

Scrutiny of COVID-19 and its impact on the voluntary sector

Response from the Bevan Foundation

The Bevan Foundation is Wales' most influential and innovative think tank. We develop lasting solutions to poverty, inequality and injustice to help improve people's lives

The Bevan Foundation has undertaken a number of projects exploring the [impact](#) of and [response](#) to the pandemic on the voluntary sector [nationally](#) and in the Merthyr Tydfil Borough.

During the first wave of the pandemic we spoke to nearly 70 charities and community organisations to understand how they had been affected. More recently we have been looking at the experiences of [shielding](#), exploring the voluntary sector's role in providing valued support to people.

Volunteering, community resilience and good practice

- Charities and community organisations have played a vital role in responding to individual and community need throughout the pandemic. They continue to provide advice, welfare and mental health support, food provision, medication deliveries and activities to support families and to avoid social isolation and loneliness.
- We have also seen collaboration between different organisations and sectors, extending across the third, statutory and private sectors. This has included provision of in-kind support, pooling of resources and developing new partnerships drawing on individual organisations' particular strengths.
- Positively, since the pandemic there has been a rise in numbers of volunteers amongst organisations focused on pandemic response delivery. Some new groups and initiatives have been set-up in response to the pandemic and have responded efficiently, effectively and at pace, under difficult circumstances.

Challenges and funding

- However, many leaders across the voluntary sector told us that while it was easy to go into lockdown, coming out of it has proven far harder.
- Many charities and community organisations have experienced a decrease in funding and/or a lack of funding opportunities. Those relying on membership fees, donations or earned income through events and shops/cafes have seen those revenue streams all but stop. Although many will be able to get through 2020, their concerns are focused on 2021 and beyond. Many have also seen costs rise as a result of having to make changes to ensure safety measures are in place, and to purchase items such as cleaning products and PPE.

- Although funding has been made available, some community organizations whose primary activities have ceased or been curtailed have been ineligible to apply to schemes that support activities focused on COVID-19 response. Some have commented on funding that is geared to the short-term financial effects rather than the long-term impacts. Also, many group leaders have not made funding applications in the past and do not have the level of awareness, skills and confidence to apply.

Looking ahead

- We found that charities, particularly smaller community groups, are apprehensive about how they can operate in the future. Many lack training on how to operate safely, some are struggling to adapt to deliver their activities under the new circumstances. Some told us they are not confident that they have the right skills or ideas to operate using different financial models.
- Given the changing guidelines it can be hard for charities to keep up, especially when trying to write action plans to help them plan for the future.
- Some also feel there is a lack of central control (by the local authority) to organize activities on the ground, while conversely, others wish to see a devolution of control from local institutions. A recurring theme has been concerns about missed opportunities for sharing resources and information.
- Ensuring people feel safe to attend voluntary and community sector activities where it is more difficult to socially distance is a huge issue, and many representatives concur that this one of the biggest challenges. If numbers fall groups may be forced to close because they no longer have the critical mass they need to keep going.