TWO

Voluntary action and the pandemic across the UK

Ewen Speed, Laura Crawford and Alasdair Rutherford

Image 2.1: Volunteer Bikers NI delivering prescriptions in Northern Ireland

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the implications of the pandemic in terms of constructing respective voluntary action policies across the four UK jurisdictions, particularly in relation to identifying both similarities and differences across the four jurisdictions. It will do this in three primary ways. First, by identifying and analysing policy documents within each of the four jurisdictions, we establish the prevailing policy contexts and how these impacted upon the respective government responses to the pandemic. Second, we consider the impact of the pandemic on the dynamics of voluntary action for the UK population, and what this might tell us about the general impact of the pandemic on public engagement with voluntary action. Third, we present a thematic analysis of a substantial corpus of reports detailing how a diverse range of organisations were engaging with the pandemic conditions. This review identifies some key themes relevant to the voluntary action response including the role of mutual aid and hyper-local activity, the importance of collaboration, partnership and innovation, and how the perceived nature of societal need influenced volunteering trends. The chapter offers a range of analysis across civil society, allowing us a snapshot of the pandemic relations between government, volunteer involving organisations and individual citizens. It also considers evidence of what organisations think is significant in terms of their ongoing response to COVID-19, such as the need to offer more flexible volunteering opportunities and concerns around the inclusion of more diverse groups of people undertaking voluntary action.

2.1.1 Consideration of similarities and differences

The public health response in the UK to the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as a natural experiment. Citizens of the different jurisdictions were randomly assigned, through their geographical location, to different public health response

categories. There was clear divergence across the different jurisdictions. For example, policies were implemented around mandated mask-wearing at different dates across the UK, despite relatively similar rates of infection. At the point of the initial outbreak in March 2020, faced with much ignorance about what the best public health responses might be, the four jurisdictions clearly responded differently to the developing crisis. For this chapter, this could be understood in terms of what the presented evidence can tell us about what the perceived, most proportionate public health response was, in the context of the extant voluntary action context that was in place in each of the four jurisdictions. In turn, this functions to offer crucial insights into the similarities and differences in voluntary action between the jurisdictions and what this might tell us about pandemic responses.

In this regard, the differences in the public health responses to the pandemic across the four jurisdictions presented a novel window into the devolved politics in the UK. This was largely because both public health and voluntary action are areas of unreserved devolved policy-making. This means they are entirely determined at a devolved level, by the respective assembly or parliament. In turn, this creates an opportunity for divergence in terms of policy-making. For example, there were clear similarities in terms of national lockdowns in each jurisdiction, as well as legislation around social distancing and such-like, but there were also differences in the public health response such as in the timing and scope of national lockdowns. This chapter explores these similarities and differences across the four jurisdictions and considers what this might tell us about ongoing voluntary action in a devolved United Kingdom.

2.2 Governing voluntary action in a pandemic: the policy response

The analysis detailed in this section considered a range of voluntary action policy documents from across the four jurisdictions that were published between 23 March 2020 and

22 March 2021. This timeframe marks the 12-month period from the initial UK-wide COVID-19 lockdown. Other inclusion criteria were that the documents, press releases, official policy documents or reports had to be issued by the respective jurisdictional government, at a national level, with one notable exception, the 2020 Kruger Review. More detailed analysis of the underlying voluntary action policy differences across the UK jurisdictions is offered in Speed (2021). Similarly, more detailed analysis of the differences in terms of voluntary action and COVID-19 response are offered in Speed (2022). The analysis of the different jurisdictions that follows is presented alphabetically, commencing with England.

2.2.1 The English case

The review of outputs for England identified six documents that were in scope. These were four documents published by the UK Government, but only relevant to the English context (see UK Government, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d) and a further two documents produced by NHS England (see NHS England, 2020a, 2020b). The final English document was a report for government compiled by a member of the UK Parliament into effective community responses to the pandemic. It is this document which the analysis considers first.

