

Charity and community group responses to COVID 19 in the Merthyr Tydfil Borough

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About the Bevan Foundation

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil for commissioning this important piece of work to understand the challenges faced by charities and community groups as a result of Coronavirus and identify key actions to survive the immediate consequences of lock-down and importantly ensure that they continue to support and provide activities in the long-term.

We would like to thank all the charities and community groups who gave up their time to take part in the survey and follow-up interviews and share their experiences and concerns open and honestly.



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1 Summary

Charities and community groups have been greatly affected by the Coronavirus and lock-down. Financially, many will have experienced a loss of income which will affect their ability to continue. In many cases they may be able to start back-up again after lock-down, however there is a real concern that without proper support they may fail to make it into 2021, with some saying that it is next year that they will begin to struggle. Their ability to plan for the future is made difficult by the lack of clear guidance and timelines.

Through the survey and interviews with charities and community groups, a number of key actions would help them to survive the immediate consequences of lock-down and importantly ensure that they continue to support and provide activities in the long-term.

- Funding support for those who have seen a decrease in income as a result of Coronavirus.
- Tailored support advice and guidance on the availability of funding and making applications.
- Provision or funding for Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and safety equipment, or how to source it in the most cost-effective way.
- Advice and training for staff and volunteers on social distancing and health and safety.
- Help with finding alternative and suitable buildings in the short and long-term, and also advice and guidance about how to operate safely.
- Specialist advice/or dedicated point of contact to made available after lock-down to provide specialist advice on furloughing, staffing issues and writing business plans.
- Support to attract and manage volunteers.
- Further digital training and sourcing of equipment.
- Sourcing and providing storage facilities.

2 Introduction

Due to the Coronavirus outbreak in March 2020 Wales entered a period of lock-down which has lasted over three months. At the time of writing, Wales remains in semi-lockdown. Although some services and businesses have resumed, there are still restrictions in place and many charities and community groups are yet to resume their 'normal' activities.

To understand the challenges faced by charities and community groups which operate in the Merthyr Tydfil borough, Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil (VAMT) commissioned the Bevan Foundation to carry out a short survey and follow-up interviews. Forty-seven charities and community groups took part in the survey, and a further twenty-two went onto take part in a depth-interview which lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. This report provides VAMT with a snapshot of the challenges they face and what action could be taken to ensure they are able to survive the immediate pressures and importantly continue long-term.

We are grateful to all those who gave up their time to complete the survey and take part in an interview and share their experiences openly and honestly.

3 The immediate impact of lock-down

Over half of those who responded to survey are continuing to provide some or all services. However roughly one in three have had to stop providing all services temporarily. Of those who were still operating, many had had to adapt - only roughly 10% provided the same services as before lock-down while around 30% reported a reduction in the services they provide.

Roughly one in four had changed the type of service they provide. During the interviews some explained that they have been able to change what they do to meet the immediate needs of the community:

All normal activities have stopped – we have helped people in most need in the village and deliver morale-boosting packs, provide newsletters, to cheer up elderly by sending poems. There are fewer young ones - but we have done things like Easter eggs, cinema nights and given them popcorn. (Older people/community group)

Some groups have not been able to provide any services, and are not in a position to diversify what they do or provide. We identified one charity which has sadly had to close permanently after nine years:

The committee members have personally donated the funds to allow office lease rental for our property to be paid up until the end of the lease in 2021. Our Chairperson is choosing to move from the area ... without that individual and the loss of funding the group has suffered due to the pandemic. (Health and social care)

Roughly six out of ten organisations that responded to the survey employed staff, and the rest rely solely on volunteers. Roughly one in five reported having to furlough staff, some said

staff were working from home or flexibly. A larger proportion reported that no measures have been taken.

Although, they have clearly been affected most group leaders and representatives remained committed to continuing after lock-down. It was encouraging to hear so many of those interviewed talk of their motivation and enthusiasm to keep going out of lock-down,. This was reflected in the survey where roughly eight out of ten said they have some level of confidence about continuing.

What drives many groups is the dedication to the people they work with. Some of those interviewed said they have tried to keep in touch with their members and users via What's App groups, Zoom calls or by other means and expressed their genuine concern over the impact that lock-down has had on their overall health and well-being:

A lot of people are widows and say they would be lost without the group ... a lot of people are going stir crazy ... the social side of our group helps them with their wellbeing. (Older people)

In particular, those working with more vulnerable groups are extremely concerned that the lack of contact and support will mean many problems will have been missed, existing problems may have worsened and more people will need help/support as a result of the lock-down. For instance, one charity reported a 40% increase in referrals since lock-down and expected to see this number rise.

