

Mobilising Voluntary Action in Wales

Learning from volunteering activity to support post COVID-19 recovery

September 2021 Briefing Paper

Sally Rees, James Lundie, Laura Crawford, and Rhys Dafydd Jones

Overview

This briefing outlines the perceptions of civil society organisations in Wales of the effects of the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic on civil society in Wales, and the response of civil society to the pandemic through voluntary action. This briefing specifically reports the findings of a Welsh survey to understand the shifting and modified landscape of voluntary action during COVID-19 and is part of a mix method UK-wide comparative study '[Mobilising Voluntary Action in the four UK jurisdictions: Learning from today, prepared for tomorrow](#)' funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of the UK Research and Innovation's response to COVID-19 to explore and evaluate:

- The role volunteering has played during the pandemic,
- the role of volunteering during recovery, and
- being prepared for any future crises.

This briefing draws on responses by 61 groups and organisations to an online survey open during May and June 2021 and sets out key themes:

- **The changing volunteer profile during the first lockdown in 2020:** Who and why people came forward to volunteer.
- **A move towards more online activities for most organisations:** The impact of using digital technology and how it changed delivery and support to people.
- **The significance of the voluntary sector, and its resilience during the pandemic:** How the sector responded and in what way it has supported the needs of communities.

This briefing also details key areas identified by respondents to support volunteering in the pandemic's recovery period. These include:

- **Maintaining some elements of new provision (such as befriending presence).**
- **More blended presence, incorporating both online and community-based focussed.**
- **More flexible approaches to volunteering, without diminishing consistency in delivery.**
- **Cooperation and coordination to maximise effectiveness of resources.**

Audience

This briefing has been written for organisations and sectors who recruit and deploy volunteers, as well as commissioners, policymakers, and funders.

Introduction

This report presents initial findings of research conducted into the response of civil society through voluntary action to COVID-19 in Wales. It draws on research conducted by WCVA and Aberystwyth University, as part of a UK-wide research project led from Northumbria University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), *Mobilising Voluntary Action*, which examines the response of civil society to COVID-19 in each of the UK's four constituent countries.

Respondents included:

- Community and voluntary organisations (active in one or more local authority areas)
- Local infrastructure organisations (such as County Voluntary Councils)
- National infrastructure organisations

Initial findings were presented at a seminar at **gofod3**, the major annual event organised by WCVA in collaboration with the voluntary sector in Wales and was held virtually over five days in June 2021.

Methodology

The briefing draws on survey data. 61 organisations completed an online survey in May or June (either in Welsh or in English). 3 responses were received in Welsh and 58 in English; however, most provided limited or no qualitative responses. Consequently, much of the qualitative data is drawn from 1 response in Welsh and 19 in English.

The responding organisations were drawn from across Wales, and included national infrastructure organisations, local infrastructure organisations (such as County Voluntary Councils), and voluntary and community organisations active in one or more local authority areas.



Bridgend Carers

The survey (Appendix 1) asked 7 core questions, including questions about:

- The effects of the pandemic on different kinds of activity during the pandemic,
- what organisations had learnt from the pandemic,
- and what they, the sector, or policymakers could have done differently; and what support is needed to enable volunteering during the eventual recovery phase.

Respondents were also asked how COVID-19 has changed volunteer engagement, how their organisation has provided social value during the pandemic, and what the pandemic tells us of the resilience of the voluntary sector in Wales. Many of these questions are informed by the recommendations of the recent report by the Welsh Parliament's Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee (2021), [Impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector](#). These 20 recommendations call on the Welsh Government to acknowledge the significance of the voluntary sector in Wales, and to work with stakeholder to support its recovery after COVID-19.

The survey also asked respondents to reflect on how their activities varied over distinct periods of the lockdown and Covid restrictions. These included:

- The first lockdown (23rd March – 31st May 2020)
- 'Stay local' 1 and the lifting of restrictions (1st June – 7th September 2020)
- Local and the 'firebreak' lockdowns (8th September – 19th December 2020)
- Lockdown 2 (20th December 2020 – 12th March 2021)
- 'Stay local' 2 and beyond (13th March 2021 onwards)

Data

The following section addresses themes that arise from the survey data. It begins with the impact of the lockdown and other restrictions imposed by the Welsh Government in March 2020 as COVID-19 became widely established in the UK, before moving to consider the significance of civil society during the different stages of the pandemic and associated restrictions in Wales, most notably the move towards more online activities and digital presence. It then moves to consider the lessons learned from the pandemic.



Blood Bikes

The first lockdown (23 March – 31 May 2020)

Volunteering activity

Many respondents noted the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions on their operations and activities. The first issue was around the reduction in the availability of volunteers as the first lockdown progressed and the Welsh Government issued shielding letters to over 120,000 people who were identified as being extremely vulnerable people at high risk of complications due to COVID-19. While those who had previously volunteered stepped down because of being included on the shielding list, many more stepped up to volunteer, but volunteering opportunities were limited due to Welsh Government

regulations. These restrictions included limitations on activities that weren't considered essential, or perceptions that COVID regulations prohibited them, as well as potential challenges in working remotely or in a socially-distanced environment (which might have required fewer personnel in an enclosed space).



