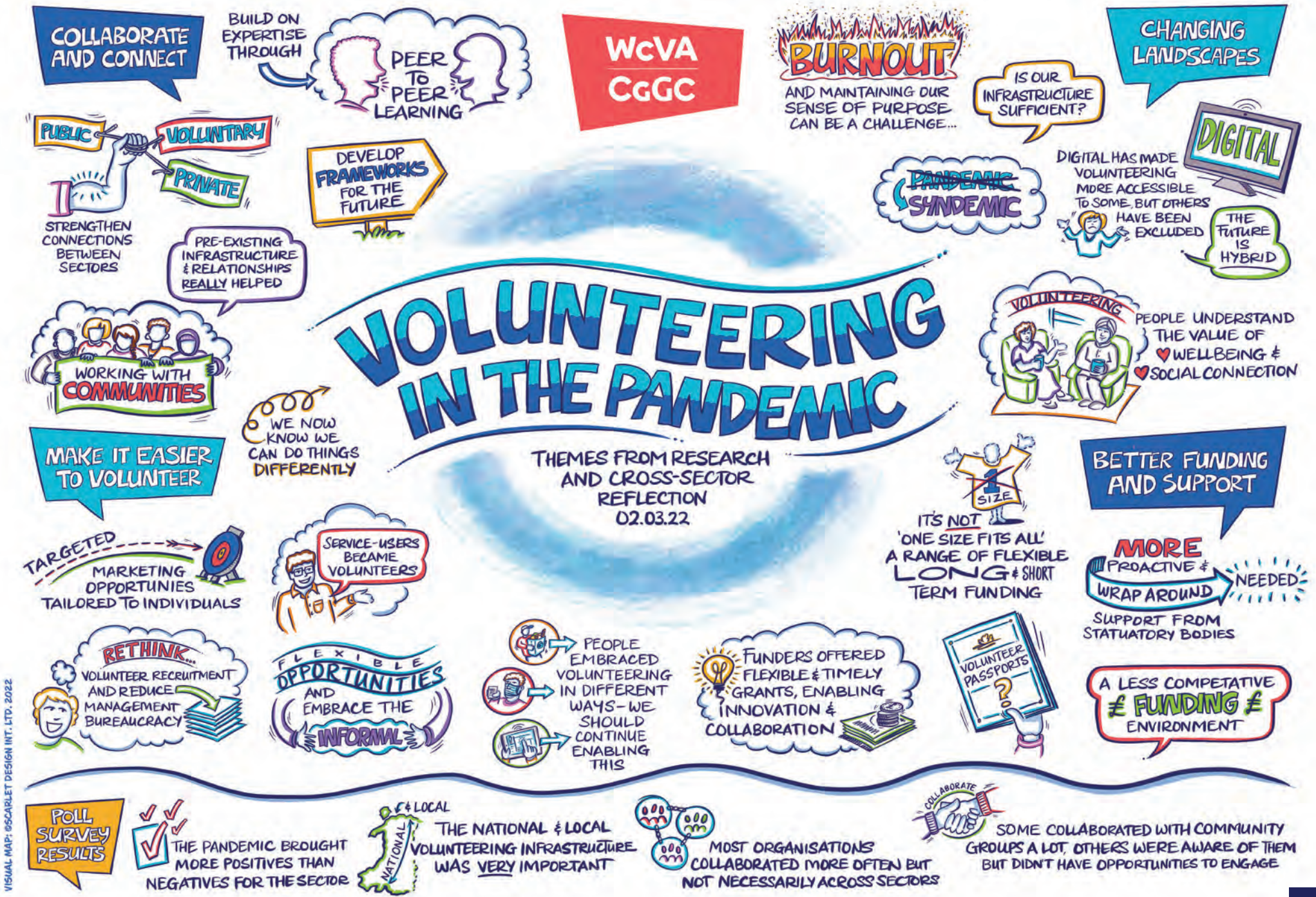
Research projects that fed into this report
(Featured in visual note 1)

- Community support and mutual aid – follows the development of mutual aid groups during the pandemic and examines the factors enabling them to continue operating
- Mobilising Voluntary Action (MVA) – explores voluntary action responses to the pandemic across the four UK nations
- Mobilising Volunteers Effectively (MoVE) – examines how to understand, scale and maximise the effectiveness of volunteer responses to COVID-19 across the four UK nations, including an analysis of the outcomes for Coronavirus Recovery Grant for Volunteering recipients
- Sustaining community-led action in recovery: Learning lessons from the community response to COVID-19 in Wales – examines the community-led response in Wales and develops a framework for sustaining the activity in recovery
- Volunteering & Wellbeing during the Coronavirus pandemic – rapid evidence review and learning from international practice, with a focus on lessons for Wales

