

WLGA EVIDENCE INQUIRY INTO COVID-19 and IMPACT ON VOLUNTARY SECTOR EQUALITY, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE,



1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities and the three fire and rescue authorities are associate members.
2. The WLGA is a politically led cross-party organisation, with the leaders from all local authorities determining policy through the Executive Board and the wider WLGA Council. The WLGA appoints senior members as Spokespersons and Deputy Spokespersons to provide a national lead on policy matters on behalf of local government.
3. The WLGA works closely with and is often advised by professional advisors and professional associations from local government, however, the WLGA is the representative body for local government and provides the collective, political voice of local government in Wales.

INTRODUCTION

4. COVID 19 has had a devastating impact on many peoples' lives and has tragically led to the death of over 2,700¹ people in Wales. These deaths, the national and local lockdowns and the requirements for shielding and self-isolation have had a serious impact on well-being and quality of life in local communities. Businesses, the economy and personal finances have been significantly affected and the Welsh, UK and the global economy faces a period of unprecedented challenge.
5. Previous WLGA evidence to Senedd Committees² has outlined the significant challenges faced by local authorities in this context, but has also highlighted the collective and critical ongoing response of local authorities and local public service providers during the pandemic.
6. Councils have demonstrated that they are uniquely placed at the heart of their communities and public service delivery and have demonstrated flexibility, innovation, resilience and responsiveness. Councils have worked closely with local partners in response to the pandemic and volunteers and the voluntary sector have played a key part in providing support to Wales' communities.
7. From the onset of COVID 19, at a national level, the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), One Voice Wales and the WLGA established a [Joint Protocol](#) outlining the respective sectors' national and collective commitment to "the health and safety of people and communities across Wales during this crisis". The Joint protocol reinforced core principles of:
 - Mutual respect – understanding and valuing the different contributions each other make.

¹ <https://www.data.cymru/covid19/mortality>

² <https://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=2772>

- Communications – clear and regular points of communication on issues of shared concern.
 - Information and intelligence sharing – sharing information and intelligence that can help support people and communities in a timely and effective way.
 - Flexibility – a focus on what we have to do to protect people’s health and safety during the crisis. Agreeing to suspend non-essential commitments where necessary but safeguarding vulnerable people.
 - Co-producing solutions - working together to design solutions that can best harness our collective resources.
8. The WLGA has worked closely with the WCVA throughout the pandemic and promoted the ‘recruitment’ and deployment of volunteers signposting through the Volunteering Wales platform³ and local volunteer schemes. The WLGA’s website also includes a COVID 19 ‘Volunteering’ portal⁴ which includes a range of resources and guidance notes.
9. The voluntary sector is broad, and includes informal, individual volunteering, through to local community groups, to professionally managed regional or national third sector organisations. Whilst the voluntary and public sectors are often described as distinct, it is important to recognise that they not only share common principles of community service (some of which are outlined above) but also share many of the same people; thousands of elected members and council and public sector workers living in and volunteering and supporting their local communities. During COVID 19, councillors and council workers have been a core part of the volunteering effort, for example. Caerphilly County Borough Council “Buddy scheme” utilised over 590 staff volunteers matched with up to 10 older and vulnerable adults/families each, Ceredigion County Council’s elected members were actively involved in supporting their communities where some shielding members telephoned vulnerable members in their community and one elected member in partnership with the local RNLI delivered food and medicine to over 90 residents per day. Denbighshire County Council’s Telephone Befriending service has been set up to check on people’s welfare, offer them regular telephone friendship and alert them to support services is being operated by council staff, volunteers and elected members.

Funding and service delivery & the effectiveness of support from the UK and Welsh government and local authorities;

10. National leadership has been provided by the Welsh Government and complemented by community leadership through local government, working closely with voluntary bodies and through their County Voluntary Councils (CVCs).
11. While much of the strategy is set nationally, the crisis has demonstrated the importance of ensuring local delivery partners are engaged in influencing its development; it is not only important to allow flexibility to interpret strategy and respond according to local circumstances and capacity but that organisations with service delivery experience and operational expertise also help shape the strategic response.
12. Councils work in partnership with agencies including the voluntary sector, community and town councils, registered social landlords etc. providing support to people that are shielding and those required to self isolate including be-friending services, shopping and prescription collections to walking dogs.
13. There is recognition that the deployment of community resources and the voluntary sector has been integral to the national and local support of people who were shielding or who

³ <https://volunteering-wales.net/vk/volunteers/index-covid.htm?lang=EN>

⁴ <https://www.wlga.wales/volunteering>

have been required to self-isolate, often supporting local authorities as the first point of contact. Welsh Government surveys undertaken in April and July 2020 identified that the rapid mobilisation of councils, voluntary organisations, community and town councils and community groups to support the most vulnerable in their localities has demonstrated the effectiveness of collaboration and partnership working, the importance of local knowledge for the effective use of community resources and emerging innovative practices.