The report titled 'Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant', the so-called Kruger Review (Kruger, 2020), has commanded a high-profile role in discussions about the English government's response to COVID-19. It is not a clear and direct policy action from government, but it is the closest that the English case came to issuing a national policy. It needs to be noted that there were explicitly labelled policy documents and strategy documents, but these tended to be published by the Local Government Association (LGA) at a local level (for example, LGA, 2020). The Kruger Review engaged with these issues at a national level, from a central 'English' government perspective, thereby

meriting consideration here. This differentiation between local and national policy contexts reflects the extent to which the underlying English voluntary action policy framework determined the types of English voluntary action organisational response, that is, the English policy response tended to be dissipated down to a number of different local responses, without recourse to a broader national strategy.

The English policy context is one where voluntary action, and the organisations involved in coordinating voluntary action, are actively seen to be separate from government. The role of government in this sphere is to ensure citizens have the opportunity to participate in voluntary action, but in this regard, government is an enabler rather than a provider of these opportunities. The organisations that actually provide these opportunities are seen as being outside of and apart from government. This was reflected in the focus of the remaining documents which were oriented towards the provision of public health guidelines intended to facilitate ongoing voluntary action in face of the pandemic.

Since the 'Big Society' policy agenda in 2010, the English policy context has tended to see voluntary action as a domain which was not the responsibility of government. This is evidenced directly in the publication of the 2018 'Civil society strategy: Building a future that works for everyone' (Cabinet Office, 2018), in which emphasis is placed on government as an enabler of civil society actors, working in collaboration with private sector actors. In terms of the specific policy response to COVID-19, the primary national level response was concerned with public health guidance. The prevailing policy context, from 2018, mitigated against the development of any concerted national governmental level of English voluntary action policy. Voluntary action policy is diffuse, atomised and highly localised, such that the idea of a national level voluntary action policy becomes hard to imagine. These more local modes of organisation contribute to a set of conditions which facilitate the political choice not to prioritise voluntary action

at the national level. The refusal of government to organise a national policy level response meant that much of the policy context was national public health guidelines.

2.2.2 The Northern Irish case

The policy context in Northern Ireland in relation to the devolved assembly is somewhat different to the situation in any of the other jurisdictions. In effect there was no devolved government in Northern Ireland between March 2017 and January 2020. This was due to political cross-party difficulties in forming an Executive. The net effect of this was that many Northern Irish policy decisions were made by the UK Government during this time. This functioned to create something of a policy vacuum in Northern Ireland. However, the Northern Irish policy analysis identified five documents that were within scope. Three of these were issued by the Department for Communities (2020a, 2020b, 2020c) a further one by the Department of Education (2020) and one from the Office of Northern Ireland Direct Government Services (2020).

Four of the documents identified were guidance documents, aimed at outlining best practice for becoming or continuing to engage in voluntary action. In this sense, they were similar to the English case. The fifth document, 'Volunteering during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic' (Office of Northern Ireland Direct Government Services, 2020) was different in that it took a strategic, more policy-oriented approach. It proposed a national response to the pandemic and was allied to a programme of work, albeit an un-costed programme of work. The emphasis across the document was very much on cross-community collaboration and coordination of activities. The policy documents spoke to a clearly defined voluntary action sector operating at a national level within Northern Ireland, and it is this sector, coupled to local community groupings, which the voluntary action policies sought to

engage and work with. The lack of a more explicit and sustained voluntary action policy programme in Northern Ireland may be more indicative of the ongoing difficulties associated with maintaining a fully functioning legislature rather than any wider comment about the state of voluntary action policy in Northern Ireland.

2.2.3 The Scottish case

The documentary analysis identified four documents that were in scope. All four were published by the Scottish Government (2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d) and none of them were guidance documents contra to what was identified in the preceding analyses of England and Northern Ireland. The Scotland COVID-19 policy response was more directive and programmatic than the other jurisdictions. For example, among a wide range of support made available across the third and private sectors, the Scottish Government provided a £350 million package of support to be invested in communities, such as the 'Supporting Communities Fund'.

Within the 2020–1 Programme for Government there was a commitment to ensure that the third sector and volunteering can 'thrive and contribute to a recovering economy and society' (Scottish Government, 2020b, p 60). Across the policy documents reviewed there was little direct and explicit voluntary action policy identified. However, it was very apparent that the third sector was centrally and directly invoked into the job of partnership and collaboration with the Scottish Government. This is a fundamental difference from the English and Northern Irish analysis in that voluntary action was construed as a direct responsibility of national level government, however, this is disbursed to local levels. The Scottish case is marked by a national policy level commitment to collaboration and partnership between voluntary action organisations and government, much more so than the English or Northern Irish contexts.

