

SC 27

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Gweithredu Gwirfoddol Cymru

Response from: Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)



Equality and Social Justice Committee's consultation on Social Cohesion

ABOUT US

[Wales Council for Voluntary Action \(WCVA\)](#) is the national membership body for voluntary organisations in Wales. Our purpose is to enable voluntary organisations to make a bigger difference together.

Through this submission, we would like to draw the Committee's attention to the role of the voluntary sector in building, enabling and sustaining social cohesion in Wales. This submission further explores the challenges faced by voluntary organisations and the opportunities for closer cross-sectoral collaboration.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should clarify and simplify its interpretation of social cohesion, set clear targets, and regularly publish information on the progress towards them.

Recommendation 2: Public sector bodies should work with voluntary organisations as equal partners in advancing social cohesion.

Recommendation 3: All public bodies should implement and adhere to The Code of Practice for Funding the Third Sector.

Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government should work with communities, public bodies, the voluntary and private sectors to produce a Community Policy.

DEFINING SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion is a complex concept with no universally accepted definition in Wales. In order to respond to this consultation, we have considered:

- Welsh Government's [Getting on Together: The Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales](#), which features two definitions of 'community cohesion' and a vision based on three foundations, three ways of working, and five underlying principles
- Welsh Government's 2016-17 [Community Cohesion National Delivery Plan](#), which features seven outcomes
- Diverse Cymru's [2021 review of Welsh Government's Community Cohesion Programme](#), which features seven aims
- The Well-being of Future Generations Act (WBFG) goal [A Wales of Cohesive Communities](#), which features a single definition and a four strand journey to achieving the goal

While there is an overlap between aspects of each interpretation, there are also substantial divergences. The vast number of terms makes it difficult to determine what Welsh Government's idea of social cohesion is, scrutinise progress towards it, or determine how it aligns with WBFG goals.

Recommendation 1: The Welsh Government should clarify and simplify its interpretation of social cohesion, set clear targets, and regularly publish information on the progress towards them.

The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales' website provides a succinct definition of each goal and consistent information on the progress made towards it. Coupled with the significance and permanence of the Act, we have decided to base our response on their interpretation of social cohesion for the purposes of this consultation.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act interprets social cohesion as:

A Wales of Cohesive Communities: attractive, safe, viable and well-connected

and breaks down the journey towards this goal into:

- ***People active in their communities*** (creating the conditions where people and communities can do things that matter to them)
- ***Connected communities*** (supporting communities to be well connected and safe)
- ***Access to key well-being services*** (supporting vibrant foundational economies)
- ***Community anchor organisations*** (valuing the role and potential that community anchor organisations can play in building cohesive communities)

THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR'S ROLE IN SOCIAL COHESION

The voluntary sector and volunteers play a crucial, multifaceted role in social cohesion. Voluntary organisations often work in partnership with public bodies and the private sector. They hold valuable knowledge of local needs and circumstances and often act as a mediator between communities and institutions. While some voluntary organisations have been established with the explicit purpose to advance social cohesion, many others promote it as a by-product of their activities.

The voluntary sector enables **people to be active in their communities** – it provides individuals with opportunities to mix and volunteer together. Volunteering opportunities range from activities aimed at responding to an emergency¹ (e.g. natural disasters), through alleviating persistent local challenges (e.g. lack of access to sport and cultural activities²), to enhancing the local environment³ (e.g. community gardening). Volunteering enables communities to come together and collectively come up with solutions to local problems.