14. Third sector organisations' submissions to the Committee will provide valuable insight into the experiences of funding and service delivery challenges, innovations and response during the pandemic.
15. From a local government perspective, councils have identified some of the key challenges experienced by third sector organisations, which include:
 - balancing of the significant 'overnight' demand for service support, often for the most vulnerable, and loss of income through reduced fund-raising opportunities;
 - the costs of providing COVID safe environments and sourcing personal protective equipment (outside of health and social care); and
 - the loss of experienced volunteering capacity who were required to shield or self-isolate, placing additional burden on existing third sector staff and volunteers.
16. Whilst local relationships have, on the whole, been constructive and effective, there have inevitably been tensions in some areas between voluntary sector bodies and councils and other partners, in particular where there have been funding pressures or capacity constraints have been experienced. The Committee has also previously noted that, given the pace of decision-making and urgency of response, it has not always been possible to follow established approaches to consultation and engagement.
17. COVID 19 has generated a positive response from individuals and communities, particularly during the early response phase, which has seen many thousands of people across Wales coming forward to volunteer or offer support to neighbours or vulnerable neighbours in their communities.
18. According to the WCVA, since the start of the outbreak, 18,000 people have signed up via Volunteering Wales, Wales's online portal for volunteering. This positive response also presented an initial challenge to established community and third sector organisations and local authorities in coordinating and supporting this voluntary effort, matching local demand with capacity and ensuring volunteers were kept engaged and informed throughout. WCVA analysis suggests 40% of these 'new' volunteers wish to continue to volunteer post-COVID 19; sustaining the commitment and involvement of these 'new' volunteers presents a challenge given the prolonged nature of the pandemic, but if harnessed and successfully mobilised provides the foundations for community resilience, renewal and recovery post-COVID 19.
19. The voluntary sector has welcomed the Welsh Government funding programmes such as Voluntary Action, Voluntary Sector Emergency Fund, Voluntary Sector Recovery Fund and the Third Sector Resilience Fund, which have been distributed primarily through WCVA.
20. This additional funding has certainly helped, however, the impact of COVID-19 has and will continue to have significant implications on voluntary organisations to generate income, particularly those who fund-raise throughout the year, so consideration should be given to extension of Welsh Government financial support for the Third Sector to assist in meeting the costs associating with COVID-19 and to help maintain stability. Welsh Government should also review funding criteria to enable newly established groups to access funding to extend their local activities. The additional Welsh Government funding for domestic abuse

and substance misuse has been also welcomed but more investment is needed as this crisis extends over a longer period.

21. Councils have aimed to provide additional support to their voluntary sector bodies for example, through relaxation of grant conditions or agreeing the refocusing of core activities to support the collective COVID 19 response .Pembrokeshire County Council, for example, have worked with other statutory partners in supporting Pembrokeshire County Voluntary Council in the development of a local COVID-19 grant scheme, bringing together a range of local and national funding streams to create a single integrated fund to help local voluntary and community groups survive the crisis and develop innovative responses to service delivery in light of COVID-19 restrictions. Others, such as Flintshire County Council and Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council have given grant funded third sector organisations flexibility to use their funds as appropriate to the situation.