2.2.4 The Welsh case

The document search identified four documents which were in scope. Three of these were published by the Government of Wales (2020a, 2020b, 2020c) and the fourth was a report from an official inquiry conducted by the Welsh Senedd into the initial Welsh Government response to COVID-19 (Welsh Parliament Equality, Local Government, and Communities Committee, 2021). In terms of voluntary action and COVID-19, the response was coordinated by Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), a national membership body for voluntary action in Wales. The WCVA is not a government body so does not have the authority to make national policy. There were many policy documents produced by the WCVA but they were not included for analysis here.

Of the four identified documents the most analytically interesting was the initial guidance on support for the third sector which was published within the first week of the UK–wide lockdown. This document announced £24 million of additional funding across three broad strands of activity: first, the Third Sector Resilience Fund, helping charities and third sector organisations through the crisis; second, by helping more people volunteer; and third, by strengthening the third sector infrastructure. This response demonstrated a clear national commitment to increasing levels of voluntary action at national and local levels. The national disbursement of the Third Sector Resilience Fund was to be coordinated by WCVA. This indicates a real commitment to collaborative partnership across government and voluntary action organisations and, in stark contrast to the English case, demonstrates engagement, on the part of national government, with existing structures within the voluntary action sphere.

The analyses presented here demonstrate the ways in which the prevailing policy contexts differed across the four UK jurisdictions. The implications of these differences become clear when we consider how the prevailing policy contexts both

structure and are structured by the policy responses in relation to voluntary action and COVID-19. It could be argued that the English case is best characterised by a lack of national policy response. This is largely because responsibility for voluntary action has been rescinded by national government and pushed down to a more local level. In relation to Northern Ireland, the lack of a functioning legislature has impacted on the policy context in myriad ways and the Northern Irish response tended more towards a reliance on public health guidance rather than voluntary action strategic policy, although there was a national level policy response. In contrast, the policy responses in Scotland and Wales have demonstrated consistent national level responses. Typically, these responses have involved collaboration and partnership between voluntary action organisations and national level government. These differences raise important questions about their impact upon the overlap between policy and practice across the four jurisdictions. However, it is also necessary for us to understand the impact of the pandemic on voluntary action at a general level, such that local and national policies might be developed to respond to that context. It is to this issue that we now turn.

2.3 Describing the dynamics of volunteering during the pandemic: the citizen response

Volunteering during the pandemic ebbed and flowed as restrictions were tightened and then relaxed. The available evidence suggests a mixed impact, with formal volunteering, undertaken in the context of an organisation, affected somewhat differently from informal volunteering, activity taken outside of an organisation. Evidence from the Community Life Survey (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2021) shows that formal volunteering rates in England fell sharply in 2020/1 from 37 per cent to 30 per cent of the population, while informal volunteering held steady. Regular, monthly, formal volunteering also fell during the pandemic, while

regular informal volunteering rose substantially from 28 per cent to 47 per cent. There was a similar picture in Scotland, where formal volunteering held steady at 26 per cent in 2020, most likely due to the significant growth in mutual aid volunteering which counteracted the decline in formal volunteering. In contrast, informal volunteering increased very significantly from 36 per cent to 56 per cent (Scottish Government, 2022c).

While these large surveys produce a representative snapshot of volunteering at discrete points during the period, it is important to understand how the dynamics of volunteering interacted with pandemic restrictions. Administrative data from digital volunteer-matching services provides us with real-time data on the number of people coming forward to participate in a formal volunteering capacity, and can help us to understand how different groups' opportunities to volunteer were affected by the restrictions. While the data does not cover all volunteers, and there are many routes to volunteering, the scale and real-time nature of the digital data do provide insights not easily achievable with other methods. Significant numbers of individuals responded to the start of the crisis by registering to volunteer. However, the challenges facing organisations in responding to the crisis meant that it was not possible to mobilise the large numbers of people volunteering. In the second lockdown there was a further surge in voluntary action, and this time organisations were in a better position to match people to volunteering roles.

