

## **Agenda – Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee**

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Meeting Venue:

Video Conference via Zoom

Meeting date: 30 June 2020

Meeting time: 13.30

For further information contact:

Naomi Stocks

Committee Clerk

0300 200 6565

[SeneddCommunities@senedd.wales](mailto:SeneddCommunities@senedd.wales)

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### **Informal pre-meeting**

(13.30–14.00)

In accordance with Standing Order 34.19, the Chair has determined that the public are excluded from the Committee's meeting in order to protect public health. This meeting will be broadcast live on [www.senedd.tv](http://www.senedd.tv)

### **1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest**

(14.00)

### **2 Inquiry into Covid-19 and its impact: evidence session on disability**

(14.00–15.00)

(Pages 1 – 44)

Miranda Evans, Policy and Programmes Officer, Disability Wales

Megan Thomas, Policy Officer, Disability Wales

Zoe Richards, Chief Executive, Learning Disability Wales

Ansley Workman, Director, RNIB Cymru

Nathan Owen, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, RNIB Cymru

### **Break**

(15.00–15.15)



### **3 Inquiry into Covid-19 and its impact: evidence session on low income households**

(15.15–16.00)

(Pages 45 – 64)

Steffan Evans, Policy and Research Officer, The Bevan Foundation

Claire Thomas, Policy and Research Officer, The Bevan Foundation

Rachel Cable, Head of Oxfam Cymru

Gwennan Hardy, Senior Policy Officer, Citizens Advice Cymru

### **Break**

(16.00–16.15)

### **4 Inquiry into Covid-19 and its impact: evidence session on gender**

(16.15–17.00)

Catherine Fookes, Director, Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales

Cerys Furlong, Chief Executive, Chwarae Teg

Robert Visintainer, Project Manager, Men's Sheds Cymru

### **5 Papers to note**

(17.00)

(Page 65)

#### **5.1 Correspondence from the Llywydd regarding the Committee's request for a Plenary debate on benefits in Wales – 17 June 2020**

(Page 66)

#### **5.2 Correspondence from the Royal College of General Practitioners Wales regarding advance care planning and the committee meeting on 16 June – 23 June 2020**

(Pages 67 – 69)

### **6 Motion under Standing Order 17.42(ix) to resolve to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting**

(17.00)

### **7 Inquiry into Covid-19 and its impact: consideration of evidence**

(17.00–17.15)

Document is Restricted

# RNIB

Cymru

**Golwg gwahanol  
See differently**

## **RNIB Cymru**

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Senedd Cymru  
Equality, Local Government and  
Communities Committee  
Cardiff Bay,  
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Many thanks for the opportunity to contribute to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak in Wales.

## **About RNIB Cymru**

RNIB Cymru is Wales' largest sight loss charity. We provide support, advice and information to the 121,000 people living with sight loss across Wales. We also campaign for improvements to services and raise awareness of the issues facing blind and partially sighted people. We support, empower and involve thousands of people affected by sight loss to improve lives and challenge inequalities.

We want to lead the creation of **a Wales where there are no barriers for people with sight loss.**

### **1. Introduction**

From difficulty accessing basic essentials and accessible information, a lack of emotional and practical support, blind and partially sighted people each face their own set of challenges every day.

The outbreak of the global coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated many pre-existing issues, but it has also created new challenges for people with sight loss. Long waiting times for deliveries means blind and partially sighted people are forced to adapt to new and unfamiliar shop layouts whilst trying to maintain a safe distance from others they may be unable to see, increasing their risk of infection. Reduced public transport services for essential journeys and loss of support from family and friends means people with sight loss are more vulnerable than ever.

More recently, as lockdown measures begin to ease, we are starting to see changes being made to our public spaces to enable social distancing and encourage greater active travel. Whilst this is a positive step, the speed of implementation, absent careful equality considerations risks making our streets inaccessible to people with sight loss. The steps taken to 'unlock our society' must not exclude disabled people and widen the gap of disadvantage even further.

## **2. Safe social distancing near-impossible for people with sight loss (RNIB research)**

Our latest research into the impact of the coronavirus lockdown on blind and partially sighted people shows:

- 66% of blind and partially sighted respondents feel less independent now compared to before lockdown.
- 80% of all respondents reported that the way they shop for their essential shopping has changed since lockdown, with half as many blind and partially sighted people now shopping alone
- 74% of respondents were either very or quite concerned about getting access to food while 21% of people reported that they had had to ration food.
- A quarter (26%) of respondents said that they had struggled to get written information in a format that they could read and 17% said that they had struggled to access online information.

Keeping two metres away from other people is difficult if not impossible for blind and partially sighted people. Guide dogs aren't trained to do this. We have heard of instances of passers-by aggressively challenging people with sight loss who have been unable to keep their distance owing to their sight loss, and many visual markers to enforce social distancing are inaccessible for people with sight loss:

*“It is very hard to know how to keep 2 metres away from people when you can't judge distance... I can't see the markings on the floor, so have been shouted at... I ended up in tears. It's not my fault that I can't see the floor markings.”*

This is having a major effect on the independence of many blind and partially sighted people, in many cases leading to isolation and depression:

*“I live alone and feel isolated and alone for the first time in my life. I am also very acutely aware of my sight impairment in ways I am not usually.”*

*“I am very concerned about social distancing when we do return to going out again. Visually Impaired people like myself who were independent before will be more disabled after this pandemic.”*

People with sight loss who would usually navigate with another person acting as a guide have also been impacted. A study by RNIB in 2015 found that people who are blind or partially sighted are more likely to live alone than the general public, with more than half relaying on others from outside their household for support. Social distancing measures have meant that if their guide is not a member of their household, then contact should not be maintained. This has in effect taken away some people's primary means of being able to leave the house.

Many people who are blind or partially sighted are also likely to use touch to navigate – for example, using their hands to identify surfaces, walls or railings. Many blind and partially sighted people who rely more heavily on touch to get about fear that they are at greater risk of contracting the virus from surfaces. As such, many are concerned about the health risks, not only to themselves, but also the general public, from leaving their house.

*Will it become a choice of starvation or corona as we can't leave our homes? I live on my own and cannot ask others to jeopardise their safety by getting my shopping’.*

All of this makes it incredibly difficult for blind and partially sighted people to get out and about for essential trips like exercise and to the shops.

## Conclusions and recommendations

RNIB, along with other sight loss charities have produced some advice and FAQs on safe social distancing and guiding for people with sight loss. We shared these with Welsh Government and Public Health Wales on 25 March, asking them to review our messages and provide specific advice for people with sight loss. We have yet to receive a response.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to provide guidance to blind and partially sighted people on how to practice safe social distancing:
  - How can I be guided safely?  
<https://www.sightadvicefaq.org.uk/independent-living/Covid-19/guiding-CV>
  - How do I practice safe social distancing?  
<https://www.sightadvicefaq.org.uk/independent-living/Covid-19/social-dist-CV>

### 3. Access to groceries and priority delivery slots

As noted in the previous section, social distancing measures are particularly difficult for people with sight loss. As a result, shopping for essentials has become significantly more challenging. Added to this, online delivery slots are hard, if not impossible, to book. With no suitable alternatives in place, we have found that people who are blind or partially sighted are finding it difficult to obtain the very basics needed to survive.

Since the outbreak the RNIB's Sight Loss Advice Service has received an average of over 100 calls a day from people who are struggling to access essential groceries.

Ordinarily, online shopping would be an effective alternative to shopping at supermarkets for those who are digitally enabled, as it allows people who are blind or partially sighted to shop safely and independently.

However, with the demand for online delivery slots having increased, blind and partially sighted people – some of whom will have relied on this service in the past to maintain their independence – and who now need it more than ever are less able to access home delivery.

On 3 April 2020, we wrote to the Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths MS expressing our concerns and calling for Welsh Government to urgently work with supermarkets to ensure that people with sight loss are considered a priority group able to access online shopping.

On 23 April, we received a response which stated that disabled people, and people with serious health conditions, who are not at the highest risk of Covid-19 and therefore outside the shielding group, should seek support from family, friends or other support groups. Where this support is not available, they should contact their local authority for volunteer support.

We recognise the urgent need to safeguard those most vulnerable to immediate risk of severe illness and commend the Welsh Government for taking action to protect the most vulnerable. However, we do not believe it is acceptable that a vital service which enabled disabled people to live free and independent lives prior to the outbreak is no longer available to them. Forcing previously independent people to rely on volunteers diverges from the social model of disability and cannot be considered a viable solution.

This issue was raised again in the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee meeting on 14 May 2020. Deputy Minister Jane Hutt MS stated that she would take up this issue. We wrote a follow-up to Jane Hutt on 19 May 2020 and we await a response.

The UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recognised that some people outside the shielded group may need help getting food because of a disability or medical condition and lack of local support. On 26 April, George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced that some supermarkets will be working with UK Government on a referral system so that when someone is not shielded but vulnerable for another reason, their Local Authority can refer them directly to a supermarket to make sure that they get a priority delivery slot. Link to the announcement here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/environment-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-26-april-2020>



To refuse to offer the a similar solution in Wales is unfair and places people with sight loss in Wales at a further disadvantage and at increased, needless risk.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The current circumstances present innumerable challenges which are unique to people with sight loss which have been being highlighted by the press and charities for weeks. While understandable, the decision to ask supermarkets to prioritise the shielded group took existing services away from those who relied on them, and - with social distancing rules and the resulting changes in-store to supermarkets - created a perfect storm for blind and partially sighted people trying to access groceries.

We are into the third month lockdown and a proper solution to securing home delivery of food for individuals who are not on the shielded list, but who nonetheless have been made vulnerable by the crisis is yet to be implemented.

### **Recommendations:**

- Welsh Government must rapidly establish a system whereby Local Authorities in Wales can refer people with sight loss made vulnerable by the pandemic directly to a supermarket to ensure a priority delivery slot.
- Welsh Government must work urgently with supermarkets to establish that people with sight loss are considered a priority group and mitigate any safety issues that would impact unfairly.
- We would like the Welsh Government to work with RNIB to create an additional referral route to priority delivery slots accessible to the blind and partially sighted people that need them, potentially through the well-established RNIB helpline.

## **4. Temporary transport measures, the built environment and remaking streets**

Coronavirus response measures are beginning to be eased across the world. With this easing, we are seeing temporary changes being made to the layouts of streets and public spaces. The Welsh Government recently signalled intentions to begin introducing temporary transport measures to enable safe social distancing and to encourage a shift towards more sustainable transport. Link to the announcement here:

<https://gov.wales/written-statement-funding-local-sustainable-transport-measures-response-covid-19>

Expressions of interest are currently being accepted from local authorities for how this might be done. Alterations include widening pavements, setting up 'pop-up' cycle ways and temporary speed restrictions.

Whilst we support the intention to encourage more active travel, street layouts can cause difficulties at the best of times for people with sight loss. We want to ensure that any temporary changes to our public spaces allow people with sight loss and other disabled people to continue to get around safely and independently.

We are already beginning to see new street layouts being introduced. One example is Castle Street in Cardiff, where the pavement has been widened into the road using cones. We are concerned that these measures are being put in place without Equality Impact Assessments being undertaken.

It is vital that the needs of blind and partially sighted people are built into systems created to ease the lockdown to ensure that they are able to play an active part in society.

RNIB Cymru and Guide Dogs Cymru, with the support of a number of third sector organisations, including Disability Wales, Living Streets Cymru, Learning Disability Wales and Ramblers Cymru have written to Lee Waters MS, Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport and local authorities outlining our concerns.

A briefing document was also sent to Welsh Government and all Welsh local authorities which provides a series of recommendations for how the new measures should be implemented in a way which addresses the challenges of social distancing for people with sight loss and promotes an inclusive approach.

We would be happy to share a copy of this briefing, if it is of interest to the committee.

We are also calling for the introduction of a 'coronavirus courtesy code' to raise public awareness of disabilities and promote safe social distancing for all pedestrians, road and public transport users. We would like this to be a key focus of the Welsh Government's communication

campaign as lockdown measures begin to ease and we move into the next phase of recovery.

It is essential that the public are aware that not all conditions are visible and are considerate to other pedestrians and passengers who may have hidden health conditions and mobility requirements.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

With social distancing likely to remain in place for some time, careful consideration must be given as to how public space and the built environment is made accessible for all. It is vital that disabled people, people with mobility requirements, and those who are vulnerable are able to get out and about safely. Failing to do so is likely to further exacerbate issues of loneliness and isolation among these groups.

All public authorities have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure they meet the needs of disabled people, and actively involve disabled people in the design and delivery of their services such as the provision or improvement of pedestrian routes and cycle routes.

Similarly, the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 requires Welsh Ministers and local authorities, in the performance of functions under the Highways Act 1980, to take reasonable steps to enhance the provision made for walkers and cyclists. The Act explicitly includes disabled people who use aids to mobility (such as guide dogs and canes) under the definition of 'walkers and cyclists'. The active travel design guidance document reiterates the need for routes to be inclusive by design.

