Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper

1.0 A RESPONSE FROM WCVA

Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) is the national membership organisation for the voluntary sector in Wales. Our purpose is to enable voluntary organisations to make a bigger difference together.

The following is submitted in response to the 'Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working' Green Paper. The response represents the views of WCVA, which have been informed by continuous discussions with voluntary sector practitioners as part of the Volunteering Wales Network and the Volunteering Practitioners Network.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Welsh voluntary sector currently finds itself in an overstretched position, yet it is expected to play a role in facilitating the reforms outlined in the Green Paper. We fear these reforms will lead to further strain on voluntary sector services without appropriate additional support.

WCVA will always support and promote the benefits of volunteering and work to ensure opportunities are open to everyone, including disabled people. However, these reforms could remove the voluntary aspect of

volunteering through the coercive threats of cuts and sanctions. This would limit any potential benefits of volunteering.

3.0 THE IMPACT ON WALES

3.1 Hitting Wales harder

Wales will be hit harder by these reforms. 11% of the working-age population in Wales receives Personal Independence Payments (PIP) compared to 7.5% in England (Thomas and Davies 2025). Wales also has the second-highest proportion of disabled people of working age in the UK. A single disabled person in Wales without children will see a 68% reduction in household income. Relative poverty in households impacted by changes to both PIP and Universal Credit (UC) is expected to increase by 219% (Bevan Foundation 2025). These cuts will have 'a devastating impact on disabled people (and their children), sending hundreds of thousands into poverty, and many more into deeper poverty' (Citizens Advice 2025).

3.2 The impact on the Welsh voluntary sector

These reforms will also have a disproportionate impact on the Welsh voluntary sector. The sector is already dealing with the residual effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis, and budgetary constraints brought on by factors such as changes to employers' National Insurance Contributions. In the past year, 78% of voluntary organisations have experienced an increase in service demand, with half of these organisations struggling to meet the demand. 69% of organisations are using reserves to meet demand, with 38% telling us they will need to

consider major steps, including closure, if conditions do not improve in the next year (Zhivkova 2025). Volunteering is not free, and the Welsh voluntary sector will struggle to meet increased demand for services while simultaneously taking on a new wave of potentially unwilling 'volunteers', especially without additional resources. This will leave groups that rely on these services in an incredibly vulnerable position.

The Welsh voluntary sector has historically played a key role in delivering employability initiatives, notably through programmes such as the Active Inclusion Fund. This fund provided long-term support for voluntary organisations to run employability schemes, including ensuring support for volunteering was available. However, following Brexit, the loss of EU funding has significantly impacted these initiatives. The UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund has not adequately replaced this support, undermining the voluntary sector's capacity to continue delivering effective employability services. Based on funding availability, it does not appear that the new Local Growth Fund will fill this gap either.

4.0 VOLUNTEERING MUST BE VOLUNTARY

Voluntary sector partners have expressed several concerns related to the proposed reforms. These include the proposals to push disabled people into voluntary roles, how to support them, and what, if any, benefits they will get from this type of engagement with the voluntary sector.

Welsh voluntary organisations are passionate about the potential benefits of volunteering and strive to ensure that everyone who wishes to volunteer has that opportunity. However, there is concern that some people will feel coerced into taking on a voluntary role by the threat of benefit sanctions. Equally, there is concern that some may be left confused

by the requirements, receive misleading or incorrect advice about their voluntary role. This can reduce the benefits of volunteering, having a negative impact on an individual's wellbeing, leaving them unlikely to volunteer again in the future. For volunteering to have a positive impact it must be voluntary. The potential for coercion under the proposed system removes the voluntary aspect. Furthermore, if a disabled person who currently volunteers loses part of their support through PIP or UC following the reforms, they may no longer be able to continue volunteering.

While there is always demand for volunteers, there is not always appropriate capacity to support them. Not all organisations have undertaken the necessary training, or have the appropriate equipment or facilities to meet the access requirements of all disabled people. These barriers may make it difficult for some disabled people to find appropriate volunteering opportunities. Regrettably, cultural and attitudinal barriers towards disabled people also remain within some organisations, which may negatively impact disabled volunteers.

4.1 Partnership working with voluntary sector infrastructure bodies

The existing volunteering infrastructure in Wales, Third Sector Support Wales (TSSW), is well-positioned to ensure that volunteering is a positive experience for all, including disabled people. TSSW's volunteering officers work across the sector to champion and enable the development of positive and appropriate volunteering opportunities. However, without appropriate resourcing, it would not be possible to increase provision beyond the current demand, leaving many disabled people unable to find or access the voluntary roles they are being told to undertake.

Given the limited outreach and communication with TSSW, there is a concern that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has not fully considered how it would support and involve volunteering infrastructure organisations. Lack of partnership working with local voluntary sector infrastructure bodies would lead to a system devoid of TSSW's expertise and support, and without the benefit of existing networks. Without expert support, an individual could be put in an inappropriate voluntary role where their access requirements are not appropriately met, impacting their wellbeing and reducing their self-esteem. This would leave disabled people less prepared for work than they would otherwise have been.

In contrast, TSSW would be able to refer an individual to one of its volunteering experts. TSSW's expert will work with the person to understand their skills, passions, and access needs. They would be placed with an organisation which understands and applies the social model of disability, has the appropriate physical infrastructure, and adequate training, ensuring a positive volunteering experience. TSSW could both provide best practice advice to organisations, guide them towards further support and help volunteers find a more appropriate placement in cases of incompatibility. It is therefore essential that any volunteering programme is implemented in partnership with TSSW in Wales.

5.0 CONCLUSION

WCVA believes that volunteering can be a positive activity for everyone, but only if there is appropriate support in place to ensure that it is a safe, supported, and enjoyable experience. Volunteering can be part of a journey towards employment, but only if this is their desired outcome.

Pushing someone into voluntary activity will reduce the potential of positive benefits and may negatively impact their wellbeing.

Volunteering will only help someone into work if appropriate support is provided. TSSW's existing infrastructure and connected networks should be involved and appropriately resourced to support anyone who would like to engage with volunteering in Wales.

Overall, it must be recognised that the Welsh voluntary sector is more exposed to the impacts of the proposed reforms, with Wales set to be hit harder than elsewhere in the UK. The Welsh voluntary sector will do all it can to step in to meet the challenges this poses. There is a growing concern that the sector will be expected to accommodate volunteers with high-support needs without receiving appropriate resourcing to do so.

The DWP and the wider UK government must reconsider its approach to welfare reform, recognising both the human costs and the impact on the voluntary sector in Wales.

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