

Witness Name: Matthew Brown

Statement No.: 2

Exhibits: 14

Dated: 15/09/2025

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF MATTHEW BROWN

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I, Matthew Brown, will say as follows:

#### Background and context

1. Wales Council for Voluntary Action plays a multi-faceted role in supporting the voluntary sector in Wales, which includes advocacy, governance and financial support, among other functions. We have a long history of managing and distributing grants and loans. Wales Council for Voluntary Action distributed European Structural Funds for over 20 years and we still continue to distribute grants on behalf of Welsh Government and other funders. We have managed and delivered a wide variety of funds and loans throughout the years, informed by the needs of the voluntary sector and the people and causes it serves.
2. In early 2020 we were managing several grant schemes, including Active Inclusion Fund, Welsh Government Wales and Africa Grant Scheme, Landfill Disposals Tax Communities Scheme, Comic Relief Community Fund in Wales and Help Wales after Storm Dennis fund. In addition, we were offering a variety of loans to social enterprises through our Social Investment Cymru team.
3. Following the Covid-19 outbreak in Wales and the introduction of lockdown measures, we worked with Welsh Government to design a suit of emergency grant schemes to help the voluntary sector respond to the pandemic. In April 2020, we launched the Third Sector Resilience Fund and the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund . The two funds needed to be designed and delivered quickly to respond to the emergency, therefore we pulled staff resource away from some of our other funding activities and dedicated the majority of their time to administer the funds. Following the initial launch, we delivered two additional phases of Third Sector Resilience Fund and a Voluntary Services Resilience Fund (VSRF), which replaced Voluntary Services Emergency Fund.

4. Our role and responsibilities pre and during the pandemic were not fundamentally different - we worked with Welsh Government and all other relevant stakeholders to respond to voluntary sector funding needs. However, the speed at which we had to deliver and the all-encompassing nature of the pandemic led us to have an unprecedented and near exclusive focus on this area of activity, especially in the early days.
5. The overall economic impact of the pandemic on the voluntary sector in Wales is difficult to quantify. All organisations lost the ability to fundraise through in-person sales, events, renting out premises and offering non-essential in-person services for an extended period of time. For some, this was coupled with the need to invest in expensive software, hardware and training to transition to online operation and service delivery. Meanwhile, many organisations experienced increased service demand and their service users' needs became more complex and acute.
6. While a great deal of people came forward to volunteer for the first time during the pandemic, many regular volunteers had to cease volunteering due to shielding, worsened health, caring responsibilities or the lack of ability or desire to transition to online volunteering. Organisations also had to furlough staff, while those who were not furloughed worked under mounting pressure both at work and at home.
7. CEOs and trustees were challenged with tough decisions daily, from safeguarding through transforming delivery to closing services to reduce costs. The pandemic brought an unprecedented number of competing challenges and priorities. Decision-makers in voluntary organisations had to balance the safety and wellbeing of their staff, volunteers and service users; the moral obligation to help those in need, the calls to ease pressure off public services, and the extreme financial pressures and long-term financial sustainability of their own organisation.
8. While the pandemic impacted all voluntary organisations to varying degrees, we felt the greatest impact would be seen in the social care subsector and initially advised Welsh Government accordingly (MB/01 – INQ000643008). We started working on that premise together, however, we later discovered the impact on organisations operating in other fields was also significant. For this reason, the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund, aimed at direct Covid-19 response activities, was open to organisations of all subsectors who have identified an acute need. We did end up distributing the majority of the fund to organisations working in the health, social care and wellbeing field (27%), but considerable portions went to other subsectors, where needs were not immediately obvious but became very apparent over time. Examples include violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, youth, and housing organisations, among others (MB/02 – INQ000179707).
9. We commissioned a detailed analysis (MB/03 – INQ000179708) of the distribution of Voluntary Services Emergency Fund, which identified further gaps and trends. The report made generally positive remarks and noted that funding patterns broadly matched population shares in different local authorities. It did, however, note that some urban areas, notably Cardiff and Newport, were relatively underfunded in

relation to their population share. This was particularly concerning to us, as these areas also have higher proportion of ethnic minority populations. These findings gave us a good basis for the Voluntary Services Recovery Fund, which replaced Voluntary Services Emergency Fund, and sought to reduce inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. We distributed 62% more funding to ethnic minorities organisations through the Voluntary Services Recovery Fund than we did through the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund, which reflected the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities (MB/04 – INQ000179706).

