

## **Agenda Supplement – Equality and Social Justice Committee**

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Meeting Venue:	For further information contact:
<b>Video Conference via Zoom</b>	<b>Rhys Morgan</b>
Meeting date: 20 September 2021	Committee Clerk
Meeting time: 13.30	0300 200 6565
	<a href="mailto:SeneddEquality@senedd.wales">SeneddEquality@senedd.wales</a>

### **Early papers**

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Report – March 2021**

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**Correspondence from Victoria Winkler, Director, Bevan Foundation to the Chair regarding child poverty and protecting migrants' rights – 23 July 2021**

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# Fifth Senedd Legacy Report

March 2021



The Welsh Parliament is the democratically elected body that represents the interests of Wales and its people. Commonly known as the Senedd, it makes laws for Wales, agrees Welsh taxes and holds the Welsh Government to account.

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# **Fifth Senedd Legacy Report**

March 2021



# About the Committee

The Committee was established on 28 June 2016. Its remit can be found at:  
[www.senedd.wales/SeneddCommunities](http://www.senedd.wales/SeneddCommunities)

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## Committee Chair:



**John Griffiths MS**  
Welsh Labour

## Current Committee membership:



**Dawn Bowden MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Huw Irranca-Davies MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Delyth Jewell MS**  
Plaid Cymru



**Laura Anne Jones MS**  
Welsh Conservatives



**Mandy Jones MS**  
Independent Alliance for Reform  
Group

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## Chair's foreword

I am proud of the Committee's work over the past five years. We have covered a broad range of issues, both policy and legislation. We have helped push issues up the political agenda, such as our early work looking at the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, which helped inform the Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan. We have consistently highlighted the inequality and unfairness still blighting our communities. The lack of equality of opportunity and outcome. The need for a more focused and comprehensive strategy to tackle poverty in Wales. These concerns ran through our work throughout this Senedd term and remain. We have also led the political debate with work looking at devolution of welfare benefits, and prisoner voting. We have shown adaptability to respond to national events, such as our work looking at fire safety in high rise buildings immediately following the horrific events at Grenfell; and over the last year on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our systematic approach to follow up work has meant that throughout the term, we have continued to seek real and meaningful progress to tackle the scourge of rough sleeping; and speed up pace with the implementation of the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. I would encourage all Senedd committees in the next term to prioritise follow-up work as this can be the most effective tool in driving through change.

I would like to thank all the stakeholders and citizens who have helped inform our work. In particular, those citizens who have shared their own lived experience, which has often been challenging, of a range of issues from seeking asylum; rough sleeping; juggling parenting with employment; and most recently the safety of living in high rise buildings. This lived experience really adds an extra layer to our scrutiny, and the recommendations we make for change. And to give my grateful thanks to members of the committee, present and past, together with our dedicated and professional team of committee clerks and researchers for their invaluable service and support.

**John Griffiths MS**

Committee Chair

## 1. Committee remit and workload

Our remit is very broad and means we have been responsible for a significant proportion of all legislation considered by the Senedd. We think this should be taken into account when drawing up committee structures and remits in the Sixth Senedd.

- 1.** All Senedd committees in the current term have had very broad remits. However, the breadth of our remit combined with our heavy legislative workload throughout this Senedd, has made it particularly challenging to manage our capacity at particular points during this Senedd term.
- 2.** This was also a challenge for our predecessor Committee in the Fourth Assembly; the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee (“CELG”), whose remit had also included culture, media, sport and the Welsh language. It recommended in its legacy report that a dedicated Communications Committee should be established in the Fifth Assembly.<sup>1</sup> This recommendation was implemented, with the establishment of the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee at the outset of the Fifth Assembly. The sport element of the CELG Committee’s remit became part of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.
- 3.** This narrowing of the remit is to be welcomed, but the remit has remained incredibly broad, making it challenging to do full justice to all the areas we cover. This is before we take into account the impact on our work programme of a heavy legislative workload, and Covid-19.

### Committee remit:

The Committee was established on 28 June 2016 to examine legislation and hold the Welsh Government to account by scrutinising expenditure, administration and policy matters encompassing (but not restricted to): local government; housing, community regeneration, cohesion and safety; tackling poverty; equality of opportunity and human rights. On 13 November 2019, the Committee’s remit was amended to include the ability to: exercise the non-

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<sup>1</sup> [Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee, Fourth Assembly Legacy Report, March 2016](#)

budgetary functions set out in Standing Order 18A.2 in relation to accountability and governance of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

- 4.** We highlighted this issue in our response to the Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform who sought our views on the impact of any change of size of the then Assembly on committees.<sup>2</sup> Much of what we set out in this letter, we still believe is relevant, and should be considered when developing committee structures and remits in the Sixth Senedd. We set out the key points below.
- 5.** When looking at other legislatures across the UK, the Senedd is the only one which combines the equality portfolio with the housing and local government portfolio within the remit of a single committee. The Scottish Parliament is the closest comparator because, as in the current Senedd, its committees undertake both policy and legislative scrutiny. It split these two elements of our portfolio between two committees during the 2016 - 2021 session, the Equalities and Human Rights Committee and the Local Government and Communities Committee. Additionally, other aspects of our work sat with other committees at the Scottish Parliament, for example, during our work on the devolution of benefits, we met with the Social Security Committee.
- 6.** The Northern Ireland Assembly has a similar model, with committees undertaking both policy and legislative scrutiny. Again, our portfolio is split between two committees; Executive (which covers equality and human rights as part of its remit); and Communities (covering housing and local government.)
- 7.** The comparison with Westminster is less direct, as select committees are not responsible for legislative scrutiny for introduced Bills. However, it is worth noting that they also split their policy scrutiny for matters within our remit across two main committees: Housing, Communities and Local Government; and Women and Equalities. There is also an additional committee; the Joint Committee on Human Rights, with membership drawn from across both the Houses of Commons and the Lords.
- 8.** We are aware that at Westminster, there is a Select Committee for each government department, and we note the merits of that approach. However, there are factors which make this more challenging in the Welsh context - primarily because there are no separate Government departments in Wales with separate Permanent Secretaries. The Welsh Government has a single Permanent

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Chair to Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform Chair, 27 January 2020.

Secretary, whereas in Whitehall, each ministerial department has a Permanent Secretary responsible for the day to day running of the department. The Permanent Secretary is accountable to Parliament for the stewardship of the department's budget and ensuring Value for Money. As ministerial reshuffles can often involve significant changes of responsibility, such a structure means it is more likely that committee structures could end up looking out of date or not reflecting Government structures. However, setting this aside, as a point of principle, we believe it makes more sense to have committee portfolios that more closely reflect ministerial portfolios.

## Legislative workload

**9.** Despite the change in the portfolio of this Committee compared with our predecessor in the Fourth Assembly, the proportion of legislation we have considered is similar; we have scrutinised 27% of all legislation introduced in this Senedd. In total, we have considered 6 out of the 22 Bills introduced. This figure would have been higher if the Regulation of Registered Social Landlords (Wales) Act 2018 had not been referred to the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee, because we were already considering two other Bills concurrently when it was introduced. We were also expecting to consider the Social Partnerships Bill, but its introduction was postponed due to the pandemic. A high proportion of the legislation introduced in recent years relates to housing. It seems likely that any committee which has housing within its remit will continue to be responsible for undertaking a significant amount of legislative scrutiny in the next Senedd. We would like this to be considered when committee remits are agreed in the Sixth Senedd.

**10.** Legislative scrutiny is core business, but as we do not have any control over when Bills are introduced, and our views on timetabling are not always implemented, it can be more difficult for us to manage our wider workloads, and ensure we can undertake the policy scrutiny we may wish to do.

**11.** Neither the issue of our broad remit, nor the heavy legislative workload is particularly problematic on its own, but the combination of the two has made it more difficult for us to manage such a broad portfolio.

**12.** We would reiterate our calls in our letter to the Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform, that legislative workloads should be taken into account when developing committee structures in the Sixth Senedd.

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## 2. Working practices

We have developed a number of ways of working which we believe are effective, and could be useful for future committees to consider.

**13.** During this Senedd term, we have utilised both formal and informal means to gather evidence and engage with the people of Wales to inform our work. For each of the policy and legislative issues we have considered, we formed terms of reference and sought views from interested organisations or individuals. Every inquiry or area of Bill scrutiny has been published on our website, usually accompanied by a formal request for written evidence and publicised through ours and the Senedd's social media channels.

**14.** The majority of our evidence gathering has been through formal committee meetings, where witnesses have been invited to present evidence to inform our considerations of a range of policy and legislation areas. Prior to entering lockdown in March 2020, we were allocated a weekly meeting slot to undertake our business. The allocated slots were on alternate Wednesdays and Thursdays, enabling us to meet on a Wednesday morning and all day on a Thursday, fortnightly. These slots were primarily used to hold formal meetings on the Senedd estate, which Members and invited witnesses mostly attended in person; video conference facilities were occasionally used to facilitate the attendance of witnesses who were unable to attend in person.

**15.** Engaging with the citizens of Wales has been a crucial element of our work throughout this Senedd term. In addition to the formal evidence sessions, we also used informal means of gathering views from people who would be less likely or unable to attend a formal meeting. We specifically allocated some of our meeting slots to undertake informal visits and hold focus groups to meet with individuals directly affected by policy areas. These informal approaches were particularly useful to hear from people with lived experience as part of our work on prisoner voting, rough sleeping and refugee and asylum seekers. We also used online surveys to gather views from a wider audience, who may not have responded to the formal calls for written evidence.

**16.** The input of citizens into this work has directly shaped our choice of work, recommendations and outputs. For example, during our work on rough sleeping, after extensive engagement with people with lived experience, we undertook further specific investigation into the problems of rough sleepers with both

mental health and substance misuse issues. We would not have focused on these particular issues without hearing directly from those with the lived experience. Our citizen engagement work has been a particularly valuable aspect of our work throughout this term. We hope that this is built upon in the next Senedd term.

**17.** In response to the national lockdown which began in March 2020, we adapted our ways of working so that meetings could be held virtually. All of our meetings since then have been fully virtual, with Members, staff and witnesses attending from different locations.

**18.** This enabled us to continue with our work and we began by undertaking an inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on matters related to our portfolio. We used Zoom to hold formal committee meetings with Welsh Government Ministers and external organisations. During this period we also undertook Stage 2 scrutiny of two Bills. Stage two proceedings were also conducted remotely, however the Chair and Clerk attended from the same location within Tŷ Hywel so that procedural advice could be provided.

**19.** Our use of these facilities has demonstrated that formal Senedd business can continue even when Members are unable to physically be in the same location and emphasises the wider benefits of remote attendance on increasing participation in business.

**20.** Our pre-pandemic work on increasing diversity in local government recognised the valuable contribution that remote attendance at formal meetings could make to enabling a wider range of people to get involved in local government.<sup>3</sup> Since March 2020, the virtual nature of all Senedd business has proven that remote attendance is as effective as physically attending a meeting. It has also brought the additional benefits of not needing to travel, such as better work/life balance, enabling more time for caring responsibilities and participating in a wider range of meetings. We have embraced this new way of working and believe there should be a wider role for remote attendance at Senedd committee meetings when restrictions are lifted.

**21.** We have also been able to use Zoom and Teams facilities to continue our citizen engagement work during the pandemic. The nature of our work in understanding the implications of Covid-19, in particular when we considered the impact on the voluntary sector, meant it was crucial for us to be able to hear from people with direct experience. We have always found focus groups to be a useful

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<sup>3</sup> [ELGC Committee. Diversity in local government. April 2019](#)

forum to gather these views, so instead of travelling to meet with people from across Wales, we held these through Teams.

**22.** The wider benefits of holding these meetings virtually were clear both for Members and participants; instead of travelling to a specified location to meet in person, participants were able to contribute from their own homes or offices, which offered more convenience to all involved. Face to face engagement usually provides wider benefits than only meeting with citizens, such as witnessing projects first hand, therefore it will be important that committees continue to facilitate such meetings when restrictions allow. However, given their benefits in enabling wider participation, greater use of virtual meetings should also be part of a mixed approach to citizen engagement in future.

