

Agenda – Equality and Social Justice Committee

Meeting Venue:	For further information contact:
Video Conference via Zoom	Rhys Morgan
Meeting date: 20 September 2021	Committee Clerk
Meeting time: 13.15	0300 200 6565
	SeneddEquality@senedd.wales

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

Private pre-meeting

(13.15 – 13.30)

1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

(13.30)

2 Scrutiny session with the Minister for Social Justice

(13.30 – 15.00)

(Pages 1 – 19)

Jane Hutt MS, Minister for Social Justice

Claire Bennett – Director, Communities & Tackling Poverty

Jo Salway – Director, Social Partnership and Fair Work

Break

(15.00 – 15.15)

3 Debt and the pandemic – Advice organisations

(15.15 – 16.00)

(Pages 20 – 53)

Gwennan Hardy, Senior Policy Officer, Citizens Advice Cymru

Peter Tutton, Head of Policy, Research and Public Affairs, StepChange

Jason Roberts, Debt Adviser, Speakeasy Law Centre



4 Papers to note

(16.00 – 16.15)

4.1 Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Fifth Senedd Legacy Report – March 2021

(Pages 54 – 77)

4.2 Correspondence from the Auditor General for Wales to the Chair regarding the work of Audit Wales – 9 July 2021

(Pages 78 – 79)

4.3 Correspondence from the Llywydd to the Chair regarding the committee timetable – 14 July 2021

(Pages 80 – 82)

4.4 Correspondence from the Chair of the Finance Committee to all Committee Chairs regarding the Welsh Government draft budget – 16 July 2021

(Pages 83 – 86)

4.5 Dwr Cymru Vulnerable Customer Workshop Report – 25 March 2021

(Pages 87 – 94)

4.6 Correspondence from Gwenith Price, Deputy Welsh Language Commissioner to the Chair regarding considering the Welsh language in the Committee's work – 19 July 2021

(Pages 95 – 96)

4.7 Correspondence from the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee to Committee Chairs regarding priorities for the Sixth Senedd – 20 July 2021

(Pages 97 – 98)

4.8 Correspondence from Director of RNIB Cymru to Committee Members regarding RNIB's latest research into the voting experiences of blind and partially sighted people – 23 July 2021

(Pages 99 – 125)

- 4.9 Correspondence from Victoria Winkler, Director, Bevan Foundation to the Chair regarding child poverty and protecting migrants' rights – 23 July 2021**
(Pages 126 – 127)
- 4.10 Correspondence from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee regarding universal credit uplift – 5 August 2021**
(Pages 128 – 130)
- 4.11 Correspondence from Altaf Hussain MS to the Chair regarding the challenges that people with sight loss face daily in Wales – 11 August 2021**
(Pages 131 – 133)
- 4.12 Correspondence from Pippa Cotterill, Head of Wales Office, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists Wales to the Chair regarding speech, language and communication needs of young people in the youth justice estate – 1 September 2021**
(Pages 134 – 135)
- 4.13 Correspondence from the Minister for Social Justice regarding the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan – 10 September 2021**
(Pages 136 – 140)
- 5 Motion under SO17.42(ix) to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting**
(16.15)
- 6 Consideration of evidence – scrutiny session with the Minister for Social Justice**
(16.15 – 16.30)
- 7 Consideration of evidence – debt advice organisations**
(16.30 – 16.45)
- 8 Consideration of childcare and parental employment scoping paper**
(16.45 – 17.00) (Pages 141 – 150)

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EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE – 20 SEPTEMBER 2021

EVIDENCE PAPER

This evidence paper outlines my priorities for the Sixth Senedd and sets out how I plan to work with Cabinet colleagues on the cross-cutting matters in my portfolio.

Addressing inequalities and achieving the Strategic Equality Plan 2020-24 objectives

The strengthening and advancement of equality and human rights has been a central focus of every Welsh Government since the beginning of devolution. This government is more resolute than ever in its focus and determination to create a fairer more equal Wales.

COVID-19 brought into focus the continuing existence of deep-rooted inequalities in our society. These inequalities have been further explored and articulated in powerful reports by the First Ministers' Socio-economic subgroup of the COVID-19 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Advisory Group and the Disability Equality Forum.

The First Minister has been very clear that equality is at the heart of our decision making and the long term aims of the Strategic Equality Action Plan 2020-2024 will be delivered by the underpinning Race Equality, Gender Equality and LGBTQI+ Action Plans and our response to the [Locked out Report](#) (and the establishment of a ministerial led Disability Taskforce.) The recommendations from the [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic COVID-19 Socio economic Sub Group Report](#) led to the development of the [Race Equality Action Plan: an Anti-racist Wales](#).

On 26 August the [Strengthening and advancing equality and human rights in Wales research report](#) was published. This significant piece of research was commissioned as part of the Welsh Government's commitment to developing a clear approach in Wales to ensuring equality and human rights are fully considered and protected. The research findings outline mechanisms to strengthen and advance equality and human rights in Wales, with the report including 40 recommendations for legislative, policy, guidance, or other reforms. Each recommendation includes detailed steps to progress toward the main recommendation.

Early in the new term I am meeting with ministerial colleagues to explore how the recommendations might be integrated into ongoing and future work. Important steps have already been taken in this regard. Our Programme for Government sets out our commitment to incorporate the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People into Welsh law. Additionally, the commencement of the Socio-economic Duty in Wales in March 2021 provides a key mechanism in supporting Wales's recovery from the impact of Covid-19.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to implement a Race Disparity Unit, alongside an Equality Data Unit, in order to provide analytical and policy capacity to drive forward on-the-ground change to tackle evidence-informed inequalities in Wales. I will also establish a Disability Disparity Unit. My officials have, and will continue to, work with stakeholders to develop an understanding of priorities for the Units following implementation.

Tackling poverty, income maximisation and benefits advice

Tackling poverty continues to be made a priority. Through the Programme for Government we have set out our commitment to improve outcomes for low income households. This includes, amongst others, continuing to support our flagship Flying Start programme; a commitment to review eligibility criteria for free school meals; and additional funding for childcare where parents are in education and training.

I am committed to driving forward this agenda and intend to use every lever at my disposal to bring about change. I continue to meet ministerial colleagues to discuss opportunities to prioritise tackling poverty in the development and delivery of their Programme for Government commitments, and within their policies and service delivery considerations. In addition, poverty will be embedded within the heart of the budget planning process (linking to the requirements of the Socio-economic Duty). This will help to focus portfolio priorities across government on those things that contribute to addressing inequalities and improving outcomes for low income households.

These discussions will focus on evidence of what works in tackling poverty. They will take on board the recommendations arising from the Child Poverty review, to ensure that Welsh Government funded programmes have maximum impact on the lives of children living in poverty. It will also be supported by findings from the research and analysis currently being undertaken by the Wales Centre for Public Policy into tackling poverty in Wales. This is considering international poverty alleviation strategies and effective poverty reduction programmes and policies.

In addition, throughout the summer I met and engaged with key tackling poverty programmes, stakeholders and those with lived experience to gain insight into the opportunities and challenges for example the Swansea Poverty Truth Commission and the Anti-Poverty Coalition. Collectively, this analysis will help to inform the design and implementation of future actions in Wales.

Since the start of the pandemic, our focus has been on increasing household income, reducing essential living costs and building financial resilience (“income maximisation”). The [progress report of the Child Poverty – Income Maximisation Plan](#) summarises the outcomes of a number of pilot programmes. The report demonstrates positive progress in a number of key areas, which we will now build upon.

The introduction of the Single Advice Fund (SAF) in January 2020 has ensured the Welsh Government is grant funding strategically planned, cost effective and integrated advice services that are helping to meet the increasing demand for access to advice services. The benefit advice services delivered through the SAF are invaluable in helping people to navigate through the benefit system to better understand what they may be entitled to and how to claim. Everyone who accesses the SAF services is offered a ‘welfare benefit entitlement check’, regardless of the presenting problem they contacted the SAF for help with e.g. housing, employment problem etc. In the last financial year, SAF benefit advice services helped people to claim over £40 million of additional welfare benefit income.

Throughout March 2021 we delivered the first national benefits take up campaign in Wales which resulted in an additional £651,504 being claimed by those entitled to benefits. Building upon the success of this campaign, we will deliver another national campaign this

autumn. From October 2020 to March 2021 we also ran six Test and Learn pilots that targeted tailored messages and support to encourage benefit take-up amongst groups least likely to be claiming all the financial support they are entitled to. The pilots engaged with 1,440 households providing advice and support to resolve more than 6,800 issues. The pilots supported these households to claim additional income of £2,468,052. An additional allocation of funding from the Covid reserves will enable the projects to operate at the same capacity throughout the whole of this financial year.

In May 2021, working collaboratively with local authorities we developed and published a [Best Practice Toolkit](#). This collates 'what works' in helping to simplify and streamline the application process for devolved benefits making them more accessible to people in need of this support.