The voluntary sector supports **connected communities**. Community transport organisations help people get to medical appointments, whilst reducing

¹ [Volunteering and wellbeing during the Coronavirus pandemic](#) (features a synthesis of 50 practice-based case studies)

² Example: [Bedlinog RFC](#) – a entirely volunteer-led rugby club in Merthyr Tydfil offering a support system for nearly 200 young people facing disadvantages, including risks of exclusion from education, involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour

³ [Landfill Disposals Tax Communities Scheme Annual report 2023/24](#) (features a large number of case studies and summarises the achievements of projects in 485 communities)

loneliness and isolation.⁴ Car sharing schemes reduce congestion and CO2 emissions, making areas a nicer place to live.⁵ Active travel organisations provide education, inspiring motivation and confidence for their beneficiaries, who enjoy the benefits of a healthier lifestyle and local social connections.⁶ Beyond physical connectivity, voluntary organisations also help digitally excluded individuals to build skills and confidence to connect with their local community and services online.⁷

The voluntary sector provides **access to key well-being services** in communities across Wales. Social enterprises contribute to the local economic development, providing fair employment opportunities, using local supply chains and answering a local need.⁸ Community energy schemes create resilience through enabling communities to generate and access affordable energy, whilst helping tackle the climate emergency.⁹ Voluntary organisations provide individuals with specialist support, help them learn about and access local well-being services.¹⁰

The voluntary sector is well represented within **community anchor organisations**. Development trusts¹¹, co-operatives¹² and housing associations¹³ frequently work in close collaboration as part of the local voluntary ecosystem. The County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) are the providers of local voluntary infrastructure support in Wales, acting as a community anchor organisation in

⁴ Example: [Transport to Health in Aneurin Bevan](#) – a Community Transport Association project with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

⁵ Some schemes go further, enabling the sharing of electric vehicles. Example: [TydaNi](#) – a community-owned electric car-sharing service which operates across Wales

⁶ Example: [Linking Up Wales](#) – a Sustrans Cymru project improving links between the National Cycle Network and eight rural communities across Wales

⁷ Example: [Helping people with learning disabilities get online](#) – a joint project of Learning Disability Wales and Digital Communities Wales enabling people with learning disabilities to access online spaces

⁸ [Social business case studies](#) (compiles a list of diverse case studies showing the impact of social enterprises across communities in Wales)

⁹ Example: [Awel Aman Tawe](#) – a community energy charity running a wind energy and rooftop solar energy co-ops, a community hub, education programme and community transport scheme

¹⁰ Example: [CADMHAS](#) – a community mental health advocacy service supporting individuals in Conwy, Denbighshire, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn

¹¹ Examples: DTA Cymru feature member [case studies](#) on their website; Building Communities Trust provides 11 case studies of organisations participating in their [Community Anchor Development Programme](#)

¹² Example: [Community Shares Wales Resilience Project](#) – a report showcasing the impact of community-led economic initiatives in Wales supported by Cwmpas

¹³ Example: [Welsh housing associations are adapting to build suitable homes for all](#) – an expert opinion blog from Community Housing Cymru provides examples of housing associations taking steps to adapt housing to meet local needs and promote social cohesion

their own right as well as supporting others.¹⁴ The voluntary sector often provides physical spaces for people to meet and participate in activities locally and supports communities to bring properties into community ownership.¹⁵

The voluntary sector provides **specialist support and expertise**. The Committee has indicated they would like to *consider the wider context of community cohesion following targeted attacks on refugees and asylum seekers in communities across the UK during the summer of 2024*. Specialist organisations, such as the [Welsh Refugee Council](#), are a crucial partner in educating and dispelling misinformation as well as supporting the integration of asylum seekers and refugees.

CASE STUDIES: VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS AS DRIVERS OF SOCIAL COHESION

Voluntary sector activities often cut across different determinants of social well-being and bring a sense of togetherness by making community members feel seen, heard, and understood.

NoFit State is a Cardiff-based charity with a rich [community-focussed programme](#). One of their partnerships, [The Square Mile/Milltir Sqŵar](#), delivered a 14-month cultural programme across Adamsdown, Splott and Tremorfa. The partnership brought together local councillors, Police Community Support Officers, local artists, a primary school, a housing association, a refugee charity and an eco social enterprise, among others. Projects like this one create social cohesion through showcasing local talent and providing an opportunity for local people to bond around a shared positive experience. The support and presence of local institutions builds a sense of trust and familiarity between community members and representatives.

Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST) Wales is a national organisation facilitating social cohesion through supporting and empowering ethnic minority young people, families, asylum seekers and refugees. They have local projects ranging from [employability services](#), through [increasing participation in sport](#), [improving access to youth work](#), to [orientation support for asylum seekers and refugees](#).

¹⁴ Example: [Swansea City of Sanctuary Community Cohesion Project](#) – funded by the local CVC, Swansea Council for Voluntary Services (SCVS)

¹⁵ Examples: [Resilient Projects Cymru](#) – funded through Community Asset Loan Fund; [Riverside pub](#) – funded through Community Asset Development Fund with support from Cwmpas

Their [Urban Safe Project](#) in Newport provides a blueprint for effective public-voluntary sector partnership. Funded by Gwent Police and Crime Commissioner's Police Community Fund, the project provides safe, culturally accessible spaces for young people aged 11-25. It works with schools, community groups and criminal justice agencies to *'provide a positive environment for young people to engage with organisations, to become confident and develop a sense of belonging, and to be inspired by role models in their community'*. While policing is not devolved, this is only one piece of the puzzle with other enablers of social well-being, such as equitable access to health and social care services, playing an important part.

EYST's nation-wide projects tackle systematic challenges such as [housing](#) and [education](#) inequalities. The projects have a dual function – they help service users through education and advocacy, but they also gather data and monitor trends, helping inform nation-wide policy and practice.

A voluntary organisation like EYST holds a tremendous amount of valuable information between their local and national [projects](#). This information can be utilised to understand and help solve local social cohesion challenges as well as inform a nation-wide strategy.

ACE – Action in Caerau & Ely is a community developed charity run by residents of Ely and Caerau in West Cardiff. The charity played a crucial role in the aftermath of the [2023 Ely riot](#). It interviewed 1,200 local residents, giving them an opportunity to speak about the needs of the community and dispel misconceptions about the area they live in. Local residents talked about the lack of public spaces and activities for young people and the importance of positive role models. Their intuition in relation to this issue is backed by research – recent report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies found that teenagers who lost access to youth clubs performed 4% worse in school and were 14% more likely to commit crimes.¹⁶ Giving local residents the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences is affirming – it shows they are impacted by the same systematic challenges as many other communities across the UK. Having ownership over the narrative enables the local community to come together and make a strong case for the support they need. This reframes the discussion away from community ostracization and despair to positive action and hope for the future. ACE's work culminated in a 40-action [community plan](#). The plan was created in collaboration with Cardiff Council, South Wales Police and Cardiff and Vale Health Board. ACE played an invaluable conciliatory role as a mediator

¹⁶ [How cuts to youth clubs affected teen crime and education](#) - Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024

between public institutions and residents, especially given the nature of the incident which sparked the riot.

Similarly, the [Phoenix Centre](#), ran by a Swansea-based development trust, played an important role in [promoting social cohesion and community resilience](#) following the [Mayhill riot in 2021](#). The voluntary sector was not, however, invited to formally contribute to the public sector's response to the riot, which we see as a disappointing missed opportunity.

These instances showcase the crucial role voluntary organisations play not only in prevention but also in reconciliation following a break in social cohesion.

ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

There are three key enablers for voluntary organisations contributing towards social cohesion.

1. The voluntary and public sectors work as equal partners in achieving well-being for all

Cross-sectoral collaboration is widely regarded as the defining feature of the Covid-19 pandemic response in Wales. Comparative analysis shows that partnership working was more prominent in Wales than any of the other UK nations.¹⁷ Yet, multiple research teams pointed to pre-existing relationships having a considerable impacts on the speed and depth of partnership working across different regions.¹⁸ Forging relationships at times of relative stability pays off at times of crisis. Equal partnership is defined by co-production, early and continuous dialogue, transparency, establishing common goals, non-extractive engagement, fair resourcing and compensation for involvement, and having a clear division of responsibilities.