### Following up on earlier work

**23.** We decided early on in the Senedd term that scrutinising the progress made in implementing our recommendations would be one of the most effective ways of ensuring change happens as a result of our work. Such follow up work has been an integral part of our activities throughout this Senedd.

**24.** Our first area of work in 2016 was post-legislative scrutiny of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, which focussed on whether that Act was working.<sup>4</sup> Since then, we continued to review the legislation periodically by holding further evidence sessions in 2018 and 2020 to assess the progress made. This was also an important consideration of our work on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the various aspects within our remit.

**25.** We published our first report on rough sleeping in April 2018<sup>5</sup>, and since then we have undertaken extensive follow up work to assess progress and ensure changes are implemented. As part of this, we have continued to push for the step change we believed was needed in meeting our ambition to end rough sleeping. We published a follow up report which focused on mental health and substance misuse amongst people sleeping rough in December 2019.<sup>6</sup> This was a priority area for us throughout this Senedd and we continued to scrutinise the Welsh Government on the matter, including through our work on the impact of Covid-19.

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<sup>4</sup> [ELGC Committee. Is the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence \(Wales\) Act 2015 working? December 2016](#)

<sup>5</sup> [ELGC Committee. Life on the streets: preventing and tackling rough sleeping in Wales. April 2018](#)

<sup>6</sup> [ELGC Committee. Rough sleeping follow up: Mental health and substance misuse services, December 2019](#)



**26.** Since the Grenfell tragedy, fire safety in high-rise buildings has been a priority area of work for us. We began our work by looking into the safety of [high rise residential buildings in the social sector](#). We followed this by looking at private sector buildings<sup>7</sup> and our final substantive piece of work at the end of this Senedd was to respond to the consultation on the Welsh Government's White Paper - Safer Buildings in Wales.

**27.** We believe that our commitment to following up previous work has been very effective in ensuring that those matters continue to receive the focus needed to result in change. By continuing to pursue these issues we demonstrated to the Welsh Government that our work doesn't finish when a report is published and that we expect to see changes as a result of our recommendations. Following up in this way is one of the most effective ways of scrutinising Welsh Government policies and actions, and we believe this approach should be embedded in future committees' work practices.

### Joint committee working

**28.** Given the crossover between the remits of various committees, we have undertaken work jointly with others where appropriate. We held a concurrent meeting with the Finance Committee and Children, Young People and Education Committee, which was particularly valuable in bringing different perspectives together to scrutinise how the impact of budget decisions are assessed. The recommendations we made in our report were followed up by the three committees during our scrutiny of the draft budgets for subsequent years.

**29.** We found this joint approach to be effective and believe there could be a greater role for committees to work together on issues of interest, particularly should remits remain broad in the Sixth Senedd. Joint working has not always been easy to facilitate when committees are allocated specific meeting slots, which are difficult to deviate away from. However a more flexible approach to scheduling meetings such as increased opportunities to use virtual or hybrid formats could enable greater use of joint meetings in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> [ELGC Committee. Fire safety in high-rise residential buildings \(private sector\). November 2018](#)

### 3. Priorities for the Sixth Senedd

The impact of the pandemic has meant that we have not been able to undertake all the work that we would have liked. There are also some issues we believe would benefit from scrutiny in the next Senedd.

**30.** The combined impact of the pandemic and the legislative workload has meant that we have not been able to do all the work we have decided upon, some of this is follow up work and some are new pieces. We believe there would be merit in a future successor committee[s] to consider looking at these issues in more detail.

#### COVID-19 follow-up

##### Homelessness and rough sleeping

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**31.** Homelessness, and particularly rough sleeping, has been a priority for us throughout this Senedd term, however the importance of tackling this issue became even more paramount during the Covid-19 pandemic. We scrutinised the Welsh Government on its actions at our first scrutiny session with the Minister for Housing and Local Government in May 2020 and followed up on this until our final meeting in March 2021. We welcome the focus given to this issue by the Welsh Government to ensure that accommodation was provided for those in need. We praise the excellent work done in the sector to house over 7000 people since the start of the pandemic, however we strongly believe that this work needs to continue in order to prevent all forms of homelessness. We are aware that some of those given temporary accommodation are now back on the street. Although the number is lower than before the pandemic, we remain concerned that the number could continue to increase without a continued focus on the services that are needed.

**32.** We are particularly concerned that the number of homeless presentations could increase substantially should the current protections restricting evictions and extending notice periods be brought to an end. We raised this with the Minister for Housing and Local Government on 11 March 2021, and a subsequent Cabinet Statement on 17 March confirmed that the protections would remain in place until the end of June 2021. We welcome this extension, but believe the situation should be monitored to assess whether further extension is required. We

recommend that continuing to scrutinise the impact of Covid-19 on homelessness is an area of urgent priority for our successor committee in the Sixth Senedd.

### The Voluntary Sector

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**33.** We conducted a short inquiry into the impact of the pandemic on the voluntary sector. Our report published in January 2021<sup>8</sup>, highlighted the essential role the voluntary sector had played in responding to the pandemic. We made a number of recommendations, including on the voluntary sector infrastructure in Wales; resources and finances; the BAME voluntary sector and the role the sector can play in Covid-19 recovery. We received the Welsh Government response to our recommendations in the final week of committee business. The Welsh Government accepted or accepted in principle all our recommendations.<sup>9</sup> We believe that a future committee should consider and review the implementation of these recommendations.

### Socio-economic duty

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**34.** Following a delay due to the impact of the pandemic, the socio-economic duty was commenced at the end of March. It requires listed public authorities to consider how their strategic decisions can improve inequality of outcomes for people who suffer socio-economic disadvantage. Through various aspects of our work during this Senedd, we have repeatedly called for its commencement. In our report on the impact of Covid-19 on inequalities, we recommended that the Welsh Government should adhere to the spirit and intent of the duty in all of its decision-making until it is commenced, and develop interim arrangements to monitor how it is meeting the spirit of the duty ahead of full commencement.

**35.** We believe that the socio-economic duty should be one of the key tools in the Welsh Government's plans to re-build following Covid-19. We therefore recommend to our successor committee that this may be an area of early priority, in particular whether or how the duty has influenced decisions taken by the Welsh Government and listed authorities.

### Poverty

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**36.** The prevalence and impact of poverty in Wales has been an area of significant concern both for us, and our predecessor committee. We have repeatedly made the case for the need for a cross cutting, comprehensive tackling

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<sup>8</sup> [ELGC Committee. Impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector. February 2021](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Welsh Government response to Impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector. March 2021](#)

poverty strategy with clear targets, deliverables and milestones which progress can be assessed against. It has been a matter of disappointment that this has never been accepted or implemented by the Welsh Government. The impact of Covid-19 on people on low incomes was explored in our report on the pandemic, *Into Sharp Relief*.<sup>10</sup> We highlighted that poverty has been a key determinant in the pandemic, from mortality rates to the risk of losing work or income, and educational attainment to overcrowded housing. The impact on low income households must be a key consideration for the Welsh Government in its recovery plans, and we recommend to our successor committee that it continues to prioritise the Welsh Government's approach to tackling poverty.

### Race Equality Action Plan

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**37.** The impact of Covid-19 on people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities has been significant over the past year, and has been an area of focus in our Covid-19 work. Professor Ogbonna's report recommended that the Welsh Government's should immediately recommence work on developing a Race Equality Action Plan. This will be published for consultation by the end of March 2021, and we recommend that our successor committee prioritises scrutinising progress in developing the plan and implementing its actions.

### Other follow up work

#### Pregnancy, Maternity and Work

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**38.** As we have outlined above, a key feature of our approach has been regular follow up on progress in implementing our recommendations. As part of our work in the final term of this Senedd, we agreed to follow up our inquiry into Pregnancy, Maternity and Work. We published our report in September 2018.<sup>11</sup> However at the time of publication there were a number of different pieces of work being undertaken by the Welsh Government, such as the Gender Equality Review; the Fair Work Commission; and a review of public procurement, which could have an impact on the implementation of some of the recommendations. The pandemic has also clearly had an impact on those juggling work and childcare. We had intended to revisit the recommendations through both oral evidence sessions and citizen engagement. However, the lockdown restrictions

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<sup>10</sup> [ELGC Committee, \*Into sharp relief: inequality and the pandemic\*, August 2020](#)

<sup>11</sup> [ELGC Committee, \*Work it out: parenting and employment in Wales\*, July 2018](#)

which began at the end of December led to us having to reconsider our work programme, and pausing this work.

**39.** We therefore believe there is real merit in this issue being looked at in more detail at the outset of the next Senedd.

### Public Services Boards

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**40.** We took a range of evidence looking at the structure, governance and resourcing, and best practice of Public Services Boards (PSBs) in 2018. We did not publish a report, as it became clear that it was difficult to come to conclusions about their effectiveness at that stage. We made a commitment to revisit this towards the end of the Senedd term, once more assessment could be made about the effectiveness of the Well-Being plans, and how they were working.

**41.** Unfortunately, due to the impact of the pandemic, we were unable to undertake this work as planned. However, we have touched upon the work of PSBs in a range of other policy work, including the impact of COVID-19 on the voluntary sector, and general COVID-19 scrutiny. We also note the work of the Public Accounts Committee at the end of this Senedd looking at the barriers to successful implementation of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.<sup>12</sup> One of the issues highlighted during our evidence sessions was the complex landscape within which PSBs are operating. They sit alongside a plethora of statutory and multi-agency partnerships, formed on a local, sub-regional and regional basis. We think this is an issue that would merit further consideration in the next Senedd.

### Poverty in Wales: Making the economy work for people on low incomes

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**42.** This was a wide ranging piece of work which we published in May 2018, that covered areas such as the Welsh Government's strategic approach to economic development; employability; procurement; pay; quality of work and benefits.<sup>13</sup> As a result of this report, we undertook further detailed work looking at the desirability of devolving welfare benefits.<sup>14</sup> However, we were not able to revisit the rest of the work due to the pandemic. As with the pregnancy, maternity and work inquiry, there were a number of on-going work streams within the Welsh Government at the time of responding. These included the Procurement Review, development of the approach to a Foundational Economy; and the Fair Work Commission; all of

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<sup>12</sup> [Public Accounts Committee, Delivering for Future Generations: The Story So Far, March 2021](#)

<sup>13</sup> [ELGC Committee, Making the economy work for people on low incomes, May 2018](#)

<sup>14</sup> [ELGC Committee, Benefits in Wales: options for better delivery, October 2019](#)

which will have had an impact on addressing the issues we highlighted in the report. We believe this is an important area of work for a future committee.

### Building Safety in high rise residential buildings

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**43.** We have been considering this important issue since the tragic events at Grenfell in 2017. We have looked at the issue in relation to social and private sector housing, and culminating in our recent consultation response to the Welsh Government’s White Paper on building safety. The Welsh Government has made a number of commitments outside of the White Paper, including the establishment of a building remediation fund which will go “further than that proposed in England.”<sup>15</sup>

**44.** It is expected that there will be legislation introduced in the next Senedd to address some of these issues. We believe it is essential though that the relevant committee continues to monitor these issues closely, in particular the challenges faced by those who own and live in flats within the existing stock of high rise residential buildings around Wales.

### Other work

**45.** There are two inquiries which we had identified that we would like to undertake in this Senedd, but we have been unable to do. We believe that both of these are very important, and that a successor committee should consider these in more detail.

### Community Cohesion / Integration

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**46.** During the Senedd term and particularly before the global pandemic hit, we were concerned at some of the reports suggesting that community cohesion had been affected by the wider political events, such as the referendum on EU membership. It was an issue we touched upon as part of our work looking at refugees and asylum seekers in Wales, and felt merited further investigation. Throughout this Senedd we have called for the Welsh Government to update its community cohesion delivery plan, which it had committed to doing twice before, in both 2017 and 2018. While we welcome on-going work to update the Race Equality Action Plan, we still believe the broader area of community cohesion and integration should be a matter of high priority for the next Senedd.