### **Recommendations:**

- Welsh Government must provide guidance for local authorities to ensure that people with sight loss and other disabled people are not unfairly disadvantaged by changes to the built environment, or any other measures taken in response to coronavirus.
- Equality Impact Assessments must be undertaken before any changes are made to public spaces.
- Coronavirus Courtesy Code should be developed to raise public awareness and promote safe social distancing for all pedestrians, road and public transport users. This should be backed up by a sustained public awareness campaign from Welsh Government.

## **5. Accessible information**

Early in the crisis, we noticed that some communications from official sources are not always fully accessible, particularly for screen reader users.

One in five people aged 75 and over have sight loss and many blind and partially sighted people have comorbidities. It is therefore essential that information about changes in policy, procedures or advice, is accessible, giving it the best chance of reaching those at high risk from the virus.

In late March we have contacted teams in Government putting out the information and began pulling together a tailored guide to make sure everyone can access what is shared digitally. Members of the Senedd were briefed on making their social media accessible too, and we have offered to help with any queries they receive from blind and partially sighted people.

Overall, we were pleased with the response. Public Health Wales acted immediately and began uploading their coronavirus public health updates with options for audio description and other accessible formats, including easy read and British sign language. NHS Direct Wales added an accessibility toolbar to their website, allowing visitors to change the page settings to suit their needs. This includes playing audio, changing font size and page colour, magnifying images and translating information into multiple languages.

Despite significant progress we continue to see instances where the needs of blind and partially sighted people are not considered in official communications. As mentioned in section 2. despite several requests no official guidance has been published for people with sight loss on how to practice safe social distancing and how to be guided safely.

The shielding letters, which were sent to the 130,000 people in Wales at highest risk of severe illness from coronavirus, were not sent out in accessible formats for people with sight loss, despite containing potentially life-saving information.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Ineffective communication with patients with sensory loss is a patient safety issue. In Wales, the NHS should be following the All Wales Standards for Accessible Communication and Information for People with Sensory Loss, providing information in people's preferred format.


The standards were introduced in 2013 and set out the level of service delivery that people with sensory loss should expect to be met with when they need healthcare. Since November 2017, GP surgeries in Wales have had the functionality to identify and record the information and communication needs of their patients with sensory loss. However, to date very little progress has been made and the Standards have not led to demonstrable change for blind and partially sighted people in Wales.

The current crisis has highlighted the reality that accessible information is not standard practice for many public sector organisations. Now more than ever blind and partially sighted people must be able to access information in a format that they are able to read so that they are able to keep themselves safe. Public organisations must meet their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010, to make reasonable adjustments for those with a disability, so that they are not placed at unnecessary risk and experience the same levels of independence and privacy expected by everyone else.

### Recommendations:

- All public information must be provided in a range of accessible formats, as standard practice.
- Systems should be in place to record patients' communication preferences and to support staff to proactively deliver on patients' stated preferences.
- When emergency communications such as the shielding letter are distributed, specific individual communication needs should be considered and information provided in their preferred accessible format by right and without fight.
- Key communications staff should receive training to better understand the communication needs of blind and partially sighted people and how to meet their communication preferences.

For further information, please contact [REDACTED], Policy and Public Affairs Manager.



RNIB Cymru would also be happy to provide oral evidence to the committee, if required.

Best wishes,



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## **Coronavirus and remaking streets – local sustainable transport measures and the impact on people with sight loss**

Coronavirus response measures are beginning to be eased across the world. With this easing, we are seeing temporary changes being made to the layouts of streets and public spaces. The Welsh Government recently signalled intentions to begin [introducing temporary transport measures](#) to enable safe social distancing and to encourage a shift towards more sustainable transport.

RNIB Cymru and Guide Dogs Cymru fully support the Welsh Government's aim to encourage more active travel. Many blind and partially sighted people enjoy walking and tandem cycling and a reduction in air pollution is a positive development for the whole community. However, the speed of implementation risks quick changes which could make our streets especially inaccessible to this group.

This document summarises our concerns and provides a series of actionable recommendations to address the challenges of social distancing and promote an inclusive approach.

A number of organisations have pledged their support for our calls, including Disability Wales, Diverse Cymru and Learning Disability Wales.

### **Summary of concerns**

Around 121,000 people live with sight loss in Wales today.

Social distancing is extremely difficult for blind and partially sighted people, which makes getting out and about for essential journeys or exercise particularly challenging.

- Many are unable to tell how far away other people are, making it harder to keep 2m away from others. Guide dogs are also not trained to maintain social distance.
- There have been incidences of passers-by challenging or shouting at blind and partially sighted people who haven't been able to keep their distance. Such unsettling and intimidating experiences have a lasting detrimental impact.
- People with sight loss are more likely to use touch to navigate – this means they are more at risk from contracting the virus from surfaces.
- People with sight loss often use familiar, learned routes. Where these have been altered in response to coronavirus, this can present challenges to independent mobility.
- Many blind and partially sighted people rely on sighted guides, which involves physical contact. In the current circumstances, only household members are able to offer this support.

## **Key ask: Coronavirus Courtesy Code**

Street layouts can cause difficulties at the best of times for blind and partially sighted people. We want to ensure that any temporary changes to our streets allow people with sight loss and other disabled people to continue to get around safely.

It is essential that people are aware that not all conditions are visible and are considerate to other pedestrians and passengers who may have hidden health conditions and mobility requirements.

**We therefore recommend that a [Coronavirus Courtesy Code](#) should be developed to raise public awareness and promote safe social distancing for all pedestrians, road and public transport users.**



We would be pleased to work with the Welsh Government and other organisations in its development. This would need to be backed up by a sustained public awareness campaign.

## **Changes to the built environment**

### **1. Widening Pavements**

In urban areas, new street layouts are starting to be introduced, using cones and barriers to widen footways along lengths of road to provide more space to allow people socially distance.

We fully support the intention to increase the available pavement space to allow pedestrians to maintain safe distances, but people with sight loss are accustomed to orientating themselves by using familiar landmarks, walkways and a known environment. If new barriers are introduced, visually impaired people may not be aware or able to interpret the intention, leading to disorientation and increased risk.

- Cones, tape and other temporary measures are not suitable for people with sight loss. Guide dogs do not perceive these as solid obstacles and will attempt to navigate between them. These are also difficult to detect using canes.
- Because of this, any temporary barriers should begin at ground level; they should also be colour contrasted, tall enough to prevent them becoming a trip hazard, and securely fixed so as not to be blown over (flimsy barriers and tape must be avoided.)
- Kerbs should be retained as a known delineator between the footway and the road.
- People with sight loss are likely to use the original pavement space, even where additional space is created on the road. It is important that every effort is made to ensure that new

barriers are solid, do not impinge on dropped kerbs, and do not restrict access to controlled crossings. Existing controlled crossings should be maintained.

- Where any changes to street layouts have been made, it is essential that these changes are communicated in an accessible way to the blind and partially sighted people who live locally or might use those streets.
- Transport operators must give consideration as to how blind and partially sighted passengers will be able to find the right bus stop or platform.

## **2. Pop-up cycleways**

Many cities have also begun to install 'pop-up' cycle facilities using temporary measures such as flexible plastic wands to protect cyclists from other traffic, and widening existing cycle lanes to enable cyclists to maintain social distancing.

These pop-up cycleways can present multiple hazards to blind and visually impaired people.

- Blind and partially sighted pedestrians find it extremely difficult to detect cycles, whilst cyclists may not realise that a pedestrian has sight loss.
- Mobility aids such as white canes can get caught up bicycle wheels, which is a further hazard to both.
- Visual cues to distinguish between pedestrian spaces and cycleways, such as painted lines are not detectable to people with sight loss.
- Many existing bus stops and pedestrian road crossings are inaccessible to people with sight loss if these must be reached across cycle lanes.
- It is vital that detectable kerbs between cycle routes and pavements are maintained. Where new routes are introduced, these must be colour contrasted and physically

separated. Painted white lines to delineate pedestrian spaces from cycleways are not an acceptable solution.

- Shared space between cyclists and pedestrians must be avoided. Where extra space for cycle lanes is required, it should be allocated from the road; it is important to retain adequate space on pavements.
- The creation of bus bypasses, or 'floating bus islands,' (where a pedestrian must cross a cycle lane to get to a bus stop) should be avoided wherever possible. In Cardiff, controlled crossings are being trialled to ensure that pedestrians can cross in safety to bus islands, reducing the risk of collisions.
- Any signage indicating any new pop-up cycle lanes should be placed on the road/cycle lane, not on the pavement, where it could cause a hazard.
- If shared spaces must be introduced, these must be clearly signified by tactile warning paving at the start and end of shared routes, so that blind and partially sighted people are aware of the presence of cyclists.
- New cycle lanes should not cross pavements or affect access to infrastructure like bus stops without accessible crossings.
- Warning markings and signs must also be provided to instruct cyclists to stop when pedestrians are near or on the formal crossing.

### **3. Additional cycle parking facilities**

Additional cycle parking facilities have also been introduced at key locations in many urban areas (outside stations, high streets), to accommodate an increase in cycling.

- Temporary cycling infrastructure and other obstructions on pavements can present tripping hazards and impede mobility for people with sight loss

- Any additional cycle infrastructure which is installed must be done with careful consideration to the needs of disabled people and others who rely on clear pavements to access transport hubs and other key locations.
- We are aware of instances where additional cycle parking will be introduced in repurposed parking spaces. Pavement space should be protected wherever possible.

## **4. Public transport**

Changes to bus and rail infrastructure will have a significant impact on the mobility of people with sight loss. The Welsh Government is currently considering options as to how public transport might be restarted in a way that allows all passengers to travel safely.

Locating a seat can be difficult for people with sight loss. The means by which they locate a place to sit puts them at a particularly high risk in the current circumstances. Transport operators can work to reduce the level of risk.

- If seating is reconfigured to allow passengers to social distance, blind and partially sighted people are likely to have difficulty finding the correct seat.
- Other new measures, such as queues and visual instructions present challenges for people with sight loss.
- As part of the likely reconfiguration of stations and platforms, barriers are likely to be needed. Broadly, the same requirements apply to the types of barriers to be used at transport hubs as elsewhere – i.e. they should begin on ground level, be solid and colour contrasted.
- When reconfiguring seating to allow people to social distance, focus should be on maintaining priority seating areas with sufficient space for disabled and vulnerable people. This should be accompanied by clear signage about who is eligible to use these seats, enforced by the operator.

- Passenger assistance must be available when booking all train journeys. Assistance should aim to keep the passenger safe, and away from others, including avoiding queues, and facilitating access to and exit from the train. Careful consideration must be given to how to manage social distancing on unstaffed stations.

## Conclusion

All public authorities have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure they meet the needs of disabled people, and actively involve disabled people in the design and delivery of their services such as the provision or improvement of pedestrian routes and cycle routes.

Similarly, the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 requires Welsh Ministers and local authorities, in the performance of functions under the Highways Act 1980, to take reasonable steps to enhance the provision made for walkers and cyclists. The Act explicitly includes disabled people who use aids to mobility (such as guide dogs and canes) under the definition of 'walkers and cyclists'. The active travel design guidance document reiterates the need for routes to be inclusive by design.

**The Welsh Government must provide guidance for local authorities to ensure that people with sight loss and other disabled people are not unfairly disadvantaged by changes to the built environment, or any other measures taken in response to coronavirus.**

If you would like any further information on the issues raised in this briefing please contact:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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# Consultation Response: Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact on matters relating to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee’s remit

Evidence to: Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, Senedd Cymru

Joint response from: All Wales People First, All Wales Forum of Parents and Carers, Learning Disability Wales, Downs Syndrome Association, Mencap Cymru, Cymorth Cymru. Submitted on the 26.06.2020

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## About the submitting organisations

### All Wales People First (AWPF)

All Wales People First is the united voice of self-advocacy groups and people with learning disabilities in Wales. All Wales People First is an organisation for, and led by, men and women with a learning disability. It is unique in Wales in that it is the only national member-led organisation that represents the voice of men and women with a learning disability.

### All Wales Forum of Parents and Carers (AWF)

The All Wales Forum's mission is to bring a national voice and recognition to parents and carers of children and adults living with learning disabilities in Wales. AWF is unique among learning disability organisations in that it is the only organisation that represents solely the views of parents and carers of people with learning disabilities across Wales.

### Learning Disability Wales (LDW/E2C)

Learning Disability Wales (LDW) is a national charity representing the learning disability sector in Wales. Everything that we do focuses on creating a Wales that values and includes every child, young person and adult with a learning disability. We do this through working with people with a learning disability and their families, Welsh Government, local authorities, disabled people's organisations and the voluntary sector. Incorporating the Engage to Change Project (E2C). Project partners of Engage to Change are Learning Disability Wales, All Wales People First, Agoriad Cyf, ELITE Supported Employment Agency and the National Centre for Mental Health at Cardiff University.

