

ELGC COV VS 12

Ymchwiliad i COVID-19 a'i effaith ar y sector gwirfoddol

Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact on the voluntary sector

Ymateb gan: Mantell Gwynedd

Response from: Mantell Gwynedd



Welsh Government

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

This paper is presented by Mantell Gwynedd to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee. It outlines the work of the Gwynedd County Voluntary Council during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

Mantell Gwynedd was established in 1997 and is one of 19 County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) in Wales. It forms part of the Third Sector Support Wales (TSSW) partnership.

We operate from a main town centre office in Caernarfon where the Gwynedd Volunteer Centre is based, and a further Dolgellau Office which serves the southernmost part of the county.

The role of Mantell Gwynedd is to promote and support the third sector in the county by providing direct individual support to groups on constitutional matters as well as financial and legal matters. It provides training and information and is a strong independent lobbying body on behalf of the third sector. With a database of almost 2,000 third sector organisations Mantell Gwynedd is well placed to reach out to the sector in Gwynedd.

Gwynedd Volunteer Centre within Mantell Gwynedd promotes volunteering and supports individual volunteers as well as providing support to organisations that benefit from volunteers. At the outset of the pandemic Mantell Gwynedd employed 14 members of staff – 10 full time / 4 part time.

During the period between mid-March and the beginning of November Mantell Gwynedd received and responded to over **3,000 enquiries**. This is an almost 40% increase compared to our usual number of enquiries.

Covid-19

1. Covid-19 Volunteering Bank

Undoubtedly, one of the key areas of work at the start of the pandemic related to volunteering.

During the first week of the pandemic Mantell Gwynedd set up the Covid-19 Volunteering Bank. This was set up specifically to recruit, place and support volunteers who wanted to give their time freely to help others. In just over two weeks over 600 new individuals had registered on the Volunteering Bank. One month into the pandemic almost 50% of these individuals had been deployed to a wide range of volunteering opportunities throughout the County. We have tried to maintain contact with some of those who were not initially deployed and some of those not deployed during the first lockdown have now been called upon during the current firebreak period.

Between March 15th and 2nd November 2020, **905** volunteers have been supported. This was only achieved due to the Voluntary Sector Emergency Fund (VSEF) from Welsh Government which enabled us to employ an additional full time member of staff in the Gwynedd Volunteer Centre. Other CVCs in North Wales also responded by setting up a Covid-19 Volunteering Banks and report similar actions and outcomes.

Many excellent examples of joint working relating to volunteering emerged during this time but one which is worth a mention is the joint working Mantell Gwynedd set up with ADRA.

ADRA is the largest social housing organisation in North Wales providing over 6,300 homes and providing services to over 14,000 customers. At the outset of the pandemic supporting vulnerable tenants became a challenge and a partnership between Mantell Gwynedd and ADRA referred almost 100 tenants for volunteer support. These volunteers provided befriending services, shopping, prescription collections and a whole host of other types of support. Potential volunteers were vetted and DBS checked prior to placement thus ensuring that individuals were supported in a safe and timely fashion. The fast tracking DBS system was invaluable during this time.

Over the coming months we will be assessing the volunteer experience and finding ways of maintaining momentum amongst this vital group who have provided immeasurable community support.

Covid-19 Volunteer stories can be seen in our Bulletins:

Martin Hunt's Volunteering Experience during Covid:

<https://www.mantellgwynedd.com/downloads/170820-no5-bulletin.pdf>

Aaron Pleming's Volunteering experience during Covid-19

<https://www.mantellgwynedd.com/downloads/090720-issue-4-mantell-gwynedd-bulletin.pdf>

Michael Laing's Volunteering experience with Rollo the therapy dog during Covi-19

<https://www.mantellgwynedd.com/downloads/170620-issue-3.pdf>

2. Grant funding

Welsh Government funding was vital during this period. The VSEF provided to CVCs enabled us to employ an additional full time member of staff to work at the Volunteer Centre. It also enabled us to increase part time staff hours to assist with community group support work. Without this funding we would have been unable to respond to the additional demands on our small organisation during this time.

Mantell Gwynedd also received VSEF funding to set up and provide a small grants scheme for third sector organisations in Gwynedd. All of the funding provided was distributed within the third sector in Gwynedd within a very short 28 day window. This was possible because we have close links to these grass roots community organisations and Mantell Gwynedd would be one of the first bodies approached by these groups looking for support. 28 small, local grass roots organisations across Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd were provided with funding which enabled them to purchase vital equipment, expand their services and increase their support during this period.

Welsh Government funding for small grants was followed by Comic Relief funding with an emphasis on safe spaces, gender equality, mental health and children prospering. Again, this money was also distributed quickly to a variety of grass roots community organisations.

We have now accessed Transformation Funding which will enable us to support a more post Covid agenda with an emphasis on providing social opportunities to support children, young people and families.

3. New ways of working

Since mid-March all of our staff have been home based. Some VSEF funding was utilised to enable this to happen efficiently.