Recommendation 2: Public sector bodies should work with voluntary organisations as equal partners in advancing social cohesion.

2. A diverse portfolio of public grants and contracts, featuring core, multi-year funding

¹⁷ [Preliminary analysis of within case policy process across the 4 UK jurisdictions](#) – Mobilising UK Voluntary Action, 2022

¹⁸ [Lessons from lockdown- Mobilising Volunteers Effectively \(MoVE\)](#), 2020; [Volunteering and wellbeing in the pandemic - Part I: Learning from practice](#) - WCPP, WLGA, WCVA, 2021; [The future we create: lessons from pandemic volunteering in Wales](#) – WCVA, 2023

Long-term thinking and long-term funding go hand in hand. There is a considerable body of evidence showcasing that long-term funding yields better results.¹⁹ The Future Generations Commissioner explicitly lists '[funding opportunities are short term and fragmented](#)' as a disabler in relation to achieving the *A Wales of Cohesive Communities* goal. The Third Sector Partnership Council (TSPC) Funding and Compliance Sub-committee spent the last two years consulting with stakeholders to review [The Code of Practice for Funding the Third Sector](#). They have identified five principles: *early & continuous dialogue, valuing & outcomes, appropriate funding basis, flexibility, and equity*. All public bodies should implement the code of practice to ensure community anchor organisations are appropriately resourced.

Recommendation 3: All public bodies should implement and adhere to The Code of Practice for Funding the Third Sector.

3. Strategic direction

We cannot achieve *A Wales of Cohesive Communities* without strategic direction. Community volunteers, local businesses, public and voluntary sector staff have made great strides in promoting social cohesion in localities across Wales. Without strategic direction, a great deal of shared learning is lost and their impact beyond the local area is limited. Conversely, communities struggling to begin tackling social cohesion issues are lacking resources and guidance on how to achieve their goals. This leads to greater inequalities and furthers social divide across the country.

In 2021, the TSPC Covid Recovery Sub-Group published a report recommending the development of a **Community Policy**.²⁰ The Sub-Group identified this need based on the feedback received from a multitude of networks for voluntary sector organisations involved in the Covid-19 response. In July 2022, we were pleased to see a [written statement](#) from the Minister for Social Justice, the Minister for Climate Change and the Minister for Finance & Local Government announcing their commitment to develop a communities policy. Unfortunately, no tangible progress has been made since. The development of a communities policy is essential in working towards Wales-wide social cohesion.

The four cornerstones of our vision for a communities policy are:

¹⁹ [Time to end the dominance of short-term grants: The evidence for multi-year funding](#) - Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), 2024

²⁰ [TSPC Covid Recovery Sub-Group Report](#) – Third Sector Partnership Council Covid Recovery Sub-Group, 2021

- **Community Assets** (ensuring communities have access to shared spaces, including community right to buy)
- **Community Resilience** (building communities' ability to respond to natural disasters and emergencies)
- **Community Cohesion** (preventative actions decreasing the likelihood of violent civil unrest)
- **Community Services** (equal access to appropriate well-being services)

To be meaningful, this policy needs to be ambitious, well-resourced, and defined by close collaboration between public bodies, communities, the voluntary and private sectors.

Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government should work with communities, public bodies, the voluntary and private sectors to produce a Community Policy.

The cost of living crisis continues to present substantial challenges to voluntary organisations and communities. Cost of living pressures result in increased service demand, whilst voluntary organisations struggle to recruit and retrain staff and volunteers. We are yet to see the full impact the increase of Employer National Insurance Contributions (NICs) will have on the voluntary sector in Wales, but we have received a clear indication that voluntary organisations are considering service and staff reductions.²¹ Meanwhile, fuel prices, inflation and the decrease in households' spending power negatively impacts social enterprises and community owned assets relying on sales income. The declining financial health of the voluntary sector is a considerable risk factor Welsh Government should consider in relation to meeting our nation's aspiration for social cohesion.

²¹ [Where is the voluntary sector in the draft budget?](#) – WCVA, 2024