

Ruth Marks

European Journal article - An alternative ABC

As children we learn our ABC and when offered opportunities to make new friends we usually take them. So when offered the opportunity to present some thoughts on the future of civil society in Wales I was pleased to say yes Why? Because it gives me the opportunity to pause and reflect on an alternative ABC – After Brexit and Covid and to make connections with BBE¹.

There are several similarities between BBE and WCVA. WCVA is the national membership body for the voluntary sector in Wales and we have a deep connection with Europe. We are the only NGO in the UK who as an Intermediary Body is able to distribute EU funds to the voluntary sector to support education, training and employment.

I have three aims in sharing these thoughts:

- Firstly to provide some background information about the voluntary sector in Wales
- Secondly to reflect on life after Brexit and the impact of Covid
- Thirdly to consider the future

Background

The voluntary sector in Wales is a vibrant and diverse sector, which can be hard to categorise: The voluntary sector includes registered charities, but also social enterprises, community groups, unincorporated voluntary organisations, and, recently, mutual aid groups. Education/training, health, and sport are the largest areas of work for voluntary organisations. However, the sector covers a wide range of areas and activities.

Charities based in Wales are smaller than their counterparts in England and Scotland: There are 32,000 voluntary organisations, of which 7300 are charities. Wales has the highest percentage of micro charities in the UK (53%). A further 32% are small charities.

Charitable income per head is half what it is for charities based in England and Scotland. (approx. £400 per head in Wales and £800 in England and Scotland.) However, this is partly due to the location of registered offices of major charities who operate UK-wide, and are registered outside of Wales. Volunteers contribute to the economic, social and cultural fabric of Wales: Prior to COVID-19, it was estimated that approximately 938,000 volunteers contrib-

¹ BBE – Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (National Network für Civil Society):
<https://www.b-b-e.de/>

ute 145 million hours, each year, which is worth £1.7 billion. This is equivalent to around 3.1% of the Wales GDP. Volunteering also has significant value, which is less easily defined in monetary terms, in terms of individual wellbeing, social cohesion, inclusion, economic regeneration, and the development of social capital.

Wales is the only country in the UK that has a formalised set of structures established to facilitate relations between the Welsh Government and the voluntary sector – the Third Sector Scheme.

The scheme sets out Welsh Government’s commitment and support for the voluntary sector, giving the sector opportunities to engage with and influence Welsh Ministers and civil servants to help the sector create real, positive change in Wales.

25 networks represent the diversity of the sector at the Third Sector Partnership Council, chaired by a Welsh Government Minister. WCVA plays an integral role in the administration of the scheme to ensure that our voluntary sector colleagues have the chance to make their voices heard by decision-makers. These also extend to biannual sector meetings with each Minister.

After Brexit and Covid

In my experience, very little work is achieved by working alone or in isolation. WCVA develops partnerships with many organisations who share our values and for the past few years we have worked with Cardiff University to develop the Wales Civil Society Forum on Brexit which is funded by the Legal Education Foundation. The Forum has undertaken research, facilitated discussion and provided briefings to inform debate in Wales and across the UK.

In a recent brief scan of the landscape several key points were made:

- Capacity to focus on Brexit has been severely limited by Covid-19

For many voluntary sector organisations Covid-19 stresses have reduced the already limited capacity to focus on Brexit related change, though there is notable overlap between the pressures each has created. Covid-19 has brought into sharp focus the concerns that Brexit would negatively impact the sector’

- The pace and scope of changes that are being introduced are challenging the sector’s capacity to respond

At a time when the sector’s capacity to prepare and respond to changes is being limited by Covid-19, consultations directly and indirectly connected to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU which intersect with voluntary sector interests are taking place at pace - often in technical and restricted terms which further sharpens the challenge of responding. Organisations are also increasingly turning their attention to seeking to understand the implications of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) for standards as well as its governance mechanisms which call for civil society engagement.

- The sector in Wales is particularly interested in maintaining, deepening and creating new international relations with partners in the EU and wider Europe.

The TCA provides an interesting opportunity for civil society representation within its governance structures.