### Downs Syndrome Association (DSA)

The Downs Syndrome Association (DSA) is the only charity in the UK dealing with all aspects of Down's syndrome. Its aim is to help people who have Down's syndrome live full and rewarding lives.

### Mencap Cymru (Mencap)

Mencap Cymru is the voice of learning disability in Wales. Our vision is a world where people with a learning disability are valued equally, listened to and included. Mencap runs different services and projects for people with a learning disability including the Wales Learning Disability Helpline.

### Cymorth Cymru (CC)

Cymorth Cymru is the representative body for providers of homelessness, housing and support services in Wales. We act as the voice of the sector, influencing the development and implementation of policy, legislation and practice that affects our members and the people they support. We are committed to working with people who use services, our members and partners to affect change. We believe that together, we can have a greater impact on people's lives.

## Executive Summary

We are submitting this response on behalf of people with a learning disability, their families and carers. We draw from reports conducted by several of our member organisations consisting of people with a learning disability themselves, People First Groups across Wales, family carers and service providers.

Our findings are:

- People with a learning disability and their families are struggling with significant anxiety and confusion. People are worried about coronavirus itself, the ambiguity of lockdown rules, and worries about the future.
- Many people have reported difficulties regarding the process of shielding. Sometimes people who should have been shielding have not received shielding letters, at other times people received them without understanding why.
- Staying safe has been a challenge for many people with a learning disability. People have reported several problems with accessing food and other commodities. They are worried about the safety of their paid support and struggle to access appropriate PPE.
- People with a learning disability have been struggling to access non-Covid-19 related health care. They have been missing out on Annual Health Checks and many have found interacting with their GP over the phone challenging.
- People with a learning disability are struggling with having lost significant support, in particular services, social workers and respite care. We are concerned not only about the effect that this loss of support has on people right now but also of the long-term effects. Parents with learning disabilities in particular are worried about losing custody of their children after the end of lockdown because they are not getting the support they need with their children right now.
- The impact on people with a learning disability who were employed pre-Covid-19 varies quite significantly and those who continue to work have had to learn new things about the new ways of working and what they need to do to keep themselves safe while travelling to/from work and while at the workplace.
- There are some small positives being reported. Some people with a learning disability are learning new skills and we have reports of great community support. We have also found Welsh Government largely responsive to our concerns throughout this crisis.



## Background

In 2018 to 2019 there were 13,507 people with a learning disability known to social services in Wales. Of these 11,001 lived in the community, 1424 were living in their own home, 7065 were living with parents/family, 2283 were living in supported living and 229 in foster care. Of the remaining people with a learning disability 108 were living in health services (including hospitals/hostels), 94 were living in local authority residential accommodation and 1206 were living in private or voluntary residential accommodation. 518 were living in other accommodation<sup>1</sup>.

The number of people with a learning disability in Wales known to social services has decreased in comparison to the previous years. This is likely due to the fact that learning disability diagnoses have become harder to come by. Taken together with other cuts made due to austerity measures, many people with a learning disability in Wales will have already have had difficulty accessing the support they need before Covid-19, leaving them particularly vulnerable to the effects of both Coronavirus and the lockdown.

We know that even before Covid-19 people with a learning disability were subject to serious health inequalities. A recent report from Welsh Government found that

*“wide-ranging evidence to suggest that disabled people in Wales experience considerable general and more specific healthcare access issues. Background evidence suggests there is a strong correlation between poverty and disability and that such poverty is compounding already existing inequalities in access to better health. For example, many disabled people have considerably shorter life-expectancies and there is evidence to suggest that this is caused by inequitable levels of healthcare provision<sup>2</sup>.”*

These existing health inequalities will have likely worsened both the vulnerability of people with a learning disability to Covid-19 and also made the loss of other support due to lockdown and the strain on the health service more dramatic.

## How we created this report

All contributing organisations have engaged with people with a learning disability, carers of children and adults with a learning disability, and service providers. Several of the contributing organisations have published documents independently and these are listed in a bibliography at the end. After

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<sup>1</sup> Statswales 2020: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Disability-Registers/personswithlearningdisabilities-by-localauthority-service-agerange>

<sup>2</sup> <https://gov.wales/review-evidence-inequalities-access-health-services-wales-disabled-people>

some of the items in the report we have put the name of the organisation in whose report the specific point is best illustrated.

## Findings

### Confusion and anxiety

- Most people with a learning disability reported feelings of loneliness, isolation, boredom and frustration due to the cancellation of meetings and events, such as local People First Groups (AWPF). This loneliness is particularly worrisome since people with a learning disability struggled with loneliness pre-Covid-19. In a 2019 survey Mencap found that 24% of people with a learning disability reported feeling lonely “a lot.”<sup>3</sup>
- Generally people with a learning disability living on their own struggle more with loneliness than those living with others. However, people living with others reported similar experiences of social isolation to those living alone (AWPF).
- Confusion about what exactly is going on and what the future holds is a major concern for people with a learning disability. Those with mental health issues and/or neurological conditions are struggling to remember the reasoning behind the sudden changes and a small minority are exhibiting some extreme behaviour including suicidal thoughts. Where required, support workers are calling in other organisations and agencies to help those most vulnerable and in need of urgent support. The lack of an end date or defined timescale is causing confusion and anxiety, as are the multiple news updates from a variety of sources, most of which are difficult to understand. A further issue is that it is not always clear whether or not the rules from the UK Government also apply in Wales or how the rules might be different. This is not helped by the UK media regularly reporting English news as though it applies to the UK as a whole (AWPF, LDW).
- People are aware of the risk of mortality from coronavirus. This is causing anxiety for people’s own lives and also how they will cope with losing somebody they know
- Some children and young people with a learning disability also have underlying health conditions and there are now significant levels of anxiety amongst their families about whether it will be safe for them to return to school or college when these settings begin to reopen. Some individuals are therefore facing an extremely long period of being isolated at home and missing out on education (DSA, LDW).
- There has been confusion around the exercise rules. For example, some people with autism thought the rules were stating that they could not go outside without a carer or other person (LDW, AWF).

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<sup>3</sup> Mencap, 3 December 2019, People with a learning disability seven times as likely to be lonely this Christmas, <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/people-learning-disability-seven-times-likely-be-lonely-christmas>

- People are confused around the term “social” distancing and it has been suggested that physical distancing would be more appropriate and more accessible (AWPF).
- Some people have voiced concerns over emergency powers and local authorities using them during this crisis. In England, the guidance on measures to reduce pressure on services states that councils still need to adhere to the Human Rights Act but in Wales it is a judgement call (Mencap).
- We have heard concerns from autistic people and from carers of disabled children in South Wales that the ambiguity of lockdown rules is causing significant anxiety. This anxiety has been amplified by worries about what one autistic person we talked to called “vigilantism”. Autistic people, in particular, are worried about being harassed by members of the public or indeed by members of the police force on the grounds of social distancing rules. The reason these rules are so hard to follow is that they are often contradictory and confusing. In addition, people describe struggling with unwritten rules. For example, one person described being harassed in a supermarket for looking at produce too long (LDW).

#### Difficulties relating to shielding

- Statutory letters offering help, advice and instructions from local services and the Welsh Government are slow to arrive and when they do, there is no support available to help with reading and understanding the content. There is currently no easy read version of the shielding letter available. Mencap asked Welsh government for an addition to the shielding letter advising people to call the Wales Learning Disability Helpline if they had difficulty understanding the letter. (Mencap).
- Some people with a learning disability have received shielding letters, even though it is not clear to them or their family why they should be shielding. Whilst there does not appear to be a widespread issue of people not following the guidelines, a lack of understanding of the letter has led to some people going out when they should be shielding. There are also some individuals who do not understand that, because they live in the same house as someone else who is shielding, they must also shield in order to protect that person (Mencap, LDW).
- Some people with a learning disability and other health conditions feel that they should have received a shielding letter from their doctor and are confused why they have not. They are worried about the best way to stay safe knowing that they have a health condition, yet have not been advised to shield (AWPF).
- Some people with a learning disability have not received a letter from their GP advising them to shield, yet they have been told to shield by care staff and/or their housing provider. In the absence of clear communication, they are confused about the rationale behind the request to shield. They have either expressed concerns that they may have a health issue which has not been communicated to them, or expressed frustration as to why the rules about shielding are being imposed on them (AWPF).

### Staying safe and healthy

- Some people with a learning disability, especially people with Down Syndrome, have underlying health conditions which means they often chose to self-isolate before it became obligatory (DSA).
- People have reported several problems with accessing food and other commodities. Priority shopping times are often too early and the queues are too long for some people. Some have asked for: personalised/appointed time slots (eg in the evening or at a specific preferred time); a priority shopping delivery system (although with concern over increased risk of contamination from delivery service); and a list of people who might get preference (Mencap).
- People with a learning disability have also reported multiple other issues around shopping: fears about having to use public transport to get there; the one-way system in stores being hard to navigate; on-line shopping not being accessible; a lack of support to get shopping done in alternative ways to going in person<sup>4</sup>.
- People are worried about the safety of paid support. Parents of people with a learning disability are doing risk assessments and taking measures at their own discretion. They also struggle with a lack of PPE and there is some confusion around whether the Direct Payment scheme will cover the cost of PPE. There is further confusion around Direct Payments and suspended services (eg carers continuing to be being paid etc. There is a wide disparity in the advice given by Direct Payments leads in local authorities (Mencap).
- Letters for keyworkers are difficult to obtain for people (Mencap).
- People with a learning disability have been struggling to access non-Covid-19 related health care. Specialists have not been visiting private homes or supported living facilities. Basic care needs have not been met (eg toenails not being cut). There are no annual optician or dentist reviews taking place and only emergency dental procedures with a very strict list through hospitals can be accessed (Mencap). This is particularly worrying given that adults with a learning disability are up to 10 times more likely to have serious sight problems than the general population.<sup>5</sup>
- All GP appointments are either over the phone or virtual, which is challenging for some people, especially those with communication difficulties.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of these issues are illustrated in the All Wales People First Member's Story of Anne and Neil, <https://allwalespeople1st.co.uk/members-stories-life-in-lockdown-3/>

<sup>5</sup> SeeAbility, 2016, Delivering an equal right to sight <https://www.seeability.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=316cd01e-01c4-452c-8951-b16a87a0674f>

- There is concern that Annual Health Checks will have been paused and may take some time to resume, meaning there will be a backlog. Knowing the health inequalities that individuals with a learning disability often experience, this area of NHS activity should be prioritised (DSA). Annual Health Checks are an important tool in the early identification of health issues and managing long-term health conditions in order to reduce the high numbers of premature deaths among people with a learning disability. A study funded by the Department of Health in 2013 found that on average women with a learning disability die 20 years younger than those in the general population and men with a learning disability die 13 years younger than those without a learning disability.<sup>6</sup>
- People also have difficulty accessing medication. Complicated procedures to change medication through email are not accessible for everyone and neither are webchat methods on websites to get a prescription. There are often long queues for medication or difficulties in getting deliveries for those who have not already set this up prior to the pandemic.

### Loss of support

- People with a learning disability are struggling with having lost significant support. They now have to spend extensive periods of time without day service activities, have had activities substituted with virtual activity plans and have extensive periods of time without any respite services. There needs to be increased support for unpaid carers looking after adults with a learning disability as it can be challenging to care for an adult 24 hours a day without any form of respite (Mencap, AWF, AWPf).
- In areas where they rely on volunteer groups and community support, people have voiced concerns over possible coronavirus contamination (Mencap).
- Parents are not being allowed to visit their sons and daughters in care homes/supported living. Having no plans in place for when the next visit will be is causing distress to both parents and sons/daughters. Similarly, parents of people with a learning disability who live far away from their adult children do not know when they will be able to see them next.
- The status of some young people's college placements is now uncertain. The 2020 academic year effectively ended in March rather than July. Where college placements are residential, it could be that some young people will miss out on one third of a year of the placement they were expecting (DSA).
- We are also concerned about the possible impact on people with a learning disability and their families/carers of the emergency 'backlog clause' that allows local authorities time to catch up on services after the peak of the crisis has passed. This could mean that people

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<sup>6</sup> Bristol University, 2013, Confidential Inquiry into the deaths of people with learning disabilities (CIPOLD) <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cipold/migrated/documents/fullfinalreport.pdf>

continue to be left without services for an unknown length of time after the lockdown has finished (Mencap).