Volunteering and community resilience and good practice and future opportunities and challenges

22. At the start of the pandemic community volunteers were recruited mainly through [Volunteering Wales](#), however there were other local arrangements and innovations such as platforms Cardiff Council's [Together for Cardiff](#), Carmarthenshire County Council's [Connect Carmarthenshire](#) and Torfaen County Borough Council's [Torfaen Community Support Mobile App](#), matching requests for help with volunteers. The WLGA also [signposted](#) local volunteering to WCVA guidance, which included safeguarding, handling of money and personal protection etc. WCVA also provided information for council contact centres to signpost callers to voluntary sector agencies. The total number of volunteers recruited through these routes is estimated at about 24,000.
23. In addition there were a number of informal volunteering initiatives such as community, faith and [COVID-19 Mutual Aid](#) and "help a neighbour" groups that arose out of the crisis.
24. The voluntary sector has been instrumental in mobilising community support to the crisis, in particular with recruitment, organisation, providing guidance and support and training. In addition, the voluntary sector are informing policy and practice on a national level, for example the Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham (AVOW) have undertaken a rapid review of food distribution in their locality in the crisis and informing the North Wales Poverty Alliance and Welsh Government approach to food security.

Some of the key aspects of successful collaborative approaches to volunteering include:

- **Partnership working with local stakeholders e.g.**

25. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council established in April a multi-agency Community Support Steering Group to oversee the response to the COVID-19 crisis and established seven multi agency locality community resilience hubs to support members of the community that required support.
26. Caerphilly County Borough Council have worked closely worked closely with Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations (GAVO) to develop a new scheme to develop voluntary support, whilst at the same time, encouraging and building the confidence of vulnerable people. The new scheme links in positively with the Volunteering Action area of the Public Service Board's Well-being Plan for Caerphilly, and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act;
27. Cardiff Council has established a Volunteer Anchor group who met to ensure that all available training and resources were shared among the community groups and The Isle of Anglesey County Council have established a joint Covid-19 Co-ordinators group, chaired by the Council's leader, across Statutory and third sector organisations. In Powys County Council, the delivery of the support was a collective effort between council services and

Powys Association of Voluntary Organisation and other local groups, through the Community Sector Emergency Response Team (CSERT)

- **Understanding of skills and building capacity in the community e.g.**
28. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council undertook a mapping exercise to better understand the types of support available from community groups and voluntary organisations and local businesses across the county, so that Locality Response Teams could utilise in supporting vulnerable residents in shopping, collecting of prescriptions, befriending etc. Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council are taking community asset based approach to use as the foundation for longer term community development work.
- **effective engagement with communities and partners is integral to the successful mobilisation of volunteers. e.g.**
29. In Monmouthshire, prior to the pandemic, the Council sought to tap into the potential of communities and developed the [Community Leadership Programme](#). As a result over sixty volunteer led community groups with over 1000 volunteers mobilised “overnight”. The Council coordinated a ‘virtual community network’, with a clear collective purpose- to protect life and support communities, “with no gaps and no duplication”.
30. The crisis has demonstrated the voluntary sector’s ability to work in partnership with councils, local health boards and other partners to respond positively to the needs of their communities. Since the start of the pandemic the WCVA have captured and shared practices and experiences to sustain the learning, including a series of webinars for the voluntary sector to reflect and share practice including a collaborative event with WLGA and One Voice Wales [Preparing for different futures; building on community response and volunteering](#).
31. The WLGA have also captured several examples of [Good Council Practice](#), which include case studies of volunteering good practice with partners.
32. The Friends in Need project, a Welsh Government funded project administered by Age Cymru, has attracted to date submissions from all 22 councils working in partnership with the voluntary sector to enhance befriending services
33. In addition, a proposed Welsh Government “sustainable volunteering” fund offers further opportunity to embed collaborative practices with the voluntary sector and other partners.
34. Some of the challenges envisaged at the beginning of the crisis have been that following the end of the furlough scheme there would be a reduction to the pool of volunteers. Many of the volunteer schemes were oversubscribed and not all volunteers were placed. There is a challenge for organisations to manage the interest in volunteering in a positive way. There is also a need to ensure volunteers receive appropriate training to ensure safeguarding and health and safety both for the volunteer and the person requesting support.
35. It is clear that the pace and duration of the pandemic will have an impact on the resilience and mental wellbeing of volunteers and employees in the public and voluntary sectors.

CONCLUSION

36. During these extraordinary times the voluntary sector and public service partners have worked together, doing their best in the most challenging of circumstances and the focus has always been on delivering the best outcomes. There have been challenges and difficulties, and more are likely to come as the crisis is projected to continue for some time. Local government and the voluntary sector will continue to work together to build on what has worked well and learn lessons for improvement and seek to support the most vulnerable, building community resilience and plan for longer-term, sustainable recovery.