

Witness Name: National Council for
Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits:

Dated: 11 April 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SARAH VIBERT ON BEHALF OF NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS (NCVO)

I, Sarah Vibert, Chief Executive Officer, on behalf of National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), will say as follows: -

NCVO

1. We are the membership community for charities, voluntary organisations and community groups in England. Together we champion voluntary action. We were founded in 1919 and have over 17,500 members made up of all causes, shapes and sizes. We exist to make our members lives easier so they can focus on changing people's lives and making their communities stronger and more resilient. We provide practical support through a variety of channels such as online, webinars and a phone and email helpdesk together with offering networking opportunities, training, consultancy and a conference suite. We work to influence government, funders, regulators and other decision makers.
2. During the pandemic, we adapted to support voluntary organisations and volunteering in a variety of ways. We bring expertise on the running and regulation of charities, as well as best practice in how to engage volunteers. We have strong relationships across the voluntary sector, as well as deep knowledge about the challenges and opportunities facing voluntary organisations and volunteers.

3. In an emergency, our role is to both help the sector to stabilise during turmoil and ensure they have what they need to respond to the emergency where appropriate. We support the sector to respond to a crisis, but we also offer support for the impact of the crisis on the day-to-day aspects of running a voluntary organisation such as governance and procurement. Organisations like ours are vital to:
 - Support voluntary organisations to understand the wider environment and have access to best practice.
 - Advocate for voluntary organisations and volunteers to ensure they can play a part in emergency response.
 - Build insight into the role voluntary organisations and volunteering in emergency response, and impact of emergencies on them.
 - Support collaboration across the sector, and with government.

4. It is worth noting that we are not an emergency organisation in the way that British Red Cross or similar voluntary organisations are, and we didn't mobilise members around a particular practical response to the pandemic.

Overview of voluntary sector

5. In 2019/20, there were 165,758 voluntary organisations (NCVO001) in the UK. 80% of charities are smaller, with an income of under £100,000. While charities earning over £1million are 4% of the sector, they represent 80% of income and spending, and have gradually increased as a proportion over time (NCVO001).

6. Civil society organisations exist to serve a variety of communities and causes across the country. They play a variety of roles including:
 - community building and leadership;
 - service delivery;
 - providing employment;
 - expertise and insight;
 - advocacy;
 - enable volunteering and participation.

7. In 2019/20 (NCVO002), the voluntary sector had £58.7billion in income and £56.9billion in spending. Over half of all income (NCVO003) (£30billion) came from the public and a quarter (£15.4billion) from the government (down from 37% a decade ago). The majority of spending (71% or £40.3billion) went to charitable activities followed by grants (15% or £8.8billion) and activities for raising funds (13% or £7.3billion). While the support package of £750million to help charities deliver during the pandemic was welcome, we also know that 1 in 4 charities used their reserves (NCVO004). This has left the voluntary sector in a financially precarious position (NCVO004).
8. The voluntary sector (NCVO005) employed about 950,000 people in 2022 (3% of the UK workforce), up by 27% since 2011. Financial support such as the Job Retention Scheme and grants would have helped retain workers. In December 2021, 30% of the voluntary sector workforce worked remotely, most of this from their home – a much higher proportion than the private sector (25%) and public sector (16%). According to Respond, Recover, Reset (NCVO006), hybrid and home working rose during lockdowns. Increased hybrid working appears to have become a permanent feature of the sector (NCVO005).
9. Almost a third of people aged 16 and over (30% or an estimated 16.3million people) volunteered with a group, club or organisation (NCVO007) at least once in 2020/21 and almost one in five (17% or an estimated 9.2million people) volunteered at least once a month. Volunteering levels fell dramatically from 37% volunteering at least once a year in 2019/20 and at least once a month from 23% that same year (NCVO007). Similar patterns were confirmed by the Respond, Recover, Reset (NCVO006) barometer survey, where volunteering for organisations fell month on month during lockdown periods.
10. People volunteering aged 65-74, while still the highest age group to volunteer, fell dramatically from 31% at least once a month in 2019/20 to 22% in 2020/21 and 40% to 32% for those volunteering at least once a year in the same period. This decline was less pronounced for those aged 35 to 64. We believe the decline in volunteering was due to people who were shielding stepping back from face to face volunteering whilst in parallel, social distancing meant many volunteering activities were paused.

