

## SCVO response to

# COVID-19 A Framework for Decision Making

May 2020

## Summary

The voluntary sector's contribution during the coronavirus outbreak in Scotland is recognised in the First Minister's introduction to the Framework for Decision Making, and that is to be welcomed. The collective response of the Scottish Government, local government and voluntary bodies has reached an unprecedented level.

It is notable, however, that these references relate primarily to the role of voluntary organisations as service providers. The early stages of the pandemic highlight just how important a confident and sustainable voluntary sector is to Scotland on a number of other fronts, including:

- The sector's contribution to **empowering people and communities**;
- The sector's **role as an employer**;
- Voluntary organisations as **economic actors**; and
- The sector's **voice in a collective approach to Scotland's future**.

It is vital that the voluntary sector is not seen solely in terms of service provision.

To do so risks devaluing voluntary organisations whose activities are not part of the immediate response to the pandemic, and misses the important roles that voluntary organisations can and should play in planning for the reset, restart and recovery phases, and the support that they will require to do so.

Voluntary organisations have a huge amount to contribute to these discussions, and alongside citizens must be considered on a par with businesses and the public sector in taking forward this decision-making framework.

[Briefing in detail >](#)

## Our response

We must build on the increased understanding and appreciation of the voluntary sector's role during the coronavirus pandemic to heighten the sector's scope to influence as well as deliver going forward. Our response outlines five areas for immediate focus.

### 1. The voluntary sector's role in providing services and supports during and following the pandemic

Voluntary sector service providers have responded at pace to deliver vital support during the pandemic. The flexibility, innovation and quality of response has been second to none. It is encouraging that this is recognised in the Framework for Decision Making, but it is also important that the value of the sector continues to be understood and appreciated by government once the immediate crisis is over.

While many voluntary organisations have flexed and adapted to support the people they work with in new ways, often without additional resources to do so, it is important that this is understood as an extraordinary contribution to our national crisis response. Staff, volunteers and organisations have gone above and beyond to ensure that support has been provided in the most difficult conditions, but this is not sustainable. An already stretched sector and workforce must be properly resourced on an on-going basis if we are to continue to provide safe and appropriate services.

The response to the pandemic by the voluntary sector, statutory partners, regulators and funders has shown what can be achieved through positive partnerships, in many cases without unnecessary bureaucracy. We can and must build on this when creating a new operating environment for voluntary organisations in Scotland.

It is also important to recognise the strength of the community-based response to coronavirus, and for this to be nurtured and developed. We must make every effort to future-proof newfound resilience in communities across Scotland to reduce the impact of future public health crises and limit the harm from subsequent economic crises. As the Scottish Parliament's recent inquiry into voluntary sector funding highlighted, 'the ability of the sector to provide support to the most vulnerable in our society in uncertain economic times is crucial.'

The sector's role in providing services and support in the early months of the coronavirus has been crucial in easing the burden on statutory services and providing person-centred support. As our understanding of the impacts of the

pandemic increase, it is also becoming clear that demand for the sector's services and supports is going to increase. The sector has a crucial role to play, for example in:

- Supporting those who may be shielding for many months to come – many of whom are also experiencing cuts in regular support – both practically and emotionally
- Supporting the many people whose mental health will be negatively impacted by social isolation
- Responding to the increased poverty and inequality which will follow the economic downturn caused by the pandemic
- Reskilling and employability, particularly for those furthest from the labour market.

Again, it is important that the sector is properly resourced to provide this support, but it is also crucial that our experiences and expertise are drawn upon in considering what these services might look like. The voluntary sector must have a role with public sector partners in designing the services we need for the future, and in safely reintroducing existing services. We know the people we work with well, and understand their needs; we have learned from our initial responses to the pandemic about what works and what could be improved; we know from past experience what did and didn't work in the previous system; and we can help to ensure that the services which need to be designed will meet communities' needs.

Across the whole system of public, voluntary and private sectors in the last two months we have seen new and innovative ways of working. We have seen flexibility and removal of unnecessary bureaucracy. Some things will have been tried that didn't work. We must capture that learning now so that it is not lost, or a rationale retrofitted later. Despite the devastating impact of coronavirus on our society, there are also things which have happened quickly and successfully that we will want to hang onto in the future. It is crucial that doesn't get lost in an urge to "return to normal."