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<sup>15</sup> [Letter from the Minister for Housing and Local Government in relation to the inquiry into fire safety in high rise blocks in Wales. 16 March 2021](#)

**47.** Unfortunately as the pandemic hit, we had to reshape our work programme, and were unable to undertake this work.

## Second Homes

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**48.** In 2018, we identified two housing related inquiries to undertake; empty properties, and second homes. We completed the empty properties work, but our legislative commitments meant we were unable to look at the issue of second homes.

**49.** While there are particular “hotspots” that this issue affects more acutely, we are aware that this has an impact on the available housing stock in many areas, and has wider consequences on communities and individuals. We therefore believe there is merit in further work on this in the next Senedd.

## Other areas of interest

### Post legislative scrutiny

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**50.** There are also a range of other areas which we feel are important, and future committees may wish to consider. In particular, we feel that there is real benefit for committees in the Sixth Senedd to undertake more post-legislative scrutiny. This was our approach in our first substantive inquiry – on the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015<sup>16</sup>, work we continued to follow up throughout the Senedd term.

**51.** Post legislative scrutiny is an important, if sometimes, overlooked area of scrutiny. There are a number of areas of work which we feel would benefit it. In particular, there have been a number of significant pieces of housing legislation:

- Housing (Wales) Act 2014 – in particular landlord and agent registration and licensing scheme;
- Impact of the Abolition of Right to Buy and Associated Rights (Wales) Act 2018.
- Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 – in particular looking at Parts 2 (Public Participation in local democracy); 4 (Local Authority

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<sup>16</sup> ELGC Committee, *Is the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 working? December 2016*

Executives, members and officers); 5 (Corporate Joint Committees) and Part 6 (Performance and Governance).

**52.** A future Committee may also wish to review the implementation of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016. This legislation has not yet been commenced, despite being passed five years ago. During the course of this Senedd, we have considered two further Acts which amended the 2016 Act. Consideration of implementation of the 2016 legislation, should also consider the changes introduced by these two Acts, in relation to the ban of letting agent fees; and the introduction of longer no-fault notice periods.

### Policy scrutiny

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**53.** There are also a range of other issues which we feel could benefit from further scrutiny in the Sixth Senedd:

- Alternative models of service delivery in local government;
- Transformation agenda in local government – digital;
- Post-pandemic recovery - local government services;
- Progress in implementing the recommendations of the Gender Equality Review;
- Regional economic inequalities and ‘left-behind’ communities. This should encompass the industrial communities and the particular challenges faced in terms of social mobility in communities which have experienced a long-term reduction in education and employment opportunities;
- Poverty – Local delivery of anti-poverty programmes in a post Communities First Wales;
- Reducing sexual harassment/increasing safety of women; and
- Availability of all-weather play areas for children and young people.



Jenny Rathbone MS  
Chair  
Equality and Social Justice  
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**Reference:** AC/274/caf

**Date issued:** 9 July 2021

Dear Jenny

## The Work of Audit Wales

Congratulations on your appointment as Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee. I wish you every success in your new role and at the start of a challenging five-year period for public services in Wales.

My remit as Auditor General for Wales means that I am the statutory external auditor of most of the Welsh public sector and responsible for the audit of most of the public money spent in Wales. In September, I am planning to publish a series of 'Picture of Public Services' outputs. These will provide our take on the key financial and wider challenges facing public services over the coming years and will set out some of the key areas of public service delivery where I will be expecting public services to demonstrate progress. I hope that the outputs from this work will be of interest to all Members of the Senedd and that they will provide a useful point of reference for their future work.

I am expecting that the work of Audit Wales will continue to play a key role supporting the work of the new Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee (PAPAC), with PAPAC remaining our primary audience. However, I am also keen that Audit Wales uses its unique perspective and expertise to support the work of other Senedd committees where we have relevant audit intelligence to bring to bear. We would

therefore welcome the opportunity to be included on any wider consultations that your Committee runs. I am also anticipating that there will continue to be occasions where committees other than PAPAC might take the lead in scrutinising issues raised by my reports, where these are relevant and timely in the context of their own scrutiny work.

We have just recently published our latest [Annual Report and Accounts](#), which tells the story of our work during 2020-21 and links to some of our major outputs. Our Annual Report also summarises work in progress or planned to start later this year and we will be sharing further details with committee clerking teams over the summer. For example, we are currently in the early stages of work looking at the subject of equality impact assessment and of a study looking at how local authorities are tackling poverty. My examination and reporting duties under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 are also relevant.

If you or your Committee members would like to find out more about the work of Audit Wales, then please do not hesitate to get in touch. If Members have specific concerns about the use of public money, then we are always open to receiving correspondence. Members can either contact me directly or they can do so via our Audit Wales address [info@audit.wales](mailto:info@audit.wales). Further details about how we handle such correspondence are available on our website: [Raising a concern | Audit Wales](#).

I very much look forward to working with you over the next five years.

Best wishes,



**ADRIAN CROMPTON**  
**Auditor General for Wales**

Senedd Cymru  
Welsh Parliament

# Agenda Item 4.3

Welsh Parliament  
**Business Committee**

Jenny Rathbone MS

Chair

Equality and Social Justice Committee

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14 July 2021

Dear Chair

## Committee Timetable

I am writing to inform you of the Committee Timetable agreed by Business Committee at its meeting of 13 July.

The Business Committee has agreed a timetable that provides committees with fortnightly meetings, with the exception of the Legislation Justice and Constitution Committee which meets weekly due to the need to consider Statutory Instruments to strict deadlines.

A key message from the Chair's Forum of the Fifth Senedd was to ensure that there is flexibility within the arrangements for committees so that peaks in workload, or new tasks, can be managed. The Business Committee has sought to introduce this flexibility by varying the meeting time allocated to different committees. This reflects the type of work that different committees might need to undertake and reflects how working practices have evolved in recent years.

To this end, the timetable is fortnightly and has a number of additional meeting slots available within it, to accommodate peaks in the work of particular committees e.g. the Finance Committee when considering a draft budget, or a committee with Stage 1 legislative scrutiny responsibilities. By under-committing the timetabling capacity, there are greater opportunities for committees to work together as the possibility of membership clashes in each meeting slot is reduced.



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In recognition of the known and expected legislative scrutiny responsibilities of some committees, the following committees are provided with a double meeting slot i.e. a morning and afternoon slot on a Thursday:

- Children, Young People, and Education;
- Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure;
- Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs; and
- Health and Social Care.

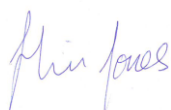
The remaining committees are provided with a single meeting slot i.e. one morning or afternoon meeting slot per fortnight. These committees are:

- Culture, Welsh Language, Communications, Sport, and International Relations;
- Equality and Social Justice;
- Finance;
- Local Government and Housing;
- Petitions;
- Public Accounts and Public Administration; and
- Standards of Conduct.

In order to provide some additional capacity for Bill scrutiny work, Fridays are also made available for committee Stage 2 scrutiny of Bills i.e. to provide an additional (and potentially longer) meeting for committees at this stage of the legislative process. The Business Committee will determine the allocation of any additional slots following a request from a committee.

The Business Committee has already indicated its intention to keep timetabling under review, so that it can respond to the needs of committees as the tasks they face change. Flexibility and responsiveness is at the heart of its decisions around timetabling for committees, and the Business Committee intends to review the committee structure and timetable around Easter 2022.

Yours sincerely



**Elin Jones MS**

Y Llywydd and Chair of the Business Committee



Chair, Children, Young People, and Education  
Committee  
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee  
Chair, Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee  
Chair, Climate Change, Environment, and  
Infrastructure Committee  
Chair, Equality and Social Justice Committee  
Chair, Culture, Communications, Welsh Language,  
Sport, and International Relations Committee  
Chair, Local Government and Housing Committee

16 July 2021

Dear Committee Chairs

## Financial Scrutiny

At our meeting on 8 July 2021, the Finance Committee (the Committee) considered the programme of engagement for the forthcoming Welsh Government's Draft Budget and our approach to scrutiny. I am writing to all Chairs of subject committees to share our thinking.

## Timetable

In accordance with Standing Orders, the Trefnydd has written to the Business Committee setting out that the Draft Budget will be published on 20 December 2021 and the annual Budget motion considered in Plenary on 8 February 2022.

The Business Committee consulted with us on the proposed timetable. As noted in the Trefnydd's letter, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has indicated his intention to conduct a multi-year comprehensive spending review (CSR), which means the Welsh Government will not know its budget settlement until the CSR concludes in the autumn.



I have written to the Business Committee to express our disappointment that the Draft Budget will be published in the Christmas recess. Whilst we appreciate the proposed timetable is due to the timing of the UK Government's CSR, this will be the third consecutive year that the proposed timetable has reduced the time available for scrutiny by the Senedd.

## Budget focus

The Committee has agreed to continue the approach followed in previous Senedds, whereby budget scrutiny is centred on the four principles of financial scrutiny: affordability, prioritisation, value for money and process. The principles are:

- **Affordability** - to look at the big picture of total revenue and expenditure, and whether these are appropriately balanced;
- **Prioritisation** - whether the division of allocations between different sectors/programmes is justifiable and coherent;
- **Value for money** - essentially, are public bodies spending their allocations well – economy, efficiency and effectiveness (i.e.) outcomes; and
- **Budget processes** - are they effective and accessible and whether there is integration between corporate and service planning and performance and financial management.

The Committee would be grateful if your budget scrutiny follows these principles.

## Engagement Approach

The Committee will be considering its approach to engagement on the Draft Budget early in the autumn term. We would like this engagement to complement and inform the work of policy Committees. I would welcome discussing this individually with Chairs, or at the Chairs' Forum.

Following the practice in previous Senedds, the Committee is happy to undertake a consultation on behalf of all Committees. Given the proposed timetable, we consider it would be most suitable to issue our consultation at the start of the autumn term.

The Clerk to the Finance Committee will notify your Committee Clerks once the consultation has been issued and I would appreciate your assistance in promoting the consultation via your own communication tools to encourage and engage with a wider audience. The provisions in relation to the reporting by policy committees changed in 2017, and you are now able to report in your own right (if you so wish), and your reports can be used as a supporting document to the Draft Budget debate.



## Finance Committee-led priorities debate

The Finance Committee of the Fifth Senedd recommended that a future Finance Committee should hold an annual debate on the Welsh Government's spending priorities to allow Members the opportunity to debate and potentially influence spending priorities prior to the Draft Budget being published.

This year the Welsh Government scheduled its own debate on *Priorities for 2022-23 Budget Preparations*, which took place on Tuesday 13 July. The Committee wrote to the Minister for Finance and the Business Committee to seek agreement that in future years this will be a Finance Committee-led debate that takes place annually before summer recess, which the Minister and Business Committee have agreed to. In future years we would hope to undertake a public engagement exercise to inform this debate, and I would welcome your thoughts on how the Committees that scrutinise the Draft Budget can work together to gather the views of the public on what they feel should be the Welsh Government's spending priorities.

## Financial scrutiny of legislation

The Committee's core function is to undertake financial scrutiny of the Welsh Government and associated public bodies, however, financial scrutiny should be embedded into the scrutiny work undertaken by all Committees. The Committee now has limited time available and many statutory obligations to fulfil. Therefore, we have agreed to initially consider each Bill that is introduced into the Senedd to determine whether we will carry out scrutiny of the financial implications of a Bill depending on the levels of costs and transparency contained within the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA). Should we decide not to undertake financial scrutiny of a particular Bill we will write to the relevant Stage one scrutiny committee to identify any points of interest that the Committee may wish to consider when reporting on the general principles of the Bill.

As this is the start of a new Senedd, I hope we can take the opportunity to explore ways of working collaboratively with other Committees to ensure the most effective financial scrutiny of the Welsh Government. I would like to suggest that we discuss this in further detail at a meeting of the Chairs' Forum.

If you have any questions about any aspect of the Draft Budget process, please feel free to contact me or the Clerk to the Finance Committee, Bethan Davies, 0300 200 6372, [seneddfinance@senedd.wales](mailto:seneddfinance@senedd.wales).

