

ELGC COV VS 10

Ymchwiliad i COVID-19 a'i effaith ar y sector gwirfoddol

Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact on the voluntary sector

Ymateb gan: Ymddiriedolaeth Adeiladu Cymunedau

Response from: Building Communities Trust



Short paper responding to Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact on the voluntary sector

Building Communities Trust (BCT) and this response

BCT supports asset based community development work across Wales funded through a National Lottery endowment. We run the Invest Local programme providing 10 yrs support and flexible funding in 13 communities and support networking, peer learning and advocacy among community based organisations across the country, facilitating a network of over 120 local organisations, meaning our experience is based on local place based work.

This response draws upon research done in partnership with People and Work and their Llechi, Glo a Chefn Gwlad initiative.

Immediate reactions to Lockdown

Many community organisations shifted their operations almost immediately Lockdown was declared. This included food production and delivery, collection of medicines, shopping and provision of basic information both via leaflets and social media.

Links were developed or activated with local retailers to source food for charitable purposes and community organisations helped those with health (but not financial) concerns to buy food (e.g. by picking up food they had brought) and also those who struggled to afford enough food (e.g. through community pantries and food banks).

Community groups' local relationships and information made accessing more isolated people easier and the crisis also made it easier for people to seek and ask for help and support, as it helped reduce the stigma some felt in asking for help; their need for help was seen as caused by an external event over which people had little to no control, rather than caused by any personal failure or weakness.

Established community organisations already possessed the infrastructure to underpin community responses: many had the physical capacity and information such as storage space, kitchens, vans, IT equipment and local knowledge (of who to work with and who needed help) required to power much of the effort.

Swift access to flexible emergency funding was essential in resourcing their response. Work to support people suffering from the mental health impacts of isolation took a little longer to get started and were hampered by social distancing requirements. This subsequently included activity packs, door step play for children, and "ring arounds" for older people and some social connections on social media. However some of the responses (such as those based upon social media) were hampered by very mixed levels of access to IT equipment and comfort in using them, especially among poorer and older groups.

It is worth noting though that the responses of community organisations were uneven, contributing to a patchy response to the crisis, and it is also true that some organisations, especially those with little experience of dealing with people "in need", and/or whose own staff/volunteers were shielding or furloughed, shut up shop and have been largely inactive since the spring.

The biggest impact of this has been a significant reduction in community based activities promoting wellbeing. Carers' support groups, parents and toddlers clubs, children and youth activities, informal exercise classes and sport and activities for older people have been halted or significantly curtailed and for many people this increases isolation and puts more strain on mental health. And for some groups this puts real pressure on their income even where they were previously self-funding.

Funding and support from different tiers of Government

Funding – including from government (often via WCVA) was plentiful and important in helping support emergency responses, though occasionally had puzzling elements of bureaucracy. Funding from trust funds and Lottery was ample and very flexible. In many ways it has never been easier to access flexible funding for community based work.

Provision of information has been more mixed; guidance on use of community buildings was often confused and information from NHS to those who should be shielding was often of poor quality.

Practical cooperation at community level was often good with local authorities though willingness to trust community groups has been very mixed. Pre-existing relationships (which contributed to levels of trust) were a major predictor of close working links during Lockdown. However, the crisis did help breakdown some of the pre-crisis barriers to co-operation such as poor communication, risk aversion and silo working, as people in both the statutory and voluntary sectors were driven overwhelmingly by the crisis to do things differently.

Volunteering and community resilience

The pandemic has brought forward a new cohort of younger volunteers, many of whom have struggled to retain involvement after lockdown, though older volunteers who shielded are slowly returning.

Community based volunteers were usually willing to accept a higher level of risk than that allowed by those volunteering for public bodies or the staff of public bodies. However, it does appear that most did develop and use both appropriate risk assessments and safeguarding policies (lots of CVCs ran fast track DBS services).

Future opportunities and challenges

Role of community based organisations

There is substantial community based capacity across Wales covering a very wide range of activities. Future policy priorities which include community-based care and support, greater focus on protecting local environments, producing local food and strengthening local economies are all ones in which strong community organisations have already proved they have an important role to play.

We have seen during the pandemic a greater willingness to work flexibly and collaborate across the community, public and private sectors. If this can be sustained the skills, knowledge and resources (including volunteer efforts) that community based organisations can leverage will aid the wider recovery effort.

Public sector staff have reported that closer working with community groups gives them access to information and connections within communities they didn't have before as well as a greater understanding of needs

Forums for sustaining and enhancing collaboration

Much collaboration on the ground during the crisis depended on individual initiative and personal relationships (which creates fragility) and there are currently limited vehicles to plan and facilitate on-going collaboration between community groups and public sector organisations (and those that are overly bureaucratic).

Public Services Boards are fundamentally not designed with this in mind and there are worrying signs of a “return to type” [the words of local authority staff] in many areas which reduce contact and collaboration with community organisations. And all too often effective collaboration at operational level isn’t sustained unless supported by senior leadership.

The cross-sector collaborative approach being taken in Pembrokeshire offers a positive example of how partnership work can be enhanced and deserves careful study but it does appear likely that such approaches will need senior leadership from within public bodies.

Resourcing

Many of the community organisations active during the pandemic have a history of self-funding their work. During the COVID period many have also benefitted from relatively easy to access funds for emergency activities.

However, there are serious concerns that “tomorrow’s money has already been spent” by both government and non-governmental funders, which may severely limit the recovery response, and that there is little way of capturing the learning of providing such flexible funding by donors themselves.