Debt related issues

The Welsh Government welcomed the decision by the UK Government to transfer a share of the UK Financial Levy, as this has enabled debt advice services in Wales to be integrated alongside the other social welfare advice services we commission within the Single Advice Fund (SAF). Our share of the levy has increased year on year. In 2019 -20 our total share was £2.45m; in 2020-21 we received £3.4m and in 2021-22 our share is just over £4m.

In the last financial year, debt advice services delivered through the SAF helped over 18,000 households to manage problem debt of over £8 million and, most importantly, put their finances on a more sustainable footing.

Covid-19 has put household finances across Wales under enormous strain and many people have been left struggling with debts accrued during the pandemic. We have established a Debt Task Group with a membership of key internal and external partners. The Group has been asked to recommend initiatives and policies that will support people across Wales who are struggling to maintain their financial commitments to repay their debts in an affordable way, avoid enforcement action and offer sustainable pathways out of debt.

Officials worked closely with HM Treasury as the UK Government policy for a 'debt respite scheme' was developed. The first part of the scheme, Breathing Space, was introduced in May 2021 and people in Wales struggling with debt can now get legal protection from creditors increasing their debt and from taking enforcement action. Officials will continue to work with HM Treasury to ensure the second part of the scheme, the Statutory Debt Repayment Plan, aligns with the specific needs of people in Wales who, because of the pandemic, are struggling with problem debt.

Basic Income pilot

We are developing options for a Basic Income pilot involving people leaving care, focused on how the pilot could be designed to support those in the greatest need. There is a lot of very complex work to do designing the pilot and working out how it will be implemented and measured. It's important that we get it right. A Steering Group and an Operational Group have been established to ensure a cross-government approach. An internal monitoring and evaluation group has also been established to produce a detailed Outcomes and Evaluation framework which will sit alongside the development of the pilot. We have actively engaged

with countries that have piloted approaches to basic income, in order to learn lessons and embed this learning into the proposed pilot. As part of the process we will be listening to key stakeholders and experts as we build the model, and to contribute to the ongoing development and evaluation of this work. My officials are currently in the process of modelling a number of options for the pilot, which will allow us to make an informed decision about what can be achieved in terms of feasibility, and affordability. I am meeting with officials shortly and they will brief the First Minister and me on progress to date, I hope I will soon be in a position to provide you with more details of how the pilot will be implemented and measured.

Fair Work Commission

We are using our powers, policy levers and influence to progress the recommendations of the Fair Work Commission. We established the Social Care Fair Work Forum and its associated working groups which seek to improve working conditions in social care and we are using the Forum to inform our approach to delivering our commitment to pay social care workers the Real Living Wage.

Workplace health and safety has been radically altered by COVID-19 and we responded to this by creating the national Health and Safety Forum. This has brought together trade unions, the main employer bodies and those responsible for enforcement to share their work and collective experience in helping to keep workplaces safe. We have teamed up with our social partners to deliver campaigns to strengthen knowledge and understanding of workplace rights and responsibilities, including in relation to Health and Safety.

Working across the Welsh Government, we are using levers such as the Economic Contract and the Code of Practice on Ethical Employment in Supply Chains to encourage fairer work practices and we have partnered with Cynnal Cymru, as the Living Wage accreditation body in Wales, to help them promote and encourage further adoption of the Real Living Wage. In addition, we are taking steps to build and communicate the case for fair work and its benefits for workers, employers and wider society and we are engaging social partners in efforts to champion fair work and share best practice.

We are strengthening the social partnership approach as a key mechanism through which we can make workplaces fairer, safer and better for all. We have already announced that we will be bringing forward the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Bill shortly, which, if passed, will introduce new social partnership, socially responsible procurement and fair work duties.

Finally, in line with the Fair Work Commission recommendations to influence in the non-devolved areas, we continue to call on the UK Government to bring forward its promised Employment Bill and to commit additional resources to enforcement, so that workers have the statutory rights and protections they deserve.

Criminal Justice

We are pursuing the devolution of policing and the wider criminal justice system. The First Minister has written to the UK Government requesting the commencement of discussions on the recommendations of the Thomas Commission. However, while criminal justice remains reserved we will continue to do everything we can within our areas of responsibility

to support its effective operation. We are also working with Police and Crime Commissioners, Welsh police forces, and British Transport Police to deliver, in this financial year, the Programme for Government commitment to maintain funding of 500 Police Community Support Officers and expand their number by 100.

Throughout the public health crisis we have worked closely with HM Prison and Probation, Youth Custody Service, Youth Justice Board, Ministry of Justice, NHS Wales and Public Health Wales (PHW) to manage the outbreaks and mitigate the impact of the virus, balancing the needs of community health, with the health and well-being of both adult and young offenders. Whilst robust restrictions within both the secure estate and probation services were necessary to reduce the transmission of the virus and save lives, we have worked closely with partners to ensure those critical services integral to the rehabilitation of offenders remained accessible.

Through positive collaboration the testing of adult and young offenders upon arrival at all Welsh prisons, Youth Offending Institutions and Secure Children's Homes was put in place. Working with Public Health Wales we implemented a testing protocol for staff in our Secure Children's Home. A national contact tracing protocol was established to minimise transmission across the secure estate in Wales and the vaccination programme continues to be rolled out at pace in prisons, in line with the community programme.

In March last year I made the difficult decision to pause work on the Female and Youth Offending Blueprints. This was in response to COVID-19 and the need for all delivery partners to re-deploy resources. On 1 July 2020 work resumed on the delivery of both Blueprints. An assessment of implementation plans has now been undertaken to review project deliverables and refresh timescales. Updated implementation plans have been produced in consultation with our key partners and have been published highlighting progress to date and outlining our future work programme.

As part of this year's budget, we are allocating a further £500,000 to the Blueprint programme to support projects which strengthen links between women in prison and their children through the 'Visiting Mums', and help progress the delivery of trauma informed practice to Youth Justice Practitioners. This additional investment in the Blueprints helps provide meaningful multi-generational improvements in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Future Generations Commissioner and work in relation to the Well-being of Future Generations Act

I meet regularly with the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (FGCfW) on the work under the Well-being of Future Generations framework. In June 2021 we published our [Programme for Government](#) which included our well-being objectives to maximise our contribution to the well-being goals over this Government term. Our Well-being of Future Generations strategic implementation framework continues to guide and informs our work to carry out and promote sustainable development and our duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

This year we established a Well-being of Future Generations national stakeholder fora, launched a new campaign page to improve awareness of the Act, delivered two Future

Generations Xchange events and developed a blog platform to keep stakeholders engaged and up to date on key activities.

In February, we published a [roadmap for 2021](#) setting an accelerated timescale for delivery of national milestones, indicators, and the Future Trends Report under the banner of *Shaping Wales' Future* programme.

On 1 September I launched a [consultation on national milestones for Wales](#) that will shape future action towards achieving the shared well-being goals. It proposes nine national milestones that will assist Welsh Ministers in assessing progress towards the well-being goals and also seeks views on potential gaps in the current set of national well-being indicators that have been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The consultation will run until 26 October 2021.

Over the past 18 months the Well-being of Future Generations Act has received considerable scrutiny on its effectiveness as a legislative framework to improve Wales' sustainability. In the autumn we will publish our response to the recommendations outlined in three key reports: the Future Generations Commissioner's Report, the Auditor General's Report, and the inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee.

We have agreed a shared action plan with the Future Generations Commissioner to align activities internationally, to utilise connections at the United Nations and platforms such as the World Expo and COP26 to promote and demonstrate how a well-being of future generations approach can help drive positive action on the world's greatest problems.

Settled status

In July 2019, the Welsh Government announced a package of free support to help EU citizens prepare for the UK to leave the EU and to help them apply for pre-settled or settled status. This support continues to ensure that we reach as many EU Citizens as possible who, for whatever reason, may not yet have applied to the EU Settlement Scheme. More recently the Welsh Government has confirmed continued funding to enable immigration specialist lawyers Newfields Law, Citizens Advice and third sector organisation Settled up until 31 December 2021

This continued provision will ensure that EU citizens' can continue to access free advice and support to help them gain pre-settled or settled status. As of 30 June 2021, 96,800 EUSS applications had been submitted by EU citizens living in Wales. The UK Government is due to publish the next quarterly statistical analysis of applications made to the scheme later this month; the Welsh Government will use this data to inform the support we continue to provide going forward.

Unfortunately, due to historic free movement, the UK Government does not know exactly how many EU citizens' in the UK are eligible to apply for EUSS and this is why it is not possible to accurately calculate the number of EU citizens in Wales who did not apply for pre-settled or settled status by the 30 June deadline. However, estimates by Local Authorities predicted that there was approximately 95,000 EU citizens in Wales and recent application numbers have now far exceeded that figure.

For those with reasonable grounds for missing the deadline, there is still time to make an application and we will continue to support those individuals. Further information can be found on the [Preparing Wales](#) and [EUSSWales](#) websites.