However, despite this level of enthusiasm and confidence most are understandably concerned about the future, particularly given the financial implications and the operating restrictions that will in place. For some it will be far easier to return, for instance those which operate outdoors or have a small membership and need very little financial resource will find it easier to resume than organizations which operate out of buildings, have face-to-face contact and need more financial resource.

Overall, most groups agreed that it was 'easy' to go into lock-down but coming out of it will be far harder. Most will need some form of support to continue.

4 Challenges

Charities and community groups face several challenges as they look to resume their normal activities. The financial impact and loss of income is a key issue, but the lack of clear timelines and ability to plan, people/service users being reluctant to return, delivering services and support (particularly if these are within buildings) and the expense and training needed to ensure social distancing and increased health and safety rules adhered to will also make it more difficult to create a 'new normal'.

4.1 Financial implications and challenges

One of the major challenges will be the financial impact of lock-down. Nearly half of survey respondents reported a decrease in their income, and nearly all of those who took part in the depth interviews reported an immediate loss of income. Many feared that the loss will continue after lock-down. Fewer than one in ten saw an increase in their income, which can be attributed to a short-term boost in funding due to Covid-19.

Those hardest hit financially are charities and community groups which rely on income from events, fund raising, membership fees and rental via room hire. During the interviews many explained that losing this income means they will have to dip into reserves (if they have any), as a result of which they will have fewer financial resources in future. Some groups are concerned that they will simply not have enough funding available to continue in the longer-term as well, especially into 2021. Most of those we interviewed accepted that any planned fund-raising activities in the short to medium-term will not happen, particularly over the summer period when most fairs etc. take place, and some predict that these activities will not restart until next year.

Many groups were just about getting by prior to lock-down, and the loss of income will severely hamper their ability to keep going:

We had to cancel an event in March - which is our primary income and we have lost £600-700 ... We usually have a shortfall of £600 and that is what the event made.
(Leisure and Sports)

A lot of our income was from bookings ... others pay a retainer. I think bookings will be flat for the next year ... we make £140,000 per year in bookings and it costs £140,000 to run. (Community facility/Youth organisation)

Some of those who employ staff predicted that they may have to lay off staff as a result of loss of income:

... All other workers have been furloughed until the end of July. Some of them will be furloughed until the end of October - but some will have to be laid off. When it comes nearer to August 1st I will have to make a decision ... when we come back we will have a much diminished service as they won't want to be hiring space in the same way as they did, so we won't be open for as long so we won't need as much staff ... We cannot top up the furlough as we don't have the funds coming in ... (Community)

[We've] Lost a quarter of income ... we are in a position where we may lose staff but it is at a time when we are most needed. We could lose a lot of staff who are extremely skilled ... you also lose momentum of the business (Employment and training)

Those who receive grant income appear to be in a slightly better position. Some said their funders had been understanding and have said they can have a longer time period to spend funding they received prior to lock-down. This was not the case for all groups, and some explained they now have money sitting in the bank which they are unable to use in the way it was intended and are concerned they will have to return this money or they are unsure about the expectations:

We had the initial funding for isolation and loneliness projects, but this happened and we couldn't deliver it ... we have done somethings but it is nowhere near the close connection and advocacy that it should have been ... there is a hole there and it is what the expectations are? (Childcare)

Grant funding is not a guarantee of survival: the charity which has closed reported that it was 100% grant funded. Another group said that its funder had placed a lot of pressure on them since lock-down to provide regular data updates on trends.

Some of those we interviewed have applied and received Covid-19 related grant funding, and are thankful for this. However some have not been successful on the basis that they are not responding directly to Covid-19 needs. Several issues were raised around current and future funding:

- Charities and community groups may not be used to applying for grants and are not well-informed about how to identify or make an application.
- Competition for grant funding is at an all-time high and is not just the 'usual' competitors, but also private businesses and individuals are applying.
- Bids often focus on fixed outcomes which do not allow for projects to be reactive and fluid (which is particularly important at this time).
- Bids have been turned down on the basis that the charity or community group is not currently financially affected, yet the loss of income will be problematic in several months' time when funding may not be available.
- Grants often covers capital costs, yet some organisations need help with running costs now and in the longer-term.
- Activities which have historically been underfunded, will need a considerable amount of investment/funding to cope with the increased demand for their service.
- The application process can be slow and applicants are faced with waiting a considerable amount of time before they can start a project (which is unhelpful at this time).