Many volunteers who stopped volunteering due to the pandemic did not return once restrictions were lifted. Working age people were more likely to volunteer for the first time during the pandemic partly due to being furloughed from paid work. Overall there are proportionally less volunteers among younger people and people from more deprived neighbourhoods, while the evidence around ethnicity is more complex. Evidence does suggest that volunteering has become more diverse during the pandemic. Our latest research (NCVO008) highlights the impact of the pandemic on volunteering.

11. Social services is the largest subsector (NCVO009) with 19% of organisations and £13.3billion in income, followed by culture and recreation (15% and £6.5billion in income) and religion (10% and £3billion).
12. Voluntary organisations are an embedded part of our public services system. Charities are funded by government to deliver a range of services across several areas including health and social care, children's service and criminal justice (NCVO010). Public services delivered by both public sector organisations and charities also regularly engage volunteers (NCVO074).
13. There are proportionately more voluntary organisations (NCVO011) in the south of England, 28% are based in the north (as are 19% of those with more than £1million income) and 19% in the Midlands.
14. Research (NCVO012) indicates that BAME-led charities have unequal access to funding including lack of long-term grant funding, regional inequalities for emergency grants, and funding for working on anti-racism and structural inequalities.
15. There are a number of national infrastructure bodies which support the sector of which we are one. We work closely with our sister councils – Northern Irish Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) (NCVO013), Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) (NCVO014) and Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) (NCVO015) – as well as other infrastructure bodies – Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) (NCVO016), Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) (NCVO017), Association of Volunteer Managers (AVM) (NCVO018), National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) (NCVO019), Volunteering

Matters (NCVO020) amongst others. We are also a founding member of the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) (NCVO021). At a local level, voluntary organisations are also supported by Councils of Voluntary Service.

16. The voluntary sector is currently facing a number of challenges. Respond, Recover, Reset (NCVO006) found that many voluntary organisations experienced an increasing demand for services as a result of the pandemic. The recent Nottingham Trent University / Pro Bono Economics barometer surveys (NCVO022) have revealed a continuation of this trend due to the cost of living crisis. If the current challenges facing the voluntary sector are of interest to the inquiry then we can provide additional detail.

The role of the voluntary sector in an emergency

17. Voluntary organisations play various roles in emergencies at a national and local level, including:
 - Identifying emerging needs in communities;
 - Continuing or adapting their existing services;
 - Mobilising quickly;
 - Supporting coordination of services, provisions, and resources alongside other agencies and bodies;
 - Advocating for and amplifying the voices of those most impacted;
 - Mobilising and coordinating volunteers where appropriate;
 - Disseminating information to communities;
 - Offering insight to improve the response of local and national government;
 - Connecting communities to wider support.
18. The value of civil society in emergency response can be maximised if organisations are involved in preparing and planning for emergencies. Large and small, national and local organisations all have a role to play. Voluntary organisations are particularly important in emergency response because they often hold trusted relationships with people who are marginalised, and bring deep knowledge about their community.
19. Coalitions and networks play a vital role during civil emergencies to support a coordinated response. A number of our members are part of the VCS Emergencies Partnership (NCVO021). This is a partnership of local and national voluntary and

community sector organisations, formed in response to learnings from several national crises in 2017, and funded by DCMS. The VCS Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) provides space and opportunity for 230 local and national voluntary and community organisations to come together and build connections that will ensure support reaches those in need more effectively.