Well-Fed Flintshire

Many organisations reduced their volunteering activities which meant that there were volunteers who were not deployed. The age profile of the volunteers, overall, became much younger, with many volunteers either being furloughed or still working who wanted to offer their time to support people in their community. ***'Roles became very limited to food banks and deliveries, befriending and shopping/prescription collection. Many organisations used current volunteers for online activities and befriending roles'*** (015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham).

There was a decrease in more formal types of volunteering whilst organisations started to adapt the way they traditionally delivered services. However, there was a surge in informal volunteering at a hyper-local level with neighbour to neighbour and street to street support, including those identified as street champions (031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

The significance of older people's roles in voluntary activities is well documented. As people over 70 were advised to shield, many organisations lost a ready base of participants. One organisation noted nearly half of its volunteers self-isolated during the first lockdown period in the spring of 2020:

'hyd at 45% o'r gwirfoddolwyr yn hunan ynysu'
['up to 45% of the volunteers were self-isolating']

(C06, Community/voluntary organisation, north-western Wales).

Easing of restrictions into the second lockdown

In the summer of 2020, restrictions began to ease as the infection rate lowered. However, this did not mean a swift return to the pre-COVID situation. Volunteers who were self-isolating continued to do so and were not comfortable to return to volunteering. The summer of 2020 saw the introduction of mandatory mask-wearing on public transport and in indoor public spaces.

However, some volunteers were uncomfortable in returning to voluntary roles. It is also important to note that between September and November 2020 local authority areas (or on two occasions, smaller localities, namely parts of Bangor and Llanelli and its environs) had tighter restrictions imposed by the Welsh Government, including a restriction on crossing the local authority boundary unless deemed necessary.

'We saw a huge rise in individuals wanting to volunteer their time. The type of volunteers were mainly those of working age, who were skilled, professional, experienced and had access to transport. The type of roles that people wanted to do included shopping, prescription collection, befriending via telephone, running daily errands, helping at a local food bank.'

(031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot)

However, many respondents noted an increased interest from new volunteers who wanted to offer their time. Those new to volunteering also included more informal kinds of voluntary activity which focussed on issues relating to the lockdown such as supporting those shielding who may feel isolated, or in foodbanks which had reported an increase in requests. Similarly, volunteers provided support for other aspects related to the pandemic, such as supporting the vaccine rollout from January 2021 onwards. In many areas

volunteers came forward to support the mass vaccination centres.

'We saw a decrease in formal volunteering opportunities whilst organisations started to adapt their services but a huge increase in informal volunteers e.g., neighbour to neighbour support/street champions.'

(031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot)

As one local infrastructure organisation highlighted, they were *'approached by ex-nurses who wanted to be able to assist with the actual administering of the vaccine'*. Several County Voluntary Councils worked with their respective Health Boards to ensure that volunteers were offered and

placed into appropriate roles, were trained, supervised, and were not in roles that should be undertaken by someone in employment – *'as soon as we put a call out for volunteers for the mass vaccination centres, the roles were filled within 24 hours'* (031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

One respondent noted that the profile of these new volunteers was different, and more representative, than the existing volunteers.

'There has been a shift in the types of volunteering, some of which is more accessible, such as digital or from home volunteering and an change in the demographics of those that have volunteered. In Wales we saw an increase in men and working age individuals registering to volunteer - which may have been a result of furlough / shifts in working arrangements and interest in volunteering by private and public sector staff'.

(043, National infrastructure organisation, Wales-wide)

A second issue noted was that the restrictions placed by the Welsh Government limited their ability to carry on with their activities such as offering lifts to appointments (039, Voluntary/Community organisation, across southern Wales). Others noted a change in procedures, to ensure a safe and secure environment, for example it *'Changed the way in which we work. There are hand washes, alcohol wipes, tissues and paper towels*



Clwb Rygbi Nant Conwy

everywhere. Social distancing is always present. People have to bring their own drinks since water is limited on the site' (011, Community organisation group, Neath-Port Talbot).

As one organisation highlighted, the number of volunteers initially decreased due to their facility closing. They had 5 volunteers at this time who were not able to be in the building at the same time. Other organisations reported that their pool of volunteers had been halved from fear of contact with others who may be unwitting vectors of COVID-19 even with social distancing and other COVID measures in place. In some cases, socially distanced environments may have limited the number of volunteers or employees available at any one time, which in turn may have meant a change in the capacity of people or cases they could deal with.

As we note in a later section, many respondents noted their activities or operations being transferred online:

'In the first lockdown, we realised that the volunteers were all feeling helpless but at the same time were struggling with the situation, so we started an online weekly support group for them to come along and talk to us about their fears. We had an average of 10 people who came along each week out of our bank of 140 volunteers. Some volunteers we have not heard from despite repeated attempts to contact them.'