Yours sincerely







Peredur Owen Griffiths MS  
Chair of the Finance Committee

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





VULNERABLE  
CUSTOMER EVENT

DIGWYDDIAD  
CWSMERIAID BREGUS

# Workshop Report

Virtual Event

March 25, 2021



## Introduction

In November 2018, we launched our strategy for supporting customers in vulnerable circumstances. This strategy published under the title of 'Supporting Our Customers – Working at the heart of our community', detailed how we intended to improve our services to customers that need our support most. In particular, it focused on 5 priority areas:

- **Data** - working with other utility companies, government and government agencies to proactively identify customers that are likely to need our help.
- **Priority Services** – improving the support that we provide to customers in vulnerable circumstances, based on what those customers tell us would help them, and increase the number of people registered for our priority services
- **Financial Vulnerability** – providing schemes to identify and help low-income households, as well as providing advice on how to reduce charges in other ways and understanding what other support they may be entitled to.
- **Partnerships** – building on our network of partners, making sure that we are working with the representatives of customers with specific needs and raising awareness of the services we provide.
- **Training** – ensuring that our people can recognise and understand the factors that will make customers vulnerable and empower them to make the decisions needed to ensure that every vulnerable customer gets the help they need.

Back in 2018, few of us could have imagined how the world we live in was going to change, as it has in the last year or so and the impact of Covid-19 on our communities, friends and families will be felt for generations. It has certainly highlighted the importance of the work that we, alongside many other organisations, do to support those that struggle to access our services.

Therefore, I was really pleased to host our first virtual conference on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021, bringing together over 80 representatives from our partner and stakeholder organisations to share the progress that we have made in the last few years, and to talk about what more we could do together to support customers in vulnerable circumstances.

We were lucky enough to have keynote speeches from our partners in Welsh Government, Cartrefi Conwy and Wales & West Utilities, looking at the areas of priority services data sharing, the benefits of community partnerships and how we can best use the information in our businesses to improve our services.

We have summarised the main points of discussion in this report, as well as our plans for taking them forward.

I would like to take this chance to thank everyone that attended and for their ongoing support. We can achieve so much when we pool our ideas, our people and our resources and, in doing so, truly make a difference to those customers that need our support most.

**Samantha James**  
**Managing Director Household Customer Services**  
**Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water**



## Summary of feedback

### Data sharing

- Many delegates are interested in understanding more about Project JIGSO, how they can contribute to and access it. Everyone could see the value and benefit of sharing priority services information
- Some local authorities already use a system to capture vulnerable customer information, linked to social care and assumed this was already shared.
- Many local support services struggle to identify which customers would benefit from their services and a central repository/source of information would help them reach out to those that need support.
- Some delegates questioned whether there was a common view on what vulnerability is and also whether people want to be classified as vulnerable.
- There is a 'fear' about not complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that needs to be addressed.
- Suggestions for Project JIGSO
  - Customers to upload their own change in circumstances (particularly where their vulnerability is transient)
  - Ability to filter information by location, nature of vulnerability, whether served by a water meter
  - Ease of use is critical.

### Partnership working

- Lockdown has taught us that, in some cases, virtual contact with customers (or clients) is a better service. Many more people are using, and have got used to, the technology. However, we still need to recognise that this won't work for all and in some cases it is necessary to work with carers/family members.
- Some utility companies are working with younger members of their communities to develop Apps for signing people up for support.
- County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) and regional advisory networks could be a opportunity to develop the 'hub' concept. A number of partnership networks have evolved over lockdown, examples quoted included Denbighshire Council's community directory and the partnership between the Autism Director, DWP and WRU.
- Referrals are really important but there are some areas that need to be addressed in order for them to work:
  - Referral process needs to be 2-way
  - There needs to be regular engagement between referral partners
  - Whilst virtual communications have worked well, in some cases it is difficult to really address customer needs unless you are meeting face to face
- GDPR is seen as a barrier by many organisations
- Partnership success in one area can be seen to come at the expense in another area and there is a need for a more uniformed approach. A way to address this could be to define the 'top 10' support schemes across various organisations and communicate consistently to all customer service teams (something similar is in place between local authorities and advice sector).



## What we are going to do next....

- Continue to work with Welsh Government and Project JIGSO team to develop data sharing platform, including reviewing conference feedback.
- Investigate the options for an advice hub, looking at examples in other water companies and in other sectors, and develop a proposal to undertake a trial by the end of March 2022.
- Complete our 2 water resilient community projects in Rhyl and Rhymney-Bargoed, building learnings into our plans and as well as ensuring that community relationships transition from the projects to our day-to-day activities.
- Explore new services to help low-income households
  - Income maximation and signposting
  - Lowest bill guarantee
- Plan for our next conference will be announced by Autumn 2021



## Appendix A: Agenda

- 09:30 **Welcome and introduction:** Peter Davies, Customer Challenge Group Chair
- 09:40 **Welsh Water overview:** Sam James, Managing Director of Household Customer Services, Welsh Water
- 09:55 **Welsh Water film:** Using data
- 10:00 **Guest speaker:** Tony Bracey, Head of Programmes, Welsh Government
- 10:10 **Breakout Session:** Applying the project JIGSO concept to benefit vulnerable customers
- 10:25 **Welsh Water film:** Providing assistance
- 10:30 **Guest speaker:** Mark Jones, Incomes Recovery Manager, Cartrefi Conwy
- 10:40 **Breakout Session:** Identifying and reaching vulnerable customers
- 10:55 **Break**
- 11:10 **Guest speaker:** Nigel Winnan, Head of Customer & Social Obligation, Wales & West Utilities
- 11:25 **Panel Q&A:** Chaired by Alun Shurmer
- 11:45 **Summary:** Sam James
- 12:00 **Event closes**

## Appendix B: Delegate list

Alun Evans	Citizens Advice
Catherine Reed-Hughes	Care and Repair
Parry Declan	DWP
Ewelina Dobczynska	Shelter
Jane Healey	Carers Wales
Jonathan Johnson	CC Water
Lia Moutselou	CC Water
Lynda Corre	
Neil Williams	Care and Repair
Rhodri Williams	CC Water
Shian Thomas	The Wallich
Jo Kenrick	NED
Agnes Xavier-Phillips	Glas Cymru
Karen Cross	Red Cross
Alun Shurmer	Welsh Water
Claire Price	MV Homes
Dawn Grant-Crichton	Care and Repair
Ffion Davies	Blind Vetrans
Shackleton Janine	CC Water
Jones, Byron	Caerphilly Council
Lisa Mcculla	DWP
Mandy Price	Care and Repair
Paul Elliott	Cardiff Community Housing Association
Richard Thomas	Care and Repair
Solitaire Pritchard	Pobl
Gareth jones	Glas Cymru
Wayne Rees	Glas Cymru
Siwan Williams	Welsh Government
Amanda Derbyshire	Care and Repair
Evans, Colette	United Utilities
Dylan Mcclellan	Energy Saving Trust
Forum	PennySmart
Jo Woodward	Groundwork
Julie Pierce	Citizens Advice
Louise Edwards	Citizens Advice
Mari Arthur	CCG
Owen Paul	JCP Employer and Partnership Team
Richard Weaver	Citizens Cymru Wales
Stacy L. Williams	Ynysmon
Nina Jones	Glas Cymru
Sorahan Rachel	DWP
Jo Harry	Care and Repair
Ian Krawczynski	Glas Cymru

Audrey McMullan	DWP HOLYHEAD
David Pownall	Advocacy Services
Elizabeth Willington	Valleys to Coast Housing
George Williams	Cizens Advice
Jo Sutton	Denbigshire council
Kate White	TGP Cymru
Louise Lewis	Shelter
Grice, Mark	Severn Trent
Peter Hughes	Energy Saving Trust
Ruth Jenkins	Newydd Housing Association
Sue Parry	Citizens Advice
Jessica Simmons	Conwy council
Emyr Roberts	Glas Cymru
Ian Catterall	Citizens Advice
Lovatt Beverley	DWP
Deborah Fellows	Newport city homes
Emma Griffiths	TGP Cymru
Himalee Rupesinghe	The Autism Directory
Joanna Seymour	Warm Wales
Kathy Lye	Age Cymru
Lucy Beavan	Shelter
Richardson, Michele	Alzheimers Society
Sandra Davies	Care and Repair
Thomas Milne	Energy Saving Trust
Sophie Lewis	Energy Saving Trust
Nick Rushbrooke	Glas Cymru
Stephanie Martin	Bristol Water
Lee G Jones	Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association
Nikki Jones	Denbigshire council
Williams Eleri	DWP
Cath Thomas	DWP
Debra Wakeham	Care and Repair
Emma Simons	Blind Vetrans
Jackie Blackwell	Citizens Advice
Jonathan Cosson	Warm Wales
Kristy Grigg	Care and Repair
Hamer Lyn	DWP
Jones Melanie	DWP
Rebecca Iddon	Valleys to Coastal Housing
Ian Catterall	Citizens Advice
Deb Bowen Rees	NED
Neil Webb	Glas Cymru
Ceinwen Jones	Conwy Council
Kayleigh Ford	Citizens Advice
Joanna Gulliford	Welsh Government, Water Branch
Elizabeth Warwick	Wales & West Utilities



Kate Newton	Dwr Cymru Welsh Water
Peter Davies	Customer Challenge Group Chair
Mark Jones	Cartrefi Conwy
Nigel Winnan	Wales & West Utilities
Tony Bracey	Welsh Government
Sally Thomas	
Lynne Darbyshire	

Jenny Rathbone MS  
Chair  
Equality and Social Justice Committee

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

19 July 2021

Dear Ms Rathbone

### **Considering the Welsh language in the Committee's work**

I am writing to you at the beginning of the sixth Senedd term to urge you to ensure that the Committee gives full consideration to the Welsh language in all aspects of its work.

In the *Cymraeg 2050 Strategy* the Welsh Government announced the vision of reaching a million Welsh speakers and increasing the percentage who speak Welsh daily to 20%. The strategy includes milestones to measure the success of its achievement, with the first milestone in 2021 and the next in 2026. During the sixth Senedd term it will be necessary to take a serious approach to holding the Government to account for the extent to which the Strategy is being achieved and the milestones reached. In that respect it is vital that the Welsh language is mainstreamed into wider legislation and policy and I am concerned that there is insufficient scrutiny of the impact of wider legislation and policy on the Welsh language in general. Indeed, Eluned Morgan, the previous Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and the Welsh Language, stated in a scrutiny session:

... I would suggest that actually, rather than just holding me to account when it comes to the budget, [...] that actually you ask the other Ministers, who've got huge amounts of money, what they're doing within their budgets in relation to the Welsh language.”  
(Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee meeting, 25 February 2021)

I emphasise that the Welsh language should not be seen as a cultural issue alone as it is a living language in all communities in Wales and a main language in many of them. Those

Comisiynydd y Gymraeg  
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Correspondence welcomed in Welsh and English

communities face a number of social and economic challenges that in turn challenge the viability of the Welsh language in those communities.

In the context of the committee's remit on fair work, in April this year the Commissioner responded to the Government's consultation on the Draft Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Bill. Among other aspects of the Bill, we discussed the definition of fair work in the Fair Work Wales report (2019), in which the Fair Work Commission describes six main characteristics. Of these, the Commissioner drew particular attention to employee voice; opportunity for growth and progression; inclusive working environment and legal rights respected. Ensuring the opportunity to use Welsh at work, to develop Welsh language skills or to gain new language skills is vital for fair work. Reference was also made to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 which is also included in the committee's terms of reference. The Well-being Act includes the goal 'A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language' and I hope that that goal will underpin the committee's work during this Senedd term.

The Commissioner published a manifesto document<sup>1</sup> for the 2021 election stating that a wide range of factors affecting the Welsh language need to be considered. It sets out that it is crucial that the Government commits to providing stability to the structures and rights already in place as a result of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and ensure that the experiences of Welsh speakers are consistent. The way of doing so is through the Welsh language standards. These are the duties placed on public organisations to use and consider the language, ensuring quality and consistency in Welsh language services. To enable the Commissioner to impose standards, the Government must prepare standards and introduce regulations. The last set of regulations came into effect in June 2018. We have introduced a programme for the Government to consider for taking this work forward as soon as possible. It would be appropriate for the Committee also to ensure that this programme is implemented as soon as possible in order to confirm the rights of Welsh speakers.