20. National and local voluntary infrastructure, including us, have an important role to play in emergencies to disseminate information, coordinate activity, support collaboration, connect voluntary organisations with decision makers, and ensure voluntary organisations have a stable foundation (e.g. in terms of governance and financial management) from which to respond.
21. Charities and volunteers are a core part of emergency response in peacetime and crisis. Charities such as British Red Cross, St John Ambulance (NCVO024) and Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) (NCVO025) all engage volunteers to support emergency response. There are voluntary positions in both the police and the fire service.
22. We recommend reading the VCSEP report (NCVO026) on a National Resilience Strategy which explains the importance of voluntary organisations in a crisis.

Before the pandemic

23. As far as we are aware we were not:
 - engaged as part of the development of the 2011 UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy;
 - engaged in the Pandemic Influenza Communications Strategy;
 - encouraged to and / or did participate in the development of local plans. As a national umbrella organisation, it would not have been appropriate for us to be involved in local plans across England. When the pandemic started we were engaged in the London Resilience Forum (NCVO027) on a daily basis until April 2020 as part of a sub group (funders community and voluntary sector sub group) as our office is London based. We may be able to locate more information on these meetings if it is of interest to the inquiry;

- invited to take part in pandemic exercises including Winter Willow in 2007 and Cygnet in 2016; and / or
 - consulted following pandemic exercises such as Cygnus in 2017.
24. From our records, we are not aware of government bringing to our attention any policies or guidance on how to prepare for a civil emergency. We think it is possible we would have been made aware of guidance accompanying the [Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#). As a member of the Strategic Group for Emergency Response and Recovery (SGERR) (NCVO028, NCVO029, NCVO030) and subsequently as one of the convenors of Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) (NCVO021) (which replaced SGERR), documents may have been shared with us, but we do not have any records. We were engaged in an emergency planning exercise (not specific to a pandemic before 2020). This was confidential. We don't have documents saved from this exercise.
25. We are not aware that local government engaged us in emergency planning before January 2020. This is not surprising as we are a national organisation. MHCLG (now DLUHC) were of the SGERR alongside us when that group was active (NCVO029).
26. In 2017, we responded to the terms of reference of the Grenfell Inquiry (NCVO031) and called for the inquiry to look at the following:
- Impact of cuts on emergency planning;
 - Whether emergency planning practice adequately involves charities;
 - How civil society was able to respond to the concerns of the community before the fire;
 - Distribution of funds and coordination of fundraising;
 - The lack of central government support of the charitable response compared to the 2005 7/7 bombings.
27. We also recommended the Grenfell Inquiry review the statutory framework.
28. Following incidents in 2017, the Charity Commission launched initiative to review how the voluntary sector could best respond to disasters and emergencies. This was called the National Critical Incident Review (NCVO032, NCVO068, NCVO069 and NCVO070 – note that some of these documents are marked by the Charity

Commission as 'Official Sensitive' so should be checked with the Charity Commission prior to sharing) and resulted in the National Critical Incident Response Framework in 2018. This project identified the need for:

- A truly high level strategic forum that engages the voluntary and community sector (VCS), including small and large charities;
- More effective co-ordination of preparedness amongst the VCS in "peacetime";
- More effective communication amongst the VCS at times of crisis;
- Better and more effective coordination between VCS organisations at a time of crisis;
- Increased efficient two way flow of information with Government and public agencies.

29. The project engaged voluntary sector umbrella bodies and key charities and resulted in the creation of the SGERR.

30. We believe there was some engagement from central government with bodies similar to us on emergency planning before the pandemic, but this could be improved. The Voluntary Sector Civil Protection forum was replaced in 2019 by the Strategic Group for Emergency Response and Recovery. The Forum was important to convene the voluntary sector in peacetime but it didn't have a mandate to implement an active coordinating role during crisis. It had a lack of direct links to strategic stakeholders. To our knowledge we did not sit on the Forum. The Strategic Group included key stakeholders from the voluntary sector, emergency response and government partners (BERG, British Red Cross (NCVO023), Civil Contingencies Unit, DCMS, MHCLG, Muslim Aid (NCVO033), National Police Chiefs Council (NCVO034), NAVCA (NCVO019), NCVO, Salvation Army (NCVO035), St John Ambulance (NCVO024), UK Community Foundations (NCVO036), Victim Support (NCVO037), plus others). This group's purpose was to drive collaboration and communication across the voluntary sector, with a specific role to support coordination and develop the capacity of the sector. The SGERR also aimed to map the capabilities and capacities of Local Resilience Forums in relation to risk registers and connectedness to the voluntary sector, and identify the gaps in provision to respond to and reduce risk.

