

# Coronavirus: community responses in Merthyr Tydfil

SEFYDLIAD  
**bevan**  
FOUNDATION

July 2020



## About the Bevan Foundation

The Bevan Foundation is Wales' most innovative and influential think tank. We develop lasting solutions to poverty and inequality.

Our vision is for Wales to be a nation where everyone has a decent standard of living, a healthy and fulfilled life, and a voice in the decisions that affect them.

As an independent, registered charity, the Bevan Foundation relies on the generosity of individuals and organisations for its work. You can find out more about how you can support us and get involved here:

<https://www.bevanfoundation.org/support-us/organisations/>

## Acknowledgements

This paper was part of a stand-alone project from April to June 2020 exploring community responses to Coronavirus in Merthyr Tydfil. The work was made possible thanks to Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil (VAMT) through the Voluntary Service Emergency Fund scheme, funded by the Welsh Government. We are grateful for their support and to all the individuals and community groups that spoke to us.



**VOLUNTARY ACTION  
MERTHYR TYDFIL  
GWEITHREDU GWIRFODDOL  
MERTHYR TUDFUL**



Cover photo: Courtesy of Twyn Community Hub

Copyright: Bevan Foundation

Bevan Foundation

145a High Street

Merthyr Tydfil CF47 8DP

July 2020

[info@bevanfoundation.org](mailto:info@bevanfoundation.org)

[www.bevanfoundation.org](http://www.bevanfoundation.org)

Registered charity no. 1104191 Company registered in Wales no. 4175018

# Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Co-ordination and initial responses.....	2
3. Identifying needs .....	5
4. Well-being .....	8
5. Food provision .....	10
6. Staff and Volunteers .....	11
7. Looking ahead.....	13
8. Conclusion .....	14

# 1. Introduction

When the coronavirus struck in March 2020 it led to an extended lockdown period and suspended many taken for granted day to day activities. Advice from the UK and Welsh governments permitted only the most essential of activities. The priority became keeping the population safe and limiting the spread of the virus. At the time of writing, Wales is gradually emerging from lock-down.

We set out to explore what the experience and immediate response to coronavirus has been in the Merthyr Tydfil borough to the pandemic. We asked what kind of needs there were, how they were identified, and how the response to those needs were planned and delivered.

We spoke to a range of organisations involved in the response to the pandemic in one to one interviews, which form the basis of this report. It is not a comprehensive overview of every activity taking place in Merthyr Tydfil, rather a snapshot that identifies common themes, experiences and ways of working. We are grateful to everyone who gave up their time to speak to us.

Helping meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable has been the primary consideration in most responses to the pandemic. Most obviously this came in the form of the supply of food and supporting those with limited support networks, pre-existing health needs, and those in crisis. Some support has also responded to emerging needs in response to lockdown – stress and anxiety, lack of schooling, family trauma, remaining occupied, active, and stimulated. Some support has also focused on supporting key workers in their critical roles.

COVID 19 has forced many organisations to innovate in ways they didn't expect. It generated seismic shifts for volunteers and staff as well as new volunteers and forms of community activity.

We heard of anchor organisations acting as enablers to grassroots groups through the supply of equipment to supply essential goods to people's doors. We learned of new forms of collaboration between business, communities and the third sector, demonstrating that "community" extends much wider than is sometimes perceived. Many groups told us that the pandemic had led to new ways of working and activities, which they plan to continue and expand.

Coronavirus looks set to remain a defining feature of life for some time, in addition to Brexit, economic downturn and other challenges that we may not even be aware of. As such, the co-ordination, resourcing and support for community responses must be supported, delivered and co-ordinated effectively to ensure the best outcomes for people in need and the organisations, groups and people supporting them.



## 2. Co-ordination and initial responses

When Wales locked down on 23 March in response to the COVID 19 pandemic, many organisations in Merthyr Tydfil acted swiftly in response to suspend, refocus or set up new activities.

Some organisations had already taken measures in anticipation of the lock down the week before. These included closing buildings, instigating social distancing measures, use of personal protective equipment and hand sanitiser and sending vulnerable volunteers and staff home. These actions were illustrative primary considerations around the safety of staff, volunteers and the people they serve.

