

“partly due to the location of registered offices of major charities who operate UK-wide, and are registered outside of Wales.”⁶

10. The structures underpinning the voluntary sector are unique to Wales, and differ significantly to those in England. The Deputy Minister described this infrastructure as being “a huge positive” during the pandemic.⁷

11. WISERD in looking at the different approaches across the UK, said that Wales was “notable” for the way in which the Welsh Government “worked with and through existing institutional systems.” They added that in meeting requirements in the Government of Wales Act 2006:

“...successive Welsh Governments have invested in the third sector and supported mechanisms for joint-working. It is notable that through the pandemic, the Welsh Government has continued to work through these existing structures, strengthening but not replacing them.”⁸

12. The WCVA is the national membership body for the voluntary sector in Wales. Across Wales, there are then 19 County Voluntary Councils (“CVCs”) who work to support and develop the sector by providing information, advice and support to local organisations. The WCVA and CVCs work together as Third Sector Support Wales. Additionally, the Welsh Government has a Third Sector Partnership Council which brings together representatives from the Third Sector, with Welsh Government Ministers and officials. It meets regularly, and the minutes are published on the Welsh Government [website](#).

13. One of the key themes we heard throughout the evidence was the effectiveness of these structures in responding to the pandemic. The WCVA recognised the “unique third sector scheme....and unique third sector infrastructure” within Wales, and that this had led to “locally sourced ideas, local solutions to local problems” which were often the “quickest and most effective” in the early weeks of the pandemic.⁹ They also told us about the importance of balancing local and national interventions:

“.....‘A local solution might often be best. If a national solution is required, then let’s look at it as a national support solution.’ Let’s, for goodness’ sake, not look at a national smothering blanket, because nobody wants anybody to be smothered. People want people to be supported, and that co-produced, local connection, whether that’s through the unique infrastructure or through new, informal mutual aid groups and activities in local neighbourhoods, there’s space for all of it.”¹⁰

14. The WLGA noted that at the outset of the pandemic, the Chief Executive of the WCVA was present at an early “high-level meeting of a small group of Ministers.....so the voluntary sector and local government were in the room with Ministers ahead of some significant announcements that were due to be made by the First Minister and Prime Minister.”¹¹

⁶ [COV VS 08 WCVA Written evidence](#)

⁷ ELGC Committee, 16 November 2020, RoP [11]

⁸ [COV VS 20 Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research and Data \(WISERD\) written evidence](#)

⁹ ELGC Committee, 2 November 2020, RoP [49]

¹⁰ ELGC Committee, 2 November 2020, RoP [50]

¹¹ ELGC Committee, 9 November 2020, RoP [35]

15. The Deputy Minister told us that the third sector structures have “proved to be very robust...”adding that they were “very much established at a national level for Welsh Government to engage with....” enabling them to do this with the many different organisations within the sector. The Third Sector Partnership Council also met with the Counsel General when he was preparing the COVID-19 Recovery Plan.¹² The Deputy Minister also acknowledged that it was important that the third sector is “kept in those arenas of policy” such as the regional and local resilience forums.¹³

16. While we will explore partnership working, later in this report, we thought it was important to reflect on the national structures that pre-dated the pandemic. Such structures are not established by accident, nor can we assume that they will always exist. They take work, and they take resourcing. It is clear that these structures helped ensure that the voluntary sector were able to contribute to the response of the pandemic from the very outset. Maintaining that dialogue during the course of the pandemic, and enabling the voluntary sector to have a direct line to the Welsh Government, but also other important local statutory services such as Health Boards and local government has clearly played a vital role in the pandemic response.

17. We should not take this infrastructure for granted. We believe it is imperative that future Welsh Governments recognise the importance of these structures and look for ways to strengthen them through its Third Sector Scheme. Some of our further recommendations, such as those relating to the formal role the voluntary sector can play in emergency planning will also link to this.

Recommendation 1. That the Welsh Government recognises the role the current voluntary structure has played in improving the pandemic response. We would urge any future Welsh Government to maintain the current third sector infrastructure, and look to identify how these structures can be improved and made even more robust.

Challenges to the sector pre-pandemic

18. While our evidence was very much focused on the impact of the pandemic, many highlighted that even before March 2020 the sector was facing a challenging and uncertain period. Hafod highlighted the on-going impact of years of austerity and public sector cuts.¹⁴ The Co-Production Network linked funding cuts happening at the same time as increased demand for services.¹⁵ While others, such as the National Lottery Community Fund highlighted the on-going uncertainty around leaving the European Union, and how the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (which will replace EU Structural Funds) will work.¹⁶

¹² ELGC Committee, 16 November 2020, RoP [18]

¹³ ELGC Committee, 16 November 2020, RoP [60]

¹⁴ ELGC Committee, 2 November 2020, RoP [110]

¹⁵ ELGC Committee, 2 November 2020, RoP [16]

¹⁶ **COV VS 1 National Lottery Community Fund, paragraph 4.1**