31. We were involved in the Charity Commission's National Critical Incident Review and had a place on the Strategic Group for Emergency Response and Recovery (SGERR) alongside government stakeholders. We know that DCMS and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat were involved in developing proposals for the National Emergencies Trust (NET) (NCVO038) and the SGERR. In 2019 we wrote to the Civil Contingencies Unit (NCVO032) with voluntary sector partners to call for more investment in preparedness, and participation from senior officials in the SGERR. We do not have records of other correspondence. We think government attendance at these meetings was sporadic. We are not aware of whether this review or group specifically discussed pandemic planning. Our understanding is that conversations with government focused on civil emergencies more generally but we don't have any records.
32. The VCSEP (NCVO021) was set up in 2019. The partnership receives funding from DCMS (NCVO075). Government officials have engaged with the VCSEP when it was set up, but our view is that this could have been more strategic and consistent.
33. Several reports authored before the pandemic suggest that the nature of support offered during an emergency could be improved. This includes providing psychosocial support as well as practical assistance. Reports also suggested a need for a more streamlined response, including a single helpline.
34. Reports highlighted the need for one fund to streamline fundraising for emergencies, and this resulted in the National Emergencies Trust (NET) (NCVO038) being set up in 2019. Following the Charity Commission's review, a board of disaster experts initiated the NET (NCVO071 and NCVO073), and was set up with a small government grant to cover set up costs. The NET is run by a board of disaster, crisis, fundraising and distribution experts. The board is supported by a secretariat.
35. The NET (NCVO071 and NCVO073) was developed to achieve the following:
- facilitate a more joined up and coordinated approach to harness public support;
 - support the UK voluntary sector to raise funds to provide a collaborative approach to crises e.g. floods, fires, terrorist attacks;
 - activate a single national fund during a crisis, providing the public with a charity to direct donations. This fund is made up of public donations;

- offer expertise on allocation of funds;
 - work through existing local grant distributors – community foundations;
 - easy applications for beneficiaries.
36. The single fund does not cover running costs of the NET. They sought other funding to cover this from other donations, corporate sponsorship, trusts and foundations. The NET also sought out benefit in kind relationships and pro bono support.
37. Before the pandemic, the British Red Cross (NCVO023) advocated for a 'right to initiate' for auxiliary organisations to enable them to respond more quickly rather than waiting to be invited to respond by authorities.
38. Reports (NCVO039) recommend that Local Resilience Forum (LRF) plans could feature better guidance on how to provide more flexible and personalised support. Before the pandemic, plans neglected longer term support needs. A significant proportion of LRF plans didn't designate a central communication channel, didn't refer to privacy and data protection, or include measures to translate communications products. Most plans referred to long term psychosocial needs but didn't make provision for short term support. Most plans didn't define groups of vulnerable people, and those that did took a narrow definition, ignoring wider factors like poverty that create vulnerability. The British Red Cross (NCVO023) recommended that LRFs use their checklist to ensure plans catered for various needs, and asked for this checklist to be endorsed by the Cabinet Office.
39. Several reports (including Ready for the Future Improving Emergency Structures NCVO040) and Harnessing the Power of Kindness for Communities in Crisis – Lessons from 2017 (NCVO041)) authored by British Red Cross (NCVO023) and VCSEP (NCVO021) partners before the pandemic highlighted that emergency planning and preparedness was not sufficient in several ways. These reports highlight issues including the following in relation to collaboration:
- Poor data sharing between emergency responders and the voluntary sector
 - Inconsistent and insufficient involvement of the voluntary sector in Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) (NCVO046). While LRFs are good at involving voluntary organisations with emergency response, when the pandemic struck

they did not sufficiently engage the wider sector or benefit from their expertise. Key reports recommend taking action to address communication barriers between the voluntary sector and LRFs.