(012, Voluntary/Community organisation, Gwynedd).

This online shift included making enhanced use of social media to keep the public informed such as using Facebook and Twitter; letting people know what they were doing or not doing.

However, not all organisations were able to transfer their activities online. For several voluntary and community organisations across Wales, services were not able to be provided in anything other than an in-person context and it was *'difficult to develop an infrastructure that can accommodate some of the online and face to face engagement where volunteers would be best suited'* (038, Voluntary/Community organisation, across Wales). One organisation's volunteers were entirely community based pre-COVID, and after the onset of the pandemic all activity had to stop:

'Prior to COVID all of our volunteers were based in their local community, having information stands and attending groups to raise awareness. Obviously all this had to stop and we had to think of new ways for them to reach out to carers. There was a large period of time over 6 months when everything stopped so there was no volunteering in the community, all the groups stopped meeting and did not go online. When we took our service online and had online meetings, due to the internet problems, we asked the volunteers if they would like to attend with us and co-host, so that if we lost our connection they could take over.'

(012, Voluntary/Community organisation, Gwynedd)

While these are all responses from voluntary and community organisations, without further specific details on these organisations it is difficult to ascertain specific patterns, which may be related to size or activity. One response suggests particular challenges for community transport groups, who felt that the restrictions prohibited offering lifts to people. Another organisation reflected on the opportunities provided by increased online activity, while also remembering that this is not a universal resource and that for some it was difficult to move to online support. However, by moving activity and support online the organisation had increased their reach in a way that they had not been able to previously achieve.

For organisations concerned with nature and the environment, impacts on volunteers' well-being were noted during the strictest periods of lockdown. Volunteer teams reported that outdoor activity had an enormous effect on physical and mental health, *'that they were so*

glad to be back outside with other people. I think that outdoor volunteering and the impact it has was curtailed for too long when it was safe to begin again, and I think that this has had an enormous impact on people's health and wellbeing' (039, Voluntary/Community organisation, across southern Wales).

Understanding the regulations

A few respondents noted that Welsh Government restrictions were open to interpretation, with some organisations interpreting them differently as they were unclear and were constantly changing. As one organisation who responded highlighted *'we were, for instance, allowing visitors and encouraging visitors to nature reserves but were not allowed out to manage them causing all sorts of problems'* (039, Voluntary/Community organisation, across southern Wales). Some respondents noted that the lack of clarity about the regulations caused confusion and duplication. When people were asked to shield, support was immediately put in place such as shopping and prescription collection and delivery but then, for example, a local authority set up a volunteer-involving service to undertake the same tasks. It was felt that *'it might have been less confusing if the resources went directly to the voluntary organisations and the infrastructures (CVCs) that supported them. If [sic.] was helpful that the Coronavirus Act enabled DBS's to be portable, this made volunteer*

recruitment to be done quickly' (031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot). Furthermore, the *'frequent changes in restrictions and unclear guidelines at times limits the ability to take action.'* (038, Voluntary/Community organisation, across Wales).

'We have learnt that working virtually we have been more efficient, reached more service users and greatly expanded our geographic reach. We have learnt that virtual activity, whilst reaching some we couldn't previously reach, we've been unable to interact with those in digital poverty, and where there is poor or no internet coverage.'

(036, Voluntary/Community organisation, northern Wales)

While some media and politicians have alluded to confusion between regulations in Wales and in England (BBC 2020), no respondent noted confusion between Welsh and English rules. Indeed, working within areas that are devolved may mean that these respondents are attuned to differences between Wales and elsewhere in the UK. However, the

different restrictions in place at different times, or relating to specific issues may be the cause of confusion here.

Learning from the pandemic

Respondents were asked to reflect on the lessons learned from the pandemic. The following six themes demonstrate the reflections made, and how organisations' practices could change in the future.

New provision

The pandemic highlighted some potential gaps in voluntary provision. One consistent theme was the provision of befriending services for people who are isolated or lonely. While the significance of volunteering opportunities (such as social prescribing) to encourage interpersonal interaction and fostering encounters, connections, and friendships are well-documented, the pandemic highlighted the need for befriending services:

'Some new roles have been developed, for example our own face-to-face befriending services changed to telephone befriending during the pandemic and moving forward, we will be providing volunteers with the option of doing either face-to-face or telephone support.'

(031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

Shielding advice for older people and those who were considered medically vulnerable limited opportunities to interact with people. More broadly, instructions to work from home, as well as socially distancing and other precautions in workplaces may have limited interactions with colleagues, while those furloughed or who lost their work may also have limited opportunities for social connection. Organisations also shared that the focus on supporting pandemic measures through collecting prescriptions or shopping gave people the opportunity for brief and distanced interactions. There was an intention among some groups to continue with befriending activities after the pandemic restrictions end.