Co-ordination of some of the immediate response around shielding letters, food provision and community safety was led by Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council in partnership with Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil (VAMT) and a range of partner organisations and elected members from across the borough. Amongst those we spoke to who had been involved in this element of the response, there was broad consensus that logistically, the co-ordination had worked well. It continued through weekly calls to co-ordinate responses and activity between key agencies, designated hubs and organisations. For those involved, some told us how co-ordination and information sharing had enabled them to target people:

*We had a list of vulnerable people from the council and we leafleted those to let them know that we were here to help, pick up the shopping, even just giving people a call and a chat.*

The level of involvement in the response at a borough wide level was naturally contingent on the size and nature of activity. Organisations and groups working at a smaller, more localised scale were generally not involved in borough wide co-ordination. Some expressed a desire to be part of some kind of wider network in the future. Others stressed the need for on-going co-ordination “post-covid”

*I think it's going to be important to work together with other agencies in Merthyr. It can't be a silo thing. Because otherwise we could be replicating stuff and on the other hand there could be things that could need doing but don't get done if you don't know what everybody else is doing.*

*There doesn't seem to be a network where there is a coordination of what is going on. In the future it would be nice for a way for the smaller groups to be coordinated, not just the big ones.*

*We do feel a little cut off from the rest of Merthyr to be honest. A lot of the time the only way we get things done is by doing it ourselves.*

Co-ordination and collaboration had also taken place at a different levels and between different organisations. Some key anchor institutions such as registered social landlords, local businesses and statutory services such as community payback (probation) played enabling roles to support community groups to deliver their response.

Some had provided in-kind resourcing in staff time and loan of vans. These staff members took on new roles as delivery drivers for food and well-being parcels. Others had loaned out equipment such as electronic tablets to community groups to use in their work to tackle social isolation. Others provided direct funding to community groups who were providing COVID 19 related responses. Organisations who received this support told us how valuable it had been.

*Without their help I wouldn't be able to get around to as many people and deliver as many packages.*

*We are very fortunate in that we've got good partners. If I needed help with buying food for our deliveries tomorrow, I just ring them (local business) up and know they would give it to us to spend on food. They do fund a lot.*

Some anchor organisations told us the support they gave was a reflection of who they see as best placed to do what. One anchor organisation, observing the extensive and localised networks that some grassroots organisations had into specific communities, took the decision to use their resourcing to support and enable that activity rather than to seek to replicate or duplicate it.

We also found that provision of support and mutual aid between organisations was something of a two-way street, illustrating a broader definition of "community response". One charitable organisation had given over a large part of their building to a nearby local business free of charge. This allowed the local business to maintain social distancing between staff and stay operational. The charity had recognised the wider community benefit of keeping businesses open and that community need also includes keeping people in jobs:

*I've told them as long as you need it, we will facilitate it to make sure that you can still open because you are talking about people's livelihoods. If they can't work and they'll have to close one of the shifts, I don't want to see that because you have knock on effect with people out of work.*

Other businesses had significantly extended their hours of operation to meet the need they saw in the community, even operating at a loss to do so:

*We were working at a loss but because we were needed, we did it*

Some businesses had re-focused away from "business as usual" to new activities supporting community responses and building on their existing relationships.

## Case Study: Business in the Community

### Merthyr Self Storage

Merthyr Self Storage (MSS) supply storage, vehicle hire and removal services. They are based near Abercanaid in the Plymouth ward of Merthyr Tydfil.

The COVID 19 outbreak led to a large drop in MSS business orders. Rather than furlough staff, it offered its services to NHS to deliver refreshments to key workers.

*At the start we had a van which had the 'stay home, protect the NHS, save lives' logo on there and another sticker saying 'help beat COVID-19, sponsored by Merthyr Self Storage'. That's what kicked everything off, we were using that as a billboard as we were driving around.*

MSS resourced this through a combination of own funds, donations from customers and the general public, discounted rates from local suppliers, donations from supermarkets. and fundraising. Staff also donated a day's wages.