- There are significant concerns around how parents with a learning disability are managing without support. One parent with learning disability reported that they are not receiving support or contact from their social worker. There are fears of unfair assessments for parents with a learning disability after the lockdown, especially given that it might take time for services to offer support again. Welsh Government needs a policy that clarifies how parenting assessments will be carried out after the crisis. This is to ensure the protection of the rights of parents from unfair assessments or removal of parental rights. There are still many questions unanswered around the situation of parents with a learning disability. What is happening in terms of family court? Are parents being asked to wait before finding out if their child is to be removed permanently? What discussions are taking place with the Courts and Tribunal Service? (Mencap).
- Poverty remains a great concern for many people with a learning disability. People have reported delayed assessments that affect their benefit payments. This has led to at least one person having to use a food bank and emergency support offered through their church (LDW).
- Welsh Government needs to implement wellbeing checks through local authorities to make sure people with learning disabilities can access the support they need).

## Employment

- The impact on people with a learning disability who were employed pre-Covid-19 varies quite significantly. Some people continue to be employed in key worker roles, with others becoming newly employed during this time. Some people in key worker roles have withdrawn themselves, been laid off or furloughed. There are people with a learning disability who are now home working if they have a job role and employer that enables this (AWPF, E2C).
- There is an ethical question that has to be asked as to what understanding those who continue to work have of the new ways of working and what they need to do to keep themselves safe while travelling to/from work and while at the workplace. In some cases, if supported by an employment project, they have been provided with additional training and support to help with this. However, there are instances where information has been sent to employees by their manager that is not in a format they can understand (E2C).
- Reasons for no longer being at work or employed vary. There are those whose health conditions or the health of others in their household means they are isolating or shielding. Some people have withdrawn themselves from the workplace due to their anxieties and fears and/or the concerns of their parent/carers. Employers whose business is currently closed have either laid off or furloughed all of their staff. This can be hard to understand and will have an impact on household income including benefits (E2C).

- People with a learning disability and their parents/carers need support to understand what being furloughed or laid off means in real terms. Also to understand their employment rights and to apply for benefits in light of either a reduced salary or no salary at all (E2C).
- Anxiety levels are high with mental health, well-being and mindfulness support being much needed. Going to work provided a structured day and in many cases a social and supportive environment that contributed to feelings of self-worth and built confidence (E2C).
- We are concerned that people with a learning disability who are now short term unemployed will become long term unemployed as lockdown gradually reduces. Many people will become de-skilled and have to relearn tasks and/or learn new tasks. Some people will have to have a complete change in direction as employment opportunities and work environments are likely to change. As a nation we do not do well when it comes to the percentage of people with a learning disability in paid employment. Economic forecasts suggest unemployment will be high in the general population post-Covid-19, especially for people aged 18-30. This will likely have a significant impact on the employment of people with a learning disability. It will be harder for those who have become unemployed and those yet to gain employment to get a paid job. Younger people with a moderate learning disability might be particularly at risk as they may not be eligible for day services and have very different aspirations. There is a real fear that a new cohort of disconnected young people with moderate learning disabilities will be unknown to services and at risk of criminalisation<sup>7</sup> (E2C, Mencap).

### Positive reports

- There are some small positives being reported. Some people with learning disabilities are gaining new skills and confidence in using social media, communication tools and other apps. Local communities are also rallying around to help vulnerable people and it is hoped this will lead to more positive and proactive relationships in the future. Those living with others are also forming stronger bonds and working more closely with each other. In some shared accommodation, residents are supporting each other by cooking meals for everybody and/or sharing tasks between them. However, some are reporting conflict and tension from too much time in each other's company (AWPF).
- There are a number of people with a learning disability who have gained employment during this time, some as a direct result of Covid-19. In addition, some people who had been furloughed but have now been supported to return to work (E2C).

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<sup>7</sup> For an extensive review of the literature on learning disability and learning difficulty and criminalisation in England and Wales please see Nancy Loukes (2007): No one knows, offenders with learning difficulties and learning disabilities – review of prevalence and associated need. Available online:

<http://www.ohrn.nhs.uk/resource/policy/NoOneKnowPrevalence.pdf>

- Other positives include ongoing support being provided remotely for people participating in a supported employment programme. For example, to develop work skills, complete accredited courses, seek employment, apply for benefits, improve mental health and wellbeing (E2C).
- Welsh Government officials throughout the coronavirus crisis have been open to working and meeting weekly with third sector partners as part of the Learning Disability Ministerial Advisory Group (LDMAG) to discuss current themes/issues. Jane Hutt and Julie Morgan meet members of the Disability Advisory Forum fortnightly. This is unique and does not happen in other UK countries and gives real-time access to civil servants and Ministers to raise issues directly from people with a learning disability and their parents/carers (Mencap).



## Other important resources

### Previous joint statements:

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the rights of disabled people in Wales - [Statement from the members of the Wales Disability Reference Group](#), 08.04.2020

[Disability Wales](#), [Learning Disability Wales](#), [Wales Council of the Blind](#) and [Wales Council for Deaf People](#), <https://www.ldw.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-and-the-rights-of-disabled-people-in-wales/>

NICE guidelines still cause for concern for disabled people, 27.03.2020

[Learning Disability Wales](#), [All Wales People First](#), [All Wales Forum](#) and [Mencap Cymru](#), <https://www.ldw.org.uk/nice-guidelines-still-cause-for-concern-for-disabled-people/>

Coronavirus Bill: Suspension of Social Services and Well-being Wales Act (2014), Welsh National Disability Umbrella Organisations, 24.03.2020

<https://www.ldw.org.uk/corona-virus-bill-suspension-of-social-services-and-well-being-wales-act-2014/>

Joint response to Coronavirus outbreak across Wales, 19.03.2020

[Disability Wales](#), [All Wales People First](#), [Wales Council of the Blind](#), [All Wales Parents and Carers Forum](#), [Learning Disability Wales](#) and [Mencap Cymru](#), <https://www.ldw.org.uk/joint-response-to-coronavirus-outbreak-across-wales/>

### All Wales People First

The effect of the coronavirus pandemic on people with learning disabilities, 12.05.2020

Available online at: <https://allwalespeople1st.co.uk/effect-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic-on-people-with-learning-disabilities/>

All Wales People First has also collected a number of **Members Stories** that give a detailed view of the lives of people with a learning disability. They can be found here: <https://allwalespeople1st.co.uk>

## Contact

For more information on this report and the issues raised in please contact

Policy Officer – Learning Disability Wales:

## Paper 3

Bevan Foundation response to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact on matters relating to its remit

## Introduction

The Bevan Foundation is an independent, charitable think-tank that develops solutions to poverty and inequality. We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's call for evidence to support its scrutiny of Covid 19 and its impact on matters relating to its remit. Our extensive work on poverty and inequality provides us with some insights into the difficulties faced by children living in low income households at this time and issues facing migrant communities and cohesion issues more generally. These impacts are likely to be significant and varied. Given our experience and expertise, our response will focus on the impact of Covid 19 on 3 of the broad policy areas that falls within the remit of the committee. Our is divided into main sections and will explore each of the following areas:

- Migration and Community Cohesion
- Tackling Poverty
- Housing.

## Migration and Community Cohesion

***Migrants, community cohesion and Covid 19***

The Bevan Foundation has just completed a project exploring the experiences of migrants living in Wales and how they can be better integrated into our communities. Although the report, *Shared ground: integrating migrants in Wales*,<sup>1</sup> was completed shortly before the coronavirus outbreak, a number of the issues we identified are likely to be heightened as a result of Covid 19.

During our work we heard migrants who have experienced or witnessed racist abuse. We found that in recent times, driven by Brexit, many EU citizens had faced some form of abuse or discrimination. Just before we went into lock-down we became aware of anecdotal reports of abuse towards Chinese members of the community. During lock-down this has decreased as there are fewer people 'out and about'. However, we are aware of online hate speech and social media comments that have been made since the pandemic, including some abuse that has been targeted at the Muslim community. While this is harmful to community cohesion now, there are also concerns that as we come out of lock-down people may again become targets of racist abuse as people look to apportion blame to particular communities.

We found that many migrants live very isolated lives. Some only engage with a limited number of people and that will often be a family unit or other people with their ethnic group. As we have seen during this crisis there has been much local activism, however many migrants will have not have existing social connections within their communities and will face communication challenges if they cannot converse in the majority language, and do not have the regular support networks that transcend their local community.

Many migrants rely on support groups. This is particularly the case for asylum seekers and refugees who often rely on these groups for friendship and also practical forms of support such as food, counselling and health and education advice. We know that this support is a lifeline, but many support groups have had to close their doors and are not able to provide that direct service.

Communicating messages around Coronavirus, social distancing, health advice and guidance and financial support is crucial for all communities across Wales, however migrant groups may face even

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<sup>1</sup> Bevan Foundation, *Shared ground: integrating migrants in Wales* (April 22, 2020)

greater barriers. Communication with migrants can be difficult during normal times, particularly those who do not speak or have any level of English and are isolated. Often, they will rely on support groups or other community members for help or other more informal communication methods – to attend doctors' appointments and visiting, attend other appointments and translate written material. Some will have the choice of formal interpretation, but this can be poor, and translators often do not have the right skill set to provide the right level of service.

The ability to communicate has long-term implications for integration. Many migrants attend ESOL classes or community conversation classes to improve their language skills. As a result of Covid-19 physical meetings are no longer happening, and it is unlikely that they will return at the same time as schools and it could be several months before they return to normal. Even prior to the lock down we were aware of high numbers on waiting lists, and this will increase pressure on the system once they return. This gap in provision could also severely hamper and set-back learners progress and we are aware of different learning abilities which may make it difficult for some to learn successfully at home. Also, people need to feel motivated, and this motivation could drop off if they are not required to speak it as they are not conversing with people in their daily lives.

Many migrant workers are working in key positions in Wales, for instance many are currently working in the care sector, providing vital support to elderly and vulnerable people in their own homes or other settings. Many will also be employed by agencies, be employed in casual positions or on zero-hour contracts, and many already face financial hardship as a result. Whilst many workers will have had their jobs protected through the UK Government's furlough scheme, many will have seen their wages reduced as a result and migrant workers could have been disproportionately affected. Thousands of other workers have lost their jobs despite the scheme, whilst some workers have seen their hours reduced, and others, such as the newly self-employed have been required to turn to the social security system for support yet we found in our work that many migrants face issues and discrimination from this system, and people told of occasions where they have been turned away for support because of the immigration status.

Asylum seekers in particular will be financially affected by Covid-19. They currently receive just over £35 per week. Already struggling before Covid-19, they often rely on attendance at support groups etc. for additional items of food, clothing and personal items. With small amounts of money many will not be able to do 'big' shops or shop online in the same way as others, and as such will find it more difficult to comply with social distancing guidance.

Many migrant families will be restricted to their homes, which could be unsuitable and overcrowded with very little realistic opportunity to self-isolate, particularly if anyone in the household developed symptoms. Worryingly, many children from migrant households will be home-schooled for many months, however we found that many families do not speak English at home or cannot speak English therefore it will be extremely difficult for them to carry out tasks sent home by the school and language development could be affected by this gap.

Lastly the progress of the European Union Settled Status Scheme (EUSS) has been impacted by Covid-19. Much of the activity of the Citizens Rights Programme was face to face-based support and guidance. We were already concerned that Wales appeared to be behind the rest of the UK in terms of its completed applications, and given the deadline of June 2021 feared that many EU citizens would become irregular migrants as a result – losing some of their rights in the process. This is a major set back as people who need face to face contact to complete the application will now have to wait – particularly those who don't have the digital skills to do so. Further, much of the awareness raising was delivered via drop-ins.

### **The Actions taken by the Welsh Government, local authorities and other organisations**

The Welsh Government, local authorities and other organisations have taken a number of welcome steps to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 on migrants.

In terms of tackling hate crime, the Welsh Government funds the hate crime and support centre which provides support for victims of hate crime. In 2019 it allocated £840,000 worth of funding to the Hate Crime Minority Communities Grant fund over two years which was used to increase capacity at the centre but also provided support for community organisations working with ethnic minority and faith communities to tackle hate crime. A further £330,00 of funding was given to a range of organisations across Wales to increase understanding of hate crime and how to report it, challenge negative attitudes in schools and colleges, and explore restorative justice approaches with perpetrators and a national campaign to reduce the incidence of hate crimes and incidents in Wales. Despite these efforts, in our report *Shared ground: integrating migrants in Wales*<sup>2</sup> we found that migrants often do not report hate crime. Since the pandemic, organisations have attempted to spread awareness of hate crime and reporting during the pandemic, and activities like the ‘Don’t hate, educate’ programme is now being delivered online. However, more action needs to be taken now to combat online hate speech –which will do lasting harm to our communities.

However, a reactive policy alone cannot deal with some of the divisions which exists within our communities, and we are arguing for a Wales-wide integration framework which aims to bring communities together, to tackle some of the underlying issues and attitudes which exist within our communities. While we are aware that there will be much to rebuild as we come out of this crisis, this will be more difficult if communities do not work together.