10. Third Sector Resilience Fund, the grant and loan programme we delivered to help the voluntary sector with general running costs and to compensate for the loss of income due to restrictions, was also open to organisations in all subsectors. Third Sector Resilience Fund's distribution was mostly in line with the share of total organisations within each subsector in Wales. Organisations delivering community activities represent the biggest subsector in Wales and received the most funding through Third Sector Resilience Fund. (MB/05 – INQ000643034)

### **Cooperation and Joint Working**

11. Wales Council for Voluntary Action worked collaboratively with Welsh Government through the pandemic. We had regular meetings with Welsh Government officials as part of eight thematic groups. These were:
  - Welsh Government Cabinet Covid-19 meetings (weekly meetings, where Wales Council for Voluntary Action's Chief Executive Officer, Ruth Marks, provided evidence from and advocated on behalf of the voluntary sector)
  - Welsh Government Covid-19 core group meetings (First Minister briefings to the leaders of Plaid Cymru and Welsh Conservatives; Wales Council for Voluntary Action was invited as an observer and contributor at various occasions, with a further role in providing links with specialized voluntary sector organisations who were invited to present data and recommendations)
  - Shadow Social Partnership Council meetings (regular meetings where Ministers and officials provided briefings and engaged in wide-ranging discussions with us, the Welsh Local Government Association, the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses Wales and Wales Trades Union Congress)
  - Covid-19 Planning Group for Social Services (weekly meetings chaired by Welsh Government's Director of Social Services and Integration, attended by voluntary and citizens sector representatives)
  - Weekly warning and information meetings (hosted by Welsh Government for local government and key community facing organisations in the voluntary sector)

- Bi-weekly funders roundtable with Welsh Government (sharing intelligence and coordinating our response according to current needs)
  - Weekly post grant panel meeting updates (where we shared information on funding allocated and data which helped inform government of emerging trends in support needs, based on applications we had received for the funding we were distributing on behalf of Welsh Government)
  - Third Sector Partnership Council and Third Sector Scheme meetings (our meetings with Ministers increased in frequency and had a primary focus on Covid-19 measures and impacts for the majority of the period specified)
12. Of these groups, the bi-weekly funders roundtable with Welsh Government and the weekly post grant panel meeting updates are the most relevant for the questions in this module of the enquiry. The bi-weekly funders roundtable was attended by Wales Council for Voluntary Action, National Lottery Community Fund (Wales), Community Foundation Wales and Moondance Foundation. Other attendees came along on an ad-hoc basis when talking on a particular subject or other input was needed. The weekly post grant panel meeting updates were attended by Wales Council for Voluntary Action and Welsh Government officials, mainly from the Communities Division.
13. We shared detailed data (MB/06 – INQ000643035) with Welsh Government very regularly, to begin with - daily and over time, weekly. We also shared information as part of the bi-weekly funders roundtable and the weekly post grant panel meetings, as well as ad hoc, when asked, or if we felt there is a need to share information more urgently. The type of data we shared was live count of applications and grants awarded, breakdowns of allocated funds by location and subsector as well as general intelligence and case studies. In turn, Welsh Government shared information about their responses in other policy areas which impacted the voluntary sector or the response work of Wales Council for Voluntary Action. We often engaged in informal analysis of the latest data together.
14. We felt that the information sharing and joint analysis were helpful and sufficient, especially in light of the considerable workload, fast-paced decision making processes, and pressures experienced by all parties involved. Whenever we voiced we need information to support our work, our contacts at Welsh Government made it available to us or we were put in touch with a different Welsh Government official who could help.