Practice-based collaborations we heard from

- Applying the Framework for volunteering in health and social care (West Glamorgan Regional Partnership)
- Developing volunteering within social services (Flintshire Local Voluntary Council) (Featured in visual note 2)
- Volunteering for wellbeing (Monmouthshire) (Featured in visual note 2)
- Volunteering in Denbighshire County Council locality team (Featured in visual note 2)
- Powys Health and Care Academy (Featured in visual note 3)
- Developing shared volunteer learning resources in Torfaen (Featured in visual note 3)
- Shared volunteer recruitment in Snowdonia (Featured in visual note 4)
- Integrating volunteer services (Age Cymru Partnership) (Featured in visual note 4)

1. Visual notes from 'Volunteering during the pandemic' event, 2 March 2022

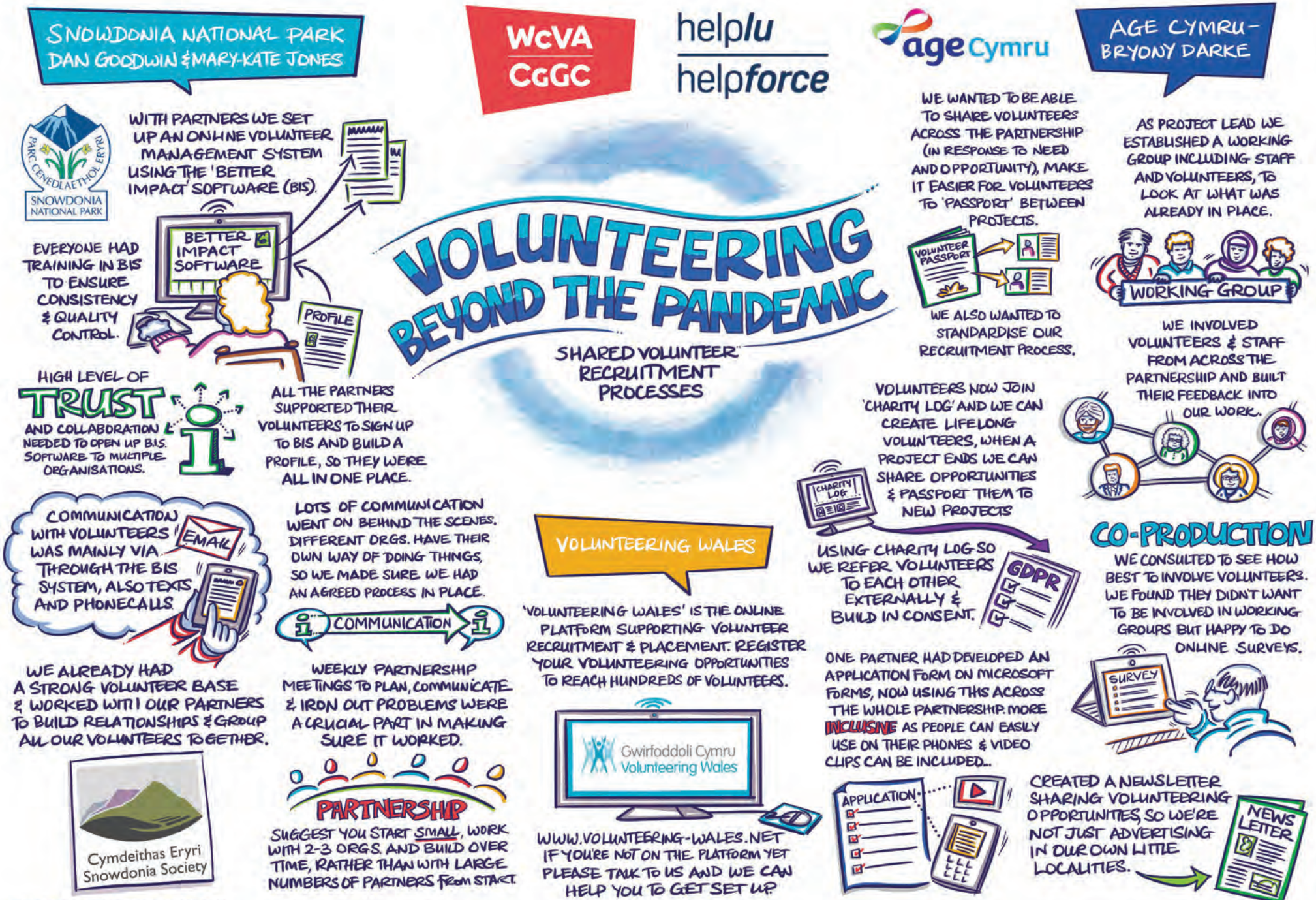


2. Visual notes from 'Volunteering beyond the pandemic' event, 10 March 2022

VISUAL MAP: ©SCARLET DESIGN INT. LTD. 2022

3. Visual notes from 'Volunteering beyond the pandemic' event, 10 March 2022

4. Visual notes from 'Volunteering beyond the pandemic' event, 10 March 2022



VISUAL MAP: ©SCARLET DESIGN INT. LTD. 2022

River Dee Community Church putting together activity packs for local children

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lessons from pandemic volunteering in Wales

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