Mobilising Voluntary Action

Learning for today, prepared for tomorrow
<u>Executive Summary</u>

"The pandemic has changed everyone's outlook on volunteer involvement. I feel this has advantages and disadvantages. Many will withdraw entirely from volunteer roles they previously were involved in and others who may have never considered volunteering will come forward to offer support."

VOLUNTEER NOW
connect · build · change

Mobilising
UK VOLUNTARY ACTION

UKRI
Economic
and Social
Research Council

Volunteer Now has been involved in a research project with the Mobilising Voluntary Action Research group. This 4-nation project focused on the volunteering response to the Covid-19 pandemic, while also investigating the impact of the pandemic on volunteering and the Voluntary and Community sector as a whole. The study aimed to compare and contrast Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England as the interface between government policies and citizen responses to the pandemic were heavily influenced by devolved policies and structures at play. In addition, the research team considered the need for Northern Ireland to act in tandem with its neighbours in the Republic of Ireland .

The research sought to identify and highlight the differences in approach and explore where there can be learning between the constituent parts of the UK. Adopting a mixed methods approach, and with dedicated teams in each of the four nations, the project examined voluntary action and volunteer responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by assessing changes in the patterns of volunteering as the pandemic progressed as well as government and organisational policies, planning and practice.

An initial literature review explored some of the key themes looking at more than 70 research papers and reports, representing a range of organisations across the UK including intermediaries and infrastructure organisations, volunteer involving organisations (VIO's) and local authorities. There were also two additional working papers, which investigated the 'voluntary action' policy contexts across the UK, and the volunteer matching platforms (Be Collective and Team Kinetic). This provided more detailed analysis on the timing and characteristics of the UK-wide desire to volunteer.

The final piece of the project incorporated an online survey and five follow-up interviews. The online survey in Northern Ireland was for organisations, both public and voluntary, that were responsible for coordinating or encouraging the volunteering response. The interviews aimed to further explore the interface between government and emergency response protocols and the practice of mobilising the volunteer response as the pandemic developed.

<u>Main Findings:</u>

The most recent and relevant document investigated by the policy context working paper *(Build a Better Future: A Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan)* does effectively identify the range of different citizens who contribute and proposes specific strands of strategy to engage with specific categories of volunteers, which is a marked difference to England. As elsewhere in the UK, the bulk of government funding for voluntary action is in the form of contracts awarded for delivering public services, and as elsewhere, this has created pressures around below cost funding, collaboration between organisations and the exercise of freedom of action for funded organisations. Nevertheless, as the evidence from this research will show continuing government support for infrastructure and community development proved vital in mobilising the volunteering response in NI as the COVID emergency developed. Long-standing 'partnership' structures such as the Government Voluntary Sector Forum were never designed to be vehicles for collaboration of the kind needed but the relationships that they sustained enabled a rapid response when the emergency began.

The survey aimed to capture a clearer picture about what happened 'on-the-ground' during the pandemic and sampled 96 organisations (a mixture of local councils, HSC trust, and local and regional infrastructure organisations). A key finding was that the majority of respondents reported that volunteer numbers were higher than pre-pandemic levels, which put severe pressure on the capacity to channel this effort effectively. Much of this volunteering appeared to be informal as respondents reported large increases in volunteering at a community level without the involvement of formal organisations. However, analysis of the "Be Collective" data

shows that as time went on, the number of people offering to volunteer fell at the same time organisations became better at placing volunteers.

At the level of Northern Ireland's 11 district councils, coordination varied, depending on the depth of pre-existing partnership working. A key problem identified was that the emergency response framework, built around council areas, had no formal role for volunteers. The consequence was particularly evident in the first wave of the pandemic where there was some difficulty in managing the spontaneous volunteer response and offers of help. The interview data clearly shows that the existing partnership arrangements between VIOs and state bodies were initially not fit for purpose. In the first few weeks of the first lockdown in February 2020, a completely new structure had to be established to provide the necessary coordination and information flows. There was recognition that this was effective due to the long-standing and close relationships between key government Departments and Agencies, and relevant voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, sustained by an appropriate policy context.

In terms of learning, the survey placed emphasis on determining the challenges and barriers facing the Voluntary and Community sector. Firstly, it is important to note that no form of volunteering seems to have escaped being at least paused to some degree, demonstrating the level of impact visible across the entire sector.

Challenges were consistent. Firstly, it was stated that it remained very difficult to plan for the future, due to a combination of factors including volunteer turnover and depletion, as well as changes to funding. Furthermore, there appeared to be a challenge for organisations hoping to re-engage their previous volunteers as these 'older, more experienced volunteers' took a step back and might be reluctant to return. It was accepted and understood that the 'new' volunteers might not be able to offer the same level of commitment in the future. Respondents feared that volunteer burnout and mental ill health might leave a gap in resources. Volunteer recruitment and retention were viewed as a major issue, as Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) would require resources to create safe environments and offer training to give volunteers the confidence they needed.

Respondents expressed concern that while there was evidence suggesting some organisations had restructured, others did not have staff in place to support rebuilding. These issues suggest there is a varying set of support needs, underpinned by the clear evidence that there was a substantial need to rebuild volunteering in many organisations. This is evident from the analysis of the "Be Collective" data which indicates that the number of volunteer opportunities being posted has not recovered to anything like pre-pandemic levels. In summary, this research suggests that the pandemic has been an enormous challenge and it remains unclear what the long-term impact will be.

Recommendations

✓ **It is important that there is practical support for VIOs to rebuild.**

The evidence shows both creativity and adaptability among some VIOs, while others have struggled or even folded. The evidence suggests that adaptability depended in part on increased use of digital platforms and media, underlining a training gap that will require funding to fill.

✓ **It is imperative that a comprehensive plan for spontaneous volunteering is developed.**

Informal volunteering and volunteer numbers as a whole were higher due to the pressures on formal organisations to coordinate this influx. Without clear civil contingency structures linking to the voluntary and community sector, it was impossible to involve the huge numbers who came forward in a meaningful way.

✓ **There is a need for relevant and strong public policy which enables and supports volunteering.**

The UK wide policy analysis does show that Northern Ireland has a supportive and enabling policy framework for volunteering. However, this is outdated and in need of review. The pandemic experience has cast many assumptions about volunteering in doubt: the division between informal and formal volunteering; the retirement of long-term volunteers; inclusion of new people in volunteering; and the rise of episodic volunteering. A new framework should build on the success of the past and learn from other jurisdictions to create an enabling environment for volunteering in the future. It should build on the new approaches to partnership forged during the pandemic, to allow a better balance between local and regional support and coordination for volunteering.

While there are trends, there is no single story of the pandemic; organisations and volunteers have been affected and have responded in different ways. This change is ongoing, and more research will be needed in the coming years to continue measuring impact. What is clear is the need to build on the learning and plan for the future to ensure that volunteering continues to play its vital role in our community life.