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Evaluation of the Welsh Government's GwirVol Programme

Research Summary

Social research

Number: 05/2012

The Department for Local Government and Communities (DLGC) of the Welsh Government commissioned a small scale evaluation of the GwirVol scheme in 2011 which was undertaken by Old Bell 3 Ltd. The aim of the evaluation was to 'review the extent to which GwirVol has achieved its aims and objectives in supporting and increasing youth volunteering in Wales'.

Introduction

The Third Sector Unit of the Welsh Government Communities Division currently provides funding for the GwirVol scheme to take forward recommendations from the Russell Commission's 2005 report 'A National Framework for Youth Action and Engagement'.

GwirVol is a central pillar of the Welsh Government's commitment to working effectively with voluntary organisations to ensure that youth volunteering is adequately supported and that levels of youth volunteering continue to grow.

GwirVol was launched in April 2009 with the following strategic targets:

- To establish GwirVol as a genuinely youth led initiative and the lead body for youth volunteering in Wales;
- To take forward the recommendations of the Russell Commission by providing a framework to bring about a step change in the numbers and diversity of young volunteers;

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

- To ensure more and better volunteering opportunities through promotion, information, advice and grant funding;
- To reward and recognise the quality both of youth volunteering opportunities and young volunteers.

GwirVol is led by the GwirVol Partnership which is comprised of representatives from the voluntary, community, public and private sectors in Wales. Administration of the programme is provided by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) on behalf of the Welsh Government. For the period 2009-2012, the Welsh Government has provided approximately £1million per annum to GwirVol.

This is used to fund a number of youth-led interventions and actions at the national and local levels. These include the national and local grant programmes, the work of youth volunteer advisors, the GwirForce youth panel, the GwirVol web site (and other information and promotional activity) and other activities. Funding for GwirVol is due to end in March 2012.

Findings

Overall, the findings from this evaluation point to high levels of satisfaction with GwirVol, both by those directly involved and those benefiting from support from the grant programmes, albeit with some caveats around the application and monitoring processes.

GwirVol is a well-managed, inclusive scheme that encourages and supports young volunteers through a mix of interventions at the local and national levels.

GwirVol continues to be a uniquely Welsh approach to meeting the recommendations of the Russell Commission (2005). The scheme has been implemented against the backdrop of a supportive policy context in Wales and this is likely to continue under the 2011-2015 Programme for Government in Wales. Moreover, at the time GwirVol was set up, there were already good levels of volunteering across all age groups in Wales, which provided a solid platform for the initiative.

In light of the wider socio-economic context – characterised by high and increasing youth unemployment and concerns around intergenerational tensions - the rationale for GwirVol is probably stronger now than in April 2009. The evaluation has found strong support for the continuation of the scheme beyond March 2012.

GwirVol provides a broad based framework by which different routes into volunteering can be offered to young people. Importantly, this has allowed GwirVol to make progress (particularly through the national grant programmes) in engaging those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The report finds that reasonable progress has been made in raising awareness of youth volunteering generally and GwirVol specifically amongst stakeholder groups and organisations in Wales. However, the report also finds that further work needs to be done to further enhance awareness levels going forward.

In terms of design, GwirVol has operated in a flexible way to take

advantage of new opportunities. In doing so, much has been learnt about ‘what works’ in delivering volunteer support at the national and local level.

There is, however, some concern about the progress made by the GwirForce intervention. GwirForce clearly has an important role in (amongst other things) providing a ‘youth voice’ that helps shape the wider GwirVol programme. There is nonetheless an urgent need to improve overall representation including increasing membership numbers, reducing reliance on certain individuals, and improving coverage across Wales (especially north Wales).

There is good evidence that the GwirVol scheme has contributed positively to youth volunteering in Wales. For instance WCVA’s monitoring evidence suggests that – while not reaching their overall targets - the national grant programmes did recruit 957 volunteers in 2009/10 providing a total of 59,000 volunteer hours input in 2009/10, while our survey of grant recipient organisations

suggests that almost all have met or will meet the targets set.

Similarly the youth volunteer advisors and Local Youth Led Grants programme showed strong levels of volunteer recruitment/engagement, and strong performance has also been recorded in the diversity of young people taking up volunteering opportunities.

However, less clear is GwirVol's effect on overall youth volunteering in Wales. Data on the aggregate amount of young volunteering hours (all Wales) is limited. The indirect/proxy measure based on number of volunteering opportunities (derived from www.volunteeringwales.net) revealed static volunteering opportunities between 2009/10 and 2010/11, though it must be stressed that the measure itself is at best indicative.

Moreover, the findings of this evaluation indicate relatively high levels of volunteer 'deadweight' suggesting that more needs to be done to engage new (rather than existing) volunteers.

At the scheme level, more needs to be done to improve the performance measures used, particularly around the website and setting SMART targets for the individual grant programmes.

The report's findings suggest that while GwirVol has generated some positive impacts on young people (and indirectly others), there is a clear need for a more detailed and robust approach to capturing and measuring impacts, particularly in presenting a more comprehensive picture of performance, and helping to better determine relative performance of the various interventions on a like for like basis.