15. We have a longstanding relationship with Welsh Government that is built on the Third Sector Scheme. Over time, we developed a shared understanding of data formats, confidentiality requirements, and appropriate insight sharing to aid in policy development and operational delivery. Per pandemic, the Communities Division often acted as our link to other parts of Welsh Government to ensure that the voluntary sector was briefed and had appropriate input in relevant conversations. The same approach was used during the pandemic. The urgency and wide-ranging implications of policy interventions during this period accelerated insights sharing between us both in terms of speed and amount of information shared.
16. In relation to the voluntary sector, we felt Welsh Government's economic response to the pandemic was very transparent. We felt included in every step of the way. They consulted with us on the needs of the sector from the earliest days of the pandemic, responded to the needs we identified, and kept us informed on their future plans. We were involved in conversations with officials, Special Advisers and Ministers at the appropriate times to ensure the economic response for the voluntary sector was well calibrated and meeting the requirements. This included cross-departmental work with the Economic Development Department, leading on business support, and the Development Bank of Wales to ensure that our support offer was not duplicated, but equally, to avoid gaps in provision. This data sharing was crucial to ensure organisations do not get double funded for the same purpose or activity.
17. I strongly believe the reason why we were able to launch the funding support packages for the voluntary sector in Wales many weeks before the equivalent operation in England was our pre-existing relationship (built on trust and understanding through the Third Sector Scheme). We had pre-existing funding structures with Welsh Government, which we ramped up significantly to deliver the additional funding streams. Joint work between the voluntary sector and Welsh Government was a smoother process because of the pre-existing structures and relationships that could be built on rather than having to start from scratch.
18. Besides our close collaboration with Welsh Government, we engaged in informal peer support with our sister councils across the UK - National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). We came together to share top level insights, approaches and challenges that we were facing across the spectrum of work with governments, as well as the voluntary sector impact and pressures we were

observing in our nations. Our meetings were not too frequent and formal as most of our respective work was nation-specific, but nonetheless they were helpful. We often faced issues with confusion when UK Government announcements of financial support for the voluntary sector were not clearly territorially defined, for example the £750m support package announced in May 2020. The initial announcements and media coverage of UK Government funds often did not go into detail in relation to the geographical scope of the funds and this information was only available in supporting documents or it was buried under headlines and ministerial statements on UK Government webpages. In the context of the stress and panic prevalent within the voluntary sector at the time, organisation leaders were not always able to locate this information quickly and this resulted in high amounts of enquiries about funding that was not available in specific geographic areas. It was helpful to be able to discuss this with sister councils and prepare to signpost organisations accordingly.

19. We also kept in touch with Public Health Wales, Development Bank of Wales and the Welsh Local Government Association throughout the pandemic. Our conversations with Public Health Wales focused on the role of volunteers in health setting and the social distancing guidance documents they were producing. We cascaded the guidance documents to the wider sector and provided Public Health Wales with feedback from stakeholders. Our conversations with Development Bank of Wales primarily focused on ensuring we do not double fund organisations for the same activities. We spoke with the Welsh Local Government Association about a broad variety of issues as they came up, seeking to understand the statutory duties and role of local authorities in supporting community needs. We provided them with feedback from our County Voluntary Council colleagues on the relationship and joint working between them and local councils, seeking to promote best practice.
20. The insights on voluntary sector activities, challenges, and impact we gathered throughout the pandemic came largely through direct input from our networks, such as the Third Sector Partnership Council, as well as from the information shared in the vast number of applications for grants we were receiving.
21. In relation to Third Sector Resilience Fund, we regularly shared live data on number of applications, subsectors represented, and emerging trends with Welsh Government, but we also conducted several surveys and produces annual review reports accordingly (MB/07 – INQ000643036; MB/05 – INQ000643034). In relation to Voluntary Services Emergency Fund and VSRF, we also shared live data with Welsh

Government and, in addition, produced two summary reports (MB/02 – INQ000179707; MB/04 – INQ000179706) and commissioned an external consultant – Eva Trier, to conduct an initial trends and mapping analysis of Voluntary Services Emergency Fund (MB/03 – INQ000179708), which was used to inform the funding criteria for VSRF. The overarching findings from the reports were that voluntary organisations were under a lot of pressure to quickly transform their service delivery to respond to new and increased needs, whilst facing considerable financial uncertainty. The quick and appropriate financial support provided helped them fulfil their objectives whilst ensuring their financial sustainability for the time being. Our final Third Sector Resilience Fund survey saw 76% of organisation feel highly or extremely optimistic about the future. Welsh Government officials were always keen to receive information from us and discuss the findings of our insights gathering. They boosted grant pots in response to evidence of high demand we presented and allowed us to transfer funding across different programmes to more accurately reflect needs.

### **Economic Support for the VCSE sector**

22. Our close working relationship with Welsh Government meant that we discussed Covid-19 and the possible implications for the voluntary sector as early as February 2020.
  