I hope that you will bear these comments in mind as you consider the committee's future work. I wish you every success in that work and look forward to contributing to it.

Yours sincerely,



Gwenith Price  
**Deputy Welsh Language Commissioner**

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<sup>1</sup> [Manifesto \(positif.wales\)](https://www.positif.wales/)

To:

Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee

Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee

Equality and Social Justice Committee

Finance Committee

Health and Social Care Committee

Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee

Local Government and Housing Committee

Petitions Committee

Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee

20 July 2021

Dear Chairs,

### Children and young people's priorities for the Sixth Senedd

As the Senedd Committee responsible for scrutinising all matters relating to children and young people, it is our intention to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard as a matter of course in our Committee's work. At our first meeting on 14 July, we agreed that this would be a key priority for us.

In order to inform our strategic planning and forward work programme, we intend to undertake a programme of tailored and meaningful engagement with children and young people. This work will begin in the autumn term. Our initial focus will be on asking children and young people what they think the priorities of the Sixth Senedd should be.

Given that the range of views held by children and young people will be of relevance to your respective committee remits, we will ensure that the results of this activity are shared with you, to ensure that your work can take account of their opinions. Our Committee team will ensure that your teams are kept up to date on the plans as they develop, and will confirm timescales in due course.

Kind regards,



Jayne Bryant MS

Chair

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

# RNIB

Cymru

Golwg gwahanol

See differently

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To: Members of the Equality and  
Social Justice Committee

23 July 2021

## **RE: RNIB's latest research into the voting experiences of blind and partially sighted people**

I am writing to members of the Equality and Social Justice Committee to make you aware of recent research RNIB has published into the voting experiences of blind and partially sighted people which highlights that almost 150 years after the Ballot Act guaranteed the right to vote in secret, people with sight loss still face unacceptable barriers in exercising this fundamental democratic right.

RNIB's research outlined in the attached 'Turned Out' report found that only one in five (19 per cent) of blind voters and less than half (46 per cent) of partially sighted voters were able to vote independently and in secret in the elections which took place across the UK in May 2021, which included the Senedd elections. Additionally, less than a third of blind voters were satisfied with their voting experience in this year's elections.

### **The problem with the current system**

Currently, each polling station must have a large print version of the ballot paper and a tactile voting device (TVD). The TVD is a plastic template which is placed over the ballot paper to enable blind and partially sighted people to locate the voting boxes and find where to make their mark.

However, it does not tell the voter the names or parties of the candidates. This means that most people with sight loss require assistance from a family member, friend, or polling station staff member to provide this information so that they can mark the right box. In May 2019, this system was declared unlawful by a court ruling.

### **Audio device trial**

In May's elections, RNIB worked with the Cabinet Office to trial a more accessible option for people with sight loss. This involved using an audio device at polling stations that enable individuals to listen to the candidates' names and used alongside the TVD this means that there is no need for another person to be present while the list of candidates is reviewed and the vote cast. The introduction of the audio device made a huge difference to making voting an inclusive and accessible experience for those who took part.

Other issues raised in the report include the lack of accessible information available to blind and partially sighted people in the run up to the elections; the inconsistencies in the training of polling station staff and levels of knowledge in how best to support blind and partially sighted voters on polling day; and issues with the inaccessibility of the postal voting system.

### **Recommendations**

RNIB is calling for urgent action to improve the experiences of blind and partially sighted voters in time for the Welsh local elections taking place in May 2022. These include:

- Ensuring the audio player and TVD is rolled out to polling stations in Wales to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote more independently, and in secret
- Ensuring Presiding Officers and their staff are trained on sight loss, and the support they should offer blind and partially sighted people
- Ensuring information provided by electoral services in the run up to the elections is provided in accessible formats
- Ensuring the postal voting system is fully accessible for blind and partially sighted people

We would be happy to arrange a presentation on the report's findings for the Committee if this would be helpful to you. If you would like to

take up this offer the Committee's officials can contact Elin Edwards,  
External Affairs Manager, RNIB Cymru, at [Elin.Edwards@rnib.org.uk](mailto:Elin.Edwards@rnib.org.uk).

Yours sincerely

Ansley Workman  
Director, RNIB Cymru



# Turned Out 2021

How blind and partially sighted people  
are still waiting to vote in secret



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**“My ability to vote in a democratic society is very important to me. Each time we go to vote, I feel less independent.”**

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## Summary and recommendations

The right to vote independently, and in secret, is a cornerstone of our democracy. Yet nearly 150 years after the Ballot Act – which guaranteed the right to vote in secret – blind and partially sighted people still face unacceptable barriers to exercising their democratic right to vote.

RNIB has campaigned on this issue for many years, calling on the UK Government to create an accessible voting system and guarantee blind and partially sighted voters can access information about elections and candidates independently.

When voting, blind and partially sighted people, without any assistance, should be able to:

- review the candidates on the ballot paper.
- reliably find, and mark, their chosen candidate on the official ballot paper.
- be in sole control of the secrecy of their vote.

Around 350,000 registered blind or partially sighted people live in the UK; an estimated two million people live with sight loss that affects their daily lives.

Sight loss is a spectrum and every eye condition affects someone's sight differently. The majority (93 per cent) of people who are registered blind or partially sighted have some usable sight.

## Turned Out 2021 headlines

- 10 out of the 11 people (91 per cent) who used the audio device in the Norfolk trial reported that they were either very satisfied or quite satisfied with their overall voting experience this year, compared with 39 per cent of blind and partially sighted voters overall.
- Only one in five (19 per cent) blind voters and less than half (46 per cent) of partially sighted voters said they could vote independently and in secret under the current voting system.
- Less than a third (30 per cent) of blind voters were satisfied with their experience of voting.
- More than half (53 per cent) of blind people reported being unable to read any information regarding the election sent to them by local councils, including polling cards.
- Eight out of 10 (81 per cent) think offering blind and partially sighted voters an audio player to assist them to vote is a good idea.
- One in three (29 per cent) blind and partially sighted people who used the tactile voting device (TVD) to help them vote, said it did not fit the ballot paper.
- A third (31 per cent) of blind voters said the support they received at the polling station was poor.
- 40,000 blind and partially sighted people risk being disenfranchised by the proposed imposition of voter ID.

# RNIB recommendations for UK Government and local electoral services

1. Roll out the audio player and TVD trialled in Norfolk to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote more independently, and in secret, by elections in 2022.
  2. Publicise better accessible voting options, and the support available within a polling station before polling day and within polling stations on the day so blind and partially sighted people know what support they can expect and request.
  3. Publish the names of candidates, and their order on ballot papers online and in local electoral offices (and in accessible formats), before elections so blind and partially sighted people can find who they want to vote for and where they will be placed on the ballot paper.
  4. Work with RNIB to ensure Presiding Officers and their staff are fully trained on sight loss, different sight conditions, and the support they should offer.
  5. Review and revise the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.
  6. Local authorities should update local registers of blind and partially sighted people, collect information on preferred formats, using them to send items like poll cards in formats voters can read.
  7. Imposing a photographic voter ID requirement risks further disenfranchising tens of thousands of blind and partially sighted people.
- If voter ID plans are to go ahead the Government must make sure poll cards are available in people's preferred formats, and accept these, as well as photographic ID, as proof of eligibility to vote at the polling station.

## Methodology

We had 626 responses from blind and partially sighted people, the highest number we have had for any of our Turned Out surveys. Continuing restrictions and social distancing measures meant there were more barriers than ever to blind and partially sighted people exercising their right to vote independently and in secret.

Due to research timescales, this was a self-selecting online survey advertised through email and social media. It is therefore likely to exclude the experience of those people with sight loss who do not use the internet.

Of those who took part in the survey, 50 per cent are blind and 50 per cent are partially sighted voters, reflective of the blind and partially sighted population in the UK.

This survey is more representative of the experiences of younger blind and partially sighted people. While around

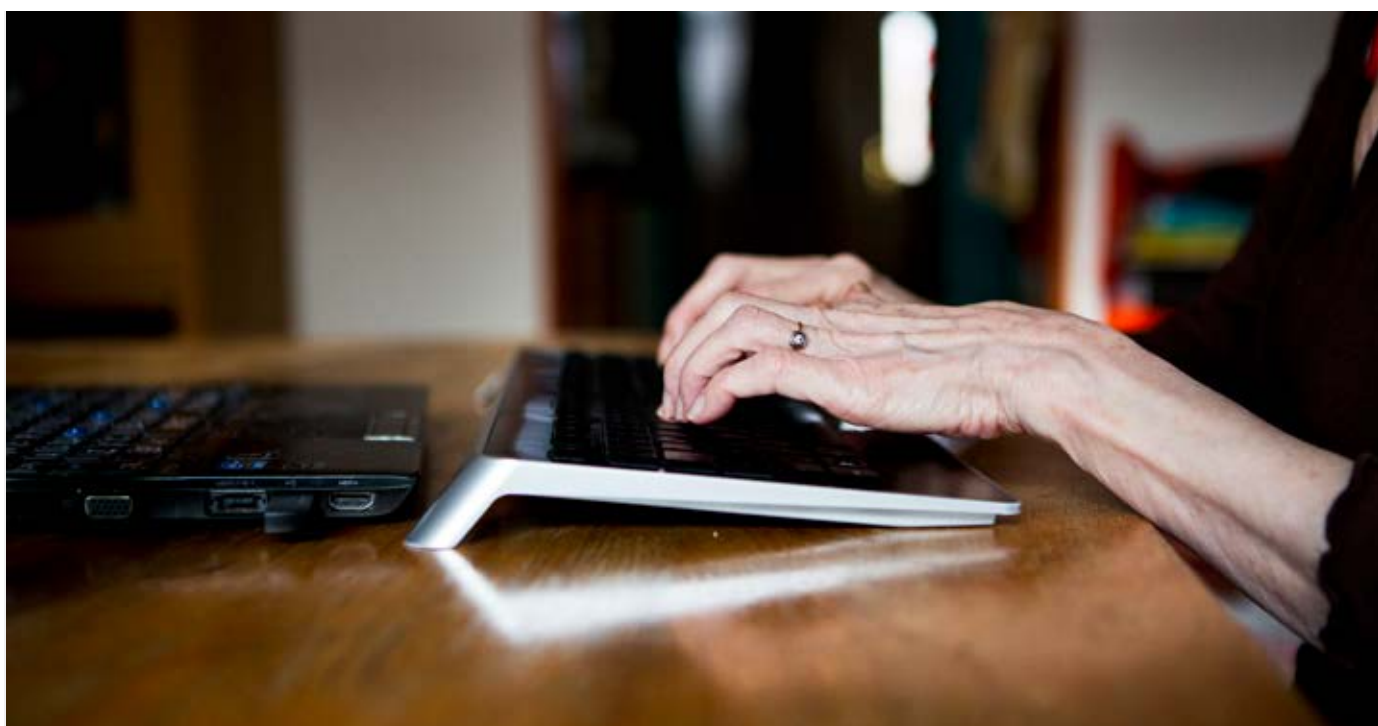
We had

# 626

responses from blind and partially sighted people to the survey

a quarter of the general population of blind and partially sighted people are working age, 63 per cent of respondents to the survey were aged under 65.

This report also contains information relating to Voter ID, gathered as part of RNIB's regular Tracker Survey into the experiences of blind and partially sighted people. The Tracker survey of more than 400 blind and partially sighted people was conducted in February and March 2021. Findings are representative of the wider population, including by age.



# Background to Turned Out 2021

We have been surveying blind and partially sighted people's experiences of voting at each General Election since 2015. Elections were postponed in 2020 due to coronavirus restrictions, ensuring a large number of elections were held in 2021. There were local elections across the countries, Police and Crime Commissioner elections, Welsh Parliament/Senedd Cymru elections in Wales, Scottish Parliamentary elections and London Mayor and London Assembly elections.