Afghan Resettlement

The Welsh Government is committed to creating a [Nation of Sanctuary](#) for refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Wales. We want to ensure they are supported to rebuild their lives and make a full contribution to Welsh society

My thoughts are with those affected by the changes in Afghanistan, including anyone who is living here as a veteran, former interpreter or refugee who may be concerned about friends and family members back home. The First Minister and I met and listened to key stakeholders across Wales, including representatives of the Afghan community, to look at how we can all work collaboratively to provide the best support possible for those fleeing Afghanistan. We are working with local authorities and the Home Office to try to identify accommodation that could be utilised to help bring those who have supported our country to safety as quickly as possible. You can find my latest Written Statement on the situation [here](#) and it is my intention to deliver an Oral Statement to the Senedd with an update in September.

Agenda Item 3

By virtue of paragraph(s) vi of Standing Order 17.42

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Citizens Advice Cymru submission to the Equality and Social Justice Committee: Levels of indebtedness during the pandemic

Summary

Whilst Covid-19 has caused huge disruption to the work and lives of everyone in Wales, it has had a highly unequal impact on household finances. Though many have seen improvements in their financial situation during the pandemic, some groups have seen a much higher likelihood of being pulled into debt. Research from Citizens Advice and others has found that low-income households and people who experienced negative changes in their employment are most likely to have faced financial difficulties during the crisis, alongside young people, families with children, and disabled people or people with health conditions.¹

We know that keeping up with living costs is a common problem for households on low incomes and those who have faced income shocks. They have a higher likelihood of falling into multiple different debts, particularly arrears on household bills like rent, Council Tax and energy costs. This can leave people with little room in their budget to make repayments or to pay enforcement costs or bankruptcy fees, making it more difficult to find a route out of debt. With little or no free income, they are also more at risk of severe hardship.

Minimising the harm for people who have been pulled into debt as a result of the pandemic should be a priority for the Welsh Government and local authorities in Wales over the coming year. The Welsh Government must act to maximise the impact that its existing programmes and services have on people in financial difficulty, whilst also recognising and addressing where its policies are exacerbating debt problems for people in Wales.

We recommend that the Welsh Government:

- 1. Identify and implement ways to improve Council Tax collection practices to ensure they do not push people who accrued arrears during the pandemic further into debt.** We would also encourage the Welsh Government to outline how they will support local authorities with irrecoverable Council Tax arrears so that the burden of this debt is not placed on low income households.
- 2. Extend until the end of March 2022 the additional DAF flexibilities which allow those in crisis to access a higher number of Emergency Assistance Payments, and to apply more frequently.** We would also encourage the Welsh Government to continue to build on its success in reaching those facing hardship

¹ Citizens Advice (2020) [Debt at the close of 2020](#)

during the pandemic, and explore how the removal of the additional flexibilities is likely to affect use and awareness of the DAF.

- 3. Seek to retain the current six-month notice period for evictions in Wales until the Renting Homes Act comes into force**, to provide more security for those who face eviction in the interim period and avoid creating additional confusion over tenants' rights amongst both renters and landlords. It should also monitor the impact that the end of the furlough scheme has in Wales in order to consider whether the eligibility criteria for the Tenancy Hardship Grant should be broadened to include affected households.

Debt advice during the pandemic

Local Citizens Advice offices in Wales helped more than 18,000 people with debt issues last year. The most common issues we saw related to Council Tax arrears (18%), credit and store card debts (18%), fuel debts (14%) and unsecured personal loans (12%). In line with other debt advice charities, the number of people we help with debt issues dropped during the pandemic. Whilst there are likely to be a range of reasons behind this trend, we have outlined some probable factors below.

Firstly, actions taken by both the UK and Welsh governments to protect household finances during this time have played a big role in mitigating the economic impact of the pandemic. Programmes like the Job Retention Scheme, the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, and the Self Isolation Support Schemes have minimized the potential losses in income and employment as a result of Covid. The £20 increase in the value of the Universal Credit standard allowance and the basic element of Working Tax Credit has provided additional support to those on the lowest incomes, with Citizens Advice data suggesting that it helped stave off a surge in the proportion of people we help with debt who are unable to cover their living costs.²

Whilst our offices continue to support people who have faced financial shocks despite the existence of these schemes, these have not materialised at the scale which might have been expected towards the beginning of the pandemic. Alongside the enforced reductions in spending which came about as a result of Covid restrictions, this has meant that many households have seen improvements in their financial situation, being able to pay down debts or build up their savings.³

Secondly, measures introduced by government, regulators and individual firms have protected people from the immediate impact of falling behind on bills during the crisis.

² Citizens Advice (2020) [Life on less than zero](#)

³ Resolution Foundation (2021) [Living Standards Audit 2021](#)

For a long period, people who struggled to pay their mortgage, rent, and other bills were protected from the worst impacts of debt such as eviction, bailiff enforcement, or being disconnected from essential services.⁴ Those in serious arrears were protected from enforcement activity through either a formal pause on proceedings or court restrictions. As a result, people have been less likely to face enforcement action and threats of eviction or disconnection which are often a trigger for people to seek debt advice. The Welsh Government has also sought to expand the support available to help people maximise their income and deal with problem debt, particularly those affected by the pandemic.⁵

Finally, Covid-19 restrictions have affected the way in which people access debt advice. When the pandemic began, Citizens Advice rapidly transitioned its debt services so people could continue getting the help they needed. Staff and volunteers adapted swiftly to expand phone, email and webchat advice channels in order to support people during the lockdown. This shift brought lots of benefits in terms of improving access for people who prefer to use digital channels or who might find it difficult to attend an appointment at a particular location. People told us they found our debt services easier to access compared to 2019-20, and we saw an increase in young people accessing advice.⁶ However, it is likely that some people would have been negatively affected by the change. This could be because they struggled to access advice via online or telephone channels, or they had difficulty acting on advice without in-person support. In Wales, Citizens Advice is continuing to work with partners to proactively reach out to people who are new to advice or are in most need of advice.

Currently, our data suggests that demand for debt advice remains slightly below pre-pandemic levels, though local Citizens Advice offices in Wales have helped more people with fuel debts and private sector rent arrears in the first quarter of 2021-22 than during the same period in 2019-20. Given the ongoing uncertainty around the course of the pandemic and its longer-term economic impacts, it is difficult to predict the take-up of debt advice services over the coming years. For example, it is still unclear what impact the ending of the furlough scheme may have on people's employment and incomes.

We anticipate that the planned removal of the £20 increase in the value of Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit will tip more households into financial difficulty, with Citizens Advice research suggesting that 2.3 million people across the UK could be pushed into debt as a result of the cut.⁷ In addition, with the energy bill price cap due to

⁴ Citizens Advice (2020) [Near the cliff-edge: how to protect households facing debt during COVID-19](#)

⁵ Welsh Government (2020) [Child poverty: income maximisation action plan 2020 to 2021](#)

⁶ Citizens Advice (2021) [Debt impact report 2020/21](#)

⁷ Citizens Advice, [2.3 million will be pushed into the red by Universal Credit cut](#), 26 August 2021

increase by around £150 a year this winter, many people on benefits - who are more likely to be on default tariffs - will be hit with rising costs at the same time as seeing their incomes cut.⁸ However, any increased need for debt advice may take some time to appear given that people do not tend to seek help immediately as they fall into financial difficulties.

In addition, the new Breathing Space and Mental Health Crisis Debt Respite Schemes recently came into effect in England and Wales. Breathing Space gives people temporary protection from most types of debt collection while they take action to get on top of their debts. We believe the scheme is playing an important role in helping people stabilize their situation and take steps to manage their debts, particularly for those facing imminent enforcement action. At the same time, many of the people we help have priority debts, negative budgets, additional vulnerabilities, or are facing very complex situations, and it therefore may not always be possible to move on to a long-term debt solution by the end of the 60-day moratorium period.

The financial impact on different groups in Wales

The pandemic has had a highly unequal impact on household finances. Whilst many have seen improvements in their financial situation during the crisis, some groups have faced a higher likelihood of being pulled into debt.

Low-income households have been much more likely to have run down savings or see their debt levels increase as a result of the pandemic.⁹ This group are more likely to have faced additional costs as a result of the pandemic and to have seen a negative change to their employment, both of which are a key factor to increases in debt. An increase in debt problems for people on low incomes is particularly concerning, as they tend to be more likely to face some of the worst impacts of debt (e.g. eviction, bailiff enforcement, or being disconnected from essential services).

Citizens Advice research prior to the pandemic highlighted a growing problem where the people we help with debts simply don't have enough money to meet their key living costs, often as a result of being on a low income.¹⁰ This puts households under considerable pressure, resulting in a higher likelihood of household bill arrears and multiple debts, and leaving little room in their budget to make debt repayments or pay bankruptcy fees. During the pandemic, we found that many of those who have fallen behind on their bills were facing severe hardship. A third (34%) of people with

⁸ Guardian, *[Energy firms join charity push for social tariff to offset fuel poverty](#)*, 6 Aug 2021

⁹ Resolution Foundation (2021) *[Living Standards Audit 2021](#)*

¹⁰ Citizens Advice (2020) *[Negative Budgets](#)*

household bill debts reported that they have been unable to afford food or other basic necessities in the period since the outbreak began.¹¹

People who saw negative changes in their employment have also been particularly at risk of financial problems during the pandemic. Experiences tend to have been shaped by the extent of the support available to them through Covid-19 protection schemes or the benefits system. Those who were ineligible or whose income was only partially protected through schemes like the furlough or the Self-Employed Income Support grant were more likely to be facing financial difficulties.¹² This includes people who were laid off or made redundant towards the beginning of the pandemic, as well as the self-employed and people in non-traditional work. Citizens Advice research found that disabled people, people with caring responsibilities and families with children were more likely to be facing redundancy in the first few months of the pandemic.¹³

Citizens Advice research conducted in November 2020 highlighted other groups who are particularly at risk of financial problems. It found that families with young children were more likely to be behind on bills, with 60% of parents reporting they had cut back on spending during the pandemic to make sure their children don't go without.¹⁴ Young people, renters and Black and Minority Ethnic people were also shown to be particularly likely to be affected.

