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Rydym yn croesawu
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Adeiladau Cambrian
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23 November 2020

Dear John

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

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown some of the best of our communities throughout Wales as people, organisations and public bodies have come together to support one another.

In my recent report, *Leave No-one Behind – Action for an age-friendly recovery*, I referred to the excellent work done by volunteers, community groups and charities during recent months.¹

My response to your call for evidence will focus on funding and service delivery, the role volunteering has played during the pandemic and my views on community resilience and good practice, as well as the opportunities and challenges the future might hold.

Funding

Covid-19 has brought huge challenges for the voluntary sector, from loss of funding streams through declining donations and closure of charity shops, as well as operational challenges with older volunteers being required to shield or self-isolate, along with dealing with furloughing staff and adhering to lockdown requirements.

In this context, the Third Sector Resilience Fund seeks to play a crucial role in supporting voluntary organisations throughout Wales, with access to this fund being facilitated through local CVCs until March 2021. With specific regard to this fund, the three strands of *Survive*, *Improve*, *Diversify* aim to encourage innovation in practice and enable organisations to expand reach into new communities.

The WCVA also facilitates access to the Voluntary Services Recovery and Emergency Funds, which I know will be particularly welcomed by many voluntary sector organisations throughout Wales. I am also aware that many small community groups have been

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

accessing funds distributed via their local authorities and local CVCs, such as the 'Support Community Action' fund in Pembrokeshire.²

Access to these funds will undoubtedly have proven invaluable in enabling the voluntary sector to remain active and offer vital support to older people during the pandemic. This needs to be sustained and further developed in order to ensure that the sector can continue to play its part in the reconstruction and recovery process, as well as build upon the innovation and learning that has occurred over the past few months.

Service delivery

As I have also highlighted, the excellent work done by volunteers, community groups and charities, alongside local business and local government has ensured that significant help and support has been available to many older people during the pandemic. Without this, many would not have been able to access critical support to obtain essentials such as food, medicines, housing adaptations and care.

I have heard from several agencies that rapid revisions were made to operating processes to facilitate faster and easier access to services, such as almost immediate transitions from paper-based administration to digital methods. I have also heard many examples of organisations working in partnership that have agreed new routes for referrals or new ways of delivering that have meant older people could get faster access to vital support.

However, movement to digital service models has also highlighted both the digital exclusion faced by many older people and the negative effects of losing the face-to-face contact usually associated with voluntary sector services.

Role of volunteering during the pandemic

There was an immediate impact on the voluntary sector and on volunteering with the loss of older volunteers as many were required to shield or self-isolate and many of them are yet to, or are unable to, return to full activity.

Whilst the Job Retention Scheme had a significant positive impact on the number of people choosing to use their time to volunteer, the ways in which they have chosen to do so have been varied. Large voluntary organisations with established volunteer schemes have provided a route for many, whilst for others a more informal approach to offering help within the community has been a more attractive approach.

I have heard from many voluntary organisations about their concerns regarding the proposed end of the Job Retention Scheme and the loss of volunteers as people returned to work, whilst levels of need were still high. These concerns are likely to resurface in March when the extended Scheme is due to come to an end.

Community Resilience, good practice and future opportunities and challenges

As I identified in 'Leave No-one Behind', we need to build upon the positive action we have seen during the past few months and continue to harness the community spirit that has delivered so much for so many in such a short space of time.

Age-friendly communities are places that enable people to age well, across all life stages. The support people provide to one another within communities, either informally or through formal volunteering, can play an important role in preventing people falling into crisis.

Equally, such support can aid rehabilitation and strengthen community links across generations.

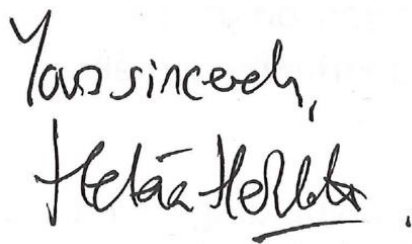
Prior to the pandemic, I had started to work with local authorities throughout Wales to examine how they can make their communities age-friendly and become part of the World Health Organisation's age-friendly communities' network. This work is now even more crucial to ensure that older people do not get left behind as communities adjust in response to the pandemic.

Conclusion

The support provided to communities and to older people by volunteers during the pandemic has been vital and the way that local authorities, community groups and third sector agencies have worked together is something we cannot lose as we move into the winter and look ahead to recovery and reconstruction from Covid-19.

Older people must be included in this journey as they contribute as volunteers and active participants with others in their communities.

Strengthening intergenerational understanding and solidarity, demonstrated in so many of our communities over the last few months, must be the cornerstone of our approach. Together we can demonstrate that we value all generations, and that all generations are part of our future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Yours sincerely, Heléna Herklots". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Heléna Herklots CBE

Older People's Commissioner for Wales

¹ Older People's Commissioner for Wales. (2020). *Leave No-One Behind: Action for an Age-Friendly Recovery*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34Zlc0K>

² Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services. (2020). *Funding*. Available at: <https://pavs.org.uk/funding/index.htm>