4.2 Future planning

When asked about the future, most groups agree that due to a lack of clear timelines and guidance on what the new 'normal' will look like it is difficult to make any plans. The current debate around reducing the two metre rule to one metre, is particularly challenging as it could have a significant impact on the delivery of services, support and activities in the future. Also, to go ahead and make changes on the basis of two metres could lead to unnecessary costs and time wasting if it is then reduced.

Some leaders have been in a position to write an action plan and undertake a risk assessment to inform their return, but this is largely based on assumptions:

I have written a plan for the youth work and it is 19 pages long and it has a risk assessment. It is based on research as I am linked into a number of national youth worker organisations. We will have to cancel the event scheduled for the summer and my contract is only for a year, so it isn't worth arranging the event for next summer because it takes a lot of organising and I would have to start in March, so it could be a waste. (Youth)

I have been trying to write a business plan but it is hard when you don't have the timeline ... it is all best guess usually but it is harder at the moment. (Community)

Most said they are waiting for government guidance (which is currently unclear) or guidance from governing/national bodies or are waiting to see what other organisations are doing:

In education they have been clear, but with childcare that is a different part of Welsh Government and it hasn't been clear cut ... I am a project manager and everything is good to go but it is all unclear; When can you start? When are your deliverables? (Childcare)

We have recently started work ... the Football Association of Wales (FAW) have given us instructions on facilities on work on ground ... to achieve standards of playing in FAW ... then we will need to think about social distancing ... how we can get access to changing rooms and issues like that. (Leisure and sports)

4.3 Encouraging people to return

Ensuring people feel safe to return will be a major issue. This issue was greater for those who may be in the shielding category like those attending older people's groups, but does also include others like parents and young people and people in vulnerable categories as well as those taking part in activities which happen indoors where it may be harder to socially distance:

I think as soon as lock-down goes we are all itching to get back ... but some people may be wary of coming back ... We have to reassure people that it is safe ... that we are not going to be hugging each other. (Older people)

Kids haven't seen football on TV, we need a campaign to get kids kicking a ball again. Parents may be wary about them coming back. (Leisure and sports)

Ensuring it is safe for people to return is key:

Their behaviour has changed already ... are people going to want to come back? We have to make sure our users feel safe and that they trust us. (Community)

Importantly, any reduction in numbers of service users will have a significant effect financially as most groups need the critical mass of people to provide any activity, service or support:

People are saying "I won't go out until I have to" ... I know someone who attends an older age club and he says that a lot of people have said they are not going to go back ... if he does and there is a reduction in the amount of people there then the atmosphere won't be the same. (Community)

Some of those who are accessing a service, like childcare, may find that they no longer need to use this service because they have been able to make-do with alternative arrangements such as using family members. The worst case scenario is they may no longer need a service if they have lost their job or are still on furlough. Again if groups lose the critical mass then the whole service may be in jeopardy (particularly if this is the only thing they provide):

People have made-do without childcare - maybe relying on grandparents and then could have got used to it and now not view childcare as essential ... Already seen some people who say they are not coming back. If we were only a childcare setting, we would struggle. (Childcare)

4.4 Social distancing and access to facilities and buildings

The need to abide by social distancing rules will be particularly challenging for many of the charities and community groups, particularly those which are based indoors or which are focused around face-to-face and physical or very close contact. For some groups, the two metre rule would severely limit numbers that could take part and could restrict the activities they would normally deliver:

We have a staff of seven and the most we will have in at a time is three people. (Social enterprise)

For one charity which has made adaptations based on the two-metre rule said it has been costly and also needs to be piloted to understand how it will work in practice:

We have had builders in to redesign the rooms, creating a one-way system. We used existing funds that we had and it is going to be quite expensive. (Advice and Support)

Some charities and community groups will not have the funds to make these adaptations, and those who use buildings they do not own/have control over will find it even more difficult as they are reliant on the owners to make it safe or even to be open at all. Some said that some owners will be reluctant to let external 'users' return as it is likely that they will open for their own purposes first. This issue may mean it is impossible for activities to return as other venues may be costly or not appropriate and/or may not be in a suitable location:

We won't be able to use the bands and balls. It is a big hall, but there is a big class and I don't know how we would keep apart. (Older people)

4.5 Understanding and abiding by the new 'normal'

Some leaders said they will find it difficult to ensure that participants, service users and volunteers will understand the new rules regarding social distancing and health and safety, and are concerned about their role if these are not routinely abided by:

It is getting people to understand that it is two metres apart ... when they see us they will automatically want to be cwtching ... we are like a big family. (Community)

5 Opportunities out of lock-down

Although charities and community groups face many challenges, more positively there are also opportunities, including, better/more effective ways of working, a rise in the number of volunteers and increased or new opportunities to collaborate with others.

5.1 Effective ways of working and ‘new ideas’

Many of those interviewed said that lock-down has provided time and space, motivation and necessity to change and improve some working practices. The increasing use of digital platforms has increased communication, allowed increased contact with some groups, decreased travel time and has sped-up some things like arranging meetings:

We have changed the way we will work in the future ... we have speeded up communication. Zoom meetings ... we had people in their 70s in the meeting and it was great. We will have a quicker response to things. (Leisure/Sports)

We were working with so many people before this and it was hard to make sure I give everyone the time ... now I have more time. I don't have to travel ... I access more people. (Youth)

With all this Zoom thing I have been able to attend meetings in Cardiff that I would never have attended. (Community)

While this is seen as a positive it is clear that contact with some groups and activities cannot be done through digital means so while this is indeed an opportunity, for many of these groups face-to-face contact is the only method of contact.

Some said that lock-down has allowed them the thinking-space make improvements to working practices, and some praised their staff and volunteers for working creatively to find solutions to issues:

Staff have been very creative ... it is like we had a wish list if we had five minutes. (Employment and training)

We have had time to discuss things that we wouldn't have had time to discuss before ... sometimes you can be so busy that you are just firefighting. When you are not managing the building you can just think about the business. (Community)

Finally, homeworking for some organisations has worked extremely well, and some we interviewed said they would consider retaining this way of working in the future (through consultation with their staff):

Homeworking has worked extremely well ... and staff have really enjoyed this. We are sending a survey out to staff to see what they want to do. (Employment and training)

5.2 A rise in volunteers and engagement

A small number of the groups interviewed reported a rise in volunteers. This was clearly viewed positively, but still requires careful management to retain them, particularly as some people will now be returning to work:

The amount of volunteers that have come through the doors since Coronavirus ... we have seen more interest ... I am hoping that people may become interested and create a wider community. (Community/leisure and sports)

We have some volunteers who will be going back to work so I have been in the process of contacting people to see who they work with, and if they will be able to work with them, maybe at different times but some people, like someone who is a teacher who said that with the school holidays they could do more ... it is also about matching volunteers up with what they want to do. (Community/faith)

Despite the rise in the number of people volunteering through the pandemic, some groups and/or activities who have historically struggled to attract people have continued to experience this.

Some services have been able to reach out to a new cohort of people, and it is hoped that this contact can continue after the crisis is over. For example, Help at Hope Merthyr was established shortly after lock-down as a direct response to the pandemic, although the representative explained they had wanted to do something around isolation and loneliness prior to Coronavirus:

We wanted to do something around social isolation and loneliness but we didn't know how, so we put a kindness card out which said that if people needed any help in Merthyr to get in touch - now we have around 45 volunteers, 25 - 30 can go out and physically do things – the rest do telephone ... Some people are saying that they are talking to people now and they haven't been talking to people for ages and haven't been in touch with social services and the voluntary sector has been so saturated that there seems to be a lot of people who have slipped through the net.

5.3 Collaboration

During lock-down some of the groups interviewed said they have worked with other organisations on activities like joint funding bids. Most are keen to avoid duplication and said they would look to continue to look for collaborations in the future. One group said they had made contact with businesses and feel this is a great opportunity going forward:

We are working with organisations we didn't before - we have been asking businesses for donations like the car auctions but we wouldn't normally be doing that ... they may do this in the future. (Community)

One explained that they have been able to attend business type forums set up in Blaenau Gwent which has been extremely useful in making connections with businesses and other organisations like housing associations, but is not aware of anything like that happening in Merthyr:

Blaenau Gwent have been great ... had business meetings and linked up with four housing associations who want to bring supply chains closer to home ... Not had any other local authorities do that. (Employment and training)

6 Supporting charities and community groups after lock-down

Most of the charities and community groups we interviewed said they have received some support, but this varied. Some of those with governing bodies or as part of a national body or association said they had received guidance and support from them. Some had working relationships with the local authority and have been in touch with VAMT for advice and signposting, although some said that they had been looking for specialist forms of support, for instance some said they had sought advice from their own accountants on issues such as furloughing.