In Wales we found that people with mental health problems were twice as likely to have fallen behind on household bills since the Coronavirus outbreak.¹⁵ We know from previous research that periods of financial difficulty can contribute to mental distress, both because of increased stress or worry associated with money and debt problems, and more indirectly by limiting the options that people have to take part in activities which support good mental health.¹⁶ This in turn can make it more difficult to deal with debt-related issues.

Welsh Government's role in tackling debt-related issues during the pandemic

Measures brought in by the Welsh Government during the pandemic have played a significant role in reducing financial hardship for households in Wales and protecting households from the immediate impact of household bill debt.

¹¹ Citizens Advice Cymru (2020) [Coronavirus debts: Estimating the size of lockdown arrears in Wales](#)

¹² Standard Life foundation (2020) [Emerging from lockdown](#)

¹³ Citizens Advice (2020) [An unequal crisis](#)

¹⁴ Citizens Advice (2020) [Debt at the close of 2020](#)

¹⁵ Citizens Advice Cymru (2021) [Mental health and Covid-19 in Wales](#)

¹⁶ Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, [Money on your mind](#), June 2016

Whilst the social distancing measures have currently ended, the economic impact of the crisis will be ongoing. Our research has shown that many of the households worst affected financially during the crisis were those already on low incomes or whose jobs were affected by the pandemic.¹⁷ Without ongoing support, households with debt to essential services and public bodies are at greater risk of severe financial hardship. The Welsh Government needs to consider how to build on successes during the pandemic to protect low income households in particular.

Rent arrears

In 2020-21, 1 in 6 of the people who came to Citizens Advice for help with debt had rent arrears. The number of people our advisers helped with rent arrears has followed the wider trend seen amongst our debt clients, with generally fewer people coming for advice initially, but with current numbers rising to slightly more than pre-pandemic levels. Around 180,000 households in Wales live in the private rented sector.¹⁸ Our research conducted in November last year indicated that over 44,000 households had fallen behind on their rent, with an estimated total of £44 million in rent arrears.¹⁹

Whilst people in all tenures have seen their employment and income negatively affected, renters are more likely to have been furloughed or lost a job.²⁰ This means that many saw significant reductions in their income, whilst their housing costs remained fixed. Renters also typically have lower levels of savings, and are therefore less able to cope with income shocks or cover living costs for extended periods of time.²¹

Pause to evictions

At the start of the crisis, we expressed our concern that if people fell behind on rent payments, they could face eviction during the pandemic. Loss of rented or tied accommodation is the single biggest reason for people being threatened with homelessness (32%).²² The second biggest is rent arrears (15%). This would have increased the risk of homelessness for many people in Wales and put pressure on local homelessness services.²³ Instead, the pause to evictions protected renters who had fallen behind on their rent payments until June 2021, giving them time to get back on

¹⁷ Citizens Advice, [Coronavirus debts](#), November 2020

¹⁸ ONS, [UK private rented sector](#), January 2019

¹⁹ Citizens Advice, [Coronavirus debts](#), November 2020

²⁰ Resolution Foundation, [Coping with housing costs during the coronavirus crisis](#), May 2020

²¹ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Protecting renters in Wales from eviction during Covid-19](#), June 2020

²² StatsWales, [Households found to be threatened with homelessness during the year. Main reason for being threatened with homelessness](#), 2018-19

²³ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Protecting renters in Wales from eviction during Covid-19](#), June 2020

their feet or to find other more affordable accommodation whilst remaining in their homes.

Whilst the suspension of evictions seems to have been largely successful, our advisers still heard from clients whose landlords ordered them to leave their homes despite this. Advisers heard from clients who had been told to leave their home during the no-eviction period, some who had been verbally harassed by their landlord and a case where a client had belongings forcibly removed from the property by the landlord.

Extension to the eviction notice

We also welcomed the extension to the notice period for ending tenancies from two months to six months, announced by the Welsh Government in March 2021. We believe this extension helped to give additional time to households that needed to stabilise their financial situation or make adjustments to their living arrangements.

This extension is due to end on September 30th 2021. As part of the Renting Homes Wales (Act) 2016, the long-term extension to 'no fault' eviction notice periods from two to six months is due to come into force in spring 2022. In light of the continued economic uncertainty as a result of the crisis, we are concerned that temporarily returning the notice period to two months between September 2021 and spring 2022 risks causing confusion over tenants' rights amongst both renters and landlords and leaves more people at risk of being evicted at short notice.

Tenancy Saver Loan

We also welcomed the introduction of the Tenancy Saver Loan in October 2020 to help renters manage their rent arrears. The measure showed a commitment to keeping people in their homes and protecting households from the wider impacts of debt.

Whilst evidence shows that large numbers of renters fell behind on their bills as a result of the pandemic,^{24,25} initial figures suggest that the number of loans allocated was significantly lower than expected. We do not know why take-up of the scheme was low, but we believe that the lending requirements and a reluctance to take on new debt are likely to have been a barrier for some renters. It is also possible that there were fewer renters who were at a crisis point when the loan was introduced given that the eviction ban was still in place, or that the number of people in arrears who were not eligible for benefits was lower than anticipated.

²⁴ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Coronavirus Debts: Estimating the size of lockdown arrears in Wales](#), November 2020

²⁵ Resolution Foundation, [Covid-19 crisis has seen 450,000 additional families fall behind on their housing payments](#), February 2021

Looking ahead, some households are likely to face further financial difficulty in the coming months. It is likely that the cut to Universal Credit at the end of September will leave many unable to afford essentials, pushing them further into debt.²⁶ There is additional uncertainty over the impact that the end of the furlough scheme will have on household finances in Wales.

Given this uncertainty, we are pleased that the Tenancy Hardship Grant remains in place to support the households that need it. Offering this support as a grant rather than as a loan will remove many of the possible barriers to accessing support, such as a poor credit history, affordability of repayments or reluctance to take on new forms of debt. Improved and targeted campaigning will also be important to increase awareness of the grant so that it is accessible to those who need it.

We recommend that the Welsh Government seek to retain the current six-month notice period for evictions in Wales until the Renting Homes Act comes into force, to provide more security for those who face eviction in the interim period and avoid creating additional confusion over tenant's rights amongst both renters and landlords. It should also monitor the impact that the end of the furlough scheme has in Wales in order to consider whether the eligibility criteria for the Tenancy Hardship Grant should be broadened to include affected households.

Council Tax arrears

Some households have been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis, leaving many people in Wales struggling to pay their Council Tax bills. We estimated in November that 64,000 households in Wales had fallen behind on Council Tax payments. More recently, figures published by the Welsh Government show that the total amount of Council Tax arrears has risen by £46.4 million. This represents a 42% increase in the total level of arrears compared to 2019-20, and is the biggest rise in arrears in more than 20 years.²⁷

Citizens Advice research has previously shown that many people in Council Tax arrears are unable to afford their bills, rather than willfully avoiding payment.²⁸ Whilst we know that the people we help with Council Tax arrears are often experiencing wider financial difficulty, the pandemic has worsened the circumstances of many households - pushing many more into hardship and debt.

²⁶ Citizens Advice, [Budget 2021 representation from Citizens Advice on the Universal Credit Uplift](#), January 2021

²⁷ Welsh Government (2021) [Council Tax collection rates: April 2020 to March 2021](#)

²⁸ Citizens Advice, [The Costs of Collection](#), April 2019

Our research found that 7 in 10 people who have fallen into Council Tax arrears during the crisis have also fallen behind on other household bills, like rent or utilities and 1 in 3 people in Council Tax arrears say they haven't been able to afford food or other necessities.²⁹ Our research found that people who saw a negative change to their employment were 2.5 times more likely to say they had fallen behind on Council Tax bills.³⁰

Council Tax Reduction Scheme

As Council Tax is one of the largest fixed costs that households pay after housing costs, the CTRS is a crucial lever to relieve financial pressures on low-income households. We strongly support the Welsh Government's continued funding of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme in Wales and the additional funding provided to local authorities to support the scheme during the pandemic. Research has found that councils with more generous Council Tax Reduction schemes tend to also have better Council Tax collection rates, as households that are less able to pay are required to pay less.³¹ This means that local authorities spend less time and fewer resources seeking to collect arrears that are likely to be unaffordable for the individual to repay.³² It also protects families on low incomes from incurring additional fees or costs that often come alongside debt enforcement.³³

Whilst the Council Tax Reduction Scheme is a crucial source of support for people who are struggling to pay their Council Tax bills, there's a risk that many people who fell behind on Council Tax payments during the crisis may not have accessed the scheme.³⁴

Firstly, awareness of the scheme is low and not everyone who is entitled to a Council Tax reduction is accessing it. We previously found that only half of people in Wales believed that someone claiming Universal Credit would be entitled to a reduction on their Council Tax bill.³⁵ Secondly, some people are losing out on support as a result of moving onto Universal Credit. Our advisers report that the people they help are not always aware they need to make a separate application for CTRS, and are therefore falling into Council Tax arrears without knowing it.