Technology made registering to volunteer easier than it otherwise would have been during the pandemic. While the profile of volunteer registrants tends to be younger than volunteers more broadly, the digital-matching services were used by quite broad demographics in terms of age, gender, rurality and deprivation, with strong patterns showing that they were being accessed by 'different' people than had been using them pre-pandemic as a way to volunteer. This might suggest a very real public response to the perceived pandemic crisis.

2.3.1 Thousands of people responded to lockdown by volunteering
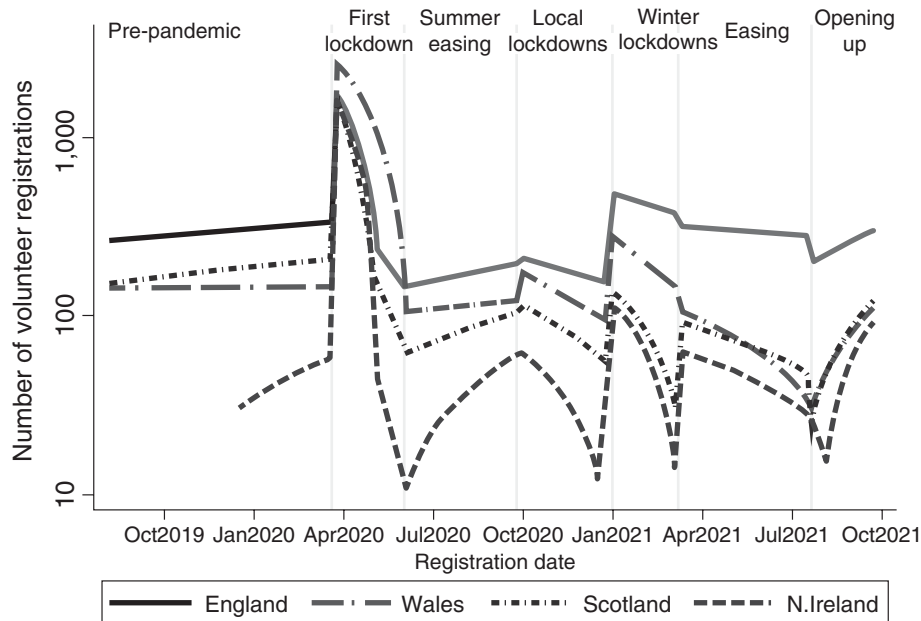
Patterns of formal volunteering engagement were broadly similar across nations, but with differences across time. All four nations showed large spikes in the number of people coming forward to volunteer in late March and April 2020. Figure 2.1 shows the number of volunteer registrations recorded in the data in each of the four nations over time. What is striking is the similarity across the nations in both the patterns and timing.

This response was both rapid and unprecedented in scale. However, organisations faced significant challenges in matching volunteers, as COVID-19 restrictions prevented some volunteer activities and organisations from navigating the fast-changing regulations. From the wider project we know that organisations had significant challenges in mobilising such a large number of volunteers in a short space of time, particularly when also navigating COVID-19 restrictions, such as requirements for shielding and social distancing, as well as the ongoing pandemic pressures themselves (Rutherford and Spath, 2021). Due to this, the number of volunteering opportunities available dropped off steeply as the volunteer numbers increased. This means that large numbers of people were not matched to a volunteering activity.

It is impossible to tell from our data whether this significant number of people went on to volunteer in other ways, either through other formal routes or through informal volunteering and other community action. But it is clear that it was simply not possible to manage the sheer scale of the voluntary action response to the crisis of the pandemic, and this was the case across all four nations.

In contrast, the second, smaller surge in voluntary action associated with the winter lockdowns in 2020 and early 2021 tells a different story. Again, we saw large numbers of new volunteers registering. But this time match rates to activity went up rather than down, and the time between registration and activity fell rather than rose. While in part determined

Figure 2.1: Number of volunteer registrations

Source: Data from Team Kinetic & BeCollective, October 2021

by the variation in lockdown restrictions, this likely reflects volunteer involving organisations' greater readiness, both in terms of the policies and procedures in place, to provide COVID-safe volunteering, and the anticipation of greater supply that allowed the opportunities for volunteers to be in place. Also, perhaps it was no longer a novel situation and people had better knowledge about what to expect and what would be required. This time the numbers of voluntary action opportunities were increasing again, and there was more clarity about how volunteering could be undertaken within pandemic restrictions. This might reflect the utility of the public health policy guidelines detailed in section 2.2. This meant that a much greater proportion of volunteers were successfully matched to opportunities.