23. The earliest record of discussions on the financial impact we hold dates back to 17 March 2020. On this day, Wales Council for Voluntary Action's (now former) CEO Ruth Marks received an email from Welsh Government's Head of Communities and Third Sector Policy, NR notifying her of a financial package of support being made available to businesses in Wales (MB/08 – INQ000643037). At this point, we alerted Welsh Government to the similar financial difficulties faced by voluntary sector organisations and a meeting to discuss financial support for the sector was scheduled for 19 March 2020. I attended this meeting with Welsh Government civil servants and presented them with a briefing document outlining our concerns about the financial position the sector is in (MB/01 – INQ000643008).
  
24. Following this meeting, Wales Council for Voluntary Action was asked to help draft the parameters and eligibility criteria for packages of support for the voluntary sector in a series of meetings with civil servants. Our guidance was taken into consideration and on 27 March 2020 the Welsh Government announced they will use existing emergency powers to allow greater flexibility over how ongoing funds for the voluntary sector can

be used, as well as the establishment of the Third Sector Covid-19 Response Fund, originally amounting to £24m. The Third Sector Covid-19 Response Fund was broken into smaller funding pots, some of which were administered by Wales Council for Voluntary Action.

25. On 9 April 2020, Welsh Government awarded administration of the initial £10m of the Third Sector Resilience Fund to Wales Council for Voluntary Action. In 2021, once the initial phase of Third Sector Resilience Fund concluded, we bid and won in a competitive tender to deliver the second (£2.5m) and third (£7.23m) phase of Third Sector Resilience Fund.
26. Also in April 2020, we launched the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund , which began as a £7.5m pot, later increased to £9m. The Welsh Government increased our existing funding and granted us permission to utilise previously awarded money towards this activity.
27. In August 2020, Voluntary Services Emergency Fund was replaced by the Voluntary Services Recovery Fund , opened as a £3.5m pot, which later received two £1.5m boosts. We advised Welsh Government on the criteria and parameters of both Voluntary Services Emergency Fund and Voluntary Services Recovery Fund, using live evidence from the voluntary sector.
28. We delivered both funds together with our Third Sector Support Wales partners. Third Sector Support Wales comprises Wales Council for Voluntary Action and the 19 County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) working with local charities and grassroot groups across Wales. We felt that this approach ensured sufficient reach and engagement with grassroots organisations, who were able to both benefit from the funds and provide feedback via our County Voluntary Council colleagues.
29. During this period, we were also administering the Welsh Government-funded Community Asset Loan Fund , which helps voluntary organisations to take ownership of properties for the benefit of local communities. This fund was created following a business case we submitted to Welsh Government.
30. We had an awareness of Welsh Government's Economic Resilience Fund but we had no involvement in advising Welsh Government on the creation of the fund and were not involved in administering it. Our only involvement was in ensuring we do not generally award grants through the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund or Third

Sector Resilience Fund schemes to organisations which have already received funding from the Economic Resilience Fund and we held conversations to help avoid duplication in messaging to be clear on which organisations should apply where.

31. I believe that all Welsh Government economic interventions designed to support the voluntary sector throughout the Covid-19 pandemic provided adequate and timely support at a time of unprecedented pressure. I am proud of Wales Council for Voluntary Action's involvement in advising Welsh Government, administering some of the funds, and helping continuously improve and target the funds to respond to emerging needs.
32. Across all funds we administered, the amount of funding offered did not always match the needs to begin with, but additional funding was made available where there was strong evidence of need. Conversely, when the available funding was not fully utilised, there were helpful mechanisms allowing for the transfer into other funds. For instance, we awarded £7.5 out of the £9m available under Voluntary Services Emergency Fund and were then able to transfer the remaining £1.5m into VSRF.
33. We were satisfied with the eligibility criteria for the support offered across all funds and felt Welsh Government took our advice. Equally, we felt Welsh Government helped us amplify the communication of the support administered through us.
34. Welsh Government's commitment to provide financial support to the voluntary sector in Wales was quick and clear. We were relieved to see the Third Sector COVID-19 Response Fund announced in on 27 March. This was over a week before UK Government's 8 April announcement of support packages in England, which resulted in Barnett consequential for Wales. Our pre-existing relationship with Welsh Government enabled us to begin delivering the Third Sector Resilience Fund and Voluntary Services Emergency Fund in early April, providing vital support to organisations across Wales. While the short timelines put a lot of pressure on Wales Council for Voluntary Action staff, we were glad to be able to offer this support to voluntary organisations as quickly as possible. The subsequent introductions of boosts to the funds and their cessation matched sector needs and we were given sufficient notices.
35. Funding Wales, the platform Wales Council for Voluntary Action manages and uses alongside Third Sector Support Wales partners, was the primary mechanism for helping organisations find funding opportunities. Voluntary organisations' prior awareness of and familiarity with Wales Council for Voluntary Action's grant making