Despite it not being a General Election year, we decided to run this Turned Out survey in 2021 so we could compare the experiences of voters under the existing system, with those taking part in the trial of an audio device to improve voting accessibility.

In law, to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote, each polling station must provide:

- a large print version of the ballot paper; and
- a tactile voting device (TVD).

The TVD is a plastic template, which the Presiding Officer can put over the ballot paper to enable blind and partially sighted people to locate the voting boxes and find where to make their mark. However, it does not tell the voter the names or parties of the candidates. Any voter wishing to rely on the TVD alone would be dependent on knowing the order of the candidates as printed on the ballot paper. In practice, this means many people require

assistance, from a family member, friend, or member of polling station staff, to provide this information so the voter can mark the right box.

These provisions used to make ballot papers accessible for blind and partially sighted voters were declared unlawful in May 2019 in a case brought by law firm Leigh Day, on behalf of campaigner Rachael Andrews, with RNIB providing supportive evidence.

While we know online voting would be a popular choice for many, the Cabinet Office has ruled this out as an option for our electoral system in the immediate future, because of security risks to online systems which could theoretically undermine the reliability of the vote. It is also concerned that braille, tactile, or large print ballot papers would be identifiable when placed with other ballots at the count.

In the judgement following 2019's Rachael Andrews' case, Justice Swift said: "a device in the form of the present TVD would [meet its obligations] if, in addition to the flaps and raised/braille numbers on

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**91%**  
of blind people and

**54%**  
of partially sighted people had to get another person to help them to vote in the polling station.

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the right-hand side, the names of the candidates and/or the names of their political parties were present in braille and/or raised lettering in corresponding position, on the left-hand side of the device."

However, based on electoral timelines, we understand from the Cabinet Office that it is impossible for manufacturers to produce individual TVDs for each constituency in the window between candidate lists being finalised and the polls.

The information they would need to contain would also make them unwieldy. Moreover, if the details were embossed in braille, it would exclude the majority of blind and partially sighted people, and those with sight loss who do not read braille.

Meanwhile, in 2020, amendments to the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill that RNIB Scotland lobbied for passed with support from all the parties represented in the Scottish Parliament. As a result, there will now be pilots run by the Scottish Government to develop an alternative method of voting which is accessible to blind or partially sighted people.

RNIB Scotland is currently working with the Scottish Government on their early stage development of a home-based online voting method which would produce a QR code to return to electoral authorities.

The 2020 Act also requires the Electoral Commission in Scotland to publish reports on the accessibility of elections in Scotland, which is in its early stages and will be reviewed as to its effectiveness.



## An independent and private vote?

Only one in five (19 per cent) blind voters and less than half (46 per cent) of partially sighted voters who voted in the May 2021 elections said they could vote independently and in secret under the current voting system.

At the polling station, nine out of ten (91 per cent) blind people and five out of ten (54 per cent) partially sighted people had to get another person to help them to vote.

As revealed in Turned Out 2019 this disparity in experiences between blind and partially sighted voters suggests that those blind and partially sighted people who are able to vote independently are relying on their usable vision.

- "I cannot cast the vote independently and in secret. This is frustrating as I don't want to share my political views with other people.
- "I usually have my partner with me to help which makes things easier but today I was alone which made me realise just how dependent I am on others. Very negative from start to finish."

Postal voting also needs reform, with three quarters (74 per cent) of blind and half (50 per cent) of partially sighted postal voters having to seek assistance from another person.

- "My daughter had to point out the candidates and she had to guide me to where to put the cross, so I had no privacy in my vote."
- "As like most people we had more than one vote to do and as it was a postal vote it made a lot extra work for my PA to have to fold all the relevant choices into the correct envelopes – this could have been made much more simple."

Voting is a fundamental democratic right. It is essential changes are made to ensure that blind and partially sighted voters can vote independently, and in secret, however they choose to vote.



## Voting satisfaction

Overall, only two fifths (39 per cent) of blind and partially sighted people are satisfied with their experience of voting while the same proportion (40 per cent) are dissatisfied with their experience of voting. The experience is judged to be less satisfactory by blind voters, of whom just 30 per cent are satisfied while 44 per cent are dissatisfied. Meanwhile 47 per cent of partially sighted voters are satisfied with their experience of voting compared with 35 per cent who are dissatisfied.

- "My ability to vote in a democratic society, is very important to me. Each time we go to vote, I feel less independent."
- "I am really disappointed with not being able to vote on my own when a sighted peer gets the option to do so without any problems, assistance, worry and able to do so in private."
- "I am able to read with my magnifier therefore I can vote independently."



## Making voting accessible to blind and partially sighted people will require wholesale changes to the system

Making voting accessible to blind and partially sighted people will require wholesale changes to the system: in materials sent before the election, staff training, and adaptations available in the polling station, as well as changes to make postal voting accessible.

RNIB's User Experience team – which provides consultancy on accessible products – ran studies on the future of voting with the Cabinet Office in January 2020 to find a way to enable blind and partially sighted people to independently match the relevant hole in the TVD with the right candidate.

They tested the concept of using an audio device with headphones so blind and partially sighted people could read the names and details of the candidates. Used alongside the TVD, this would ensure no need for another person to be present while the list of candidates is reviewed and the vote cast. The audio players have raised, tactile buttons and are easy to use independently. Information about the candidates would be recorded onto USB sticks by Presiding Officers before the election. Plugged into the players, these would be taken into the voting booth by blind and partially sighted people.

Testers reported:

- "Very good idea and quite easy. Easier to vote for one. Would feel confident using this. Would prefer voting with the audio device, have more privacy."
- "That was good. Prefer to use the audio device and use it independently rather than postal vote."
- "It is good, better than having somebody read this out. More independent. What would put me off is that it is an extra thing you have to have. The biggest problem is that in my local polling station I feel they would not do it discreetly and that is important. So, prefer my partner to help me. The actual process [of the audio device and TVD] is fine as I can vote independently and privately."

RNIB called on the UK Government in 2020 to roll out the audio player alongside the TVD in time for the elections in May 2021.

However, in November 2020, the Cabinet Office advised that this was no longer possible due to practical difficulties in procuring the audio players in time. Instead, RNIB agreed to support with the delivery of a trial to ensure the system works well for blind and partially sighted people.

## The Norfolk Trial

RNIB worked with Broadland and South Norfolk Councils and the Cabinet Office to deliver an accessible voting trial in which voters used an audio player and headphones, alongside the TVD, to vote more independently and in secret during the May 2021 Elections. The audio player and TVD were used in nine polling stations across three electoral districts. Blind and partially sighted people were made aware of the trial through social media, local talking newspapers, and local press and television.

Of the 11 blind and partially sighted people who took part in the trial and completed RNIB's online survey, five were severely sight impaired, six were partially sighted. Overall, reactions to the proposed solution were very positive. Ten participants said the audio player was very helpful, while the other participant said it was quite helpful. When asked if they would use the audio device again, all the participants said that they would.

Ten out of the 11 (91 per cent) participants in Norfolk voting using the audio player and TVD reported that they were either very satisfied or quite satisfied with their overall voting experience this year compared with only 39 per cent of blind and partially sighted respondents across the whole country.

Similarly, ten out of the 11 (91 per cent) participants in the Norfolk trial reported that their voting experience was better than previous years. This is significant when compared with the 15 per cent of blind and partially sighted respondents who, in general, said their voting experience had improved this year. When asked to share their experience of using the audio device participants explained:

- "The speaker and the plastic cover worked well. With my limited sight, I think I know who I voted for. I felt much more confident than last time (although my sight continues to get worse)."
- "The same Kings player I have from Calibre and I used it with the TVD worked OK. Yes, it was much easier."
- "Yes, much better than before. I could hear the candidates through the headphones and used my finger to find the right circle."
- "Much better for me. I listened to the politicians' names on the player and counted down the numbers."
- "Much easier. The sonic talking news player was great."

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## Ten out of 11

participants in the Norfolk trial reported that their voting experience was better than previous years

In follow up interviews, three participants explained they liked the audio device and found it easy to use. They said it added to the feeling of privacy and independence as the person could be left alone to listen to the candidates as many times as they wanted, without having to rely on electoral staff. When headphones were used, they felt this was quite private without intruding on other people and without drawing attention to themselves by having the staff member read out the candidates, sometimes multiple times.

The interviews highlighted some areas for improvement, for example technicalities relating to the audio. It is important when the audio recording is made that the speech is not too fast.

One person commented that they had to listen to it several times to absorb the information. It is essential that the audio list of candidates is numbered so that the numbers line up with the numbers on the TVD.

Others reported they would have appreciated a private area to sit and take their time with the device, and it was emphasised how important headphones are to ensuring choices are private:

- "It would be useful to be able to sit in a separate area and listen to the audio."
- "When using headphones, it was quite private but without you would be drawing a lot of attention to yourself and this would add to the stress."

Blind and partially sighted voters taking part in the trial also highlighted that, while voting independently using the audio player and TVD, there is still anxiety relating to not being able to be sure whether the pen has marked the paper and whether the mark is put in the correct location.

As a result, some still felt that they had to ask polling station staff to check that they voted correctly as they were not confident in using the TVD, this means that the vote is not private. One voter suggested a stamp with a cross might give them more confidence in the process.

Our survey found overall eight out of ten (81 per cent) blind and partially sighted voters in the UK thought being offered an audio player to assist them to vote in the polling station is a good idea.

RNIB is confident the proposed accessible voting solution will enable more people to vote independently, but it is not a panacea because of these remaining difficulties.

Along with changes that need to be made to better train staff, and ensure consistency of experience, many blind and partially sighted people continue to tell us they would prefer telephone or online voting.

In addition, clear communication on what accessible methods are available for people to use at the polling station is key. This way people can prepare themselves before coming in to vote and they know to ask for the assistance they need. It also helps if the list of candidates is easily and accessibly available to review prior to voting so it is clear what to expect on the day.

## Information prior to the election

Blind and partially sighted people who responded to our survey reported not being able to access information sent to them prior to the election, both from local councils and political parties.

Under the Equality Act, service providers are obliged to provide information in an accessible format as a reasonable adjustment to provide equal access to their services.

Political parties need to prioritise this issue to ensure they are reaching all their potential voters and giving citizens access to the information they need to inform their choice. Failure to provide this information in an accessible format is likely to be a breach of the Equality Act.

- "I couldn't read any of the leaflets from any of the candidates."
- "Information from campaigners and councils should be made available on a centralised website for easier access/reading."

Just 12 per cent of blind people and 32 per cent of partially sighted people said they were able to read all of the information sent to them by their local council, including poll cards.

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# Just 12%

**of blind people said they were able to read all of the information sent to them by their local council.**

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53 per cent of blind people and 15 per cent of partially sighted people said they couldn't read any of the information the council sent them, which is the same as in 2019.

Local electoral services should be sending information about an election in accessible formats. Local authorities hold registers of blind and partially sighted people and, in England, Care Act guidance has been amended to make it clear that local authority services, including electoral services, could use these registers to make sure they are sending information in accessible formats to blind and partially sighted people.

- "I didn't receive any of this information in an accessible format. I learned at a later date I could request this, but it was then too late."
- "All material I received was provided in standard print which is not good for me because I don't have any sight. Braille or other alternatives would have been better."

Local authorities should update local registers of blind and partially sighted people, collect information on preferred formats, and use them to send items like poll cards in formats that voters can read.

## Polling stations, postal and proxy voting

### At the polling station

Our survey found 54 per cent of blind and partially sighted people who were able to vote did so at a polling station. These voters reported experiences which suggest inconsistencies in staff training and levels of knowledge in how to support blind and partially sighted voters. Only two out of five (40 per cent) blind voters said that the support they received at the polling station was good, while a third (31 per cent) said the support they received was poor.

Coronavirus restrictions meant the 2021 Elections were particularly challenging for councils and polling station staff. New policies and procedures had to be put in place to ensure a safe and secure environment for staff and voters, and local authorities reported difficulty in recruiting the required number of polling station staff.

These challenges meant blind and partially sighted people experienced additional difficulty getting the support they needed at polling stations.