We are also calling on the Welsh Government to support a ‘cohesion network’ to ensure that issues affecting migrant groups are considered across the public and private sectors, not just by third sector groups which are supporting them. It should involve housing, health and education providers and importantly employers. Given the need to rebuild our communities after Coronavirus, developing a partnership approach is even more important than when we first recommended this, prior to the pandemic.

In terms of ESOL provision, the Welsh Government needs to consider the impact the pandemic has had on people’s individual learning journeys, but also on those who were unable to access support prior to lock-down. It therefore needs to reevaluate its current approach, taking into account some of the lessons learned from lock-down. For instance to what extent has online learning made ESOL more accessible for people who have work or childcare commitments?

Children who live in non-English/Welsh speaking families should receive additional language support before or when they return to school to ensure they have not been negatively effected as a result of lock-down.

Another area where we believe steps could be taken by the Welsh Government to help migrant families more generally is through the promotion of support schemes that are available to low income families in Wales. Schemes such as the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the Discretionary Assistance Fund already provide vital support to thousands of families across Wales, but may not be as widely known amongst migrant communities. Some migrants may feel they are not eligible particularly if they have faced discrimination when trying to access financial assistance in the past. As we come out of lock-down these families may continue to struggle, and it is vital that our frontline staff are not discriminating on the basis of migrant status. We are aware that the Welsh Government will be delivering training on migrants’ rights, and this needs to be rolled-out urgently so migrants do not face unnecessary financial hardship.

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<sup>2</sup> Bevan Foundation, *Shared ground: integrating migrants in Wales* (April 22, 2020)

We also believe that there is a role for the Welsh Government to play in putting pressure on the UK Government to make changes to the UK-wide asylum system. Firstly, we agree with the growing number of charities, including the Welsh Refugee Council, that the UK Government should increase the amount of financial assistance asylum seekers receive, which should be brought in line with Universal Credit.

We also believe that there is now a stronger case for lifting the ban on asylum seekers being able to work. We think this would be extremely worthwhile and would follow a number of other countries who have done this in response to the pandemic. In our report, we made the case for providing more meaningful voluntary activities for asylum seekers and refugees who cannot work and in some European Countries they have sought to provide asylum seekers with voluntary roles to support the response to Covid-19. In the short-term the Welsh Government along with local authorities and others could engage asylum seekers in this way.

In terms of EU citizens, the Welsh Government should do all it can to protect their rights by making the case to the UK Government to, at the very least, extend the timeline of the application to compensate for the time lost due to Covid-19.

## Tackling poverty

### *The impact of Covid 19*

The most recent data on poverty in Wales was published on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, as the nation was beginning to come to terms with the new lockdown measures introduced to control the spread of Covid 19. The newly released data was for the 2016/17 to 2018/19 period, providing a snapshot of poverty in Wales at the eve of the Covid 19 outbreak.

The data showed that for the three year period to 2019, 23% of people in Wales lived in poverty,<sup>3</sup> approximately 700,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Even before the Covid 19 outbreak people living in poverty were at a greater risk of being in poor health, whilst children growing up in poverty were less likely to achieve the top grades in school than their peers from higher income households. The impact of these inequalities has been starkly highlighted by the virus itself with the mortality rate for Covid 19 being nearly twice as high in Wales's most deprived areas compared to its least deprived.<sup>5</sup>

The virus has not only highlighted the impact of existing inequality on society. Covid 19, alongside the lockdown measures put in place to stop its spread is likely to have exacerbated the issues that so many families trapped in poverty were already facing. Not only do the lockdown measures mean that thousands of people who are already trapped in poverty face deepening hardship, many more risk being pulled into poverty alongside them.

16% of Wales' employees work in business that have been ordered to close as a result of the lockdown.<sup>6</sup> The economic consequences of Covid 19 mean that many thousands of other workers, working in sectors that have not been directly impacted by social distancing measures have also been

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<sup>3</sup> Stats Wales, 'Percentage of all individuals, children, working-age adults and pensioners living in relative income poverty for the UK, UK countries and regions of England between 1994-95 to 1996-97 and 2016-17 to 2018-19 (3 year averages of financial years)' available at - <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/householdbelowaverageincome-by-year>

<sup>4</sup> Stats Wales, 'People in relative income poverty by tenure type' available at - <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/peopleinrelativeincomepoverty-by-tenuretype>

<sup>5</sup> ONS 'Deaths involving COVID-19 by local area and socioeconomic deprivation: deaths occurring between 1 March and 17 April 2020' (1 May 2020) available at - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19bylocalareasanddeprivation/deathsoccurringbetween1marchand17april>

<sup>6</sup> Bevan Foundation, 'State of Wales Briefing: Risks and Impact of Coronavirus' (March 27, 2020)

affected. Whilst many workers will have had their jobs protected through the UK Government's furlough scheme, many will have seen their wages reduced as a result. Thousands of other workers have lost their jobs despite the scheme. The most recent data shows that the number of people claiming Job Seekers Allowance and Universal Credit had doubled between April 2019 and April 2020, with nearly all the growth happening in the last month.<sup>7</sup> Other workers have seen their hours reduced, whilst some, such as the newly self-employed have fallen through the cracks in the system and have been required to turn to the social security system for support.

Even some workers whose employers are still operating as normal have faced significant challenges. As many as 10% of Welsh employees don't earn enough to qualify for sick pay, with this being the case for a higher proportion of disabled people and women, leading to a significant cut in income for many faced with having to self-isolate.<sup>8</sup> Recently published research by the Resolution Foundation highlighted that 68% of households across the UK had seen a reduction in their household income as a result of the outbreak.<sup>9</sup>

These pressures have been especially pronounced for families with children, with research from Turn2Us showing that families with children are more likely to have lost income as a result of Covid 19, with 71% of children living in families where at least one parent has had their employment affected.<sup>10</sup> An additional risk factor for families with children is childcare. Often reliant on schools and grandparents for childcare previously, parents, who would have the option of continuing in work fulltime, are having to reduce hours or be furloughed, and some are even having to take unpaid leave or are losing their jobs.

At the same time that many people have seen their income reduce, their living costs have increased. Faced with spending an increased amount of time at home, households are facing increased utilities bills and the stockpiling of food especially affected those on low incomes, with the Trussell Trust seeing a record spike in the number of people using its food banks at the end of March.<sup>11</sup> Families with children have again been especially impacted. Restricted to their homes, without school, access to libraries and often limited access to parks, families are faced with increased bills, as they try to home educate children, as well as keep them entertained. Over 60,000 children in Wales lost access to Free School Meals when schools were shut.<sup>12</sup> Given that some families in receipt of Free School Meals are faced with spending an additional £30 to £40 a week, on food during school holidays, this is a significant benefit families are missing out on.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, whilst childcare providers are shut, parents are still being asked to contribute towards their childcare costs or risk losing their child's place when the provider reopens. This may be a particularly pressing concern for parents who have seen their incomes reduced, owing to them having to take on more childcare commitments following the closure of their provider.

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<sup>7</sup> Office for National Statistics, 'H110 Regional labour market: Headline indicators for Wales' (19/05/2020) available at - <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/headline-labour-forces-survey-indicators-for-wales-h110>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> The Resolution Foundation, 'The economic effects of coronavirus in the UK' (April 30, 2020) available at - <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-economic-effects-of-coronavirus-in-the-uk/>

<sup>10</sup> Turn2us 'Coronavirus pandemic leaves children facing financial crisis' (22 April 2020) available at - <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/About-Us/Media-Centre/Press-releases-and-comments/Coronavirus-pandemic-leaves-children-facing-financ>

<sup>11</sup> Trussell Trust, 'Food banks report record spike in need as coalition of anti-poverty charities call for strong lifeline to be thrown to anyone who needs it' (1 May 2020) available at - <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/05/01/coalition-call/>

<sup>12</sup> Bevan Foundation, 'State of Wales: Free School Meals and Coronavirus' (29 April 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Forsey, Hungry Holidays – Report of the APPG on Hunger (2017) UK Parliament All Party Group on Holiday Hunger

The increasing pressures felt by many households are likely to have an impact on their wellbeing. People from low-income backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks, with the long-term impact on their health, education and economic outcomes well documented. Many households don't have adequate digital access for home learning and to stay connected, either relying on pay-as-you-go data or having only one, often small, device shared amongst family members. For children, this can have an impact on their education. Recent research by the Sutton Trust highlights the impact this is having on children's education during lockdown. For example, whilst 50% of teachers in private schools report they're receiving more than three quarters of work set for their pupils during this period back, only 27% report the same in the most advantaged state schools, with this dropping to just 8% in the least advantaged state schools.<sup>14</sup>

It is not just children affected, however. With public spaces such as libraries and community hubs shut, many people living in poverty have lost access to the support services and technology they rely upon. This does not only make it more difficult for individuals to manage their finances and their social security entitlements, but increases their risk of feeling isolated, with people living in poverty unable to afford the technology many have come to rely on to stay connected during lockdown.

### ***Tackling poverty – the actions taken by the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities***

The Welsh Government and local authorities have taken a number of welcome steps to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 on people who are trapped in poverty.

The recent announcement by the Welsh Government that an additional £11 million will be made available to support the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) and that restrictions on how often an individual is entitled to apply for support is hugely encouraging.<sup>15</sup> DAF already provides vital support to thousands of families across Wales. It is vital that the Welsh Government seeks to promote DAF further amongst the wider public, given that some of the families who are currently struggling may have little experience of engaging with the welfare system or with support agencies.

Another welcomed step taken by the Welsh Government is the decision to make an additional £40 million available to help local authorities deliver support in lieu of Free School Meals, including over school holidays.<sup>16</sup> We do have some concerns however, about the discrepancy in how individual local authorities are using these funds to support families.

Immediately following the announcement that schools across Wales would be shut, local authorities sought to put in place emergency measures to ensure that families in receipt of Free School Meals continued to receive some support. This primarily took the form of "grab and go" food bags, with parents encouraged to attend schools to collect lunch that would be provided for their children in lieu of Free School Meals. The shortcomings of this approach became immediately apparent with anecdotal evidence from a range of local authorities suggesting that only a small proportion of parents were attending schools to collect these meals, due to stigma, a lack of access to public transport following the lock down, and concerns about social distancing. Many local authorities sought to find alternative ways of providing families with support.

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<sup>14</sup> Sutton Trust, 'Covid 19 Impacts: School Shutdowns' (20 April 2020) <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

<sup>15</sup> Welsh Government, 'Discretionary Assistance Fund receives £11m boost in Wales' (1 May 2020) <https://gov.wales/discretionary-assistance-fund-receives-11m-boost-wales>

<sup>16</sup> Welsh Government, 'Wales has become the first country in the UK to guarantee ongoing funding for children to continue to receive free school meals during the coronavirus pandemic' (22 April 2020) available at - <https://gov.wales/wales-has-become-first-country-uk-guarantee-ongoing-funding-children-continue-receive-free-school>



Local authorities have developed three primary models for providing support in lieu of Free School Meals in line with Welsh Government guidance:

- Direct cash transfers to families
- Food vouchers that parents can redeem at supermarkets
- The delivery of food parcels

Initially, it appeared that the Welsh Government's preference was for families to be provided with vouchers in lieu of Free School Meals, with the Welsh Government seeking to develop a national voucher scheme, in line with the one in place in England. Local authorities would then be able to opt into this system. The Welsh Government have now abandoned these proposals, a step welcomed by the Bevan Foundation. Early feedback from England suggests that the scheme has been difficult to administer. Not all supermarkets have signed up to the scheme meaning parents have to travel considerable distances to shop or visit more expensive stores than they would otherwise do, whilst stigma issues have not been fully removed.

To counter some of these short comings the Bevan Foundation has consistently argued that the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities should provide cash to families in lieu of Free School Meals. We believe that providing cash to families is the most effective way of supporting social distancing, providing families with flexibility and choice, improving convenience for families by allowing them to shop local, reducing stigma and allowing families to prioritise their spending needs.<sup>17</sup> Whilst it is important that the Welsh Government and local authorities continue to provide additional support to families that may fall through the cracks in any cash based system, for example, by supporting local foodbanks, we believe that all local authorities should be providing families with the option of receiving cash in lieu of Free School Meals.

17 local authorities either now do so or have announced plans to introduce such a system soon.<sup>18</sup> Whilst we welcome the moves made by these local authorities, we are concerned that families trapped in poverty in Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport and the Vale of Glamorgan, may be missing out on support they vitally need, due to the fact that their local authorities do not provide them with the option of receiving a cash payment.<sup>19</sup> We believe that the Welsh Government should give a clear steer to these five local authorities that they should provide cash, to ensure parity of support across Wales. In conjunction to this, we believe that it is important that the Welsh Government regularly ask for updates from local authorities about how many children have taken advantage of alternative Free School Meals support. This would allow the Welsh Government to share best practice across authorities and would enable it to identify whether any additional funding will be needed to maximise support.