Based on survey results and on engaging with the charities and community groups, a number of key actions could help support charities and community groups to survive the consequences of Coronavirus.

6.1 Funding support and advice

The availability of funding will be key to ensuring some of the charities and community groups continue. Roughly seven out of ten who took part in the survey said that financial support is important, and of those who said their income had decreased by more than 50% roughly half said that they were only somewhat confident that they could continue.

When interviewed, charities and community groups which rely on fund raising activities said that without this source of income they are likely to be affected towards the end of this year and into 2021. They also fear they will not be eligible for any grants that could potentially become available.

Many of those interviewed agree that funding should be made available to specifically address the loss of earned income as a result of lock-down, and should run throughout 2021:

Financial grants. I haven't looked for any - we are really in the unknown at the moment ... We haven't been able to collect membership fees. (Community)

Just that we know that we will have a spike in referrals starting after lock down. The money we have received from grant funders has been welcome. However, it is short-term money (for the next 6 months). This isn't new money and some grant funder will not be allowing new applications as their resources have gone into Covid-responses. Short-term we are managing fine but are likely to feel the pinch over the next financial year. Government funding will also be impacted with money being moved back into central budgets. (Community/faith)

Advice around finding and applying for funding would also be helpful, and roughly six out of ten who took part in the survey said this is important.

In the interviews, a couple also mentioned the time taken to receive grants and said that it would help if applications could be processed quickly to enable projects to be more responsive to immediate needs.

6.2 Social distancing and health and safety

Planning to resume normal activities is fraught with difficulties, particularly given issues around social distancing and health and safety. Around a half of the survey respondents said they would want advice on social distancing measures and roughly the same number said that the provision of safety equipment (PPE, screens) is also important.

Those interviewed said the following advice, support and training (possibly provided by VAMT, local authority or Welsh Government) would be extremely helpful over the coming months:

- Advice on managing people and buildings safely in the context of social distancing.
- Health and safety training for staff and volunteers (possibly provided through VAMT).
- Provision of PPE, cleaning products and other safety equipment and/or sourcing funding if needed.

6.3 Alternative, suitable, and safe spaces

While there was a low response recorded in the survey on the importance of support to provide better facilities, many of the charities and community groups who took part in the interviews said this would be valuable, particularly for those groups which operate within a building and need some support to make them safe. Some said that they simply will not be able to operate in their current building, will need more rooms (which will cost more money) or the building will not be available to them. Many of those interviewed said they need help, financial assistance and investment to support them to either source different options or carry out work to existing buildings. For instance some said that the local authority and other organisations with bigger halls and capacity could be offering their facilities at a reduced rate:

Our facilities are small. How can we fit everyone in and make sure they socially distance? There is possibly a role for others to help out, we would be reluctant to use schools, but what about leisure centres? If you want to hire a hall at Rhydacar it is £500! And people won't travel very far. (Community)

Some said these are longstanding issues, but explained that this situation has created a greater urgency to address them:

There is a lack of investment. Dressing rooms which were meant for 10 years have been there 40 years. We will not be able to socially distance. They are so bad - too small. What if it rains? (Sports and leisure)

6.4 Other forms of support

A number of other forms of support were also suggested by those we interviewed:

- Specialist advice/or dedicated point of contact to made available after lock-down to provide advice on furloughing, staffing issues, writing business plans, sourcing funding and grants. Those interviewed said that VAMT could be in a position to be

the point of contact, but said they view them as a ‘signposter’ rather than a direct source of this information and support.

- Support to attract and manage volunteers. Some said that they simply cannot afford to take on someone to carry out the recruitment and management of volunteers and said that this could be a role that VAMT provides by helping attract and match volunteers to what they are interested in.
- Further digital training and sourcing of equipment.
- Sourcing and providing storage facilities.