Voting experiences were mixed with few positive reports:

- "The staff were very clearly trying their best, but, because I had problems using the tactile device, my dad who was helping me vote had to fill out a form stating that he was helping me. This has never happened before, and I've spoken to other people who did not have this experience. I think there needs to be some consistency in the system."
- "At no time did staff say they would offer assistance if required. Neither were there any signs explaining if you required assistance to ask a member of staff."
- "Very supportive, efficient and helpful."
- "They asked if I was okay, but the help was limited due to social distancing."
- "I explained I can't see well but no assistance was offered, just a prompting where to fetch the ballot paper from. I stood as my name was crossed off the voting list but did not see and was not told that another woman further down the table was holding my papers out to me."

I went to the voting booth and was obviously struggling but no assistance was offered. Then I had to ask where the ballot box was. The staff member (who I told earlier about my sight) just waved his arm saying: "over there".

Then I wasn't sure where the exit was and no one told me, by which point I felt humiliated and reluctant

to ask for help again. Not a positive experience at all, one which I doubt I will repeat."

- "The staff were very patronising. Despite me not needing any assistance, they talked to me like a child (I'm 20) and asked me if I could "cope" with voting."
- "As it stands, it's a totally humiliating experience from start to finish, no assistance offered at any stage with people there just making assumptions that everyone can see. If staff there were trained on responses to people with sight impairment the whole experience could be improved."

It is essential that all polling station staff are aware of their responsibilities under the Equality Act and the Representation of the People Act and know how to support a voter with sight loss. While we suspect staffing difficulties related to coronavirus made this situation worse, we consistently hear reports of poor training affecting experience.

In the Norfolk trial, lack of awareness of sight loss among staff was one of the things highlighted by voters which made using the new audio device more difficult:

- "The officer in the polling station was not familiar with the audio device."
- "The officer in the polling station did not realise that they did not need to supervise the person listening to the audio. This infringed on the person's privacy and once left alone with the audio device it was much easier and less stressful."

All three participants who were able to take part in in-depth interviews with RNIB's User Experience Team felt there was a lack of understanding from polling station officers of the needs of blind and partially sighted people. They said this was apparent when guiding people in the polling station, instructing them to fold the paper (to keep their vote secret), looking over their shoulder and not giving them privacy, and being unable to verbally guide them to put their vote in the ballot box themselves. This, in addition to a potentially stressful journey if the person needs to go to an unfamiliar location, can make the voting process quite difficult.

Norfolk trial participants also raised a lack of knowledge of how to use the TVD and the audio device.

- "There is still a reliance on the officer to fit the TVD correctly and a blind person is not able to check this. During the voting it was a friend that noticed that the TVD was not fitted correctly, and this would have resulted in an incorrect or void vote."
- "The officer in the polling station was not familiar with the TVD and did not know how to use it."
- "The TVD was the incorrect one (European one) and hence did not fit the ballot paper correctly."
- "The backing paper was difficult to remove and therefore the TVD did not stick to the ballot paper and it was difficult to use as it moved around on the ballot paper."

Across the UK, one in three (29 per cent) blind and partially sighted people who used the TVD to help them vote, said it did not fit the ballot paper. This seems to be particularly the case in the Scottish and Welsh Parliamentary elections, where the candidate lists, particularly in regional elections, can be very long.

If the TVD is going to continue to be an important component of voting for blind and partially sighted people in the future, this simply cannot continue. Safeguards will need to be built into the system, with Presiding Officers checking the TVDs sent to each polling station against the local ballot paper.

In advance of the election, RNIB worked with the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators to create training materials for polling station staff. These included a film created with blind and partially sighted people, a handy tips guide on how to support blind and partially sighted people and input into the Handbook for Polling Station Staff.

RNIB Cymru also worked with the Electoral Commission to produce a pocket guide to voting, which provided useful tips and advice for blind and partially sighted voters, so they were aware of their rights, and what to expect, when voting. The introduction of new measures to support blind and partially sighted people to vote is a prime opportunity to retrain polling station staff in supporting voters with sight loss. RNIB is keen to support in the development of appropriate training materials.



## Postal voting

Nearly half (45 per cent) of blind and partially sighted people used a postal vote, with 47 per cent of blind respondents and 44 per cent of partially sighted respondents voting this way. This is substantially higher than in 2019 when 31 per cent of blind respondents and 26 per cent of partially sighted respondents voted by post, likely due to coronavirus restrictions. Voter experience of postal voting was mixed and there is still a lot to do to ensure postal voting is fully accessible to blind and partially sighted people:

- "The idea of a postal vote seemed a great idea, however the reality was not suitable for persons with sight loss. It would be nice if they asked if another format could have been offered."
- "Another person filled in the ballot paper for me. I had not wanted that person to know how I vote."
- "I had to be very careful to place the forms in the right envelopes in order not to spoil the vote."
- "It was difficult and took some time. Initially I left out a ballot paper because it did not indicate how many ballots there were."
- "I could not have managed by myself. I had to vote three times so there was lots of paperwork. I would've just got frustrated and given up without the help of my daughter."
- "Having a postal vote gives me plenty of time to read and cast my vote. There is no pressure and also I don't feel nervous about going to the polling station."

- "Hideous!! It is a complicated process and it should be simpler or have a clear alternative for people with sight loss."
- "The instructions were confusing, and it felt like there was too much information to read and it also seemed contradictory. My sighted husband and I managed to work it out, but it wasn't easy."

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**As in 2019, we are calling on the Government to review and revise the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.**

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## Proxy voting

A small proportion – less than one per cent – of respondents to our survey chose to use a proxy vote. All respondents, who explained why they chose a proxy vote, said it was because they were not confident in the provisions made to help them vote in a polling station.

## Disenfranchisement of blind and partially sighted people

Disappointingly, 18 respondents to our survey reported attempting to vote but being unable to cast their ballot. Of the 18 people, ten were registered blind. People opted out because of a lack of confidence in the system, or they were faced with inaccessible materials so didn't know how or where to vote:

- "I completed the online form [for a postal vote] but was sent a paper to confirm my signature which I couldn't see and couldn't do... I cried because I couldn't vote. People died to give me the right to vote and this is the first time I've not been able to vote. I am deeply distressed by this."
- "I have to get assistance from my dad, or family member, to fill in the voting ballots so I have to tell him who I want to vote for and for which party I want to vote for. The information is not in an accessible format for me to vote independently."
- "I never received anything, so I don't know as this would've been my first election."
- "Because it needed to be in large print at all times, I have previously voted and it's still the same issue."
- "This year I was expecting postal voting but there was no ballot paper."
- "I had no one to fill in the ballot paper for me and I didn't know what I'd find when I got there with regard to social distancing etc."

A further 25 voters told us they did not attempt to vote; 15 were blind and ten were partially sighted. Six respondents said they thought they would not be able to read the ballot paper, nine said they would be unable to vote in secret – and they didn't want to share their vote with someone else – and two said they did not know there was an election.

It is essential that adaptations available to blind and partially sighted people to enable them to vote are widely publicised ahead of polling day, and clearly explained at the polling station. Without this, blind and partially sighted voters are either being excluded from, or opting out of, the democratic system because of the barriers they face casting a vote.

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**It is unacceptable that blind and partially sighted people are left feeling disenfranchised from the democratic system because it is not accessible.**

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## Voter ID

The Government proposes the introduction of an ID requirement for voting, which will be included in the Elections Bill. RNIB is concerned that the introduction of voter ID will make the electoral process even less accessible for blind and partially sighted voters, who are disproportionately less likely to hold a passport or driving licence.

The sanctity of the voting process is extremely important, but we do not believe the imposition of a voter ID requirement is a proportionate response to the potential for fraud, bearing in mind the number of people it will disenfranchise.

We estimate blind and partially sighted people are twice as likely not to have photographic ID compared to the population generally. This disparity means blind and partially sighted voters are at much greater risk of disenfranchisement by this policy than the general population. RNIB's Tracker Survey suggests 13 per cent of blind and partially sighted people have no acceptable photographic ID, meaning it's possible this new requirement could exclude 40,000 blind and partially sighted people from the electoral process. This is on top of the existing barriers faced by blind and partially sighted people.

Pilots for voter ID were held in 2018 and 2019. The Government said:

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**“There is no indication that any consistent demographic was adversely affected by the use of voter ID.”**

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However demographic information on those turned away from polling stations was not recorded as part of the pilot.

We know at least one blind man was turned away from the polling station and unable to cast his vote because the new requirement had not been communicated in an accessible way, and although he had his polling card with him, the pilot area was not able to accept this as proof of his right to vote.

It is unclear why the Government has chosen to introduce a photographic ID above other forms of ID or proof of address. The Electoral Commission's evaluation of the voter ID trials in England found twice as many people were not issued a ballot paper in (0.4 per cent of voters) for the photo and mixed ID pilot models, compared with the poll card model (0.2 per cent of voters).

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**Proposed voter ID could disenfranchise:**

**40,000**

**Blind and partially sighted people**

---

Fewer voters would likely be disenfranchised if people were able to bring their poll cards rather than having to get photo ID. We therefore recommend that if a requirement to show ID is introduced it allows people to bring their poll cards as proof of ID. Of course, this would need to be implemented alongside policies recommended above to make poll cards available in individuals' preferred formats.

If a photographic ID requirement is introduced, the application process for any locally issued voter ID must be fully accessible, and there must be ways for people who are digitally excluded to apply.

During the pandemic RNIB has had to support the Government repeatedly to retrofit policy to make it accessible to blind and partially sighted people. For example, we continue to support the Government to make home coronavirus testing accessible. It is essential that the needs of disabled people are built into the roll out of this policy from the beginning.

Assuming the voter ID requirement goes ahead we will be calling on the Government to:

- Ensure communications around the voter ID requirement are accessible to blind and partially sighted voters and communications are sent in voters preferred formats. Local authorities could use registers of blind and partially sighted people to do this.
- Ensure digitally excluded voters are informed and given the opportunity to register for photographic ID by carrying out a large-scale outreach programme, potentially similar to the door-knocking carried out for the census or the digital switchover help scheme. While this would be an extensive logistical undertaking it would be necessary to ensure that blind and partially sighted voters are not disenfranchised.
- Ensure any locally issued voter ID application process can be accessed in a variety of different ways – for example online, a paper application, or in person – and applications are available in a variety of different formats such as braille, large print and audio. Any web pages used would need to be fully compatible with screenreading software. Blind and partially sighted people have reported that current online application processes for ID, such as passports, are very difficult to navigate.
- It would also be helpful if the voter IDs themselves had a tactile marking that distinguished them from other cards the voter may carry.

## Conclusion

With the Norfolk trial and user testing, we have made some progress towards making voting more accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

The experience of blind and partially sighted people in the trials has been positive, and in the absence of telephone or online voting, it is likely the audio player used alongside the TVD is the best next step forward to deliver more accessible voting for blind and partially sighted people.

Meanwhile, much more needs to be done to improve training in the polling station, the accessibility of postal voting, and to make sure people get information about the election in their preferred formats.

There has been a long wait for accessible voting since current provisions were declared unlawful in May 2019 and the audio player should be rolled out in time for the elections in 2022. Even then, it is unfortunate that this will mean a solution hasn't been implemented until three years after the legal judgement.

At the same time, while we work collaboratively with the UK Governments to improve the accessibility of voting, the prospect of voter ID risks disenfranchising tens of thousands of blind and partially sighted people. We are concerned that if implemented as planned, the Elections Bill will give to blind and partially sighted people with one hand while taking away with another.

Blind and partially sighted people have the same right as everyone else to vote independently and in secret.

Nearly 150 years after the introduction of the right to vote in secret, it is shameful that so many are disenfranchised, have to tell another person their vote, or struggle to get the information they need. An accessible voting system is vital for a healthy democracy.

# Devolved Nations Elections

Following the devolution settlements within the respective nations of the UK, the UK Government is responsible for administering General Elections across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, while responsibility for delivering devolved elections lies with the devolved administrations.

For example, the Scotland Act 2016 devolved legislative responsibility to the Scottish Parliament for running Scotland-wide elections (Scottish Parliament, Local Government; and referenda), while the UK Government maintains responsibility for UK-wide elections in Scotland. This led to the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act which contains separate measures relating to electoral administration in Scotland.