Between March 2020 and January 2021, there was an 80% increase in the number of UC claimants in Wales. Many of these new claimants may not have known their eligibility

²⁹ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#), March 2021

³⁰ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#), March 2021

³¹ Policy In Practice (2020) [Council Tax debt collection and low-income Londoners](#), December 2020

³² Money Advice Trust (2021) [Council Tax after Covid](#)

³³ Citizens Advice Cymru (2021) [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#)

³⁴ Citizens Advice Cymru (2021) [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#)

³⁵ Citizens Advice Cymru (2021) [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#)

for Council Tax reduction or that they needed to make a separate application.³⁶ Most local authorities allow backdated applications for Council Tax bills for up to 3 months before the application, however some households may have fallen into debt without knowing they could apply for CTRS and may now be unable to access this support.

It is important to recognise that some people who do claim CTRS may still not be able to afford their Council Tax bills. Council Tax payments can place a disproportionate cost burden on low-income households as they tend to pay more as a proportion of their income, meaning that families who are not eligible for the full amount of CTRS may still struggle to afford their bills.³⁷

Additionally, eligibility for Council Tax reduction may fluctuate for some households each month, depending on income. This was more evident amongst some of our clients during the pandemic. Factors such as claiming benefits for the first time, workplaces closing and reopening and access to additional payments or grants such as self-isolation support or the bonus payments given to NHS and social care staff have made it harder for some people to keep track of their changing eligibility and to keep up with bills.

Pause on the use of bailiffs

Citizens Advice strongly welcomed the pause to the use of enforcement agents for Council Tax collection during the pandemic, having highlighted problems within current collection practices in previous research, including the ways that bailiff use can escalate debts and cause distress.³⁸ The pause to bailiff use for arrears collections meant that people experiencing financial difficulty as a result of public health measures did not experience rapid escalation to court procedures or the threat of enforcement action. It also helped to protect people in crisis from some of the negative mental health impacts associated with debt collection.³⁹

Whilst the use of bailiffs to collect Council Tax arrears has been decreasing in Wales in recent years, in the most recent year for which figures are available there were still over 50,000 Council Tax debts being referred to bailiffs by local authorities in Wales.⁴⁰ With many more households in arrears, we are deeply concerned that more people will be subject to harm caused by collection practices.

³⁶ Department for Work and Pensions, [Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 8 July 2021](#), (2021)

³⁷ Citizens Advice Cymru (2021) [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#)

³⁸ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#), March 2021

³⁹ Citizens Advice (2018) [A law unto themselves: How bailiffs are breaking the rules](#)

⁴⁰ Money Advice Trust (2019) [Stop the Knock: An update on local authority debt collection practices in England and Wales](#)

We have previously highlighted several aspects of Council Tax collection which can worsen debt problems rather than helping people get their finances on track:⁴¹

- People can be made liable for the full annual bill after missing a single Council Tax payment. This means one missed payment can increase someone's debt significantly, and leave them more at risk of being subject to bailiff action.
- Councils have limited powers to recover debt without getting a court order. This pushes councils to use the court process very quickly and often leads to people incur extra charges.
- Pressure to collect arrears quickly means councils regularly refer debt to bailiffs. This process adds extra fees to people's debts and can cause significant distress.⁴²

Our advisers are already beginning to see issues arising from the collection of Council Tax arrears as enforcement has resumed. We have seen several clients who are struggling to agree affordable repayments plans with enforcement agents and are worried about how they will repay their arrears. Earlier this summer, a client in South Wales had an affordable repayment offer refused by the enforcement agency dealing with his arrears. He felt pushed into accepting a repayment plan that he could not afford but felt he had no choice but to accept. He then defaulted on repayments and had his vehicle clamped by the bailiffs. The client had existing health problems and felt that dealing with his Council Tax debts had a severe impact on his mental health.

We have also heard from clients that have been subject to aggressive or humiliating behaviour by bailiffs, despite being unable to make repayments or displaying signs of vulnerability. Advisers heard from one client who complained that bailiffs had clamped their neighbour's vehicle thinking it was theirs, then refused to unclamp it unless they paid over £2200 in full. This caused embarrassment and panic for the client. In another case, a client who had recently lost their mother to the coronavirus, had an affordable repayment offer refused and was visited multiple times by bailiffs trying to enter their home.

Next steps

Local authorities have a responsibility to try to collect unpaid Council Tax, and it is likely that there will be households in arrears who are unaware that they have fallen behind or have seen their financial situation improve enough to repay the amount owed. But

⁴¹ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#), March 2021

⁴² Citizens Advice Cymru, [Helping to ensure a fairer Council Tax system in Wales](#), March 2021

passing Council Tax debts to bailiffs to enforce is currently causing harm to people who have already borne the brunt of the economic downturn.

Given that some local authorities have managed to maintain their collection rates despite bailiff action being severely restricted, local authorities should consider again whether the frequent use of heavy handed debt collection is necessary. Instead, the Welsh Government should take the opportunity to learn from how local authority services have adapted during the pandemic, and commit to fixing the issues within Council Tax collections that are currently exacerbating debt problems for people in Wales.

We are pleased to see that the Welsh Government committed to seek reform for a fairer Council Tax system in its Programme for Government.⁴³ However, urgent action is needed to improve collections for people who have fallen behind during the pandemic, so that there is not a disproportionate burden placed on low-income households, further deepening the unequal impact of the pandemic.

We believe that the Welsh Government needs to prioritise improving Council Tax collections in Wales, learning from successes during the pandemic and aiming to drastically reduce the number of low-income households that face court action as a result of falling behind on Council Tax bills. We recommend that the Welsh Government:

- 1. Identify examples of good practice in Council Tax collection amongst local authorities during the pandemic.** Many local authorities have found ways to support people struggling with Council Tax arrears during the pandemic whilst bailiff action was severely restricted, including awareness raising campaigns for CTRS and offering deferments of payments for clients struggling at the start of the pandemic. Any learnings from this exercise should be used to develop better collection practices that do not encourage the frequent use of bailiffs.
- 2. Evaluate the impact of the Council Tax Protocol for Wales and commit to placing the voluntary measures it contains on a statutory footing if needed.** Whilst the Council Tax Protocol was a welcome recognition of the need for a fairer Council Tax arrears collections process, the experiences of Citizens Advice clients suggest that many people continue to face problems because of the way that Council Tax is collected. If there is evidence that Local Authorities are not implementing the protocol in a way which ensures that Council Tax collection is fair and protects people in vulnerable circumstances, the Welsh Government should explore making some aspects statutory.

⁴³ Welsh Government, [Welsh Government - Programme for Government](#), 2021

3. **Outline the actions the Welsh Government will take to support local authorities with irrecoverable Council Tax arrears.** The UK government announced they would be launching a new guarantee scheme for 75% of 2020-21 irrecoverable local tax losses and to give them three years (rather than one) to repay collection fund deficits.⁴⁴ We would like to hear more information on how the Welsh Government will support local authorities with irrecoverable arrears, so that the burden of this debt is not placed on low income households.
4. **Change the regulations governing the collection of Council Tax to ensure they do not push people further into debt.** It should make changes to ensure that Council Tax debts are not enforced in a way that exacerbates financial difficulties brought on by the pandemic. This should include:
 - Helping to prevent Council Tax debts from escalating by stopping people becoming liable for their annual bill when they miss one payment
 - Making it easier for councils to improve collection by giving them more powers to collect debt in a fair way without getting a liability order first.
5. **Maximise the support provided to low-income households through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.** It should seek to increase take up of the scheme and guarantee that people eligible for the scheme do not lose out as a result of moving onto Universal Credit.

Emergency financial support

We strongly welcomed the changes the Welsh Government introduced to the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) in response to the Covid-19 crisis, with the aim of helping families and individuals facing financial challenges. These included:

1. *Extra funding* - around £11m extra was allocated to DAF at the beginning of the pandemic, effectively doubling the available budget compared to 2019-20.⁴⁵ Between March and December 2020, £16.4m was allocated through DAF, compared to £10.57m in 2019-20 (and £7.49m in 2018-19).⁴⁶
2. *Additional flexibilities* - including allowing those facing hardship as a result of the pandemic to make 5 rather than 3 claims for an Emergency Assistance Payment

⁴⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, [December 2020: COVID-19 funding for local government in 2021 to 2022 - consultative policy paper](#), (July 2021)

⁴⁵ Welsh Government, [Discretionary Assistance Fund receives £11m boost in Wales](#), May 2020.