It would be unreasonable to expect that organisations would be able to respond as quickly in a fast-developing and unprecedented crisis such as the first lockdown. However, the second lockdown response shows that with the right policies and preparation in place organisations can mobilise to cope with a dramatic surge in the supply of volunteers.
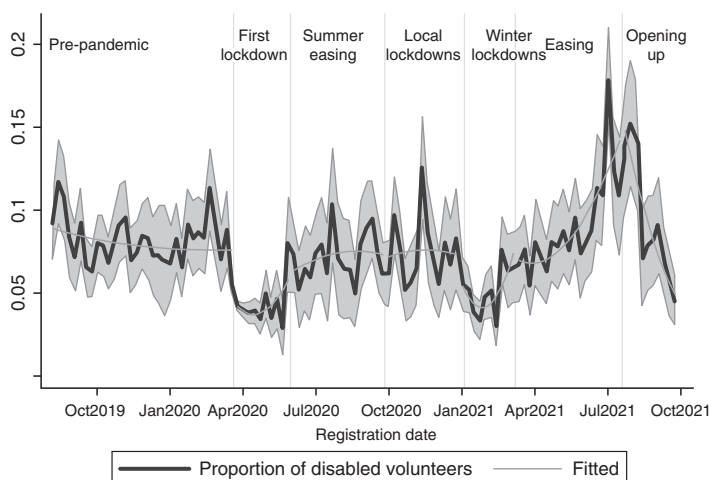
2.3.2 A different profile of volunteer

COVID-19 has accelerated many aspects of digital society, particularly in relation to public service provision (Peek et al, 2020). The volunteers who came forward through the digital volunteer-matching services at the start of lockdowns differed from the profile of volunteers before the pandemic across all four nations. Lockdown volunteers were older, with those in their 30s, 40s and 50s showing particular growth in participation. This was repeated in the winter lockdown and was likely driven by a combination of furlough and home-working facilitating volunteering. While lockdown volunteering brought in many new people to volunteering, it also risked excluding some groups. Again, it is striking how similar patterns are across the nations. Lockdown volunteers were less likely than those

pre-pandemic to come from the most deprived areas, and this is particularly prominent in the second lockdown. In both lockdowns the surge of volunteers were much more likely to have come from rural areas than at other times. These patterns are likely to reflect both differences in the profile of people who were volunteering, as well as a broadening of the demographic using digital routes to volunteer opportunities.

2.3.3 Returning to 'normal'?

By September 2021, the end of our study period, the numbers and characteristics of volunteers had largely returned to the pre–COVID-19 average across the nations. For more detailed characteristics, we must combine data across the nations due to relatively small samples. But this reveals some interesting patterns across time. The average age of new volunteers fell again, as participation among those in their 30s to 50s fell. The number of opportunities has started growing again. However, we are also concerned about the groups for whom volunteering has not returned to normal. Participation among those in the most deprived areas has not bounced back to pre-pandemic levels. It would appear that COVID-19 has exacerbated existing exclusions which are mitigating against a number of groups being able to engage in voluntary action.

For example, Figure 2.2 shows that volunteers reporting disabilities were much less likely to volunteer during both the first and second lockdown. This might reflect the increased COVID-19 risk to some people in this group. The proportion of volunteers with disabilities grew through spring and summer of 2021 as restrictions eased and COVID-19 numbers fell. After the significant relaxation of restrictions in July 2021, and as COVID-19 numbers started to grow again, the numbers of volunteers with disabilities started to fall steeply again (see Figure 2.2). This reflects the complex interplay of COVID-19 restrictions, with existing and developing underlying health risks.

Figure 2.2: Proportion of disabled volunteers

Source: Data from Team Kinetic, October 2021

2.3.4 Understanding volunteering during the pandemic

This analysis also helps us to shed light on the dynamics that may lie behind the patterns in formal volunteering observed in the survey data (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2021). The fall in formal volunteering participation does not seem to have been driven by a fall in the willingness to volunteer, but instead by the effect that restrictions had on whether opportunities were available to volunteer.