Improved monitoring and evaluation processes would also help underpin a more rigorous approach to assessing the value for money offered by the scheme as a whole as well as the individual interventions. Within the scope of available resources this is likely to include both quantifiable measures (e.g. hours of volunteering input) as well as softer outcomes (e.g. attitudinal change and wider impacts on communities).

Crucially however, GwirVol must also retain a degree of flexibility and the capacity to reallocate funding in light of future findings on relative value for money. For example, the findings for the Local Youth Led grants in particular suggest a relatively strong performance, which could potentially lead to a coherent argument for this particular intervention receiving a greater proportion of overall GwirVol funding in future years.

Recommendations

The evaluation made twelve recommendations, namely:

Recommendation 1: In light of the broadly positive findings of this evaluation, we recommend that the GwirVol programme is retained for at least another three years. While recognising the pressures to cut budgets for third sector support programmes, it seems important to stress that existing GwirVol funding is spread across a number of interventions and any significant reductions in overall funding for GwirVol would risk making

individual interventions tokenistic, and render the scheme as whole, ineffective. We recommend therefore that existing funding levels are retained as far as possible.

Recommendation 2: We recommend that the current mix of interventions is retained, while also providing flexibility to ensure continued adaptation to changes in the wider policy context: in particular, GwirVol should aim to identify potential opportunities from current and emerging policy developments (e.g. providing follow-on volunteering opportunities for those studying the Welsh Baccalaureate, linking with the UK National Citizen Service agenda and opportunities around emerging policy developments like the Child Poverty agenda in Wales).

Recommendation 3: For the present we recommend retaining approximately the same balance between the different interventions as in the current scheme. However, given the strong performance of local grant schemes, and the small amount of funding currently available, we would argue that this

element should be protected in absolute as well as relative terms. Where possible, local grant panels, YVAs and CVCs should seek to identify match funding for these 'pots', drawing on good practice examples such as that in Swansea.

Recommendation 4: We recommend that awareness raising and promotion remains an on-going focus of the GwirVol scheme and with increasing emphasis on: a) promotion in areas with relatively low take up (e.g. few volunteers from North Wales have so far engaged in GwirForce) and b) raising awareness of the overall impact and benefits of youth volunteering.

Recommendation 5: We recommend that GwirVol continues to target young volunteers from all backgrounds and does not become exclusively focused on engaging traditionally hard to reach groups, while retaining its record of success in this regard.

Recommendation 6: On balance, we recommend that GwirForce should be retained though there needs to be a step change in the

pace of delivering GwirForce activities and impacts. Promotion of GwirForce, particularly in north Wales needs urgent attention, and GwirForce members must be given sufficient resources to cover promotional materials/costs and travel expenses to this end.

Furthermore we think that cross-representation between the Local Youth Panels and GwirForce is highly desirable, while recognising the necessary limitations arising from the voluntary nature of participation in both.

Recommendation 7: We recommend that the current management arrangements for GwirVol are retained, but with urgent attention given to increasing the membership numbers and scope of the partnership board (and sub-groups). In particular, though we recognise that this represents a generic challenge for many partnership based bodies, GwirVol should seek greater engagement from private sector organisations. There are significant advantages in WCVA, with its structural links to the CVCs and its high profile within the third sector, continuing to manage the scheme.

Recommendation 8: We recommend that while GwirVol should continue to operate inclusively, encouraging volunteering from all young volunteers in Wales, there should be a strong focus (particularly in the national grant programmes) on attracting individuals who are new to volunteering. Moreover, we think careful consideration should be given to the inclusion within GwirVol of the 14 and 15 year old age group.

Recommendation 9: Should the national grant programmes be retained, WCVA should review the grant application and monitoring forms in the light of the feedback from our questionnaire to ensure that they are as simple as possible, drawing on their broader experience, and discussing with the Welsh Government any obstacles which they perceive as arising from the latter's requirements. WCVA and the Welsh Government should also consider whether smaller, locally based organisations could be signposted for assistance to the YVAs for support (and potentially

for support from the local grants) in the first instance.

Recommendation 10: We recommend that GwirVol revisits (and where appropriate revises) the existing performance measures – particularly those associated with the web site / online data - to ensure robustness in the monitoring approach. In addition, GwirVol staff should work with applicants to create targets that are SMART – including for promotions grants.

Recommendation 11: We recommend that GwirVol Partnership Board gives careful consideration to how total youth volunteering hours in Wales can be derived and monitored (e.g. perhaps as part of the wider statistical information collated by WCVA in its third sector statistical resource). We also recommend that the Welsh Government and the GwirVol Partnership Board gives consideration to measuring young people's attitudes to volunteering across Wales, perhaps via the National Survey for Wales.

Recommendation 12: We recommend that the GwirVol Partnership Board consider feasible ways of developing more detailed and robust impact monitoring and associated value for money data (e.g. what might be included within the standard returns from funded organisations, how surveys of young volunteers might be used and whether a case study template could be further developed to capture more detailed and indirect impacts e.g. to derive potential impacts on local public services).

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