⁴⁶ Senedd, [Written Question WQ82085\(e\)](#), answered 17/02/2021

(EAP) in a 12 month period, and to claim once every 7 days rather than every 28 days.

3. *Off-gas fuel support pilot*- Adding new support for fuel payments to those off-the gas grid (typically in rural areas) who heat their homes with LPG or oil.

Early in the pandemic, we estimated that 4 in 10 (42%) people had seen their household income drop because of the crisis, with nearly 1 in 14 (7%) losing 80% or more.⁴⁷ Our frontline advisers suggest that the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) has been crucial during the pandemic and, as a result of increased funding and flexibility, was able to provide a much needed safety net for more households in need, particularly for those who are most vulnerable.

Demand for the DAF reflects the severe financial hardship experienced by many people in Wales during the crisis. Data published by the Welsh Government shows £15m has been granted to people in Wales through Emergency Assistance Payments.⁴⁸ It also suggests that the proportion of successful applications has increased, with 58% of applications leading to an award in 2020-21, compared to 42% the previous year.⁴⁹

The number of individual clients coming for help with Localised Social Welfare (including DAF applications) in 2020-21 was more than 2.5 times the number of people who came in the year before. Demand for support through DAF was often coming from people who faced gaps in income, either because of changes in employment or whilst waiting for a benefits payment, or who were in severe financial hardship and were struggling to pay for basics like food or heating.

Amongst people who came to us for help with the DAF and other forms of localised social welfare between March and October 2020, 1 in 3 (34%) also needed advice on accessing a foodbank and 1 in 6 (17%) needed advice on making an initial claim for Universal Credit. Demand for support with DAF applications also reflects the unequal nature of the impact of the pandemic. People who come to us for advice on DAF were disproportionately likely to be in rented accommodation, to have a disability or a health condition, and to be unemployed or unable to work. People in these groups were also more likely to face employment or income loss as a result of the pandemic.^{50, 51}

Insights into off-gas fuel support

⁴⁷ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Facing the cliff edge](#), April 2020

⁴⁸ Welsh Government (May 2021) [Summary data about coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and the response to it](#)

⁴⁹ Senedd, [Written Question WQ82085\(e\)](#), answered 17/02/2021

⁵⁰ Citizens Advice Cymru, [Facing the cliff edge](#), April 2020

⁵¹ Citizens Advice, [An unequal crisis](#), August 2020

The pandemic and its impact on household finances heightened the need for emergency support and we strongly supported the development and introduction of a pilot to provide DAF grants for off-gas fuel support in late 2020. The pilot enabled the DAF to make single payments to households using oil and up to three smaller payments to those using LPG.

Evidence from our advisers had long indicated that there was a gap in the emergency support available to households, particularly in rural areas, who use LPG or oil for heating. LPG and oil typically have minimum order values for deliveries. Where households are in emergency financial situations and can not afford the minimum value of fuel, they are at risk of living in a cold home, especially in cold weather.

The DAF had been unable to support them in the same way that it was able to support households who, for example, may be on prepayment meters and use a mains gas boiler for heat, but cannot afford to top up.

When the pilot began, advisers immediately indicated that the payments were making a significant difference in helping households in fuel poverty to heat their homes by enabling them to top up their fuels.

With the debts that households will continue to experience, there is an ongoing need for the DAF to continue being able to provide emergency financial payments for fuel to households off the gas grid. It is important that this is available all year round to provide equity with other energy consumers and to ensure that specific groups, such as the Gypsy and Traveller community who are more likely to use LPG for heat, have equitable access. Such support remains essential to address the needs of rural households in Wales and until such time as households are supported to move to low carbon heating technologies.

Upcoming changes to DAF

Our data indicates that demand for the DAF remains high. In the first quarter of 2021-22, we helped three times as many people with issues relating to Localised Social Welfare (including the Discretionary Assistance Fund) than during the same period the previous year.

However, the extra flexibilities which allow people to access more than 3 EAPs and to apply multiple times in a shorter period are due to come to an end on 30 September. The additional criteria which has allowed people to claim if they incurred pandemic-related costs has already been removed. Since the additional criteria were removed, the number of EAPs being granted has significantly reduced.

Given the challenges facing low-income households as we move into the autumn, we are concerned the removal of the additional flexibilities will mean that households who are still required to self isolate and those facing income shocks when the furlough scheme ends will be disadvantaged. As outlined above, those who have been pulled into debt as a result of this crisis are particularly likely to be on low incomes and therefore at risk of severe hardship. This group are among those who are more likely to need multiple grants to support them whilst they try to improve their financial situation.

Looking further ahead, we believe there is an opportunity for the Welsh Government to build on its successes in providing emergency financial support through DAF during the pandemic as we move into the next financial year. Use and awareness of the DAF has significantly increased, which is in part due to the more flexible approach and a higher profile amongst frontline workers, as well as the increased budget.

It has been recognised as an important lever for supporting disadvantaged groups, as evidenced by the steps the Welsh Government has taken to ensure DAF is used by people with No Recourse to Public Funds status, EU migrants, and people in fuel poverty. It is also being recognised as a way of reaching the people in Wales who are in most need and may be less likely to engage with other types of support, through the development of referrals into the Single Advice Fund.⁵²

We believe all of these steps have helped to remove barriers which might previously have prevented people eligible for support from accessing DAF, and to target financial support towards addressing some of the most harmful impacts of poverty and financial insecurity. However, there is more that could be done to ensure that the support provided through DAF is reaching those in need and results in a lasting improvement to people's circumstances.

There is an urgent risk that these positive developments will be undermined or lost if use and awareness of the fund declines as we move out of the pandemic. If the removal of the additional flexibilities results in applications being declined for people who are in genuine need of support, there is a risk this will eventually result in people being less likely to think they might be eligible or frontline workers being less likely to recommend it as an option for the people they are helping. Although demand is unlikely to remain as high as it was during the initial months of the pandemic, reducing the level of funding to pre-pandemic levels could also lead to unintentional 'gatekeeping' if there is a perception that resources are limited and someone's case is not sufficiently severe.

We recommend that the Welsh Government extend until the end of March 2022 the additional DAF flexibilities which allow those in crisis to access a higher number of Emergency Assistance Payments, and to apply more frequently. We

⁵² Welsh Government (2020) [Child poverty: income maximisation action plan 2020 to 2021](#)

would also encourage the Welsh Government to continue to build on its success in reaching those facing hardship during the pandemic, and explore how the removal of the additional flexibilities is likely to affect use and awareness of the DAF.

StepChange submission to the Equality and Social Justice Committee inquiry into the level of indebtedness during the pandemic and personal, household and consumer debt

About

StepChange Debt Charity is the UK's leading specialist debt advice charity, offering free and impartial advice to those in problem debt across the UK through telephone and online debt advice channels. The statistics in the appendix of this submission are based on a sample of 5,670 clients resident in Wales that StepChange provided full debt advice to in 2020.

Responses to committee questions

The effectiveness of the Welsh Government's overall approach to tackling debt-related issues during the pandemic, and to consider how its policy might need to develop over the coming months to address upcoming challenges.

- StepChange has commissioned public polling to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on financial difficulty and problem debt. Our most recent polling was conducted in January this year.¹ The table below sets out high level impacts on adults in Wales at that time.² We understand the Bevan Foundation will shortly publish more recent analysis of the impact of the pandemic on debt in Wales.

	%
Long-term income fall since March 2020	29%
Signs of financial difficulty	21%
Problem debt	7%

¹ StepChange (2021) [*Stormy weather: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on financial difficulty in January 2021*](#)

² All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,458 adults, including 181 adults in Wales. Fieldwork was undertaken between 25 and 27 January 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Income fall means a respondent experienced a fall in income since March 2020 that affected their ability to pay for day to day expenses and their income had not recovered in January 2021.

'Showing signs of financial difficulty' is defined as meeting one or more of nine indicators including falling behind on essential bills and regularly using an overdraft; 'problem debt' is defined as meeting three or more of these criteria.

Arrears on household bills includes council tax, rent, mortgage, energy, water and telecoms.

Hardship is includes having fewer than two meals a day for two or more days, rationing or going without basic utilities for five or more days and going without clothing or footwear appropriate for the weather (in each case we specify that respondents go without these things because they cannot afford them).

'Run down savings' means a respondent stated they have used more than half of their savings to pay for essentials since March 2020.

Arrears on household bills	10%
Experienced hardship	18%
Borrowed to make ends meet	25%
Run down savings	6%
'Certainly' or 'probably' unable to pay for essentials in next 12 months	10%

These figures are broadly comparable to the rest of the UK. Notably, our figures suggest that a higher proportion of Welsh adults have experienced hardship (18%) compared to England (11%) and Scotland (14%).