Demand rocketed and the business extended the service and increased the number of delivery people. MSS delivered refreshments to hospitals in the Cwm Taf area including Prince Charles Hospital in Merthyr Tydfil and to schools acting as hubs for the children of key workers.

MSS also had a pre-existing relationship with a community organisation providing support to elderly and vulnerable people that sometimes rented a minibus from MSS for day trips and hospital visits. Working together, they set up a system to deliver daily essentials, (teabags, sugar, milk, bread etc) to the people the group supports

Their response to the pandemic received some coverage on BBC Wales news. As demand continued to increase, it extended help members of the public and set up criteria for support. People have to be shielding, in financial difficulty or single parents to receive help.

MSS plans to continue the deliveries for as long as they are needed, which it says may extend past the ending of lockdown. Although MSS has previously worked with local charities, the pandemic cemented their desire to commit more charitable and community focused work.

### 3. Identifying needs

There were a range of methods used by organisations involved in the coronavirus response to establishing what people's needs were and how to meet them. Understanding needs for some organisations went hand in hand with raising awareness of what kinds of services and responses they made available to people. One group created "kindness cards" which they promoted through existing networks to raise awareness of the kinds support they could offer. Another had used a combination of phone calls and delivered letters to over 3,000 people to attempt to cover everyone in the locality to let them know what help they could provide and asking them to get in touch. Social media was deployed by many groups to spread the word about how they could help people.

There were instances of brand-new activities and groups forming who wanted to offer help and be useful by raising awareness of what they could offer. Some of these initiatives were ad hoc and about testing the water to see if and how they could be of service to the community:

*To be honest we had no idea what the response was going to be- whether it was going to be something or nothing.*

*We got setup simply because we knew each other.*

Some organisations targeted specific groups that they perceived as likely to need support or even to fall through the gaps. Older people were identified by some organisations as being sometimes unwilling to articulate their needs and ask for help. This appeared true in some instances where they had been referred for support anonymously or by concerned family members

*A lot of the older people do not want to make a fuss and they won't ask for help. So a lot of them their names have been given anonymously or by family members or people you know.*

*We'll help anyone but we tried to target the elderly as they won't ask for help - they are very proud*

Many community organisations were acutely aware of their unique closeness to people's lives and ability to detect needs or for needs to be disclosed to them. While some people were very open about their difficulty, organisations also mentioned the social stigma and embarrassment associated with asking for help

*It's a really big deal for people to talk to a stranger on the phone and say; "I'm in dire need for food" and I don't think that should be underestimated*



*When we were delivering the packs people were saying money is tight. One said "lucky it's light (the season) as I only have £1.30 on my meter and my Universal Credit doesn't come for a few days". Families are really struggling.*

*It's a real privilege and honour for us to be able to support the people of Merthyr at this time and for them to trust us with some quite sensitive information in terms of how tough life is for them.*

One organisation had set up a £10,000 community hardship fund, paying £50 directly into people's bank accounts after a simple application. It designed the application process not to be too intrusive and had procedures for confidentiality and to minimise the sharing of sensitive information for the people reviewing applications. It estimated it could help around 200 families through the hardship fund.

For groups and organisations ordinarily focused on specific groups and needs prior to the pandemic, their approach was often about changing the way they worked to continue provide support. The limitations of lockdown for identifying and monitoring needs with more vulnerable groups was a significant worry and barrier for some:

*That's our big concern. Our whole model is based on that contact with people. So we're not picking up any clues about health and well-being, domestic abuse, drug or alcohol abuse and how that might be affecting the family, because it's all being done by telephone.*

We also spoke to community organisations who were mindful of what needs they were and weren't able to meet. Some that had received referrals that they were not able to take:

*We've only declined two referrals. They had a level of need that we couldn't meet. I'm very conscious that we've got volunteers out there who would be putting themselves at risk. So those referrals had needs over and above what we could safely provide.*

## Case Study: Community Responses to coronavirus

### Twyn Community Hub

Twyn Community Hub was established in 2014. The hub is a registered charity provides a range of community services and activities, including youth services, community classes and intergenerational work. It serves the community of Twynyrodyn in Merthyr Tydfil.