Changing practices: towards a 'blended' presence

The move towards a more pronounced online presence led to reflections on how the internet and digital technology could improve the organisation's practice. Several respondents noted an intention to continue with enhanced online or remote activities, which demonstrated a more efficient use of time and money. Organisations who had continued to hold meetings online had significantly reduced time spent travelling between meetings and visits (035, Voluntary/Community organisation, across northern Wales).

The initial move online was often marked by a use of available resources, driven by necessity. As time moved on, there was an opportunity to reflect on what worked, and what did not, and to adjust accordingly. For some organisations, there will be an investment in training, to better support online meetings. Most groups are characterised by an intention to move towards a more 'blended' approach to their practice. This is typically a mixture of online and other remote provision (such as the telephone) and in-person activities:

'All volunteers are recruited online with little to no direct contact. Our organisation will definitely change for the future - even face to face meetings (when they happen) will be recorded using digital systems and opportunities will be more up to date than before.'

(015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham)

'I have learnt that in troubled times, people are good and come forward to help. We saw a marked increase in people wanting to support others. We adapted our system as quickly as possible, but it would have been good, on reflection, to offer more remote options for volunteering and volunteer induction, even before Covid to make volunteering more accessible.'

(014, Voluntary/Community organisation, Monmouthshire).



Clwb Rygbi Nant Conwy

Some organisations established new roles as face-to-face befriending services changed to telephone befriending during the pandemic. One organisation stated that they will be offering their volunteers the option of either face-to-face or via telephone support (031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

Another organisation developed a Wellbeing hub on their website and were providing taster videos for carers on mindfulness and yoga. This organisation started a bilingual listening (telephone) support service for carers who were struggling with their caring role and they trained volunteers to provide the service (012, Voluntary/Community organisation, Gwynedd).

A 'blended' approach provides a holistic way of working and choice for people. For some people, digital deprivation and limited broadband accessibility (particularly in some rural regions) and/or lack of familiarity or confidence with some internet-based technologies meant that having the option of telephone contact was preferable, but that 'blended' delivery gave the choice of the comfort of more human encounters via voice or in-person

'The greater efficiency of using virtual media will be integrated into all our work. We have also saved around £10,000 in travel expenses and will wherever appropriate, continue this way of working.'

(036, Voluntary/Community organisation, northern Wales)

interactions. However, responses indicate a more ‘blended’ approach to practice, where online interactions are used to provide more efficiency, rather than a wholesale replacement of previous practice.

Coordination

Another recurrent theme was the fragmentation of civil society in Wales. Many responses alluded to ‘silo mentalities’, where relationships existed between organisations (such as through funding relationships or established collaborations), but often very limited ‘joining-up’ of organisations working in similar, but different, areas or fields. There were strong established relationships locally, but this was not always replicated nationally with sectors and **‘needs more conversation’** (038, Voluntary/Community organisation, across Wales).

Other organisations highlighted that the pandemic accentuated the disjoint between sectors and **‘how little collaboration there is between sectors and within councils and health boards. Also, how there is a need for a volunteering platform which is easier to operate and a volunteer passport scheme to allow volunteers to move between organisations’** (015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham).



The Arches, Rhayader

A few responses noted the proposed volunteer passport. The passport would provide the means for people volunteering for one organisation, whose personal details have already been substantiated including a DBS check, to be accepted by another organisation. The passport would make it easier for a volunteer to move between organisations and different settings to respond to their areas of interest and a gain wider experience, but also to deal with supply and demand, particularly in emergency situations. This proposal was welcomed where it was mentioned by respondents and an improved volunteer platform for volunteering opportunities and the management of volunteers with **‘more cohesion between areas. Better support for the organisations requiring volunteers, more funding for volunteer managers’** (015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham).

Alongside such initiatives, respondents also reflected on how their own practice could be developed to facilitate more interaction and cohesion in the voluntary sector. *'Support will*

'The newly proposed volunteer passport so that volunteers could pass seamlessly between different voluntary sectors.'

*(011, Community organisation group
(Neath Port Talbot)*

be needed to help volunteer-involving organisations to follow guidelines to ensure volunteers are kept safe in their roles and that they are adhering to public health measures such as social distancing' (031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

One organisation specifically working and raising awareness of women's health inequalities highlighted that:

'We know we will need a dedicated, experienced volunteer coordinator to manage, train and support our volunteers. We will need regional support group volunteers. The delays to health care delivery due to the pandemic means there will be rationing/re-prioritisation of need moving forward, which will inevitably mean that more women in Wales will require support, advocacy and opportunities to get their voices heard. We will need co-chair and membership of Gynae Voices forums - a forum set up by us and health boards putting co-production at the heart of planning and delivery of services. This runs in one health board currently, with plans to implement across the remaining six. We will also need to recruit campaign lead volunteers for new areas as health concerns emerge. We also anticipate we will need to provide more training to volunteers and members around self-advocacy, empowerment, confidence building and self-esteem building as they navigate the health care system.'

(037, Voluntary/Community organisation, throughout Wales).