process made the application process easy for most and we were able to quickly scale up our online platform which helped with the move to digital approaches. Nevertheless, we continuously gathered feedback and sought to improve its accessibility. The extreme pressures of the pandemic forced us into streamlining and finding any efficiency we could in order to deliver grant funding faster than ever before. We improved our efficiency at every opportunity.

36. Despite streamlining and scaling back questions as much as possible to speed up application and delivery processes, we did not compromise on our core control measures. We followed a two-stage check process for the Third Sector Resilience Fund scheme, which involved loan finance, and required evidence of good governance, value for money, and ability to repay. We used our existing database to perform screening checks, review information on applications and managed risk of fraud and duplications of funds. We provided Welsh Government with weekly detailed breakdowns of the organisations receiving funding, their intended beneficiaries, the number of volunteers engaged, the sums bid for and awarded. This ensured Welsh Government avoided funding the same organisations through other streams for the same activities. The implementation and interaction between our and Welsh Government's control measures has been outlined in an Audit Wales report (MB/09 – INQ000643039). We also ran a live spreadsheet with other funders compiling information on applications received to prevent duplicate funding for the same activity or purpose (MB/10 – INQ000643009).

### **Other Economic Support Schemes**

37. In addition to the support provided through the Third Sector COVID-19 Response Fund, voluntary organisations in Wales were able to access other key economic support packages through:
- a range of non-voluntary sector specific Welsh Government schemes, such as business grants and loans
  - the UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
  - Community Foundation Wales Wales Coronavirus Resilience Fund and Wales Respond and Recover Fund
  - National Lottery Community Fund Wales Awards for All (Covid-19 specific) Fund and People and Places (Covid-19 specific) Fund
  - Moondance Foundation COVID-19 Relief Fund

Smaller financial packages from other funders were also available for parts of the sector at different points in time.

38. We worked in close collaboration with all major funders in Wales as part of The Wales Funders' Forum to ensure there are no significant gaps in the funding offered to the voluntary sector in Wales. In 2021 we commissioned an independent evaluation of Wales funders' response to the Covid-19 crisis, which found that 'the funds have provided a complimentary funding offer catering for a wide range of organisations with different profiles, including groups and organisations that had not applied for funding prior to the pandemic' (MB/11 – INQ000643010).
39. Our perception, which was also shared by funders operating outside of the Welsh borders, was that the funding offer in Wales was clearer, more comprehensive and delivered quicker than in other parts of the UK. We discussed emerging trends and issues with other funders as part of the Wales Funders Forum, but as we were focused on our own delivery, we are not in a position to provide detailed scrutiny on other funders' decision-making in regards to specific aspects such as eligibility criteria or communication of support. We can confirm we exchanged intelligence during forum meetings and members generally sought to target their offer based on different jointly identified gaps so that support reaches the widest possible audience. Equally, frequent information-sharing would have reduced the risk of fraudulent claims.
40. The organisations most likely to struggle to access financial support were non-constituted and unincorporated groups. We supported non-constituted groups by referring them to their local County Voluntary Council to help them re-structure or join an existing constituted group in order to continue their activities and become eligible for financial support. We supported unincorporated groups open to incorporation by allowing them to apply for Third Sector Resilience Fund and, if approved, draw down the grant once they become incorporated. The role of supporting smaller groups in Wales, usually those that are unincorporated, was taken forward in the main by Community Foundation Wales and we worked closely with them to dovetail our financial support.
41. At the beginning of the pandemic we also advised Welsh Government that organisations may struggle to cover staff wages before the roll out of UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and this resulted in the offer of bridging loans of up to £25,000 via an additional £1m lending facility that we agreed with Welsh

Government. In the end the speed of rollout of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme meant that this was only minimally utilised.