- Fragmented responses across emergency responders.

40. Before the pandemic voluntary sector organisations recommended (NCVO039) that government review legislation and accompanying guidance to improve the framework for emergency response.

41. Reports (NCVO039) indicate a disconnect between national guidance and local planning. The British Red Cross (NCVO023) recommended that the government play a greater role in supporting local resilience forums to share best practice and maintain national standards, such as reviewing plans. Recommendations also included reviewing regulations and guidance under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to ensure it is fit for purpose and outlines a clearer role for the voluntary sector.

NCVO's response to the pandemic

42. We provided information and advice for our members. A designated part of our website was a hub for pandemic guidance where we communicated key government guidance of importance to the sector in a timely and accessible manner (NCVO042). We helped organisations keep up to date with changes to covid legislation and government support, such as social distancing requirements, the furlough scheme, the financial support package for charities, changes to the legal status of volunteers, and signposting to opportunities for individuals to support governmental or non-governmental programmes, such as NHS Responders. Our guidance was made available to all (our member wall was removed) and we developed and updated guidance in emerging areas such as financial difficulty, scenario planning, mergers and closure.

43. We gathered insight about the voluntary sector and volunteering through the Barometer project (NCVO006) with Nottingham Trent and Sheffield Hallam Universities to inform the government's response. We gathered feedback from our members during member events so share with government, in addition to polls and surveys of our members and collection of case studies.

44. We worked collaboratively with other voluntary infrastructure organisations to campaign for support and funding for voluntary organisations and volunteers, so they could support communities. We championed the role of both voluntary organisations and volunteering, and advised key decision makers on how to support voluntary organisations and volunteers to play their part.
45. We communicated regularly with government (particularly DCMS and Number 10) to ensure they understood the impact of the pandemic on our sector. We connected government departments to different parts of the voluntary sector to support the emergency response. At the start of the pandemic, we had regular meetings with SpAds from Number 10 Downing Street. When we were part of the VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance (NCVO043), we had fortnightly briefing calls with alliance members, NHS England and Department for Health and Social Care about the pandemic response.
46. We worked with other organisations to set up the Civil Society Group (NCVO044) – a collaboration of over 50 voluntary infrastructure organisations. This group communicated and met frequently to share our insight about challenges across the voluntary sector, and coordinate our efforts to inform the government’s response. We are also an active member of the VCSEP (NCVO021), which worked to support coordination of the voluntary sector’s response.
47. Our advocacy spanned a number of issues including but not limited to the engagement of volunteers in pandemic response, governance, procurement and commissioning, sector funding, and vaccination requirement proposals. We led a sector-wide campaign to secure government support for charities at the start of the pandemic. This resulted in a £750million support package being announced by then-chancellor Rishi Sunak on 8 April 2020. We worked with the government to ensure volunteers could continue certain activities as key workers during lockdown.
48. We attended the volunteering coordination cell meetings, chaired by Volunteering Matters (NCVO020), to bring oversight to the way in which volunteers were engaged during the pandemic.

49. We set up a regular meeting of volunteer involving organisations to brief them on emerging guidance, and participated in meetings with DCMS and volunteer involving organisations to inform the development of government guidance on volunteering.
50. We facilitated connection between our members by bringing them together online to network and discuss their challenges. NCVO and Tortoise (NCVO045) developed a series of ThinkIns discussions that provided our members an opportunity to offer their insights and experiences.
51. We hosted a series of free webinars throughout the pandemic in partnership with other organisations, offering tailored guidance on emerging issues such as risk management, safeguarding, key governance and regulatory issues. At the peak of the pandemic, over 700 individuals registered to attend our webinars.
52. During the pandemic our Helpdesk was available to the sector, meaning organisations could call or email us with any questions.
53. Our office is in London, so we joined the London Resilience Forum subgroup (NCVO027). This gave us vital insight into how Local Resilience Forums (NCVO046) operate.
54. We supported initiatives such as the funders collaboration in response to the pandemic, to ensure funder practice supported the sector.
55. We transitioned our training offer to online delivery, meaning our services continued to be accessible to those that needed it.
56. We worked with our trusted suppliers to ensure the support offered was relevant to the challenges experienced by voluntary organisations during the pandemic. We particularly worked more closely with our trusted suppliers on issues like digital and hybrid working.