Other measures taken by the Welsh Government which we welcome include the decision to temporarily remove attendance requirements for young people in receipt of EMA, and the announcement that £3 million will be made available to support children from digitally excluded families.<sup>20</sup> Whilst we welcome the announcement of extra support for digitally excluded children, we believe that it is important that the Welsh Government recognises that many children will still continue to struggle to get access to learning materials online and that there is likely to be significant learning loss amongst children from low income households when schools finally reconvene.

In addition to putting new schemes in place we believe that it is important that the Welsh Government and Welsh Local Authorities make a concerted effort to promote all the support services which it is

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<sup>17</sup> Bevan Foundation n(10)

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Welsh Government 'Extra £3 million to support digitally excluded learners' (30 April 2020), available at - <https://gov.wales/extra-3-million-pounds-support-digitally-excluded-learners-wales>



providing. In addition to the support schemes already discussed other schemes that Welsh Government should promote extensively include the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Discretionary Housing Payments and Health Start Vouchers.

We also believe that there is a role for the Welsh Government to play in putting pressure on the UK Government to make changes to the UK wide social security system. As the number of households dependent on the safety net it affords has increased, it is more vital than ever that the social security system provides sufficient support. We welcome some of the steps that have already been taken by the UK Government on this but believe that significantly more can be done. Amongst the reforms that we believe that the Welsh Government should be pushing for include the end of the 5 week wait for Universal Credit, the scrapping of the benefit cap and an increase in the child element of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credits to increase by at least £20 per week.<sup>21</sup> Such changes would provide a significant uplift in support to households who are struggling, putting more money in families' pockets.

One further area where we believe that the Welsh Government could take action to lessen the impact of Covid 19 on poverty relates to another of the committee's areas of interest, housing.

Housing – the impact of Covid 19 and the actions taken

Housing is the largest living cost faced by most households. Whilst many households have seen their incomes reduce as a result of Covid 19, they must still find enough money to pay for their rent or their mortgage at the end of every month. Indeed many social housing tenants in Wales actually saw their rents increase as restrictions were put in place to control the spread of Covid 19.<sup>22</sup> The scale of the crisis has been such that some much welcomed action has already been taken by the UK and Welsh Governments as well as by banks who have provided mortgage holidays for many borrowers.

Action taken by the UK and Welsh Governments have provided vital short-term support for households across Wales. It is welcome that families are safe in the knowledge that landlords are not permitted to evict them whilst lockdown measures remain in place. Many households, however, are likely to be falling significantly behind on their rent, building arrears that might lead to their eviction once lockdown protections are lifted. Such uncertainty causes significant stress for families and may lead to some households prioritising spending their money on rent, rather than on other essential items such as food. These pressures are likely to be most pronounced for households living in poverty.

The Welsh Government has already taken some action to ease these pressures in the social housing sector. On April 3rd the Minister for Housing and Local Government, Julie James MS, published a letter to social housing tenants which sought to reassure tenants that there will be support available for rent arrears. The Minister states –

All social landlords have agreed not to take eviction action against any tenants experiencing financial hardship as a result of coronavirus. I have asked them to go further and ensure every tenant can get support when they need it and that no tenants are left with unmanageable debts when the coronavirus crisis is over.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst this statement is to be welcomed it does leave many outstanding questions, the most pressing of which is what constitutes, an “unmanageable debt” and how would a tenant/ landlord prove that

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Wilkes, 'Coronavirus crisis puts 8.5m children in UK a pay cheque away from going without food' (Daily Mirror, 23 April 2020) available at - <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/coronavirus-crisis-puts-85m-children-21908857>

<sup>22</sup> Steffan Evans, 'Dealing with the fallout of coronavirus – the role of social housing rents' (Bevan Foundation, 15 April 2020) available at - Dealing with the fall out of coronavirus – the role of social housing rents

<sup>23</sup> Minister for Housing and Local Government, 'Letter to all social housing tenants' (3 April 2020) available at - <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/inline-documents/2020-04/letter-to-all-social-housing-tenants-in-wales.pdf>

that debt was a result of coronavirus? This lack of clarity could see many tenants opt out of receiving support they desperately need. It is vital that the Welsh Government provides greater clarity as to what level of support social housing tenants are expected to receive once the immediate impact of the crisis begins to ease.

There is also a need for greater clarity on what the Welsh Government's medium to long term plans are with regards to the increased debt social landlords will be holding. Increased debt could have an impact on a social landlord's regulatory rating and lead to a landlord breaching borrowing covenants. Asking social landlords themselves to repay the debt would severely impact their ability to construct new social housing and put pressure on them to increase rents further in 2021/22. Will the Welsh Government therefore be prepared to pay down some or all the debt accrued by social landlords over the next few weeks and months? We believe that it is crucial that the cost of covering increased arrears does not fall on the broader tenant body, nor that it should have an impact on the Welsh Government's broader social housing building programme.

Indeed, the current crisis raises fundamental questions about the viability of continuing to ask tenants to cover the costs of constructing new social housing through their rents. As the crisis has demonstrated, at time of financial hardship, those already living on the margins of poverty are often squeezed the hardest. We believe that the time has come to move to a fairer, more sustainable and a more redistributive approach to funding the construction of new social housing in Wales. One way in which this could be achieved is for the Welsh Government to reprioritise its investment in housing, increasing spending on social housing grant, whilst cutting spending on other schemes such as the help to buy programme which has less clear benefits for improving housing affordability.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst there is a need for more clarity from the Welsh Government about the support that is on offer to tenants in the social housing sector, this need is even more pressing within the private rental sector. Whilst some tenants may be able to draw on the DAF and Discretionary Housing Payments to help them with some of their housing cost, this support is unlikely to be sufficient to support all households struggling with their rent. Whilst we support the Welsh Government's calls to the DWP to relax the eligibility criteria for DHPs in line with the action its taken with regards to DAF, the Welsh Government should also commit to providing local authorities with additional funding to allow them to provide the maximum amount of DHP support over the coming months. Even having allowed for this however, there is a need for the Welsh Government to publish clear proposals on how it will avoid a homelessness crisis within the private rental sector once current restrictions on evictions are lifted.

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<sup>24</sup> Steffan Evans, 'Time to shift the dial? Is social housing the solution to or cause of poverty' (Welsh Housing Quarterly, April 2020, available at - <https://whq.org.uk/the-magazine/issue/118/time-to-shift-the-dial/>)

## Committee Inquiry into COVID-19 Citizens Advice Cymru submission to the ELGC

### Summary

1. Citizens Advice Cymru has helped more than 20,000 people in Wales since the lockdown began. Our network of 19 Local Citizens Advice offices across Wales is delivering advice by phone and online during the lockdown. We're continuing to monitor data from our website and local advice services to understand people's concerns during this crisis.
2. No one knows yet what the full impact of the outbreak will be. However, we estimate that 4 in 10 households (42%) in Wales have already lost income as a result of the Coronavirus crisis.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of the outbreak have been extensive and are likely to be ongoing.
3. Whilst national and local government has taken significant steps to protect people from the impact, our advisers continue to help clients through a time of considerable financial hardship and uncertainty.
4. It is vital that the Welsh Government uses its powers through the devolved settlement to take timely and effective action. Our research has identified three key areas within the portfolio of the committee where we believe more must be done to ensure people do not fall into greater hardship.
  - 4.1. **Council tax debt:** where people fall behind on council tax as a result of the pandemic, they still face escalation of debts and strict enforcement. Local authorities, with the support of the Welsh Government, must use their powers to protect those struggling with payments in order to prevent longer-term hardship.
  - 4.2. **Housing and rent arrears:** current protection from evictions comes to an end on 25th June, leaving households vulnerable if they have fallen behind on rent during the lockdown period. Welsh Government must extend current pauses on evictions to prevent a cliff-edge for tenants who have fallen behind.
  - 4.3. **Tackling poverty:** The extent of poverty in Wales has left many households vulnerable in the face of the financial shock posed by the Coronavirus outbreak. Welsh Government should act swiftly to ensure people living in or at risk of falling into poverty are aware of support available to them.

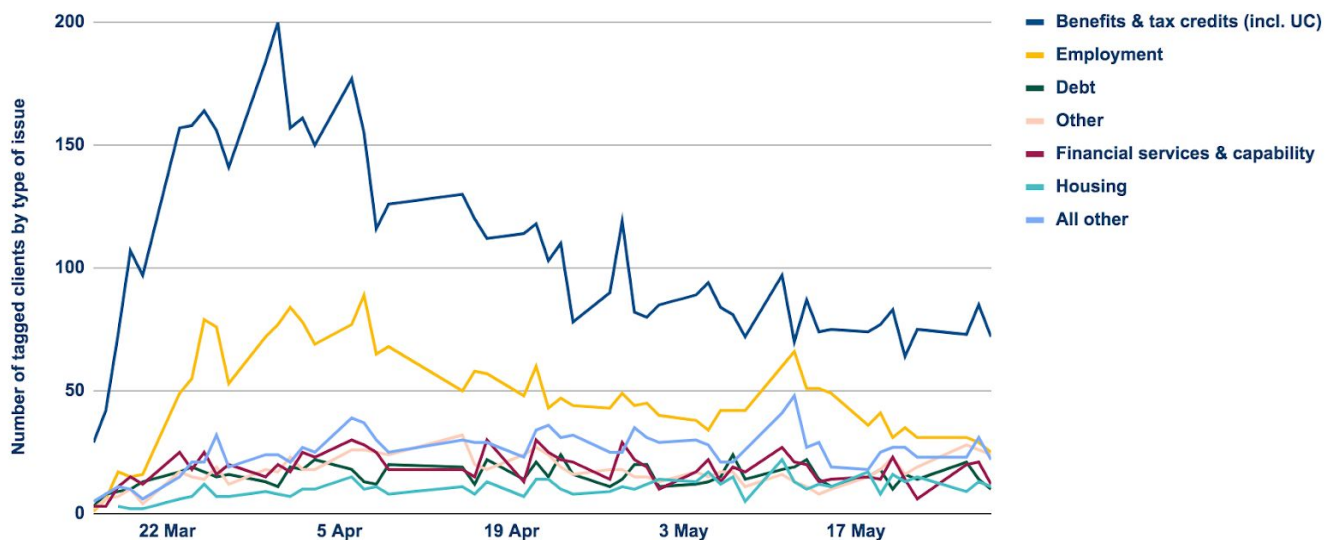
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<sup>1</sup> Citizens Advice Cymru, Facing the cliff edge: Protecting people in Wales from the financial consequences of Covid-19, May 2020

## Impact on households in Wales

5. We estimate that around 250,000 people across Wales have already seen their hours cut, been laid off, or made redundant as a result of the outbreak.<sup>2</sup> More than 4 in 10 (42%) people have seen their household income drop because of the crisis, with nearly 1 in 14 (7%) losing 80% or more. As businesses navigate the easing of lockdown measures, it is likely that more jobs will be lost.
6. Our services across Wales have helped 6,400 clients with issues related directly to the Coronavirus outbreak since the lockdown began. Our data from this period shows significant numbers in cases of benefits entitlement and employment advice, demonstrating the levels of uncertainty and concern people are facing during this time.

Figure 1: Clients with issues relating directly to Coronavirus since the start of the lockdown period.



7. Despite interventions from both the UK and Welsh Governments, Citizens Advice Cymru is already seeing people affected by the crisis who are struggling to make ends meet. Based on a nationally representative survey of adults in Wales, we estimate that by the middle of April:
  - 7.1. Nearly 300,000 people had fallen behind on one or more household bills - such as gas and electric, broadband, or council tax - as a result of the outbreak.
  - 7.2. A third (34%) of renters had fallen behind or expected to fall behind on their rent.

<sup>2</sup> Citizens Advice Cymru, Facing the cliff edge: Protecting people in Wales from the financial consequences of Covid-19, May 2020

- 7.3. People in shielded groups, young people, and people in insecure work are likely to be worst affected.<sup>3</sup>

### **Some groups are not able to access financial support**

8. The income support schemes and wider benefits system are providing much needed financial support for those who have lost income during the crisis. However, Citizens Advice Cymru continues to give advice to those who have seen huge losses of income but do not qualify for different forms of financial support. These groups include:
- 8.1. **Workers who do not meet the eligibility criteria for the schemes** - This includes people who have been self-employed for less than a year, or who were not employed or on the payroll of their current employer by the 19th March.
  - 8.2. **People whose employer has chosen not to furlough them** - Some people who are required to self-isolate because they or someone they live with are in the shielded groups have had their requests to be furloughed refused. Our advisers have also highlighted cases where people who would have been eligible for the Job Retention Scheme have instead been laid off or made redundant.
  - 8.3. **People with 'No Recourse to Public Funds'** - We have seen several cases where migrants who have lost employment and have no recourse to public funds are being pushed into hardship.<sup>4</sup> As this group is currently very unlikely to be able to find other employment or to change their living situations during this period, they are being left without long-term monetary support which is needed to avoid financial difficulty.
  - 8.4. **Employees struggling to access sick pay** - Those who have been through periods of ill-health, or who are at increased risk of Coronavirus, are entitled to sick pay if they are ill or shielding. However our advisers have highlighted cases where people were unsure of their rights or were having difficulty applying for sick pay.
9. People who fall into these categories are likely to be left on a lower income, and may experience longer term impacts of the outbreak. It is important, therefore, to consider measures that will mitigate the risk this poses.