42. We consider the economic interventions introduced for the voluntary sector in Wales throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to be adequate and well-matched to the unique needs and challenges faced by the sector.
43. We ensured smaller, community based organisations outside of major cities had equitable access to grant funding administered by us by monitoring the take up and partnering with County Voluntary Council colleagues to distribute the funding. We commissioned a trends analysis on Voluntary Services Emergency Fund distribution, which showed a relatively equitable distribution of funding, with the top four local authorities receiving the highest amount of funding per head not featuring major urban centres (MB/03 – INQ000179708). This once again demonstrated the benefit of having a joined up voluntary sector infrastructure partnership - Third Sector Support Wales , comprising the 19 local County Voluntary Councils and Wales Council for Voluntary Action, worked in a formal partnership with Welsh Government, drawing on pre-existing relationships and mechanisms. This enabled us to deliver a geographically comprehensive response very quickly.
44. We found that areas where the public, private and voluntary sectors had well-established pre-existing relationships fared better throughout the pandemic, delivered support quicker and avoided duplication. We advocate for the forging of strong links between all sectors at times of relative stability to ensure that everyone can come together seamlessly when an emergency occurs.
45. While we are not in a position to estimate how many organisations were at risk of closure despite being in receipt of government support. At the point of concluding Third Sector Resilience Fund Phase 1, we knew that none of the organisations we supported through the fund had collapsed. The latest evaluation we made to supply Audit Wales with information for their July 2022 report only found two organisations of the ones we funded through Third Sector Resilience Fund Phase 1 had ceased to operate.
46. We received very positive feedback from voluntary sector organisations about the overall effectiveness of government measures in sustaining the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise sector during the pandemic, both in term of addressing immediate needs and long-term sustainability. To quote some of our survey respondents:

*'The TSRF [Third Sector Resilience Fund] has been an absolute game-changer for us. We have seen an increase in the number of people facing food poverty and hardship and this funding has enabled us to provide practically for the higher numbers coming towards us, whilst also continuing to offer them a warm and hospitable environment to all those who come through our doors. It is difficult to express how grateful we are for the generosity shown to us by giving us this grant and the subsequent impact it has made. THANK YOU!'*

*'The TRSF [Third Sector Resilience Fund] funding helped us to survive the pandemic. We are reliant on income from eco-tourism and this disappeared. The TRSF3 [Third Sector Resilience Fund Phase 3] funding allowed us to move forward. We used it to employ a Fundraising Development Manager and were lucky to find the right person. Her work has helped us to greatly improve the profile of Bardsey (Enlli) and we have developed many more important connections within Wales and beyond. This situation has helped us grow our sustainable income, a situation which we see continuing in the coming years. We are very grateful.'*

## **Unintended gaps**

47. Working as partnership between Third Sector Support Wales, Third Sector Partnership Council, other funders, and Welsh Government meant that from the beginning we had existing structures and mechanisms that supported, funded and represented all parts of the voluntary sector in Wales. This meant we were able to gather input from across the sector quickly and be made aware of any issues or potential gaps in funding provision early. For example, we quickly found out that demand for funding from the hospice sub-sector was substantial and would utilise too high a proportion of the funding available for the entire voluntary sector. We informed Welsh Government and they took a decision to fund hospices directly through a separate £6.3m pot. This meant that we were able to support all other voluntary organisations fairly. The value of pre-existing partnerships and formal structures really proved to be a huge benefit to the design and delivery of the financial and general support response.

## **Impact on Volunteering**

48. Two of the funds we delivered, Voluntary Services Emergency Fund and Voluntary Services Recovery Fund, were specifically designed to support voluntary organisations responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The vast majority of organisations did so by engaging volunteers. In total, we delivered £15m, which resulted in the engagement of 13,000 volunteers and supported over 1m beneficiaries. This funding directly supported volunteering activity in Wales by helping organisations build and maintain the necessary support structures to co-ordinate activities, provide adequate training, and offer safe and appropriate opportunities to volunteers.

49. We surveyed Voluntary Services Emergency Fund awardees on how confident they felt in their ability to maintain and increase support prior to receiving funding, receiving an average score of 4.8/10, their confidence in their ability to manage through the pandemic post funding jumped to 8.7/10 – a 81.3% percent increase in confidence.