57. Two members of our Volunteer Development Unit were seconded at short notice in summer 2020 to DCMS to support the government's policy development on volunteering.

Our reflections on pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience

58. We have summarised what we believe government could have done differently in respect of the pandemic in 2020.

59. Our reflections are more relevant to planning for civil emergencies generally, rather than pandemics.

60. When the pandemic struck, voluntary organisations and local authorities had been significantly impacted by a decade of cuts to public spending. We believe this had an impact on the capacity of both voluntary organisations and local authorities to respond.

61. The role of the voluntary sector in an emergency is vital, for the reasons outlined above. Organisations such as us have recognised there needs to be improvement to the voluntary sector response (NCVO041), including the need for upskilling and better coordination. We are supportive of the VCSEP (NCVO021), which was set up in 2019, to achieve this aim.

62. We believe when the pandemic struck voluntary organisations had varying levels of readiness to respond to an emergency.

63. The setting up the National Emergencies Trust (NCVO038) and VCSEP (NCVO021) were positive steps to support the role of the voluntary sector in responding to emergencies. It was positive that Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) (NCVO046) did engage emergency response voluntary organisations before the pandemic, and during.

64. When the pandemic started, we had regular communication with officials at DCMS and Number 10. We also had regular communities with Ministers at DCMS. We had some engagement with DHSC through the Health and Wellbeing Alliance (NCVO043), and DLUCh via the Communities Partnership Board.

65. Government set up a £750million fund for charities to help them to continue their work to support communities during the pandemic. The government did not appreciate the scale of the potential impact on charities if a) they could not operate fundraising activities, b) demand for their services increased, c) they required funding to adapt working and volunteer arrangements, in line with covid restrictions. For example, the initial government response was for a £50million package of support, similar to that granted the voluntary sector in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. This was a lifeline for many charities, but funding did not reach charities quickly enough (NCVO078). Infrastructure bodies received little / no government support to deliver vital work or engage with coordination groups. If we hadn't received £1million from the National Lottery Community Fund, our response would have been dramatically difference.
66. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, there was some engagement with us and partners on civil emergencies. When the Strategic Group for Emergency Response and Recovery (SGERR) was active, there was some engagement from government but it was intermittent and there was no funding for this work. We don't have records of these meetings. We are not aware of the SGERR being engaged specifically on pandemic planning. We don't currently have the insight to speak to whether different parts of our sector were engaged well.
67. At a local level, we think that specialist equality organisations could have been better engaged by LRFs. We know that the pandemic had a particularly challenging impact on small organisations led by marginalised groups, particularly those that were already financially precarious. We were involved in developing equitable funding principles to support funders to distribute in an inclusive way (NCVO079).
68. At a local level, the voluntary sector could have been better engaged in planning. We know that LRFs do engage the voluntary sector, but the quality of this engagement varies across areas. Reflecting on the pandemic response, in particular we think there could have been improvement to the capacity building and engagement of smaller specialist organisations and organisations led by marginalised groups. We think that both guidance and funding for local government could have supported this. We think that there could have been more investment in and support for local

organisations to be ready for emergency response. We recommend that the inquiry speaks to NAVCA (NCVO019) and consider research done on the role of local infrastructure organisations (NCVO077)

69. There were initiatives led by central government that would have been better delegated to local authorities (NCVO047), such as testing.

70. At a national level, we don't think there was enough consideration of how to ensure equality and prevent inequality through the government's response. This had a significant impact for the groups that voluntary organisations work with and support. Equally Ours (NCVO048), the umbrella bodies, for equality voluntary organisations produced a resource (NCVO049) documenting the impact of the pandemic on equalities.