Flexible volunteering

As identified, new volunteers have emerged during the pandemic. Many respondents wished to continue their involvement with these new volunteers and encourage their continued participation. However, they noted a change was needed in broader volunteering and employment practices to facilitate volunteering alongside busy lifestyles:

'For businesses to introduce flexible hours for those who want to volunteer'

(013, Voluntary/community organisation, Neath-Port Talbot)

One organisation felt that people want to volunteer on a more 'one-off' basis with less long-term commitment (015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham). However, they noted that organisations may not be able continue to offer certain services due to not being able

to keep volunteers safe from contracting COVID-19 during the pandemic as they were not considered volunteer key workers (015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham).

Other respondents shared that they were working with others to develop volunteering opportunities; reflecting on what they had learnt throughout the pandemic to accommodate people's needs, availability, and locations. Short, time-limited or flexible opportunities have worked well with the younger and working age volunteers but it was felt that organisations needed to **'embrace equality, diversity and inclusion'** (031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot) across volunteering opportunities. However, as one organisation pointed out, it could be helpful to develop a volunteering programme that encourages people to volunteer but **'perhaps some people are still nervous of coming out'** (039, Voluntary/Community organisation, across southern Wales).

'Proper living wages that mean people do not have to work such long hours and therefore miss out on volunteering. Change the image of volunteering; it is heavily white, female, aged 30/40 plus dominated - it needs to be made more attractive to wider demographic.'

(040, Voluntary/Community organisation, Wales-wide)

A Wales-wide organisation felt that there was a need for more **'micro and / or flexible volunteering that meets availability of wide range of volunteers, including young people, family, employer supported, retirees etc'** (043, National infrastructure organisation, Wales-wide). As the respondents have indicated, an emphasis is placed on flexible volunteer opportunities, such as the kinds associated with micro-volunteering and flexible volunteering. However, one response noted the need for predictable volunteer commitments:

'We require volunteers who are able to commit every week in order to take over the food bank as well as more delivery drivers to meet the demand'.

(013, Voluntary/community organisation, Neath-Port Talbot)

As this contribution indicates, there is a need in some areas for consistent provision to ensure that services are delivered. This is not necessarily incompatible with more flexible approaches to volunteering but highlights the need for careful coordination and planning.

Similarly, one respondent noted that the sector also needs to be more flexible in its approach:

'We have seen a different cohort of volunteers due to furlough, and it's been important to capture that group to help them continue to volunteer. The onboarding process for 'formal' health and care volunteer opportunities with

statutory sector bodies is quite rigid, and time consuming. It would be good to levels of flexibility with regards to these requirements, particularly as volunteers want to get involved straight away. Access to funding for informal groups that weren't constituted was an issue.'

(041, Local infrastructure organisation, Powys).

Finally, one respondent noted that they anticipated organisations prioritising existing volunteers or those with experiences, rather than new volunteers:

'A lot of organisations will be prioritising their existing volunteers to resume face-to-face volunteering activity before they are in a position to recruit new volunteers. This will have a knock on effect, for example those who volunteer as part of their college or university course may not be able to achieve the requested amount of volunteering hours, those that use volunteering as a stepping stone to employment may find that they struggle to get the appropriate experience they need for their career choice and those that use volunteering to get out of the house and make new friends could find themselves at home becoming isolated or lonely.'

(031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).



The Arches, Rhayader

Consequently, there may be an impact for those who require a volunteering placement to complete a qualification, or for young people's citizenship schemes (such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award), which may be an introduction to volunteering for younger people.

Significance of the voluntary sector

Finally, respondents reflected on the significance of the voluntary sector in Wales. Some responses considered the contribution of the civil society in Wales during COVID-19:

'We have learned that volunteers stepped up to help immediately and voluntary organisations/groups adapted their services to provide essential support to residents without being prompted or asked to do so. Whilst we saw some groups having to pause activities due to community centres not being open for example, groups thought innovatively and started to offer services in a different way to ensure people got the support they needed'.

(031, Local infrastructure organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

'Getting volunteers out to shop, collect prescriptions and deliver meals to citizens etc. Supporting people through the Denbighshire Digital Buddies scheme (phone based direction by volunteers in IT matters). Telephone befrienders have been critical for isolated people during the pandemic also.'

(017, Local infrastructure organisation, Denbighshire).

However, some respondents also reflected on the broader significance of civil society in Wales. As has been widely noted, there have been substantial cuts to the public sector over the past forty years, including the years of austerity following the 2007-08 global financial crisis. Consequently, voluntary and infrastructure organisations have played a significant role in providing social welfare in the context of these cuts:

'For the public sector and the powers that be to recognise how much their services rely upon volunteers and to provide the necessary support. For their to be a better route of communication between sectors. For their to be a volunteer platform which is more accessible and which caters to the needs of the CVCs, organisations and volunteers better, and which gives more access to CVCs to manage and view throughout Wales'

(015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham).

