

Volunteering and wellbeing in the pandemic: Implications for policy and practice

Introduction

Volunteering has played a crucial role in supporting communities during the pandemic. Interest in volunteering saw a dramatic spike early in the pandemic (Volunteering Wales, unpublished), and volunteers have helped meet people's emotional and physical needs during the crisis. There is widespread interest from policymakers and practitioners in maintaining this activity to contribute to a wellbeing-led recovery in Wales.

To inform this recovery planning, we conducted two studies on the contribution of volunteering to individual and community wellbeing during the pandemic: a synthesis of 50 practice-based case studies using a case study synthesis method (Taylor-Collins et al., 2021) and a rapid evidence review (Boelman, 2021).

Individual wellbeing means 'how satisfied we are with our lives, our sense that what we do in life is worthwhile, our day-to-day emotional experiences (happiness and anxiety) and wider mental wellbeing' (Stuart et al., 2020). We looked at impacts on both volunteers and those they were helping.

Community wellbeing means 'the state of our population, society and our environment across Wales overall. It looks to ensure that people have the economic, social, environmental and cultural conditions around them to be well' (Well-being of Future Generations Act, 2015). The wellbeing goals of the Act (see Figure 1) can

be considered indicators of community wellbeing.



Figure 1: The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) goals

Volunteering means any activity which is unpaid, freely chosen, and benefits others or the environment (Ellis Paine et al., 2010), including formal (through an organisation) and informal or reciprocal help (such as mutual aid).

In this briefing we summarise the key findings from our two studies and offer recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

Positive and negative impacts on wellbeing

Volunteering during the pandemic has had both a positive and negative effect on individual wellbeing, for the volunteers and for the people they have helped.

Volunteers generally fared better in terms of their wellbeing than those who didn't volunteer. Positive impacts that contribute to wellbeing

include social connection and inclusion, personal growth, sense of purpose, and feeling appreciated.

Though there is limited evidence, negative impacts on wellbeing have been found for those who had to stop volunteering (either for health and care reasons or because previous roles were no longer possible), those whose offer to volunteer was not taken up, or those in stressful and challenging frontline volunteer roles.

Those being helped have experienced positive impacts on their wellbeing, particularly around improved mental health and social connection and inclusion. This was often connected to the positive relationships developed with volunteers, especially interactions ‘on the doorstep’ during food or medicine deliveries.



However, there is little evidence on those whose needs were not met during the pandemic, or on the negative implications for wellbeing on those individuals. Understanding more about who has been negatively impacted by the volunteering they have done (or not done), and the help they have (or have not) received during the pandemic will be important in understanding where wellbeing support should be targeted in the recovery, and where volunteer recruitment and deployment strategies should focus their efforts.

Existing infrastructure for ‘A Wales of cohesive communities’

The volunteer response did not spring up out of nowhere. Evidence suggests that areas that had invested in social cohesion pre-pandemic – such as through specific programmes – appear to have remained more cohesive during the

pandemic than others. Investment during the pandemic, in the form of flexible and emergency funding schemes for community organisations and groups, helped facilitate the rapid volunteer response.

Similarly, existing infrastructure played an important role in coordinating the volunteer response and contributing to community wellbeing. This ranged from local, physical spaces in the form of church halls and community cafés, to local governance in the form of town and community councils, county and borough councils, to third sector organisations such as charities, county voluntary councils (CVCs), and umbrella bodies.

The importance of collaboration

Collaboration is an important part of community wellbeing and one of the five ways of working under the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Effective partnership working to tackle local needs, involving the kind of organisations described above, involved a pooling of expertise and enabled knowledge flows between partners. For instance, grassroots groups could provide local intel on community need, while larger organisations such as councils and CVCs could provide volunteer recruitment and training support. Where these partnerships worked well, this made a positive difference to communities because it enabled the development of individual and community wellbeing through volunteering.

Blending formality and informality

These partnerships were also an example of the blending of formality and informality that took place in relation to the volunteer response. Much of the volunteering that took place during the pandemic could not easily be categorised as either ‘formal’ or ‘informal/reciprocal help’. Activities that might ordinarily be considered informal help – such as shopping for a neighbour – were often facilitated by formal organisations. This blend was valuable in providing the help needed in a way that aimed not to duplicate or to leave gaps in support. The interaction between formality and informality

signals a potentially new volunteering ecology that could change how communities respond to those who need help in future.