An important element of our work in supporting the third sector is the Network meetings we convene. Our Third Sector Volunteering & Wellbeing Networks and our Social Value Networks have continued meeting virtually. The sector has adapted well and numbers of participants have remained good. The network meetings provide Mantell Gwynedd with important information about the state of the sector in the county. Some key messages from Third Sector Network meetings can be seen below (point 6)

Grant Panels have taken place virtually and these too have worked extremely well.

Our quarterly newsletter was replaced by a monthly online Covid-19 Bulletin containing important Covid updates, information about funding available and directing groups to important sources of up to date information.

All national and regional meetings have also worked well virtually.

4. Partnerships and Joint working

On an all Wales level our TSSW partnership has been absolutely vital during this period. Weekly TSSW online meetings co-ordinated by WCVA provided the space needed to share good practice, keep members updated on developments and a platform for general and more specialist Third Sector matters to be discussed. It is an invaluable partnership.

On a regional North Wales level the North Wales Resilience sub group, co-ordinated by North Wales Police, provided the platform for discussions between PHW, BCUHB, the six Local Authorities, the six County Voluntary Councils and North Wales Police. Again, this weekly meeting provided the space needed for the wider regional discussions and joint approaches.

On a county level the Gwynedd Resilience Group was established which met weekly and included the CVC, Local Authority, Housing Associations and others. Again, an invaluable forum to promote joint working, avoid duplication and seek joined up approaches to community challenges. It worked well.

All of the above would have been weekly meetings March to August but have since reduced to fortnightly or monthly. However, it is important to note that relationships which were formed during those months have provided an important legacy for future partnership working. It is vital also to note that when the firebreak was announced in Wales these forums reformed quickly and efficiently.

5. Providing payroll support and supporting advice

Mantell Gwynedd provides a payroll service for a number of Third Sector organisations. 72% of those to whom we provide a payroll service needed to make furlough applications and payments. Whilst the HMRC online system was a commendably set up on very short notice and provided good guidance, many Third Sector organisations turned to Mantell Gwynedd for support as they struggled with the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Support and guidance in this aspect of our work has been ongoing since March with many Third Sector organisations struggling with cash flow and with understanding the ongoing changes of the system and implications on their organisation.

Using the additional VSEF funding we increased capacity within our organisation in this area of work in order to deal with the workload.

6. Feedback from the sector

As noted above Third Sector Network meetings, including the Volunteering & Wellbeing Network, became virtual meetings from March onwards. Maintaining these Networks was seen as a priority as they provide the space needed for some of our important grass roots organisations, as well as national charities, to come together to share good practice.

Some key messages from the first three network meetings included:

- The key role of volunteers during Covid-19 with organisations emphasising, more than ever, the value of volunteer time.
- Organisations noted how they had to adapt services as roles expanded. Services, particularly support services, moved online. Adaptability has been key.
- Befriending schemes became increasingly more important and became the new way of working for many organisations.
- Volunteer roles were expanded and adapted and volunteers responded well.
- The income of some organisations has reduced by 50% due to being unable to fundraise. This has put the future of some organisations in jeopardy whilst others have worked differently and found innovative ways to fundraise.
- Furlough brought relief to some organisations but created an additional burden for others. Whilst some staff were furloughed others continued to work and those who remained working were pressured with additional tasks.
- Digital Inclusion has been highlighted as a priority area needing attention.
- Work needs to be undertaken to look at volunteer retention for the future.
- Organisations working with young people reported a big increase in the number needing support and vastly increased numbers of referrals of young people to services. The mental health of young people is a key concern.
- Community transport organisations reported services, apart from non-essential medical travel, almost ceasing completely.
- An abundance of new services emerged to respond to new needs.

7. Measuring Social Value

Since 2014 Mantell Gwynedd, as part of our Social Value Cymru project, has been at the helm of developing, promoting and communicating the importance of measuring and understanding the social value of all that we do. Mantell Gwynedd itself was the first umbrella organisation in the UK to achieve organisational COMMIT status for embedding social value in all of our work. We employ two full time and one part time Social Value practitioners.

Social value is about understanding the value/worth of changes to people's lives. Placing a value on these changes means we can invest in what provides the greatest social return so that we create even more positive change in people's lives. As part of our response to Covid-19 we are now measuring the social value of VSEF funding which was provided to two third sector organisations in Gwynedd. This will help us create greater impacts and more positive changes in the future as this social data will inform future decision making.

More information about our Social Value work can be seen at:

<https://mantellgwynedd.com/eng/social-value-cymru.html>

Conclusions

Partnership working, on a national, regional and county level, was critical in order to respond effectively during this period.

Partnerships set up to respond to Covid-19 have left a vital legacy for future joined up working.

Volunteers became the adhesive holding some of our communities together in Gwynedd and the County Voluntary Council became the “go to” place for volunteer information and support.

Grant funding was vital to grass roots organisations in order to help them maintain services and, in some cases, expand delivery and respond to community need.

The Voluntary Sector Emergency Fund was pivotal to the success of the CVC work in Gwynedd.

Measuring the Social Value of some of our Covid-19 work will be vital for the future to ensure we invest in what provides the greatest social return on investment.

Bethan Russell Williams

Chief Officer, Mantell Gwynedd.

November 3rd, 2020.