As a first response the Twyn Hub team switched their focus to the immediate needs of the local community. They set about reaching residents of Twynyrodyn to let them know what services the hub would continue to provide and to capture local needs.

The hub had contact with over 3,000 people via telephone calls and a letter drop to those it did not have contact details for. It also made extensive use of social media to disseminate information, maintain contact and raise awareness of their activities and services during the lockdown period. Their response has focused on three main areas:

- **Emergency Line** – They set up an emergency line which is open every weekday from 9am to 5pm to field calls from community members and offer support. It is also used to make wellbeing checks on vulnerable people known to the Hub team and to field referrals.
- **Food Distribution** – The Hub re-purposed their hall to become a distribution centre from which they co-ordinate weekly food parcels and daily hot meals. They became a member of the Fair Share food scheme and on a daily basis provide up to 250 hot meals directly to people's front doors
- **Social contact and activities** – The hub provide activity packs for looked after children in the Merthyr Tydfil borough and also send out newspapers and crosswords to adults that are isolating. They have also provided socially isolated people with electronic tablets that come with internet provision for those that don't have a connection and set up a zoom book club along with zoom quizzes and bingo to maintain virtual social contact and stimulation

## 4. Well-being

A large proportion of the organisations we spoke to emphasised the importance of social contact and supporting people's well-being needs. This ranged from social isolation to stress and anxiety to remaining physically and mentally active.

Ensuring that people who live alone have social contact was a primary consideration for some community groups. Some had set up dedicated telephone lines to take calls from people and to call them from. Befriending services had also been set up and extended. A number of groups scheduled weekly and twice weekly calls to people who would otherwise have no social contact.

*Some people don't speak to anyone at all for week and weeks. And this is actually just normal life for them. So they don't know what's going on. Lots of people ring us because they don't understand (the latest advice) so we have to try and explain.*

*Some people just appreciate a wave from us when they know we are out and about and to see a friendly face they know*

Recognising the importance of continuity of contact, one organisation had developed a "foster volunteer" scheme in the allocation of volunteers to households they were supporting. This scheme meant that if the usual volunteer allocated to a household was not able to volunteer that week, there was a back up volunteer that would be guaranteed to see them. This way each household they supported were limited to one or two of the same volunteers and guaranteed as much continuity as possible in who they saw.

Helping people remaining physically and mentally active was often built into coronavirus related activities. A number supplied newspapers, crosswords and produced newsletters delivered to people's homes as a way of providing extra activities. One community group set up a weekly newsletter where people receiving it could submit items for the next edition as a way to stay active and feel involved. Some distributed exercise instructions and, in line with the boom in gardening, had given out plants to grow to the people they were supporting.

There were organisations that also emphasised that well-being support and concerns applied across generations including families, parents and young people. One described the pressures of lock-down on families and young people in particular:

*Our young volunteers are coming in because they don't have a safe place at home. They want to get away from that family trauma and come to a safe place. They were frightened initially (of coronavirus) but their home life is so bad that they want to come in.*

Some organisations perceived that lockdown had come with a risk of some people and groups being overlooked. One thought that it was possible that they might be helping plug some gaps in some provisions with their service due to suspension and reduction in activity from other support agencies and services

*I think we are plugging a gap in terms of assisting carers. There's single parents with children with life limiting illnesses. There's people who have got their adult children with them who are shielding for health reasons. There's people with parkinsons and dementia who are caring for people. So we are potentially plugging a gap where some services have stopped.*

Through daily contact with families, one community organisation observed the needs of parents navigating the closure of schools and the resulting pressure within some households on parents and children:

*Where a lot of people are focusing on the vulnerable and the old, there is actually a lot of parents struggling in their houses with children, full time, that they're not used to. And there's children's behaviour and things. I think that's a massive thing that's being missed out at the moment. We have started a campaign sharing a video about child to parent abuse as that's really overlooked.*