'The reduction in public service spending leading to drastic service cuts, and the appalling work practice of zero hours contracts leading to job insecurity and taking all work offered were major problems before the pandemic. These have not gone away; it is a mistake to think that Covid has had a major impact on the resilience at this stage, there are so many other factors to consider. The cuts in public services means that more and more people are reliant on voluntary sector services. This means that 'competition' for a reduced pool of available volunteers is extremely high; this happened pre Covid and is likely to be an issue for some time.'

(040, Voluntary/community organisation, Wales-wide).

'We have also discovered how much the public sector relies upon volunteers, not only during times of need, but increasingly on a daily basis, in an attempt to provide enhancement to services and to reduce costs.'

(015, Local infrastructure organisation, Wrexham)

As the final quotation indicates, there is a danger of focussing on the response to COVID-19 as some kind of ‘magic pill’, without considering the broader circumstances which are characterised by a lack of resources and uncertainty.



Mold Community Shop

Resilience

The role of the voluntary sector during the COVID-19 pandemic was praised by virtually all respondents. Many organisations reflected on their ability to adapt during extremely difficult – indeed, unprecedented times and circumstances:

‘The voluntary sector in Wales is extremely resilient. Even throughout the pandemic we were able to support hundreds of families throughout Neath Port Talbot due to the help of our volunteers’

(013, Voluntary/community organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

‘They have been able to turn on a pin and respond to need, by being flexible and accommodating it’s been astonishing. Concerned about resilience going forward in terms of funding for organisations attempting to recover and deliver services differently.’

(041, Local infrastructure organisation, Powys).

Even in circumstances where a decline was noted, there was optimism for the future, based on the lessons learned during the pandemic:

‘I think it has been shaken by COVID-19 but will come back stronger in the future. It has learnt many important lessons.’

(019, Voluntary/Community organisation, Neath-Port Talbot).

Most respondents noted a recovery in the number of volunteers. Some reported being in fairly robust conditions after 2020:

'We have returned to our normal volunteer base with an increase in volunteers. There has been support throughout from Neath CVS, our accountants and the local Council- Neath Port Talbot Borough Council.'

(011, Community organisation group, Neath-Port Talbot).

One organisation noted that to support voluntary activity in the eventual recovery period, there is a need to:

'anwytho'r rhai sydd wedi bod yn gorffwys yn ol i wirfoddoli; dulliau newydd o gynnyg hyfforddiant'

['induct the ones who've been resting back into volunteering; offering new ways of training']

(C06, Community/voluntary organisation, north-western Wales).

When discussing the resilience of organisations or individuals, there is often a focus on the outcome or more quantifiable dimensions (e.g. numbers of volunteers), and less of a focus on the costs or impact of achieving that outcome. Indeed, the pandemic had placed a burden on several volunteers; the emotional, physical, and well-being effects of meeting targets and planning recoveries are less noted:

'Our volunteers are fatigued. There has been an increasing demand for involvement from our volunteers, particularly in terms of responding to surveys, consultations, speaking at online events, focus groups etc. Our volunteers are valued because they have lived experience of living with long-term chronic health conditions - a lot of them are experiencing exacerbated symptoms of their conditions and have been unable to access health care during the pandemic, so the increased level of activity has had a significant impact on them. The pandemic has impacted every aspect of the lives of those of us who run the charity, volunteer for it, and receive support from it - which means we're finding it challenging to appropriately support our volunteers and members. Access to funding has been challenging - the pressure to apply within short-term cycles creates a lot of work, is very stressful and time-consuming in terms of having to apply for the funds, recruit people for short-term work, train them, then report on the funding within short timescales. This is at a time when people want and need security. We want to provide that security and are under immense pressure to deliver our core mission and deliver activities to support people during this time.'

(037, Voluntary/Community organisation, throughout Wales).

One organisation, which focussed on supporting women [details], noted the impact of participation during COVID-19 on their volunteers, who were frequently confronting their own trauma in situations where support would have been less readily available:

‘There needs to be an appreciation and mechanisms put in place to properly resource co-production and involvement of grass-roots organisations. Whilst we very much appreciate being seen as a go-to body, advocating for the needs of women in Wales living with health conditions, we believe that we and the women we support deserve proper recognition - many organisations and public bodies are relying on the information and contributions of these volunteers. Just because these meetings have moved online and therefore don't have travel expenses, our volunteers are regularly reliving their trauma for the benefit of public bodies and their work going forward, and they should be compensated for that.’

(037, Voluntary/Community organisation, throughout Wales).

To conclude, the voluntary sector in Wales has demonstrated a tremendous capacity to continue to provide important services at an extremely challenging time. However, there is a danger that focussing on outcomes, framed in the language of resilience, obscures the costs of achieving these outcomes. There is a need to consider the ongoing support required during recovery for individuals and groups who have invested a great deal of physical and emotional labour in voluntary activity.

Conclusions

The response of the voluntary sector to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21 is highly praiseworthy, with many organisations adapting to work within new guidelines and restrictions and faced with a shortage of volunteers. Most organisations reported a significant increase in new volunteers, particularly in areas related to the pandemic and the increasing demand for foodbanks and support with daily living. However, not all organisations reported an increase in activities or volunteer numbers. Groups and organisations in some fields – such as nature, wildlife, and conversation, noted significant challenges in being able to continue with activities, with effects on volunteers’ health and well-being.