71. The government should have better planned for the equality implications of a pandemic response, and prioritised ensuring equality in the response. This was particularly evident in relation to Prime Ministers' national announcements, health advice and in development of the mass vaccination programme. Very little advice was provided in languages other than English, in accessible formats for disabled people, or targeted to groups who experience exclusion, discrimination or other barriers to health and social care, despite these being required by law. There should have been detailed and transparent equality impact assessments. We don't know whether equality organisations were effectively engaged by central government before or during the pandemic. We recommend the inquiry speaks to Equally Ours (NCVO048) and notes their report (NCVO049).

72. The Mobilising Voluntary Action project (NCVO050 and NCVO051) found a mixed, but more often negative, experience among voluntary organisations and others of the government's policy response to volunteering in England during the pandemic.
 - a. Inconsistent and confusing public health guidance for frontline organisations put a strain on those managing and coordinating volunteers and was deemed to have caused further delays in implementing this guidance locally.

- b. The pandemic and policy response was found to expose and amplify inequalities in volunteering already in place before March 2020, with areas and organisations better prepared for crises – whether due to greater pre-existing experience, collaboration, resource (or a combination) – responding better to the pandemic.
- c. There was a disconnect between the ‘top down’ response being driven nationally and what was happening at a local level, with the ‘NHS responders’ scheme cited as an example where the perception in some areas was that local volunteering infrastructure and knowledge was overlooked or underutilised.
- d. The government’s ‘call to action’ to volunteer was beneficial in raising the profile of volunteering and was cited as helping to bring volunteering into the ‘consciousness of the public’.
- e. Volunteering is a devolved matter, and other UK nations have differing mechanisms for creating and implementing policy nationally. This created challenges in England in developing the policy to the crisis, and the role that central government should play in coordinating volunteering nationally.
- f. Local authorities, infrastructure and volunteer-involving organisations shared concerns about ‘covid money’ running out as the nature of this funding was deemed to have supported innovative collaboration, compared to the competitive nature of funding pre-pandemic.
- g. Respondents want to see a clearer strategic direction and stronger leadership for volunteering both at the policy level and within the voluntary sector.

73. Reflecting on the ways in which volunteers were engaged during the pandemic, we think there should have been improved coordination and strategic oversight for volunteering on a UK wide basis. The Mobilising Voluntary Action project (NCVO050 and NCVO051) recommended the government prioritise these factors to enable effective participation of volunteers.

- a. Long term planning and preparedness
- b. Address inequalities between and within communities’ abilities to respond to emergencies

- c. Effective communication and collaboration
- d. A strategic direction for volunteering in England
- e. Creation of a healthy environment for volunteering

74. We think there needed to be more involvement of the voluntary sector at a central government level in planning for a pandemic scenario to reduce significant gaps in guidance and reduce duplication. Government officials were involved at stages in VCSEP meetings, but to our knowledge this was not to engage the sector ahead of planning to inform plans. Alongside the VCSEP, we needed initiatives led by government to bring in the expertise of the sector to inform plans. This would have enabled government to design more effective and equitable plans and understand what was needed for voluntary organisations and volunteers to play their part. It would have also enabled voluntary organisations to better support the pandemic response.

75. Central and local government could have reduced duplication of the efforts of voluntary organisations (NCVO050). We don't know if this was due to lack of knowledge of activities, or due to different views of which bodies should perform certain roles. We think this could have been avoided by local and central government having better knowledge of what voluntary organisations do and how to reach them.

76. The government should have provided comprehensive, inclusive and accessible communication and guidance. This needed to be accessible for people who don't have English as a first language and disabled people (NCVO052, NCVO076) who needed alternative formats. Guidance was needed about the impact on certain groups, such as pregnant women. We think voluntary organisations were forced to generate guidance for the public where it was not available from government, and create accessible communications products where government failed to do so. Better planning and coordination might have avoided these gaps. Where voluntary sector expertise is needed, we think there should be funding to feed their expertise into government plans and activities.