- We note later in this submission the impact of the pandemic on StepChange's service. The impact of the pandemic on the total number of people experiencing problem debt in Wales is difficult to gauge at this stage. However, we can make some high-level observations:
 - Demand for debt advice has fallen during the pandemic. This is likely to reflect UK-wide interventions such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme as well as a series of measures by regulators to protect those struggling during the pandemic. This includes, for example, payment holidays introduced by the Financial Conduct Authority, the 'evictions ban' and other agreements between utility regulators and providers. These measures seem to have been somewhat successful in preventing financial crisis driven by consumer credit debt and arrears on household bills. (This is not to say that these interventions have prevented hardship, which evidence suggests has risen during the pandemic.)
 - It is evident from our own and wider research that, notwithstanding demand for full debt advice, the pandemic has had a big negative effect on some households (as reflected in the above statistics). Our polling suggests that those who were more debt vulnerable at the outset of the pandemic are among those more likely to be affected negatively – we provide more detail about these groups below. Many who were not struggling with debt at the outset of the pandemic have also experienced difficulty (such as mortgagors in affected sectors). Debt and arrears among those affected may yet crystallise into acute problems in coming months.
 - Some who were in difficulty at the outset of the pandemic have benefitted from reduced expenses and/or savings and may now be less likely to be struggling with debt. At an aggregate level, it is therefore important to understand not only the total number of households experiencing financial difficulty but the change in composition and experiences within this group.
- Aspects of the devolved safety net in Wales are likely to have mitigated the negative impact of the pandemic on Welsh households to some degree, including the more generous (compared to England) Welsh Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the Council Tax Protocol for Wales and

the Discretionary Assistance Fund. We also note the Welsh Government created the Tenancy Saver Loan Scheme during the pandemic (we comment further on this support below).

- Financial difficulty caused by the pandemic is likely to have a scarring effect on the financial resilience of some Welsh households and increase vulnerability to problem debt. Over the coming months, the Welsh government, working with local authorities, can help these households by:
 - Supporting those with arrears on priority bills, particularly council tax and rent to address these debts safely and affordably. This includes re-emphasising the importance of the Council Tax Protocol for Wales and responsible council tax collection, ensuring eligible households benefit from the Welsh Council Tax Reduction Scheme and supporting councils to address irrecoverable arrears.
 - Ensuring Discretionary Housing Payments and the Tenancy Hardship Grant reach households struggling with Covid-19-related arrears (including revising eligibility criteria if necessary). The Welsh government should also consider further steps to prevent arrears-related evictions caused by the pandemic before the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 comes fully into force.
 - Continuing to support and promote alternatives to borrowing to make ends meet and high-cost credit for those in financial difficulty. This includes building on lessons from the Discretionary Assistance Fund during the pandemic, working with local authorities to direct households in financial crisis away from high-cost borrowing (for example, through debt advice and responsible lenders), and engaging with the no-interest loan scheme pilot to shape a scheme that is well-designed to meet needs in Wales.

In the longer term, the pandemic should prompt a renewed focus on financial inclusion and supporting households to build financial resilience.

The impact of individual debt on public services during the pandemic and beyond, and to explore whether changes could be made to the approaches that public bodies are taking to debt recovery.

- We note that research produced by the Welsh government indicates that there has been an increase in the proportion of households with low incomes in council tax arrears during the pandemic.³ We welcome the proactive measures the Welsh Government has taken to spread best practice in council tax debt collection through the Council Tax Protocol for Wales. However, this protocol operates within the context of a mandatory process that requires a demand for full payment shortly after a bill is missed and escalation to court. It is vital that council tax regulations are amended to prevent counter-productive escalation of council tax

³ Charlesworth, Z. et al (2021) [Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme in Wales: Final Report](#). Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 53/2021.

arrears and provide greater flexibility to councils to tailor collections activity and respond to evidence of financial and other vulnerability among those in arrears.

- More generally, StepChange believes that there needs to be a statutory overarching framework that binds government debt management processes to accepted principles of good debt management practices. This could be based on the Fairness Principles contained in the Digital Economy Act 2017, which would establish clear standards around affordability and vulnerability and ensure consistency of treatment for those who owe money to government organisations.

The impact of the pandemic on take-up of debt advice services, and to understand the implications of future demand for Welsh Government policy.

- In 2020, around 500,000 people began a debt advice session with StepChange compared to 650,000 in 2019. After falling significantly in the early months of the pandemic, when regulators put in place payment holidays and agreed exceptional temporary measures with firms and utility providers, demand for debt advice has somewhat recovered but remains lower than at the outset of the pandemic. This is true of demand for StepChange's service in Wales as well as the wider UK.
- Future debt advice demand is difficult to predict. In addition to the varying impact of the pandemic on financially vulnerable groups, some measures put in place by regulators during the pandemic remain in place. This includes the FCA's 'tailored support guidance', which requires firms to take exceptional steps to support customers in financial difficulty, alongside agreements between utility regulators and providers. Many local authorities, housing association and landlords also appear to have adapted their approach to debt collection during the pandemic. These steps, alongside the pandemic income protection schemes, appear to have mitigated acute payment pressures for many. The extent to which these steps have fully addressed financial difficulty is likely to become clearer in coming months.

How different groups have experienced debt issues throughout the pandemic, and whether Welsh Government policy interventions have met the needs of particular groups.

- We have provided data in a short appendix about the make-up of StepChange clients in Wales in 2020. In keeping with the wider UK population, our experience is that certain groups with low financial resilience (for example, having lower savings or assets) and who are exposed to more risk factors are more vulnerable to problem debt. Notably, a high proportion of our clients are single parents, are younger than average and are renters. 54% of clients had an additional vulnerability such as a health problem (including mental health).
- At a national level, the experience of different groups during the pandemic reflects a combination of pre-existing debt-vulnerability and pandemic-specific impacts. In our April

'dashboard' assessment of the impact of the pandemic, we highlighted six groups as particularly vulnerable to financial difficulty and hardship arising from the pandemic:

- **Parents with a child under 5** – While parents are not significantly more likely than average to have been impacted financially, those with young children who were affected are more likely to have experienced negative impacts such as arrears on household bills and hardship, and to have resorted to credit to make ends meet.
 - **Single working age adults** – Single adults are more likely to have experienced an income fall, particularly those in younger age groups, and are significantly more likely than average to have experienced negative impacts.
 - **Those with a minority ethnicity** – Those with a minority ethnic background are significantly more likely than average to have experienced a prolonged fall in income, hardship and negative financial impacts. FCA analysis (among other sources) highlights how this experience reflects pre-existing labour market differences and notes the range of experiences among different subgroups.
 - **Single parents** – Single parents have the highest levels of problem debt, hardship, arrears and borrowing to make ends meet among standard household definitions. Single parents are less likely to have run down savings; this likely reflects lower pre-existing levels of savings.
 - **Young renters** – Renters under 35 have a higher than average likelihood of being affected by the pandemic and experiencing negative impacts—notably more so than young people with a mortgage or who live rent-free or pay board.
 - **Self-employed and insecure workers** – Those who are self-employed or run a small business are most likely to have experienced a fall in income due to the pandemic, followed by those whose hours or earnings fluctuate, many in roles typically described as 'gig economy' work. Workers in these groups are also more exposed to negative impacts.
- We are particularly concerned about those negatively impacted by the pandemic in the private rented sector who are vulnerable to housing insecurity and eviction. We comment below on the support available to this group in Wales.

The effectiveness of mechanisms such as the Discretionary Assistance Fund and affordable credit in providing assistance to those most in need during the pandemic, and what changes could improve future delivery.

- StepChange has called for a national package of financial support for struggling renters affected by the pandemic. Having established the Tenancy Saver Loan scheme, we note that the Welsh Government has converted the scheme into Tenancy Hardship Grant in recognition of the need to widen access to those who cannot afford to repay a no-interest loan. Awareness of the scheme is vital, particularly as the scheme may be accessed by those not receiving social security (and is targeted at those not receiving housing support through Universal Credit or legacy benefits).

- We welcome the Welsh Government’s decision to allow up to five (rather than three) Emergency Assistance Payments through the Discretionary Assistance Fund up to the end of September 2021. We do not have evidence of the specific impact of this step, but our experience of debt advice shows that over-indebtedness is often driven by repeat borrowing needs. Providing a viable alternative to desperation borrowing is likely to help prevent or mitigate debt problems.

This noted, our polling suggests that while approximately 13% of those in Wales who experienced a fall in income during the pandemic accessed local support (including support from a foodbank, other voluntary organisation or local authority), 56% borrowed to make ends meet. We estimate that 26% of this group used one or more form of high-cost credit. This suggests that while local support, including grants is somewhat effective, there is substantial unmet demand for alternatives to borrowing.

- StepChange has made the case for further investment in a range of options to meet the needs of those at risk of, or experiencing, acute financial difficulty to prevent and end harmful debt spirals. This includes wider access to grants for those who cannot afford to repay loans as well as new national no interest loan schemes. We note that the Westminster government recently announced a no-interest loan scheme pilot, including a pilot based in Wales, and articulated the ambition to test and scale this scheme up nationally.⁴
- Demand for emergency payments is, in part, a signal that standard social security payments are inadequate. Those relying on support are unable to meet fluctuations in essential costs or build a buffer against unpredictable expenses. Alongside the need to maintain and increase the value of social security payments in Westminster, this also speaks of the need to closely integrate social security and wider public policy measures that support financial resilience. We welcome the debate about developing a simplified ‘Welsh social security’ offer encompassing devolved support and would encourage stakeholders to consider how financial resilience can be promoted through devolved policy.