Associated with this, is the yet unknown longer-term impact on mental health. Some organisations anticipated that there would be needs related to stress, anxiety, family breakdown and trauma that will need further support. Some organisations observed that the pandemic had also shone a light on pre-existing needs that were normally seen as more low-level, in new ways:

*Realistically, people's needs aren't going to go away post covid. I think covid has highlighted a shed load of needs that have always been there but have been too low level for any attention.*

*We know that people are going to struggle to come out of this and to get back into society. So we want to do smaller groups, low stimuli groups for those who suffer with anxiety and stress to bring them in and support them through it, including access to legal advice, financial advice and debt support.*

## 5. Food provision

One of the biggest areas of action was the need to continue to supply food to people and to meet the rocketing demand amongst people in need and to support key workers.

A number of community organisations joined the FairShare food distribution scheme, which provides excess food from supermarkets to member organisations who pay a quarterly membership fee. They indicated their intention to continue to remain members permanently beyond the pandemic period.

Merthyr Tydfil's principal foodbank, Merthyr Cynon Foodbank, highlighted that although the pandemic was not something that had been anticipated the year previously, the crises of flooding from storm Dennis in February 2020 and the uncertainties over the impact of Brexit on food supply had in some ways helped prepare them.

*I always thought it would be because of Brexit, then of course came the floods so we had a good response from the public*

Unlike other some other food banks which had been forced to close due to lack of food, it had managed to maintain a good supply of food and remain running thanks to support from the public and some businesses, networks of local faith groups and cash donations.

However, they described the increased demand for food during the pandemic as "staggering". A comparison of foodbank figures between 2019 and 2020 indicates the scale of the need. Between 23 March 2019 and 15 May 2019 the foodbank (covering the Merthyr Tydfil borough and the Cynon valley in neighbouring Rhondda Cynon Taf) fed approximately 600 people. In the same period in 2020 it fed 1681 people, a doubling on the previous year. These figures do not include the other new and existing food delivery schemes that were taking place across the borough, which were also substantial and had seen a rise in demand across the board.

The effort to provide food to people in need across Merthyr Tydfil was clearly a massive one and many initiatives took place. One organisation had helped re-distribute food from suspended school breakfast schemes. Another had taken to cooking and delivering hot meals each day between Monday and Friday to vulnerable people alongside food parcel deliveries. In a specific ward, the organisation was sending out over 275 food parcels a week and 250 hot meals.



## 6. Staff and Volunteers

Volunteers have been fundamental to the response to COVID 19 in Merthyr Tydfil. The impact of the lockdown resulted in fresh availability of new volunteers. These included furloughed workers people who normally commute or work away for extended periods who were now home based. Equally, the pandemic also resulted in the unavailability of many existing volunteers who needed to shield. This had an impact on some organisations more than others and in different ways:

*I'm home from work on twelve weeks isolation, so I was able to put things together. So within two days we sorted out guidelines for the volunteers. We've got a volunteer what's app group. I did a policy for gifts and donations. We did all that in about two days, and then started taking referrals.*

*A big impact for us is our volunteers – we rely heavily on volunteers. The majority are over 70 so they are high risk.*

The staffing implications for community organisations with paid staff teams were also considerable:

*Until today I have been the only member of staff working all the others have been furloughed. It is manic, I'm doing four jobs in one. We had to furlough staff otherwise we'd be closing the doors permanently.*

*I've had four days off in the last thirteen weeks*

Some organisations recruited new and additional volunteers. Others reduced their volunteer numbers accordingly with the closure of physical buildings or centralisation of services or activities to a single location.

We saw a mixed approach to volunteer recruitment and management. Some organisations rapidly ran DBS checks on new volunteers and stressed the importance of these checks alongside the careful recruitment and selection of volunteers:

*To be fair, we had a lot contact us, but you've got to be a bit wise haven't you? Some people contacted us and said "we live in Merthyr and want to help, what can we do?". So all our volunteers are DBS checked, that's really important to us.*

Conversely, we also spoke to groups who told us there had been "no time" to do DBS checks on their volunteers in response to the pandemic.