77. All government departments should have been thinking about the needs and the role of the voluntary sector when developing plans and guidance. When the pandemic struck, we appreciated the significant efforts of officials at DCMS to connect to other

departments about the needs and role of voluntary organisations and volunteers. However, it was clear at several points that voluntary organisations and volunteers were an afterthought in the design of the pandemic response. Guidance was often not written with voluntary organisations and volunteers in mind. Sector support was developed with business in mind, not taking into account the ways in which voluntary organisations operate differently. In the early stages of the pandemic charities and volunteers needed clearer guidance on what they could do to support communities during lockdowns. While the Job Retention Scheme was helpful for some charities that could put their work or services on hold, it was not helpful for charities that had to keep operating. The Business Interruption Loan Scheme was aimed at organisations with a significant amount of trading activity and so wasn't suitable for much of our sector.

78. Improvements could be made to voluntary organisation data at a local and national level before crisis hits. At the start of the pandemic, we were asked by government officials for very granular data about the voluntary sector with tight timescales for response. This included data about voluntary organisation finances and their needs during the pandemic, as well as detailed information about the services voluntary organisations provide at a local and national level. We gave all the information we could and put some mechanisms in place to try to gather more data. We were not able to provide all the information required as this data did not exist. In particular we could not provide subsector breakdowns in the way that civil servants wanted – the categories used by the Charity Commission and for the Civil Society Almanac (NCVO009) were too high level and didn't provide the detailed information required by civil servants. Charities report annually on their financial accounts, so we could not provide real time information about charity finances. Our Civil Society Almanac published in 2022 (NCVO009) analyses Charity Commission data from 2019/20. We think the data thresholds set by Treasury were unrealistic. We are unclear as to whether other sectors were asked to provide similar data.

79. In summary we think these are key lessons to inform future responses:

- Advance planning with the voluntary sector at a local and national level.
- Resourcing the voluntary sector to give their expertise to planning and to upskill in preparation for a response.

- Working in partnership with equality organisations at a local and national level, ensuring any response furthers equality, and producing transparent impact assessments.
- Better data about the voluntary sector.
- Improved coordination across government.
- Investing in the voluntary sector during peacetime supports resilient and equitable responses to emergencies, so it is vital to support voluntary organisations of all types through the cost of living crisis.
- A strategic and coordinated approach to volunteering across to UK that builds on existing activity in the voluntary sector.

80. We support the VCSEP's (NCVO021) recommendations to inform a National Resilience Strategy (NCVO026), including:

- a. Emergency and community focused voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement should be mandated in National Strategy and Guidance, specifically in the planning of, training for and responding to major emergencies at every level of the local resilience structures.
- b. The local resilience structures should be supported to meaningfully foster engagement and capability building with and amongst the VCS.
- c. The VCS should be recognised and adequately resourced as a network of effective and connected resilience building assets.
- d. The VCS Emergencies Partnership and representative partners are engaged in ongoing set of discussions following this submission on how to practically enable these changes to happen and how they sit within wider reform.

Other organisations we believe may hold relevant information or materials

- ACEVO (NCVO016)
- Agenda Alliance (NCVO053)
- Business in the Community (NCVO054)
- Care England (NCVO055)
- Children England (NCVO056)
- Clinks (NCVO057)
- Equally Ours (NCVO048)

- Homeless Link (NCVO058)
- Hospice UK (NCVO059)
- Inclusion London (NCVO060)
- LGBT consortium (NCVO061)
- Maternity Action (NCVO062)
- National Voices (NCVO063)
- NAVCA (NCVO019)
- NICVA (NCVO013)
- SCVO (NCVO014)
- UK Youth_(NCVO064)
- VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance (NCVO043)
- VCSEP and partners (NCVO021)
- VODG_(NCVO065)
- Voice for Change_(NCVO066)
- Volunteer Scotland_(NCVO067)
- Volunteering Matters (NCVO020)
- WCVA (NCVO016)

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed by Sarah Vibert (CEO) for and on behalf of National Council for Voluntary Organisations

Signed: Personal Data _____

Dated: ___11 April 2023_____