Sustainability of volunteering

A significant proportion of those who volunteered during the pandemic were new to volunteering. Many of these had been furloughed, made redundant, or switched to home working. Retaining some of the flexibility that has enabled these new volunteers to contribute to their communities could help to retain their involvement in future, but it is unclear how many will continue to volunteer once society has reopened, despite the need for volunteering remaining. Volunteer strategies will need to plan for the potential challenges with sustaining volunteers and consider how best to meet need under changing circumstances, including in transitions between emergency response and recovery.

Tackling inequality through volunteering for 'A more equal Wales'

Much of the volunteering during the pandemic aimed to contribute to community wellbeing by mitigating the negative impacts on those who were disproportionately affected – for example, those unable to access food or medicine. This aimed to prevent the deepening of inequalities and was often underpinned by, as well as helping to develop, cohesive communities. In some ways volunteering has also raised awareness of these inequalities and reduced the stigma surrounding them.



However, this does not mean that volunteering is a panacea for addressing these inequalities. The pandemic has brought to the fore (and is likely to have worsened) issues such as poverty, racism, and gender inequality and it will not be

possible for volunteering alone to solve these wider challenges.

Suggestions for further research

There is a gap in wellbeing-specific research on the pandemic and volunteering. Many studies cited in the evidence review were not designed to focus on wellbeing impacts, and the case studies were not written with a wellbeing focus. Further research that focuses on both individual and community wellbeing could provide greater insight into the themes highlighted in this report and discover new themes not identified here.

Case study synthesis is a rigorous method that can be applied at pace, making it ideal for responding to immediate policy and practice needs. Applying the method to a wider sample of case studies, such as those collected from different groups/organisations or written from the perspective of volunteers, and case studies which report what did not work as well as what did, as well as any negative impacts on wellbeing, would be valuable. Supporting groups, organisations and funders to develop good case study templates and to interpret and learn from a collection of case studies could also help improve understanding of volunteering's contribution during the pandemic and beyond.

Recommendations

- **Volunteering should be an important part of Wales' wellbeing-led recovery**, especially in helping reach those who have been most vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. It has been linked to increased individual and community wellbeing before and during the pandemic and has contributed to the Well-being of Future Generations goals.
- **Formal and informal volunteering are both crucial elements of Wales' volunteering ecology**, and both require nurturing if volunteering is to flourish. Ongoing investment in all levels of community infrastructure is needed to build and maintain strong communities that are prepared to respond to crises like the pandemic and beyond, such as

the climate emergency. Prioritising support for places with lower levels of community and individual wellbeing could help those areas that need it most.

- **Positive relationships that have formed between public services and groups and organisations of all sizes should be maintained** to promote effective collaboration in future, since collaboration has been a key enabler of individual and community wellbeing in the pandemic. Maintaining opportunities for dialogue between partners about needs and how to meet them, as well as on shared, cross-sectoral priorities beyond the pandemic, will be crucial in supporting wellbeing during the recovery.
- **Matching volunteers to need can be achieved effectively on a hyper-local level.** Strengthening volunteer recruitment and matching strategies and platforms to reflect the highly localised forms of volunteering that have thrived during the pandemic, informed by local intel, could contribute to a positive volunteer experience and help communities get the support they need. Moreover, finding opportunities promptly for those who offer their time can help avoid adverse impacts on individuals' wellbeing, such as those caused by frustration, and help sustain the increased levels of interest in volunteering seen during the pandemic.
- **Some approaches to volunteer coordination are conducive to volunteer wellbeing but some can have a negative impact.** Providing mental health support to volunteers in physically or emotionally challenging roles and providing accessible volunteer opportunities – cognisant of barriers such as digital exclusion, for instance – can help mitigate the negative impacts of wellbeing on volunteers. This underlines the importance of volunteering providers in delivering this support.

- **Supporting people to volunteer whose wellbeing has been especially adversely affected during the pandemic**, and who are likely to experience challenges during the recovery – such as young people, whose education and careers have been severely disrupted – could help to manage the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on society.

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For further information contact:

Emma Taylor-Collins

+44 (0)29 2087 5345

emma.taylor-collins@wcpp.org.uk

Wales Centre for Public Policy

Cardiff University, 10/12 Museum Place, Cardiff CF10 3BG



www.wcpp.org.uk



029 2087 5345



info@wcpp.org.uk



@WCfPP



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Welsh Government