Where we need to be cautious is the extent to which we might say that volunteering is returning to 'normal'. Some deviations from normal are to be welcomed: more use of technology to access volunteering; and a broader profile of volunteers using that technology. But others might create cause for concern: the falling participation of those in the more deprived communities; and the decline in volunteer registrations among disabled volunteers.

Conclusions drawn from this analysis, therefore, must only be taken together with the evidence from across these domains. But what is striking is how similar the patterns are across the nations. We see the same spikes in registrations, and the same patterns in activity. Despite different policy responses and timing, the broad pandemic phases do seem to match to changes in the numbers and profile of volunteers over time. And by late 2021, we see most characteristics returning to pre-pandemic levels across the four jurisdictions.

Overall, we can be reassured that volunteering on the whole is resilient. The challenges of the first lockdown did not deter volunteers registering in the second. Where formal volunteering was not possible, informal volunteering seems to have sprung up in its place. On most characteristics, volunteer registrations have returned to normal. But we must be concerned with those who risk being left behind due to COVID-19 risks as society returns to normal if volunteering is to be a diverse and inclusive activity. This may require fresh thinking in the ways in which people can get involved, and feel safe in their involvement, as we come out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So far, we have considered the policy responses to voluntary action in the context of the pandemic, and the citizen response to voluntary action in the context of the pandemic. Now we consider the role of the voluntary action organisations themselves.

2.4 Coordinating the voluntary action response: the organisational response

In order to assess the organisational response to the pandemic, we undertook qualitative analysis of published research which captured common organisational experiences of responding to the pandemic. Over 70 reports from voluntary and community sector organisations were compiled for analysis. These were wide-reaching in scope and content, and represented a broad range of organisations, including reports produced by individual

charities, think tanks and infrastructure organisations. Similar overarching themes were observed surrounding the challenges and successes of coordinating voluntary action in the face of the unfolding pandemic. In spite of these similarities, there was a clear geographical unevenness in the quantity of published material in each jurisdiction.

2.4.1 Key themes in the thematic analysis

A range of methods were employed across these studies including interviews, focus groups, surveys and case studies. While many of the reports referenced the UK, few explicitly discussed experiences in Northern Ireland, further evidencing the need for a UK-wide study. The reports analysed ranged from those published in the immediate aftermath of the first lockdown in March 2020 up to the end of February 2021. The majority of the reports reflected on patterns observed in spring/early summer 2020, with less coverage on the impact of fluctuating infection levels and government restrictions in the late summer/winter months. The focus of the reports also varied considerably, from those exploring how volunteer involving organisations adapted their working practices, to those focusing on the issues the voluntary and public sector were addressing, for example, loneliness and isolation, supporting those who were shielding, to reports that commented on the changing nature of volunteer engagement.

Three central overarching themes which appeared repeatedly across the 70 reports were, first, the importance of mutual aid, second, the value of collaboration and, third, issues around digital technologies, each of which will be discussed in this chapter. In terms of mutual aid, there was widespread recognition that mutual aid and hyper-local groups were instrumental in providing emergency support within place-based communities. As Tiratelli and Kaye (2020, p 28) argue, 'these groups are not a "nice-to-have" – they are of decisive importance to the health and welfare of thousands of

people'. Mutual aid offered an agile, flexible and responsive approach to addressing societal need, often mobilising far more quickly than formal organisations, who had to adopt new systems and processes of remote working (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020; Curtin et al, 2021). In terms of collaboration, relationships and partnerships were cited as critical. There were numerous examples of good collaborative practice where organisations worked together, playing to their strengths to coordinate activity, while in other areas tensions arose in defining who was best placed to respond, often resulting in duplication (Cretu, 2020). The MOVE project analysed data from different local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales to classify different response models. Three frameworks were identified that captured the ways different stakeholders brokered relationships and collaborated to coordinate voluntary action (Burchell et al, 2020). The strength of pre-existing relationships across sectors and the size of the area played a role in determining how collaborations played out during the pandemic. The issue of collaboration echoes some of the policy analysis in section 2.2, where different jurisdictions were characterised by fundamentally different approaches to the ethos of collaborative working.