50. We received overwhelmingly positive feedback for these grant programmes from organisations like the Swansea Samaritans, who said:

*'Thanks to this grant, we can continue to be there for every caller no matter what their issue is, giving emotional support when it is needed. One caller said to me the other day, "thank you for saving lives". We're grateful to the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund for enabling us to do that.'*

Or BMMR Parish Trust:

*'The support from WCVA [Wales Council for Voluntary Action] and the Welsh Government has not only given us financial resources, but confirmed that we're doing the right thing for our communities at this time, they're the first organisations that have given us a significant grant, so we are very thankful and grateful.'*

51. Third Sector Support Wales also received funding to scale up Volunteering Wales (Wales' online matchmaking platform connecting volunteers with suitable opportunities) to meet the rapidly growing demand. Over the four week period between 23 March to 20 April 2020 there were nearly 15,000 new volunteer sign ups. The platform was used by tens of thousands of people who found volunteering opportunities during the pandemic and continues to service volunteers and voluntary organisations to this day.

52. The promotion and roll-out of Volunteering Wales to wider audiences was mostly successful, with some complications arising from unclear communication from UK

Government in their promotion of the GoodSam App. This platform was not needed, nor widely used by voluntary organisations in Wales, however press releases and media messaging led some Wales-based prospective volunteers to think this is the place to go and they were understandably disappointed when they did not find local opportunities there. We believe better communication between UK and Welsh Government, and specifically greater care and consideration of the different voluntary sector landscape in Wales on behalf of UK Government would have prevented this.

53. In addition to distributing funding and providing a matchmaking platform, Third Sector Support Wales, underpinned by new and existing Welsh Government funding, provided extensive best practice, safeguarding, governance and other types of support to organisations involving volunteers.

54. We believe there were sufficient resources allocated to support volunteer recruitment, training and retention during the pandemic.

### **Lessons Learned and Reflections**

55. Wales Council for Voluntary Action was involved in the production of three major reports summarising lessons from the pandemic in Wales:

- Volunteering and wellbeing during the Coronavirus pandemic (MB/12 – INQ000643028)
- TSPC [Third Sector Partnership Council] Covid-Recovery Sub-Group Report (MB/13 – INQ000643029)
- The future we create: lessons from pandemic volunteering in Wales (MB/14 – INQ000643030)

56. Recommendations from the reports included:

- Making volunteering an important part of Wales' wellbeing-led recovery
- Appropriate investment in both formal and informal volunteering
- Maintaining the positive relationships which have formed between public services and voluntary sector organisations
- Matching volunteers to need at a hyper-local level
- Promoting approaches to volunteer coordination which are conducive to volunteer wellbeing
- Supporting people to volunteer whose wellbeing has been especially adversely affected during the pandemic

- The Welsh Government to work with the voluntary sector to establish a volunteering cross-sectoral leadership group to support and champion volunteering across all principal sectors
- The Welsh Government to establish an internal, cross-government volunteering group to ensure key departments are helping realise the potential of volunteering within their sphere of influence
- The Welsh Government to set out a clear Community Policy, which articulates the relationships at and between the national, local, and community activity.
- The Welsh Government to undertake a cross-sectoral piece of work to further define what it means to involve communities in the design and delivery of services.
- The Welsh Government to map opportunities to influence emerging policy, legislation, guidance and funding on govt involvement to ensure that national voluntary sector delivery partners are involved at the very beginning of policy and strategy shaping.
- Voluntary sector infrastructure bodies to undertake a substantive review of future support needs for the sector to thrive in Wales.
- Refresh the TSPC [Third Sector Partnership Council] Funding and Compliance Sub-committee and its focus on the relationships that should underpin Welsh Government funding for the sector.
- The Welsh Government and other funders to ensure that voluntary sector infrastructure, volunteer involving organisations, local authorities and community groups have access to sufficient funding, which enables them to dedicate staff resource to forging partnerships and developing common crisis-response strategies.
- Volunteering infrastructure organisations to make resources and support more accessible to informal groups and volunteers.
- The voluntary sector to continue exploring and developing purpose made digital tools to make volunteering opportunities more accessible and straightforward for potential volunteers.
- The voluntary sector, public bodies, and funders to learn from the progress made during the pandemic and continue regularly reviewing administrative procedures to reduce bureaucracy.
- The Welsh Government and other funders must invest in activities enabling new types of volunteering and collaborations.
- The Volunteering Cross-Sectoral Leadership Group to embed the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic into their work reviewing Welsh Government's volunteering policy. Volunteering be on the agenda of senior leaders across all sectors in Wales and run as a 'golden thread' through Welsh public policy.