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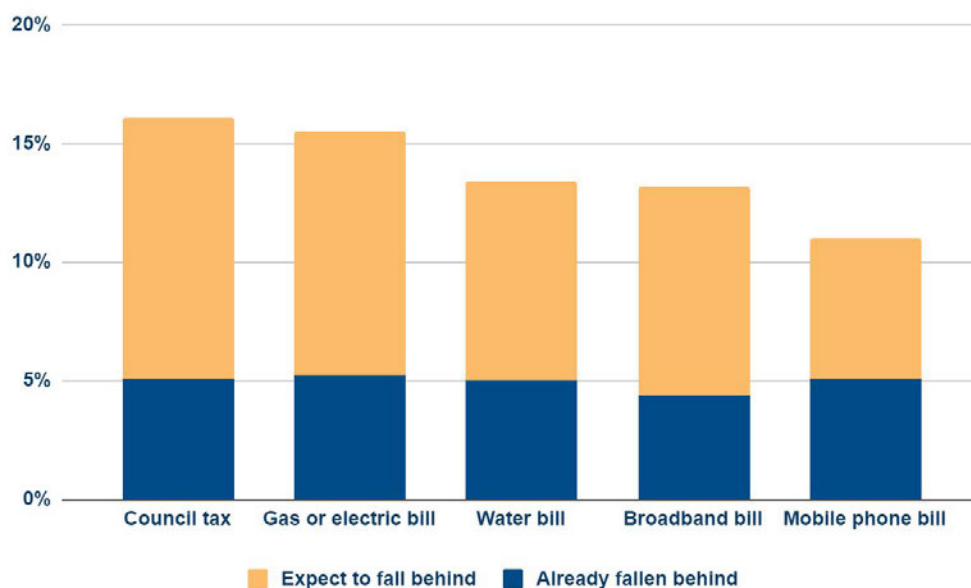
<sup>3</sup> Citizens Advice Cymru, Near the cliff-edge: how to protect households facing debt during COVID-19 May 2020

<sup>4</sup> Citizens Advice, Lockdown Lifeline: Ensuring adequate support across the benefits system during the Covid-19 pandemic, May 2020

## Local government and council tax arrears

10. Council tax debt is the biggest debt problem we see at Citizens Advice Cymru. Last year we helped 5300 people with issues relating to council tax arrears. As we continue to see the economic impact of the pandemic, it is likely that many more will struggle to keep up with payments.
11. Our polling in April found that around 1 in 7 (16%) adults in Wales have fallen behind or expect to fall behind on their council tax bill as a result of the Coronavirus crisis.<sup>5</sup> These figures are also comparable to other research looking at the financial impact of Coronavirus.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 2: Proportion of those fallen or likely to fall behind on household bills



12. People in Wales received their 2020/21 council tax bill at the onset of the crisis in April. Under current regulations, a typical council tax payer - paying around £1,600 a year council tax - faces becoming liable for the full amount if they are unable to meet instalments at the start of the financial year.
13. Our research shows that people who fall behind on council tax payments are generally unable to pay, rather than unwilling.<sup>7</sup> Falling behind on council tax payments this early in the year leaves people vulnerable to escalating debts from fees added during the enforcement process (including the cost of the liability order and bailiff fees). This risks pushing people further into debt.<sup>8</sup>

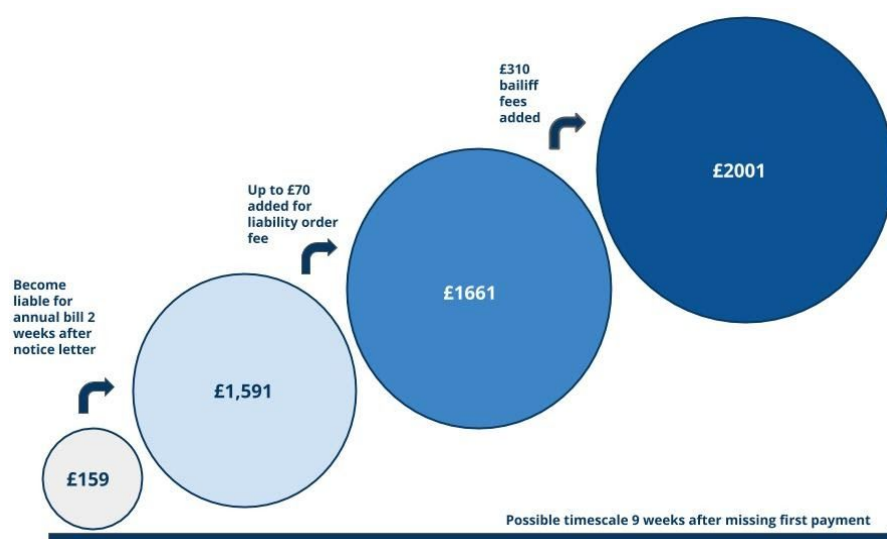
<sup>5</sup> Citizens Advice Cymru, [Facing the cliff edge: Protecting people in Wales from the financial consequences of Covid-19](#), May 2020

<sup>6</sup> [Data published by the ONS](#) suggests that 16% of adults in Great Britain are struggling to pay bills. [Research commissioned by the Standard Life Foundation](#) found that 17% of households in the UK were in arrears, with 12% saying they found it a constant struggle to pay bills.

<sup>7</sup> Citizens Advice Cymru, [The Potential Impact of Coronavirus on Council Tax Arrears](#), April 2020

<sup>8</sup> Citizens Advice, [Wrong Side of the Tax: Council tax debt collection needs to change](#)

Figure 3: Diagram to show how debts could escalate after missing one bill



14. Whilst many low-income households will be able to claim a Council Tax Reduction this support does not protect all those who struggle with payments. Knowledge of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme amongst adults in Wales is also relatively low. Only half (48%) of adults in Wales think that someone claiming Universal Credit would be entitled to a reduction on their Council Tax.
15. In March, we highlighted the need for Welsh Government and local authorities to take steps to protect people from the impact of falling behind on council tax bills. The UK Government and local authorities have put some measures in place to protect people from council tax debt and enforcement:
  - 15.1. At a national level, there is currently an informal pause on enforcement of new council tax debts due to magistrates courts not hearing liability cases.
  - 15.2. Some local authorities have advertised the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) on their website homepage and have encouraged people to contact them if they are struggling to pay. Some have suggested that people may defer payments to move the first two months of payments to the end of the year to delay current payments, whilst others have highlighted the existing option of paying the bill over 12 instead of 10 months.
  - 15.3. Some local authorities have announced an explicit pause to enforcement and advertised this on their websites (e.g. Gwynedd Council).<sup>9</sup>
16. However, these measures are temporary. Without further action, we are likely to see more people falling into arrears and being subject to enforcement action. They also vary from local authority to local authority, risking a 'postcode lottery' of access to support.
17. There's a risk that more people falling into arrears will lead to a significant loss of council tax revenue for local authorities. At a time when budgets are under pressure,

<sup>9</sup> Gwynedd Council website, [Council tax](#) (accessed 2 June 2020)

it is vital that councils are given the resources to ensure that the cost of the crisis is not pushed onto individuals in financial difficulty. Collecting arrears fairly and agreeing on manageable repayments is crucial to avoid pushing people into deeper debt after the crisis and to ensure the wellbeing of citizens during this time.

### **What is still needed to safeguard people in Wales?**

- 18. *The Welsh Government should ask local authorities to pause enforcement of council tax bills missed during the crisis for 6-12 months, and offer a 3 month council tax holiday for those who cannot afford to make payments.*** It must be prepared to offer additional funding to cover the losses that councils may face as a result. Importantly, this measure would also protect people who cannot access CTRS or other benefits, due to their immigration status. People who have NRPF (no recourse to public funds), some EU migrants and other irregular migrants, (such as visa overstayers, refused asylum seekers), are not able to access this support.
- 19. *Local authorities could also consider extending the backdating period for Council Tax Reduction beyond the 3 month minimum.*** Whilst the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) is an important form of protection for people on a low income, our research shows that it does not protect everyone who needs support with paying council tax. Our research found that a quarter (26%) of people in Wales have delayed or decided not to claim a benefit, despite thinking they could be eligible.<sup>10</sup> These figures indicate that many who are eligible will not be accessing the necessary support and may find themselves falling behind. This measure would ensure that people have sufficient time to explore their entitlements and access the scheme.

#### **Case study: Client received letter from the council demanding full bill**

A client in [REDACTED] sought advice about his council tax overpayment debt. He had been making repayments to the council through weekly £10 installments made in a local council service centre. Due to the closure of this centre during the covid outbreak, the client sought to contact the council to arrange alternative methods of payment to ensure these payments would be made on time. The client received no response, despite writing to the council and multiple attempts to call on the phone.

The client then received a letter from the local authority, demanding the full £1750 debt to be paid in full as a result of the missed payments, causing him great concern. After further contact via email, the council resolved the issue and the client was able to get up-to-date on their repayments, however the situation had left the client concerned that enforcement action could be taken against them.

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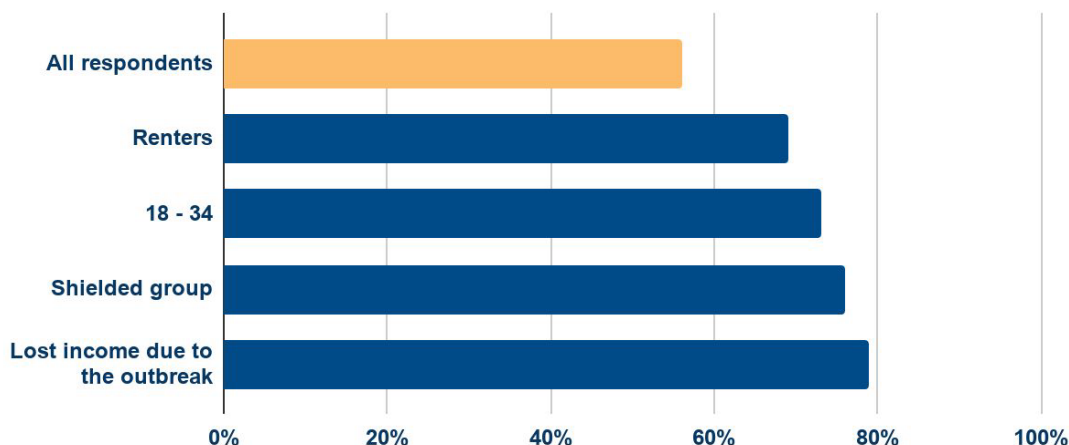
<sup>10</sup> Figures are taken from polling conducted by YouGov Plc on behalf of Citizens Advice. Total sample size was 1002 adults and fieldwork was undertaken between 27th February - 2nd March 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+).



## Housing and rent arrears

20. Approximately 1 in 4 households live in social or rented private rented accommodation in Wales. Although the Coronavirus outbreak is affecting everyone, its financial impacts are not evenly distributed. While around half (56%) of adults in Wales said they were worried about their ability to cope financially during the crisis, this figure was much higher for some groups, including renters.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 4: Percentage of adults in Wales who are worried about their ability to cope financially during the crisis



Source: Citizens Advice analysis of an Opinion survey carried out between 2 and 7 April 2020

21. Around a third (34%) of those in the private rented sector reported that they had fallen behind or expected to fall behind on rent payments as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak.
22. The UK and Welsh Governments have taken steps to protect those who are renting their homes from eviction during this time, including:
- 22.1. Temporary measures require that landlords give a 3 month eviction notice to tenants, protecting tenants from facing eviction during the peak of the crisis.
  - 22.2. Guidance for private sector landlords on how best to support tenants and keep them safe during the crisis.<sup>12</sup>
  - 22.3. An increase to the local housing allowance to 30% of the lower local area rent rates.
  - 22.4. A new digital information campaign to support people struggling with housing issues during the crisis.