The voluntary sector also has a key role to play in ensuring that service design processes include the people who are supported by services.

## **2. The sector's contribution to empowering people and communities**

It is vital that consideration of Scotland's future includes the people who have been impacted by the measures put in place to control the pandemic. We must truly understand their needs, and must take the opportunity to learn from their experiences of what has and hasn't work.

We are extremely supportive of the references to co-production in the Framework for Decision Making, viewing this as an essential element of a human rights-based approach. Many voluntary organisations have been working in this way, and advocating for its roll out, for many years, and the sector is well placed to make this way of working a reality. It is vital that the time and resources required for co-production are recognised and invested in.

Confidence in voluntary sector services comes about because of the work to nurture trusting relationships between services users and providers. Not only does this allow the sector to gather lived experience that they can also use to advocate for change, but confidence in these relationships also makes voluntary sector services particularly well placed to work with those most disengaged and isolated from their communities. This trust in voluntary organisations is by no means restricted to service providers, and organisations such as sports clubs and uniformed organisations will also have a pivotal role to play here. There is also a vital role for the sector in ensuring that the national conversation about the pandemic is accessible to different groups within society, for example, in advocating for accessible information for people with disabilities and making every effort to ensure that nobody is left behind. Whether in relation to food distribution, digital inclusion or many other things, the response to the pandemic has been community empowerment in action. We cannot lose that as we transition into recovery.

In considering the voluntary sector's role in relation to the pandemic, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking first of those organisations that are providing a direct response, or working with those most severely impacted. It is important, however, to remember that voluntary organisations right across the sector are employers and economic actors, and that very many voluntary organisations will have expertise that will be vital to discussions on how to rebuild the society and economy that we want to see.

### 3. The sector's role as an employer

Scotland's voluntary sector has over 100,000 paid staff, but we are also a sector like no other. We work with over 1.4 million volunteers and that number is increasing, and almost half of those paid jobs are part time, presenting its own challenges with shared spaces.

By taking cognisance of the sector's role as an employer, and the unique nature of voluntary organisations, the Scottish Government must include the sector in plans and discussions relating to sector and sub-sector specific guidance. These issues include but are not limited to:

- What support will be available to help organisations consider how to maintain physical distancing as lockdown is eased/reintroduced?
- Thinking through the costs of physical alterations such as office refits, additional cleaning, PPE etc – and who covers those costs?
- How to manage the confidence of employees coming back to work?
- How to adapt to management, recruitment, training etc online?
- The Scottish response to any changes to furlough arrangements
- What it means to be a good employer.

In order to sustain the many benefits of the voluntary sector that have come to the fore in recent weeks and months, it will be crucial to consider the role and needs of the many thousands of people who give up their time to volunteer in Scotland, whether providing support, working behind the scenes or assuming the roles of charity trustees.

### 4. Voluntary organisations as economic actors

The voluntary sector's contribution to the Scottish economy stretches well beyond the large numbers of people we employ and the sector's significant yearly turnover, which reached £6.06b in 2018. For example, the sector provides a route back into employment through specialised programmes and offers vital care for our rapidly aging population and others requiring person centred support so that others can go to their own work. There's also the matter of formal and informal volunteering, the economic and social impact of which is largely unmeasured.

Recognising voluntary organisations as economic actors means that they must be included in discussions about how to adapt and innovate during physical distancing, and how to respond if lockdown rules are reintroduced. The Framework talks about working with “businesses” on this, and it is important that voluntary organisations are also included.

As well as the importance of allowing voluntary organisations to make a general contribution to these discussions, there may be some issues which could only be considered if they are included, for example the impact on fundraising on social distancing. Cross-border charities will have particular insights into different decisions on exit/entry from lockdown being introduced at different times across the UK.

In addition, it will be important to engage voluntary organisations in discussions about the sad reality that some organisations won’t survive this crisis, in order that Scotland can make reasoned decisions on issues around redeployment of staff or assets, and ensuring consistency of support for beneficiaries.