57. Wales Council for Voluntary Action has implemented and supported many of the report recommendations and continues to hold discussions with Welsh Government and other public bodies to influence their decision-making processes.
58. We co-ordinated and contributed to the work of the Third Sector Partnership Council Funding and Compliance Sub-committee, which undertook a detailed consultation with the voluntary sector and produced a new version of Welsh Government's Code of Practice for Funding the Third Sector.
59. We helped establish, support and contributed to the work of the Volunteering Cross-Sectoral Leadership Group, which undertook an extensive review of Welsh Government's volunteering policy and oversaw the design of A New Approach to Volunteering in Wales, due to be published in July 2025. The New Approach will feature a Vision and Framework and will serve, among other purposes, to ensure the recommendations from the pandemic learning exercises get implemented.
60. We continue distributing funding on behalf of Welsh Government and other funders. In 2021, we launched the Volunteering Wales Strategic Grant Scheme, which seeks to unlock the strategic potential of volunteering over the longer term. This is a crucial step to building national infrastructure, sharing learning, and being prepared to effectively deploy volunteers in future emergencies.
61. We continue to invest in our grant making and grant management portals – Funding Wales and MAP, building on the learning from the pandemic. This ensure we can launch and scale funding distribution work even quicker when an emergency arises.
62. We have also optimised the way we collect, store, systematise and display data, including through the introduction and roll out of Microsoft Power BI dashboard across the Third Sector Support Wales partnership. This will enable us to understand, analyse and share data quicker in future emergencies.
63. Wales Council for Voluntary Action has completed an internal digital transformation programme, allowing us to seamlessly pivot to 100% home working if the need arises again in the future.
64. We continue growing, optimising and promoting Volunteering Wales platform, including a major redevelopment and relaunch in June 2023, to ensure it is fit for purpose. The new version is much more accessible and scalable.

Volunteering Wales features an 'emergency volunteer' tick box which allows us to directly call upon the existing volunteer pool in future emergencies – both local and national. A similar functionality has also been introduced for organisations which are prepared to be a first line of contact in a future emergency. The emergency mobilisation components of our platform require further investment and integration into a formal Welsh Government framework for emergency volunteering.

65. We are an active participant in the Wales Resilience Forum, chaired by the First Minister of Wales. The Forum brings together all stakeholders who would be playing a role in a future emergency. We are advocating for the inclusion of the collapse of the voluntary sector on the National Risk Register.

66. We are in an open dialogue with Welsh Government in regards to the design and implementation of a Community Policy.

## **Recommendations**

67. During the pandemic, we saw first-hand how vital the voluntary sector was. Volunteers and voluntary organisations stepped up immediately keeping people connected, safe, and supported at a time when public systems were still mobilising. In moments of national crisis, it is often communities, not institutions, that act first. This is a key lesson that must not be forgotten. Yet, in too many places, we have seen a return to 'business as usual' with the default focus shifting back to public sector led responses. To improve future economic responses to pandemics, the role of the voluntary sector must be fully recognised, consistently resourced, and structurally embedded in planning and delivery.

68. We recommend the following actions:

1. UK Government and Welsh Government should formally recognise the voluntary sector and voluntary sector infrastructure as an essential partner in emergency planning and response, with a defined and funded role across UK and devolved resilience frameworks.
2. Welsh Government should work with the voluntary sector to establish a standing framework for emergency volunteering, with a trained, supported, and pre-verified pool of volunteers ready to be mobilised across Wales. We believe this would be best delivered through linking with our existing mechanisms of recruiting emergency volunteers on the Volunteering Wales platform.

3. UK Government and Welsh Government should put flexible, pre-agreed funding mechanisms in place to allow emergency funds to be distributed quickly to trusted voluntary sector partners, without unnecessary legal or procurement delays for all types of crisis response - from floods, through missing people, to pandemics.
4. UK Government and Welsh Government should sustain investment in voluntary sector infrastructure in 'normal times', so that the ability to scale up in a crisis is not lost due to underfunding between emergencies.

69. The key insight is this: scaling up trusted, community-based mechanisms is faster, more effective, and better value for money than starting from scratch. The foundation for a stronger future response lies in how we support and include the voluntary sector today.

#### **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:** Personal Data

**Dated:** 15/09/2025