- The sector is also facing the challenge of adapting to wider changes to the territorial Governance of the UK

Early in the Brexit Forum's work it was highlighted that some organisations in Wales were more accustomed to engaging with Welsh and EU structures and mechanisms than with those of the UK Government. Withdrawal from the EU has disrupted this landscape. Organisations now face the challenge of learning to navigate new relationships with Westminster and Whitehall where policy has lately been underpinned by centralisation.

At the same time as we were adjusting to life outside the EU the sector was active in the response to the Covid pandemic. In August 2020 the Deputy Minister and Chief Whip, in her role as chair of the Third Sector Partnership Council (TSPC), established the TSPC Recovery Sub-Group in order to provide a formal structure for engagement between Welsh Government and the voluntary sector in Wales in relation to recovery from COVID-19. Essentially the sub-group was established to provide a mechanism for strategic engagement on recovery planning.

The sub-group aimed to ensure voluntary sector voices are heard and contribute across the recovery work streams supported by Welsh Government. As the lockdown is eased and we focus more on recovery, we need to build on and strengthen the relationships that have been created and ensure we are not moving back to the pre-COVID world. In building that new future, we all want a strong and sustained emphasis on the contribution of voluntary and community action. Advising on this is was the clear focus of the sub-group's work.

The sub group decided to focus on three key work streams (Volunteering, Relationships and Support), all of which would be examined in relation to a set of cross-cutting themes relating to the type of recovery we want to see in Wales.

The five cross cutting themes that reflect our shared ambitions for recovery are:

- Equality and justice for all
- A green and just recovery
- A more resilient voluntary sector
- Inclusive collaboration and citizen involvement
- Community-led action

In another example of partnership work WCVA has worked with the School of International Futures to develop a community foresight toolkit for voluntary organisations in Wales. This should support voluntary organisations in Wales to imagine and shape the futures they want

to see post-pandemic, and post-Brexit. It was funded by The National Lottery Emerging Futures Fund.

The project built on recent work in which diverse voluntary and community groups have engaged in discussions about how we can shape a positive future² in the wake of Covid-19 and Brexit. The project is supported by the Better Futures Wales steering group which is made up of voluntary sector leaders from across Wales.

Although many issues faced by civil society in Wales are devolved to the Welsh Government, (health, education, social care) there are others that are reserved matters for the UK Government (criminal justice, welfare benefits). We have good links with civil society organisations across the UK and supported a sector wide campaign to emphasise that the voluntary sector has never been more needed.

The future

We have learned a lot since the EU referendum vote about the disconnect between communities and formal government structures. There are big inequalities in Wales and these have increased and become more visible as a result of the Covid pandemic. We have seen a huge surge of informal, local grassroots community activity based on principles of mutual aid and being a good neighbour. One size does not fit all and there is room for – and need for - less formal, less structured activity supported by community leaders as well as formal structures, with nationally recognised charities and anchor organisations.

People volunteer their time because they believe in something – they might be passionate about a particular cause, they might be angry about something and want to make a change.

Wales has a long-standing history of volunteering, mutual aid and voluntary action, especially at a community level. The voluntary sector has responded incredibly. It has been swift, agile and made a huge difference to individuals and communities across Wales. This is an incredibly challenging time for many voluntary organisations – we will see deep and permanent change to the sector landscape in Wales.

The future is hugely uncertain. There are opportunities to create a better future in the longer term in the way we respond now. We need a strong and resilient sector if we are to do this.

In conclusion

I hope this alternative ABC has provided some information and food for thought about the future of civil society in Wales. We need to be good neighbours to each other in Wales and to our partners across the UK and Europe. A thriving and sustainable civil society benefits us all. We look forward to continuing to work with our partners to promote this ambition.

² <https://wcva.cymru/influencing-a-positive-future/>

Further information:

- Equalities, Local Government and Communities committee inquiry: The impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector: <https://wcva.cymru/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-the-voluntary-sector.pdf>
- Voluntary sector manifesto Senedd Cymru elections 2021: <https://wcva.cymru/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Voluntary-sector-manifesto-2021.pdf>
- Welsh Parliament Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee (February 2021): Impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary sector: <https://senedd.wales/media/d4jh52zz/cr-ld14075-e.pdf>

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