The pandemic has highlighted the dependence on the voluntary activity to provide many services in Wales. While the pandemic may have placed its role under the lens, and has required an enhanced response from many groups, voluntary organisations have been providing such support for decades. In many instances, respondents do not feel that there has been enough acknowledgment of voluntary organisations and volunteer roles in society. In particular, groups working with survivors of abuse often relive their own trauma in recurring distressing and exhausting experiences. The significance of voluntary activity for society is important to acknowledge.

Thinking ahead to the eventual recovery period of the pandemic, groups and organisations feel that there are some common areas that can be addressed to provide support for the future.

Firstly, respondents intend to maintain some elements of new provision. Befriending services are noted as a significant development that is considered an important feature with

which to continue. Befriending services have the potential to combat social isolation and loneliness and are seen as important provision that aligns with priorities for action in Welsh Government's Connected Communities strategy (2020) published on the cusp of the pandemic. This may be particularly important in the case of those without access to or confidence in using broadband or smartphone technology if more activities take place virtually. Befriending services also have the potential to align with social prescribing approaches, which may also encourage people to volunteer in the future.

Secondly, respondents noted the need for more blended presence, incorporating both online and community-based activities. Many organisations spoke of the efficiency of online activities, particularly in having meetings and avoiding time and money on travel. Online training activities were noted as useful, with the potential for more digital resources being noted. However, respondents also reflected on the value of community-based activities in building connections and providing opportunities for in-person interaction. These approaches are particularly important when considering digital poverty and the limited broadband access in some areas of Wales. The use of social media was also important during the pandemic, as it allowed services users and community members more broadly to be informed about the organisation's activities and may have increased awareness of both the support and volunteering opportunities available.

Thirdly, more flexible approaches to volunteering, without diminishing consistency in delivery of services. Respondents valued the emergence of new volunteers during the pandemic but recognised that factors such as furlough enabled more volunteering. Once furlough came to an end and restrictions were lifted, many new volunteers returned to work and had less time to continue volunteering. Organisations valued the greater diversity of new volunteers during the pandemic. More flexible and micro-approaches to volunteering were seen as allowing continued voluntary activities. Such an approach is something that organisations can plan for, although some respondents noted the need for a broader social change, such as more flexibility from employers.

While more flexible approaches to volunteering were generally welcomed, one organisation also noted the need to ensure that it was crucial to ensure predictable volunteering patterns to ensure consistency in delivery, and that needs were met. This approach does not contradict the call for more flexible and micro- approaches to volunteering but highlights the need for careful planning.

Finally, respondents noted the need for cooperation and coordination to maximise effectiveness of resources. Several respondents commented that civil society in Wales could be perceived as fragmented at times, and the opportunities to cooperate to strengthen capacity were important to develop. There were also calls for more funding for organisations so that key staff roles could be supported to provide further training and coordination. As the second and third point above notes, such coordination is important to maximise groups' presence and effective use of volunteers. Taken together these four points highlight related concerns that can better support the voluntary sector in the eventual recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

References

- BBC (2020) 'Covid: has devolution helped or hindered coronavirus response?', https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-54719456?at_custom4=54A78BDA-1956-11EB-862A-2003933C408C&at_custom2=twitter&at_custom1=%5Bpost+type%5D&at_custom3=%40BBCWalesNews&at_medium=custom7&at_campaign=64 (last accessed 26th August 2021).
- Welsh Government (2020) *Connected Communities: A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- Welsh Parliament's Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee (2021) *Impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector*. Cardiff: Welsh Parliament.

Project website and media

English: www.MVAin4.uk

Cymraeg: www.MVAin4.uk/cymraeg/

Twitter: @MVAin4

Appendix 1 – Survey questions

Please select the type of organisation you are responding on behalf of.

- 1. I am responding on behalf of an Infrastructure Organisation (i.e you support the work of other groups in the voluntary and community sector for a CVC).**
- 2. I am responding on behalf of a Local Authority Volunteering Lead and can answer questions about volunteering in my area.**
- 3. I am responding on behalf of a volunteer involving organisation in the voluntary, public or private sector and can answer questions about volunteering in my organisation.**

After selecting one of the three choices the respondent will be asked for further information about their organisation.

Follow up question for choice 1 and 2

Which of the following best describes your organisation?

- Local authority
- Local infrastructure organisation (e.g CVC, volunteer centre).
- Regional infrastructure organisation (e.g Regional Partnership Boards)
- National infrastructure organisation (e.g. Community Housing Cymru, WLGA, Welsh NHS Confederation).
- Other (please specify)

Follow up question for choice 3.

Which of the following describes your organisation? More than one could apply

- Voluntary/community organisation or group (such as a charity or mutual aid group)
- NHS Trust
- Other public sector organisation or body (e.g Local Authority)
- Social enterprise
- For-profit business or company
- Other (please specify)

Where does your organisation operate?