In terms of digital technologies, numerous examples of innovative approaches and processes were observed (Cretu, 2020). The pandemic has clearly accelerated the adoption of digital tools to recruit, support and manage voluntary action (Donahue et al, 2020). Some activities that were traditionally carried out face-to-face, for example, befriending, were reimagined as virtual or telephone services. While digital technologies had a transformative impact, facilitating connection at a safe distance, the move to digital exposed inequalities in digital knowledge and access (Welsh Parliament Equality, Local Government, and Communities Committee, 2021). Such findings cautioned against seeing 'digital' as a one-size-fits-all approach to facilitating voluntary action in the wake of COVID-19.

In addition to capturing what was happening on the ground in response to pandemic conditions of voluntary action, reports had already begun to speculate on what recovery might look like, and whether the innovations COVID-19 prompted would have a long-lasting legacy. These reflections were most insightful in determining some of the conditions that either underpinned or acted as barriers to effective voluntary action pandemic responses. The pandemic radically transformed working life, with the furlough scheme and surge in remote working increasing volunteer availability, enabling some who had not volunteered before to take on roles (Coutts et al, 2020). Conversely, pandemic restrictions curtailed the involvement of many long-standing volunteers who were forced to shield or whose roles no longer existed. As Ellis Paine (2020) notes, the pandemic saw individuals both step up and stand down from volunteering, with calls to consider the long-term impact on those who paused their involvement during the pandemic (Grotz et al, 2020). This finding was also evidenced in the analysis presented in section 2.3.

Across the board, funding was a concern, with the flexibility of some responses constrained by funding dedicated to specific projects. Some reports advocated for future funding to target core organisational costs to enable more agile responses (Coutts et al, 2020; Wilson et al, 2020a). While on the surface many comparable patterns were observed in volunteering activity, the pandemic revealed the relative strength of pre-existing relationships and infrastructures (Wilson et al, 2020b; Wyler, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic exposed the legacy of previous investment, particularly given that joined-up responses were reported in areas with social and community-led infrastructure and in areas with previous experience of cross-sector emergency responses, for example, those prone to flooding (Wyler, 2020). This would suggest that those jurisdictions with more facilitative, partnership-based policies were better placed to respond to the pandemic. At a national, UK level, variations in funding and infrastructure did not impact upon the number

of citizens volunteering to help, but they do appear to have had an effect on how enthusiasm to volunteer was converted into meaningful action.

2.5 Conclusion

In comparing the four nations, we faced the challenge of disentangling the different COVID-19 responses at governmental, citizen and organisational level. What this analysis demonstrates is that there were marked similarities between the four jurisdictions, and that there were marked differences. As we write this some months after the initial lockdowns in the UK, it is hard to assess whether any of these differences had any significant impact on the progression of the pandemic. For example, volunteering numbers across the four jurisdictions are now broadly similar, as indeed they were throughout the initial responses and subsequent lockdowns. Yet what they do suggest, and indeed even evidence, are fundamental differences, across the devolved assemblies of the UK, to the role and function of voluntary action in relation to the state and voluntary action organisations. The citizen response was largely similar across the respective jurisdictions. However, how well voluntary action organisations were able to deploy these volunteers was impacted by previous experience, and the organisational context in which they were located. If there was a commitment to collaboration and partnership working then this led to more effective organisation of the voluntary action response. In terms of the policy context, both Scotland and Wales, at the level of national government, had a voluntary action policy regime characterised by partnership and participation between voluntary action organisations and government.

The challenges of measuring the impact of policy differences can also be observed in public health policy; rates of COVID-19 transmission and mortality are not significantly different between the four UK jurisdictions in spite of policy differences.

This may reflect the contagious nature of COVID-19, it may reflect economic arguments for opening up winning out globally, against public health arguments for locking down. The fact of the matter is, we are still in the middle of this global pandemic and it is impossible to draw any conclusions with any certainty. However, we can say that it was easier to mobilise and organise a voluntary action response to the pandemic when voluntary action policy and practice was regarded as a central and crucial part of the public response to the pandemic. This proved to be the most effective means of mobilising the huge groundswell of citizen response.