In Northern Ireland, the Assembly has no legislative power with respect to elections. UK Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly and Local Government elections are all "excepted matters". The law governing electoral registration and the conduct of elections is contained in a number of primary and secondary legislation.

In Wales, the Welsh Government has powers under the Government of Wales Act 2006 with respect to the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament, local elections and referenda. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 reformed local government electoral arrangements including extending the franchise to 16 and 17 years olds, and The Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act 2020 delivered further reforms to electoral and operational arrangements.





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Jenny Rathbone

By email

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2021

Dear Jenny

Congratulations on your election as Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee. We believe that your committee will have a vital role to play in scrutinising the Welsh Government to ensure that they are taking appropriate measures to solve poverty and inequality. We look forward to working with you to achieve these goals.

I am sure you, committee members and the committee team are currently exploring possible inquiries that could be undertaken over the course of the Senedd. We wanted to take the opportunity to get in touch and suggest some policy areas that your committee may wish to focus on in respect of equality and social justice.

### Child Poverty

Child poverty remains stubbornly high in Wales. With more than 3 in 10 children living in poverty, we believe that taking action to solve the problem must be a priority for the new Welsh Government.

The Welsh Government has already shown that it is willing to take action on child poverty. The Welsh Government's decision to commit to providing support in lieu of Free School Meals over the holidays until Easter 2022 is a very positive step, as is the decision to extend the Pupil Development Grant – Access. There is still much more that could be done, however.

An inquiry by your committee could provide an opportunity to take a holistic review of the measures that have been taken to date to solve child poverty. It could provide an opportunity to identify areas for further action and share ideas for better collaboration. With the ending of furlough and the proposed cut to Universal Credit this autumn, this work would be very timely.

### Protecting migrants' rights

Wales' population today reflects more than a hundred years of in-migration from around the world. People who have migrated to Wales make a valuable economic, social and cultural contribution and it is only right they are treated equally with fairness and respect.

Given the recent changes to the immigration system including the ending of free movement there is a real concern about the impact of the hostile environment on migrants living in Wales and on their rights. In our work<sup>1</sup> looking at integration we found that migrants can face hostility, discrimination and barriers. There are concerns that the end of free movement could have an even greater impact on those who live in Wales,

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<sup>1</sup> Bevan Foundation (April 2020) Shared ground: integrating migrants in Wales  
<https://www.bevanfoundation.org/resources/shared-ground-integrating-migrants-in-wales/>

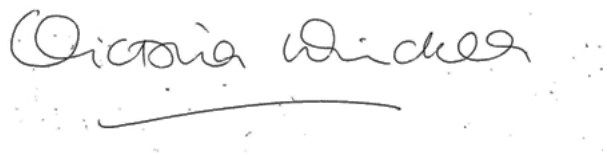
particularly those who have not applied to the EUSS scheme or have received pre-settled status, and who may face restrictions on their ability to access housing, jobs and education or in some cases deportation.

While immigration is a reserved matter, an inquiry by your committee would provide an opportunity to examine the impact of UK policy and identify possibilities to take further action to support people who live, work and study in Wales.

If you would like to discuss any of our ideas further then we'd be delighted to meet with you and your team.

I hope our work is of interest.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Victoria Winckler". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that spans the width of the signature.

Victoria Winckler,

Director

# Agenda Item 4.10

20 July 2021

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP,  
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP,  
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

Dear Rishi and Thérèse,

We are writing as the chairs of our Parliaments' relevant committees regarding the £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit, which is due to end in October.

The UK Government did the right thing at the start of the pandemic to increase Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit to give better support to people during these incredibly challenging times.

This uplift has been a lifeline for millions of families, saving them from being impoverished and we welcomed its extension until October. We now hope you will consider making this uplift permanent and extending it to legacy benefits, which are disproportionately claimed by disabled people.

Ending the uplift would mean that the 6 million people claiming Universal Credit will lose £1040 in annual income overnight. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has estimated that removing the uplift would force 500,000 people, including 200,000 children, into poverty.<sup>1</sup> Families on the lowest incomes, those with children and particularly single parents, BAME families, and families where someone is disabled are disproportionately affected.

Even with the uplift in place, the Foundation calculates families unable to find work are getting £1,600 less per year in social security support than they would have done in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Families with children are even worse off, receiving around £2,900 less than ten years ago.<sup>3</sup> It is also worth remembering that we entered the pandemic with the main rate of unemployment support at its lowest level in real terms since around 1990, by removing the uplift you will return this form of support to its lowest level in 30 years.

You also risk removing this support from families at the very time unemployment is expected to peak, as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme comes to an end.

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<sup>1</sup> Keep the lifeline: why the Government should keep the £20 uplift to Universal Credit, Briefing, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, January 2021, page 3: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/keep-lifeline-why-government-should-keep-20-uplift-universal-credit>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, page 4

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Those on lowest incomes spend more of their income in their local area, thereby supporting the economic recovery.

Continuing the uplift is also an important preventative spend measure. By spending now on social security, saving people from poverty you will be saving more money long term on health, education, justice and other social services.

It is also clearly unfair that those in receipt of legacy and other related benefits have not received the same uplift. Their needs are just as great, the value of their social security support fell by just as much over the last decade and they have faced the same difficulties during the pandemic. Their support should be increased by an equivalent amount too.

As the cross-party conveners of the relevant committees, we hope that you will take seriously our view that the uplift should be extended. To give people the certainty and security they deserve it would also be helpful if you could make an early statement confirming your intention and we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

The image shows four handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged horizontally. From left to right, they are: Neil Gray, Stephen Timms, Paula Bradley, and Jenny Rathbone. Each signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Neil Gray MSP

Stephen Timms MP

Paula Bradley MLA

Jenny Rathbone MS



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

**RT HON THERESE COFFEY MP**  
Secretary of State for Work & Pensions

The Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP  
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee

572

August 2021

*Dear Stephen,*

### **RESPONSE TO JOINT LETTER**

I recently received your letter co-signed by the Chairs of the relevant committees in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Since the start of the pandemic, the Government's priority has been to protect lives and people's livelihoods.

That is why the Chancellor announced in the March Budget that the temporary £20 a week increase in Universal Credit was to be extended for a further six months, until October. This formed a part of a £400 billion package of measures put in place to support people through the pandemic well beyond the end of the roadmap out of national lockdown.

Now the economy has reopened it is right that the Government should focus on supporting people back into work and supporting those already employed to progress in their careers. Our ambition is to support two million people move into and progress in work through our comprehensive £33 billion Plan for Jobs.

This includes, £2 billion for our Kickstart programme, which provides 6-month work placements for Universal Credit claimants aged 16-24; £2.3 billion for an additional 13,500 Work Coaches to support people into work; and £2.9 billion for our Restart programme, which provides 12 months' intensive employment support to Universal Credit claimants who are unemployed for a year. Through this programme the Government will continue to support individuals and businesses.

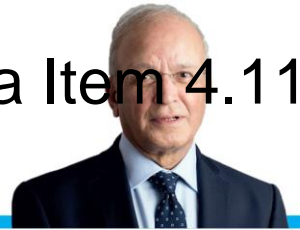
Finally, at my appearance at the Work and Pensions Select Committee on 7 July, I was clear the department would communicate with claimants as the uplift came to an end. In his letter to you on 22 July and the Minister for Welfare delivery notified you of our first communication with claimants.

I am copying this response to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neil Gray MSP, Paula Bradley MLA and Jenny Rathbone MS.

*Yours sincerely,*

Pack Page 78

*Therese*



Our Ref: AH/SMM

11 August 2021

Jenny Rathbone MS  
Chair  
Equality and Social Justice Committee

Dear Jenny

I recently met with RNIB Cymru (Royal National Institute of Blind People) and was interested to learn more about the challenges that people with sight loss face daily in Wales.

Since the pandemic, blind and partially sighted people have faced additional challenges, some exacerbated by the necessitated changes and restrictions. For example, social distancing is by definition more difficult – if not impossible – for those who cannot use vision to judge distance.

I understand that there have been and continue to be issues with the accessibility of public health information. For example, letters inviting individuals for a vaccine, have not routinely been available in accessible formats. Information available and guidance at vaccine centres has not been accessible and we have heard of the particularly poor experiences of some individuals with sight loss going to receive their vaccine. I feel this is a matter of equality. Blind and partially sighted members of our community should have equal access to care.

In eye care, we know that the pandemic has meant a huge backlog of appointments across all eye conditions. However, even before coronavirus, people were losing sight because of the phenomenal waiting times. In January 2021, of the highest risk category patients, 57.3 per cent – **nearly two thirds of the waiting list** – were beyond target and therefore listed as being at risk of irreversible harm or significant adverse outcome.

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Ceidwadwyr  
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Welsh Parliament



The Welsh Government introduced Eye Care Measures in 2018 to support Health Boards to prioritise patients based on their clinical needs. As the first country in the UK to have dedicated targets for eye care, these should be welcomed, but what we have now is stark evidence as to the scale of the problem being faced. No one should lose their sight because of needless waits for treatment.

Given the disproportionate impact that this community continues to feel, I would be keen to bring the challenges to the attention of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

*Altaf*

Dr Altaf Hussain  
Shadow Minister for Equalities

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Altaf Hussain MS

August 11<sup>th</sup> 2021

Dear Altaf

**Your meeting with RNIB Cymru**

Thanks very much for letting me knowing about your recent discussion with RNIB.

The 57% of people waiting to be seen for an eye appointment who are now deemed at risk of losing their sight because of the amount of time they have been waiting is pretty scary. This is probably best followed up by the Health Committee as a lot of this will be about the efficiency with which eye patients are being appropriately triaged to the full range of eye clinicians and the extent they are using IT images taken by the high street optometrist to flag up people that need to be seen urgently. So I will pass on your letter to Russell George as Chair of the Health Committee.

All the other issues are important equality concerns which we can include in our discussions at our next strategy meeting in September.

Yours sincerely,



Jenny Rathbone MS

Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee

CC Russell George MS, Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.



# Agenda Item 4.12



Jenny Rathbone MS,  
Chair,  
Equality and Social Justice Committee  
Senedd Cymru  
Cardiff Bay  
CF99 1SN

1 September 2021

Dear Ms Rathbone,

Many congratulations on your appointment as chair of the new Equality and Social Justice Committee. I am writing as Head of Wales Office for the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. I appreciate the wide-ranging remit of the committee and the many calls on the committee's time but wanted to take an early opportunity to raise the possibility of a short inquiry into the speech, language and communication needs of young people in the youth justice estate. As the facts below highlight, this is a significant issue which could benefit from a timely, focused review.

## Key facts

- Up to **60%** of young people in the youth justice estate have speech, language & communication needs (Bryan et al, 2007).
- **66%-90%** of young offenders have low language skills. 46-67% of these are in the poor or very poor range (Bryan et al, 2007).
- Around **40%** of young offenders find it difficult or are unable to access and benefit from rehabilitation programmes that are delivered verbally, such as drug rehabilitation courses (Bryan et al, 2004).

To our knowledge, this issue was last reviewed by the Senedd over ten years ago when the then Communities and Culture Committee report 'Youth justice: the experience of Welsh children in the secure estate' (2010) highlighted a lack of provision in Wales for young and adult offenders who have speech language and communication needs and recommended the Welsh Government enable pilot work to be done in Wales on the potential benefits of speech and language therapy for juvenile offenders both in custody and on release. Despite evidence from the pilots, provision remains extremely patchy over a decade later. This was briefly touched upon by the recent Health Committee inquiry on the provision of health and social care in the adult prison estate in Wales in which the governor of HMP Parc acknowledged that there was unmet need for speech and language therapy among the prison population.

We believe a potential short inquiry by the committee could be extremely helpful in shining a light on this key area and would be happy to provide further information to the committee should you wish to explore this possibility further. We have also raised this topic with the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee but understand that the Equality and Social Justice Committee may be better placed to consider this request.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Cotterill', is enclosed in a light grey rectangular box.

**Pippa Cotterill,**

**Head of Wales Office**