Tick all those that apply

- **Based in Wales but operating elsewhere (e.g. internationally)**
- **Based in England but operating in Wales**
- **Operating throughout Wales**
- **Operating in specific parts of Wales (choose local authority from the list)**

- Blaenau Gwent
- Bridgend
- Caerphilly
- Cardiff
- Carmarthenshire
- Ceredigion
- Conwy
- Denbighshire
- Flintshire
- Gwynedd
- Isle of Anglesey
- Merthyr Tydfil
- Monmouthshire
- Neath Port Talbot
- Newport City
- Pembrokeshire
- Powys
- Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Swansea
- Vale of Glamorgan
- Torfaen
- Wrexham

What is the approximate size of your organisation, based on income from the last financial year (2019/20)?

Select one option

- Voluntary contribution/less than £1,000
- £1,000 to <£10,000
- £10,000 to <£100,000
- £100,000 to <£1million
- £1million to <£10million
- £10 million to <£100 million
- More than £100 million
- Don't know

If you are unsure you can always check your Annual Accounts on the Charity Commission or Companies House website

1. **How has the pandemic impacted the levels of activity of different types of groups, clubs or organisations in your area?**

	Same level of activity	Increase in activity	Pause in activity	Change in activity	Don't Know
Children's education/schools (e.g. Parent Teacher Associations, School governor, Supporting fairs and fundraising, Helping in school, Running pupils' clubs)					
Youth/children's activities (outside school) (e.g. Youth clubs, Sports clubs, Hobby or cultural groups for children)					
Education for adults (e.g. Attending or teaching classes,, Mentoring, Cultural groups, Students Union, College governor)					
Sport/exercise (taking part, coaching or going to watch) (e.g. Sports clubs or groups (e.g. football, swimming, fishing, golf, keep-fit, hiking), Supporter clubs)					
Religion (e.g. Attending a place of worship (church, chapel, mosque, temple, synagogue) , Attending faith-based groups, Saturday/Sunday School)					
Politics (e.g. Membership of, or involvement with, political groups, Serving as local councillor)					
Older people (e.g. Involved with groups, clubs or organisations for older people e.g. Age UK, Pensioner's clubs, visiting, transporting or representing older people)					
Health, Disability and Social welfare (e.g.					

Medical research charities, Hospital visiting, Disability groups, Social welfare (e.g. Oxfam, NSPCC, Samaritans, Citizens Advice Bureau), Offering respite care, Self-help groups (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous))					
Safety, First Aid (e.g. Red Cross, St. Johns Ambulance, Life Saving, RNLI, Mountain Rescue, Helping after a disaster)					
The environment, animals (e.g. National organisations (e.g. Greenpeace, National Trust, RSPCA), Local conservation groups, Preservation societies)					
Justice and Human Rights (e.g. Special Constable, Magistrate, Legal advice centre, Victim Support, Prison visiting or aftercare, Justice and peace groups, Community or race relations, LGBT groups, National organisations (e.g. Amnesty International))					
Local community or neighbourhood groups (e.g. Tenants' / Residents' Association, Neighbourhood Watch, community group, local pressure group)					
Citizens' Groups (e.g. Rotary Club, Lion's Club, Women's Institute (WI), Freemasons)					
Hobbies, Recreation/Arts/Social clubs (e. g. Clubs or					

groups for the Arts (e.g. theatres, museums, amateur dramatics, orchestras), Hobby or cultural groups (e.g. local history club, Social club)					
Trade union activity (e.g. Membership of, or involvement with, a trade union.)					
Befriending (friendship services combating isolation and loneliness e.g. tea and talk)					

2. **What have you learnt from the volunteering response in your area or organisation? On reflection, what could you, the sector or policy makers have done differently?**
3. **What support do you think will be needed to enable volunteering in your area or organisation during the eventual recovery phase?**
 - I. What is your organisation doing or planning to do to support this?
 - II. What else is needed from other stakeholders?
 - III. What new voluntary roles are anticipated or desired in the future to respond to emerging needs?
4. **How have the following aspects varied in your area or organisation during the course of the pandemic?**

It would be appropriate to comment on:

- *Number of volunteers*
- *Type of roles*
- *Profile of volunteers*

First lockdown (March 2020 – 31 st May 2020)	'Stay local' 1 and lifting of restrictions (1 st June 2020 – 7 th September 2020)	Local lockdowns and Firebreak (8 th September 2020-19 th December 2020)	Lockdown 2 20 th December 2020-12 th March 2021	'Stay local' 2 and beyond (from 13 March 2021)

5. How has COVID-19 changed the way in which volunteers are engaged in your area or organisation? Will these changes impact the way your organisation operates in the future?
6. How do you think your organisation has provided social value for the community or individuals you **are or have been** supporting during COVID-19?
7. Based on your experience of the past year, what does the COVID-19 pandemic tell us about the resilience of the voluntary sector in Wales?