Some community organisations shared their concerns about how they could continue to deliver key services with volunteers while meeting their responsibilities to them:

*It is the same with the transport, at the end of the day we have a duty of care to our volunteers and clients. It is impossible to be 2 meters apart in a car.*

The extent that volunteers were willing to go to enable response activity to continue was admirable. However it also demonstrated how stretched some resources are for community organisations, including those who had carried on through the use of personal funds of existing members:

*Our group has very little money. At the moment I'm paying for it (response activities) on our behalf*

## 7. Looking ahead

As the lock-down period eases and some sectors and activities resume and seek to establish some kind of normality, the lasting impact of the pandemic is likely to remain the defining backdrop against which communities continue to operate.

We found community groups and organisations at very different stages in how they were able to envisage the future. Some were still almost entirely focused on day to day outputs while others were looking to the long term.

Amongst organisations that had developed new ways of working and new services, many reflected that the pandemic had been a catalyst for things that they had considered but not yet done and how they planned to retain some changes.

*(The service) was setup in relation to the pandemic, we were mulling it over anyway but this pushed us into doing it.*

*I don't think we will go back to how we were. I think we will stick with some of the more efficient new ways of working that are seemingly more effective*

For other organisations, the pandemic has meant suspension of some services and activities and closure of buildings and services, some of which are significant sources of revenue. For them, re-start and survival appeared to be the primary consideration in how they looked to the future:

*The first thing is how do we get our building up and running. The whole guts of that building have gone. How do you get (all that activity) back up and running?*

The sense of “keeping going” with COVID-19 responses and “taking one day at a time” came across in some of the conversations we had with communities. Some were not aware of the predicted challenges that are likely to remain and that are yet to emerge and even indicated an expectation for need to subside:

*A lot of the work we are doing now I guess, touch wood, there will hopefully not be a need for it.*

Other community organisations had clearly given consideration to the long -term impact of the pandemic and what it would mean for them the people they worked with. One organisation alluded to the increased need it expected to see as a result of the serious economic downturn that has been predicted:

*We had referrals for people who had lost their jobs. I know many more will be referred to us, even increase unfortunately as the economy you know, won't do very well.*

## 8. Conclusion

Many community responses to coronavirus in the Merthyr Tydfil borough were deployed quickly to meet immediate needs and to adapt to the circumstances of lock-down. The pandemic generated new ways of working, new activities, services and innovations. It highlighted and revealed diverse sets of needs of different people and groups and helped establish new contacts and relationships with some of them. Community organisations that changed the way they work told us of their intentions to embed changes that worked well and continue to provide services developed during the pandemic into the future.

The co-ordinated response took a partial form, led by established organisations anchor institutions and statutory services, in addition and sometimes separate to ad-hoc localised responses. This meant that while there was a borough wide consistency in some elements of response, others were variable and localised across the borough depending on how they were organised, who organised them and what the nature of the response was. Some localities in other parts of Wales had taken a “street by street” approach where each street had a community point of contact to help ensure comprehensive coverage and contacts across an area. The community initiatives that had delivered thousands of contact letters door to door in a specific pockets of Merthyr Tydfil offered perhaps the closest example of this kind of activity.

The community response to the coronavirus has also brought fresh understanding to the term “community”. Mutual aid between statutory services, businesses, anchor institutions and communities and community groups has played a fundamental role. We saw positive and pro-active responses from variety of businesses and we also saw examples of community support to businesses to enable them to keep going. Some anchor organisations took a strategic decision to play an enabling role by supporting grassroots organisations, reflecting important considerations of who is best placed to do what, and how.

These are important lessons from community responses to pandemic that can and should be scaled and learned from. For communities across the wider area of the south Wales valleys and indeed, across Wales, the devastation of flooding has been experienced three times with the space of less than a year. The impact of Brexit is on basic supplies, jobs and workers is likely to be felt especially towards the end of the year. This is on top of the almost inevitable economic downturn which is certain to hit communities like Merthyr Tydfil hard. The transferable lessons and opportunities to build on new partnerships, community initiatives and innovations that have come from the community response to the coronavirus could help strengthen the community response to the challenges that lie ahead.