<sup>11</sup> Citizens Advice Cymru, [Facing the cliff edge: Protecting people in Wales from the financial consequences of Covid-19](#), May 2020

<sup>12</sup> Welsh Government, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for landlords and managing agents in the private rented sector \(version 3\)](#)

## What is still needed to safeguard people in Wales?

23. On the 25th June, current measures preventing evictions during the pandemic by increasing the eviction notice period to 3 months will come to an end and many renters who have fallen behind on rent payments may face eviction. It is important that Welsh Government acts to prevent further disruption to the lives of people in rented accommodation.
24. ***In the short-term, the Welsh Government must provide reassurance to renters in Wales by using its existing powers to extend the notice period to 6 months as soon as possible.*** The recent extension to mortgage holidays for homeowners recognises that people will continue to struggle to meet essential costs beyond the end of the lockdown period. This protection must also be given to renters for at least 3 further months.
25. ***Additionally, the government should accelerate plans to implement the Renting Homes (Wales) Act, and to pass the amending bill to permanently extend the minimum notice period required under a section 173 notice from 2 to 6 months and restrict the issue of such a notice until 6 months after the date of issue of a contract.*** The Renting Homes (Wales) Act, should be brought forward to provide protections from 'no-fault' evictions and to extend the notice period to ensure that renters have sufficient time to pay rent arrears or to find alternative accommodation if needed.

### Evictions as a result of rent arrears accrued during the Covid-19 crisis

██████████ has been furloughed from his employment and has struggled to cover essential costs during the Coronavirus outbreak. His wages through the furlough scheme are not enough to live on and he should be entitled to Universal Credit. However, an administrative mistake by the DWP miscalculated his entitlement and has left Adam struggling to pay his rent.

██████ landlord has issued him with a 3 month eviction notice for the end of August as a result of the rent arrears that he has accrued. Whilst the landlord has given the legal notice, ██████ is concerned that he will not find another property to rent and feels that when he receives the correct financial support, he will be able to pay his landlord the arrears and would ask to be allowed to remain in the property.

## Tackling Poverty

26. Whilst the outbreak of Coronavirus has impacted heavily on households across Wales, there has been a disproportionate impact on those who were already living in poverty.<sup>13</sup> Our evidence suggests that many people who have lost income as a result of the crisis are not able to access timely and adequate financial support. There is therefore a risk that these groups will face increased hardship as time goes on.
27. Whilst it is difficult to predict the trajectory of the outbreak, current evidence suggests that those at greatest risk of poverty are being disproportionately affected. Households that earned the least before the crisis are being hit the hardest.<sup>14</sup> There is evidence to suggest that income shocks will be concentrated amongst people with lower earnings and a lower likelihood of having savings to fall back on.<sup>15</sup> People in insecure work appear to be facing worse financial impacts as a result of the crisis, whilst also being less likely to have savings to fall back on.<sup>16</sup>
28. People whose incomes have been disrupted by the outbreak need to be able to rely on the benefits system as a safety net. However, we are seeing many cases where people are not getting the support they need:
- 28.1. **Our data shows that many clients are still unaware of what support they are entitled to.** The number of clients our advisers have helped with 'reducing income and maximising income' is four times the number that came in the same period last year, demonstrating the high need for advice on benefit entitlements.<sup>17</sup>
  - 28.2. **Some clients have experienced delays in accessing financial support,** for example, whilst waiting for payments from Universal Credit, the Job Retention Scheme and the Income Support Scheme. This delay has left many people struggling to make ends meet and some of our clients have reported falling behind on household bills as a result. Our data also shows an increase on the demand for food bank vouchers during this period compared to the same period last year.<sup>18</sup>
  - 28.3. **People claiming benefits may still not have enough to cover their costs.** Even those who have access to benefit support may find that they do not have enough to meet their costs. Citizens Advice research published last year found that almost half (49%) of those receiving working-age benefits had struggled to meet essential costs over the 12 months prior.<sup>19</sup> Our research earlier this year showed that across the UK, 40% of people we

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<sup>13</sup> Resolution Foundation, [The effects of the coronavirus crisis on workers • Resolution Foundation](#)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Resolution Foundation, [Doing what it takes](#) March 2020

<sup>16</sup> Citizens Advice, [Near the cliff-edge: How to protect households facing debt during COVID-19](#), May 2020

<sup>17</sup> Analysis of internal client data collected by our local offices.

<sup>18</sup> Analysis of internal client data collected by our local offices.

<sup>19</sup> Citizens Advice, [Achieving income security for all](#), September 2019

helped with debt who claim income-related benefits had a negative budget.  
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- 28.4. **Some people may find it more difficult to get support whilst social distancing measures are in place.** Our network of 19 Local Citizens Advice offices in Wales are currently delivering advice via telephone, email, webchat and other online routes. As people continue to socially distance and avoid face to face interactions, it is likely that this trend will continue. In particular, people within shielded or vulnerable groups will not be able to use face to face channels for some time. Whilst our offices have adapted to ensure everyone can still access crucial advice, we're concerned that older people, people with language barriers and those who are digitally excluded may be less likely to be receiving up-to-date information and accessing all the support they are entitled to.
29. In March we recommended some actions that would protect the most vulnerable during this period.<sup>21</sup> The Welsh Government has already recognised the need for further financial support. It recently announced that an extra £11 million would be given through the Discretionary Assistance Fund, a vital emergency route for payments that meets the urgent needs of those in financial difficulty.<sup>22</sup> However, this support only offers short-term relief and more must be done to ensure people are accessing all available support during this time.

### **What is still needed to safeguard people in Wales?**

30. As the crisis continues, the Welsh Government has a crucial role to play in crafting a policy response which protects people on low incomes and those who face the worst financial consequences of the outbreak. Wales already has higher rates of poverty than the UK average, and there is evidence to suggest that some coastal and rural communities would be particularly vulnerable to job losses if and when protections are lifted.<sup>23 24</sup>
31. Whilst many of the policy levers which directly affect household finances sit with Westminster, the Welsh Government has already shown that it can act to fill some of the gaps in support where it deems the response from Westminster to be insufficient.<sup>25</sup> More must be done within the current devolution settlement to protect people's finances during this crisis.
32. **The Welsh Government must be proactive in encouraging people to check what benefits or support they are entitled to.** It should consider a universal intervention

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<sup>20</sup> Citizens Advice, February 2020 , [Making Ends Meet: The impact of the benefits freeze on people in debt](#)

<sup>21</sup> Citizens Advice Cymru, [Helping Wales through the Covid-19 pandemic](#)

<sup>22</sup> Welsh Government, [Discretionary Assistance Fund receives £11 Million Boost, Discretionary Assistance Fund receives £11m boost in Wales](#)

<sup>23</sup> Social Metrics Commission, [Measuring Poverty 2019](#), July 2019

<sup>24</sup> Centre for Towns, [The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on our towns and cities](#), April 2020

<sup>25</sup> Welsh Government, [Discretionary Assistance Fund receives £11m boost in Wales](#), May 2020

such as writing to all households in Wales to ask people to check what benefits they might be entitled to if their income has been or will be affected by the Coronavirus outbreak. This should include benefits and support schemes administered in Wales, such as the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the Discretionary Assistance Fund.

33. At a minimum, it should ensure targeted information is available to those most at risk of financial difficulties during the crisis, particularly renters, people in the shielded group, and people with no recourse to public funds or irregular migration status.

#### **Case Study: lack of digital literacy and uncertainty over entitlements**

A self employed taxi driver in [REDACTED] was unable to work during the lockdown period. As he does not have digital literacy or access to IT at home, he contacted our adviser to find out what type of financial support he may be entitled to.

Our adviser was able to explore his entitlement to the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme and found that as he had not completed his tax returns for HMRC, having not earned over the threshold, he would not be eligible for the scheme.

Our adviser informed the client of his options and supported the client to apply for Universal Credit and Council Tax Reduction. They then explained that he could talk to his landlord regarding rent payments if needed. He was then referred to other local support to help with immediate needs.

As he was not able to explore his options himself, this caused delay to him accessing the support he needed.

# Agenda Item 5

## Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

### 30 June 2020 – papers to note cover sheet

Paper no.	Issue	From	Action point
ELGC(5)–18–20 Paper 5	Benefits in Wales: options for better delivery	Llywydd	To note
ELGC(5)–18–20 Paper 6	Inquiry into COVID–19 and its impact on matters relating to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee’s remit	Royal College of General Practitioners Wales	To note

John Griffiths MS  
Chair, Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee  
Senedd Cymru  
Cardiff Bay  
CF99 1SE

17 June 2020

Dear John,

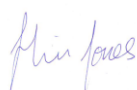
## **Request for a Plenary debate – Benefits in Wales**

Thank you for your letter to the Business Committee requesting a debate on the Committee's report on Benefits in Wales.

The Business Committee considered the letter at its meeting on 15 June. Having previously agreed to only schedule committee debates directly relating to Covid-19 in the short term, the Committee felt that this request did not fall in that category.

Business Managers did however agree that this was an important debate to have and will look to schedule the debate for early in the autumn term.

Kind regards,



**Elin Jones MS**

Llywydd and Chair of the Business Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg. We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.



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Pack Page 66

**Welsh Parliament**  
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23 June 2020

Dear John Griffiths MS,

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Covid-19 Evidence

It came to our attention that during the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee meeting of 16 June 2020 reference was made both to RCGP Wales specifically and to the profession more broadly in relation to advance care planning and the Do Not Attempt Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (DNACPR) instruction. We thought it might be useful for Committee Members if the College addressed this matter.

We support the point made by the Older People's Commissioner that there is a need to be open about the importance of advance care planning in a way which respects individual wishes. Our college strongly supports the principle of patient autonomy and empowerment, so that they are put in control of important decisions about their wellbeing. This is normal procedure for GPs in Wales and across the UK. However, we believe that with broader government and NHS communications around the importance and non-invasiveness of advance care planning there would be an even more open culture to discussing the topic.

It is very important that advance care planning and DNACPR are not viewed as one and the same. There is a need to separate the concept of planning your own care and the specific action of agreeing to the signing of a DNACPR form. Each sensitive discussion must be unique to, and at a pace suitable for, the individual patient and may require discussion over a period of time. DNACPR is a sensitive issue which does not necessarily need to be part of advance care planning.

Advance Care Planning

Many patients are grateful to be given the opportunity to express their wishes and state clearly what they want to happen as their condition changes. This is not 'giving up' but rather accepting the carefully considered views of the individual. Each person's circumstances are different and should be respected as such. Decisions whether to continue certain treatments (e.g. chemotherapy), to try alternatives or even to be hospitalised require deep consideration. To make any decisions in life, people must be well informed, and this involves asking the right questions. GPs are good listeners and used to explaining things in straightforward language. As GPs working in the current COVID-19 crisis, it is important that we have sensitive but frank discussions with patients in order to explain the risks and benefits should they need hospital admission and the likely implications for continuing family contact in hospital.



## DNACPR

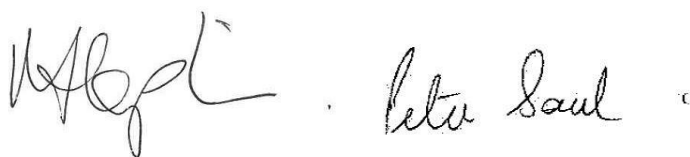
The Committee meeting referenced a surgery in the Ogmore constituency which had been criticised after a letter relating to DNACPR was issued to some patients. It is not for the College to comment on this specific incident, though we note the swift apology from the practice. An emotional response to this incident was understandable, but DNACPR should never be seen as ill-intent or a matter of pressure on the patient. Quite the opposite, it is intended to ensure the patient has the power to decide on how they wish to be treated. The role of the GP is not to take a view, but to dispassionately provide the best information that they possibly can so that the patient is in possession of the relevant evidence if they wish to make such a decision.

That CPR in the community carries less than a 10% success rate is not widely published although has been highlighted to promote the use and training of automatic electronic defibrillators (AEDs); especially in public places. The risk of CPR during COVID-19 had been recognised as an aerosol generating procedure (AGP) which places those in the vicinity at potential risk of contracting the disease. These facts – low success with a now risky procedure, has led some professionals to try and clarify the wishes of those at the end of life as to whether they wish to undergo CPR.

Age is a factor in the decision, as success of CPR declines as we get older, but other factors such as the underlying illness and comorbidities are more important. The reality is that even if CPR is successful the chances of recovery to a lifestyle experienced before a cardiac event are low. This is a discussion which could be appropriate to have at any age and at a suitable time. The decisions made must not be seen as irreversible, and as conditions change, so should the care planning.

Secondary care is used to outlining the risks associated with any procedure and will often discuss a DNACPR at the time of a crisis without the opportunity to plan ahead or to consider things in great detail. General practice offers this time and planning as part of ongoing support to the individual and family.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Mair Hopkin**  
**Joint Chair**  
**RCGP Wales**

**Dr Peter Saul**  
**Joint Chair**  
**RCGP Wales**

**cc.**

**Vaughan Gething MS**

**Heléna Herklots, Older People's Commissioner for Wales**

**Victoria Lloyd, Chief Executive, Age Cymru.**

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