As discussions are taking place within sectors of the economy, it is vital that relevant voluntary organisations are included, for example the inclusion of community transport organisations in transport discussions. There is also a crucial role for the sector in discussions about the rebuilding of the Scottish economy, as part of our role in helping to shape Scotland’s future. If the Scottish Government is successful with a transition to a wellbeing-oriented, inclusive economy, the largely unmeasured and understated economic contribution of the voluntary sector will become even greater.

## 5. The role the sector has to play in a collective approach to Scotland’s future

### A collective approach

We are very much in favour of the collective approach set out in the document, and the voluntary sector should play a role in this, in line with principles of transparency and engagement. As outlined above, it is important that there is equity between public, private and voluntary sectors in these discussions.

It is also crucial that people and communities are part of this collective approach, and as noted above the voluntary sector has a key role to play in helping to facilitate this through both co-production and collective advocacy.

As equal partners in a collective approach, voluntary organisations must retain their ability to challenge other partners, including government. Our role in



holding decision-makers to account is not, and must not be viewed as, incompatible with a partnership approach.

Collective action has been vital during the pandemic, for example joined up working between voluntary, statutory and private sectors in getting food to those who need it. We must now consider how can we harness this, including the interest in volunteering and diversity of volunteers.

It is also important that the right voluntary organisations are involved in the right discussions – this does not always mean the largest or most well-known.

### Making shared principles real

Many of the aims and principles mentioned in the Framework for Decision Making and previously put forward by Scottish Government are in line with those the voluntary sector has pursued for many years: a wellbeing economy; inclusion; equalities; human rights; kindness and compassion – all already encompassed in our National Performance Framework and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Putting these principles into action has never been more crucial.

We welcome the opportunity for Scotland to have these principles at its heart in considering our response to the pandemic, and are particularly supportive of the Scottish Government's commitment to recognising that the impact of the pandemic is not equally distributed across our society. It is vital that this recognition is a driving factor in what happens next, and the voluntary sector is a key partner in ensuring this. Those who were already disadvantaged are being hardest hit: people with disabilities, BME communities, families living in poverty, carers, women, those with mental and physical health problems, older people. These and others are the groups that voluntary organisations already know and support, and that trust those voluntary organisations. It is imperative that we all work together with people and communities to ensure the best future that we can for them, and for all of Scotland.

It is also important to note that for many of voluntary organisations, sustainability was a concern even before the pandemic. To ensure that the people and communities who have been disproportionately hit by recent events have the support they need, investment in the voluntary sector will be more vital than ever.

However as noted above, the sector's role in thinking about Scotland's future is by no means restricted to organisations on the front line. In discussions around a

wellbeing economy, for example, our environmental and human rights organisations will also have a critical role to play, reminding government of our global/international responsibilities, as well as our responsibilities here at home, and research-based charities will have crucial insights to contribute to these national discussions.

### Putting plans into action

As Scottish Government moves through phases of reset, restart and recovery, it is imperative that appropriate voluntary organisations are involved at every stage. To give just a few examples, environmental NGOs must be part of discussion on safe return to the countryside as lockdown restrictions are eased; voluntary organisations working with disabled people must play a role in helping to avoid unintended consequences of the way in which new norms and regulations are developed; voluntary organisations that work with and around public services must be involved in discussions around their re-opening; and those involved with sport and physical activity must be a key part of discussions about re-building and maintaining emotional wellbeing across society.

It is also incumbent on all of us to take action that ensure that rhetoric around a human rights-based approach or focus on wellbeing become reality. While for Scottish Government this might involve greater use of equality and human rights impact assessments, the voluntary sector could play a key role in monitoring and reporting on the impact of changes on different marginalised groups.

*This response has been prepared by SCVO, the national membership organisation for the voluntary sector, on behalf of our 2000+ members. Information on the response was circulated to the 334 members of our Policy group, and specific comments were received from:*

*Alliance Scotland, Befriending Networks, Built Environment Forum Scotland, CCPS, GCVS, Human Rights Consortium Scotland, Inclusion Scotland, National Autistic Society, National Trust for Scotland, Royal Blind, RNIB Scotland, RSPB Scotland, SAMH, Scottish Community Safety Network, Scottish Sports Association, Scottish Wildlife Trust, SIAA, Turning Point Scotland.*