Appendix

	Gender
Female	59%
Male	41%
Other gender identity	0.12%

⁴ <https://fair4allfinance.org.uk/news/plans-announced-for-new-uk-wide-no-interest-loan-scheme-pilot>

	Household
Couple with children	21%
Couple without children	14%
Single with children	22%
Single without children	42%

	Housing tenure
Renting - private landlord	34%
Living with family	15%
Mortgaged	14%
Renting - Council or Housing Association	14%
Renting - Housing Association	13%
Owns property outright	4%
Board payment (not with family)	2%
Other	2%
Shared ownership (mortgage and rent)	1%

	Employment status
Full-time employed	35%
Part-time employed	15%
Unemployed: looking for work	15%
Not working due to illness or disability	14%
Unemployed: not looking for work	10%
Retired	4%
Carer	3%
Student	2%
Zero hours contract	2%

	Priority arrears ⁵
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⁵ % clients in Wales with responsibility for that bill and in arrears.

Council tax	35%
Gas	26%
Electricity	27%
Water	33%
Rent arrears	25%
Mortgage	17%

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

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.¹ 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-

¹ [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.² 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

² [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.

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.³ 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

³ [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.⁴ 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 2018⁵, 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 2019.⁶ 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.

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

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

⁶ [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 buildings⁷ 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.

⁷ [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

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

33. We conducted a short inquiry into the impact of the pandemic on the voluntary sector. Our report published in January 2021⁸, 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.⁹ We believe that a future committee should consider and review the implementation of these recommendations.

Socio-economic duty

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

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

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

⁹ [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*.¹⁰ 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

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

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 2018.¹¹ 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

¹⁰ [ELGC Committee, Into sharp relief: inequality and the pandemic, August 2020](#)

¹¹ [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

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 2015.¹² 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

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.¹³ As a result of this report, we undertook further detailed work looking at the desirability of devolving welfare benefits.¹⁴ 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

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

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

¹⁴ [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

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."¹⁵

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

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.

¹⁵ [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

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

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 2015¹⁶, 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

¹⁶ 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

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. 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

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.

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 25th 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 Krawyczynski	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

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

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Correspondence welcomed in Welsh and English

welshlanguagecommissioner.wales

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 document¹ 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

¹ [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.

R N I B

Cymru

Golwg gwahanol

See differently

RNIB Cymru

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rnib.org.uk/Cymru

RNIB Helpline: 0303 123 9999
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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

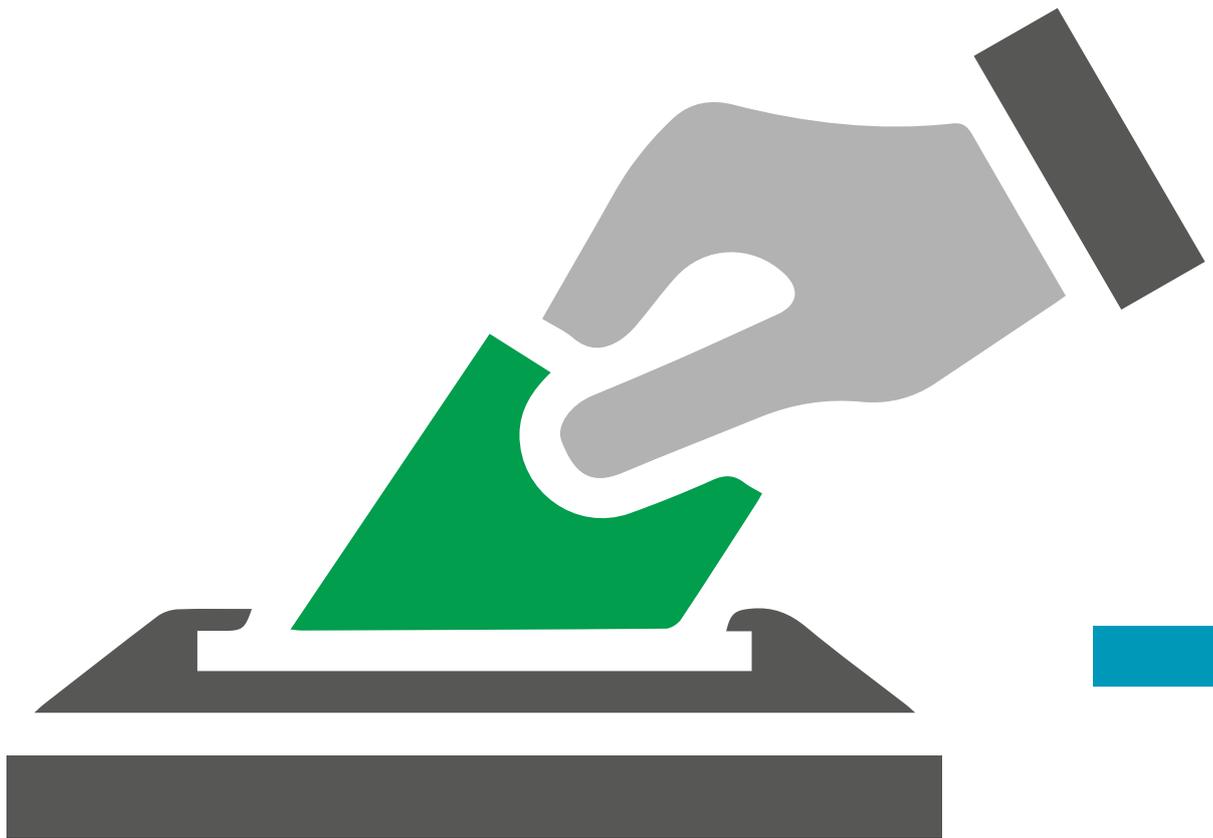
take up this offer the Committee's officials can contact Elin Edwards,
External Affairs Manager, RNIB Cymru, at Elin.Edwards@rnib.org.uk.

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.”

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

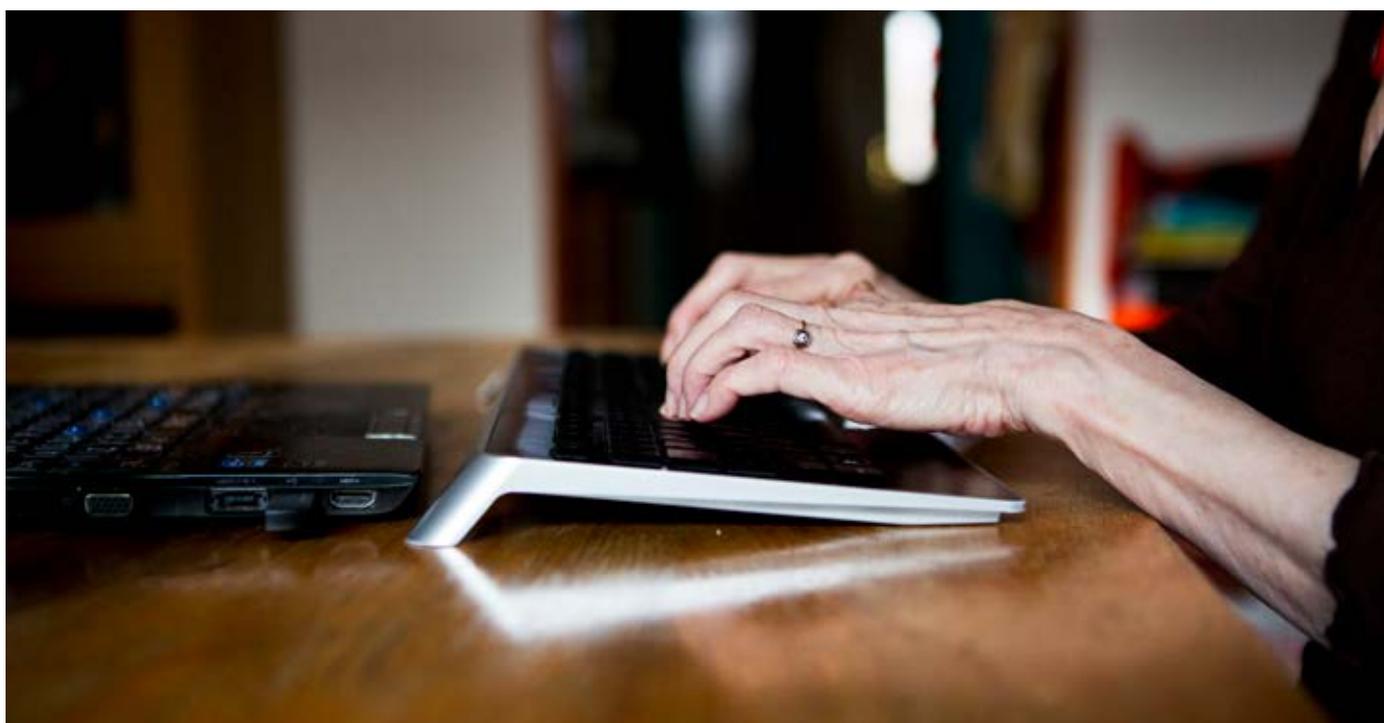
We had

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

91%

of blind people and

54%

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

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."

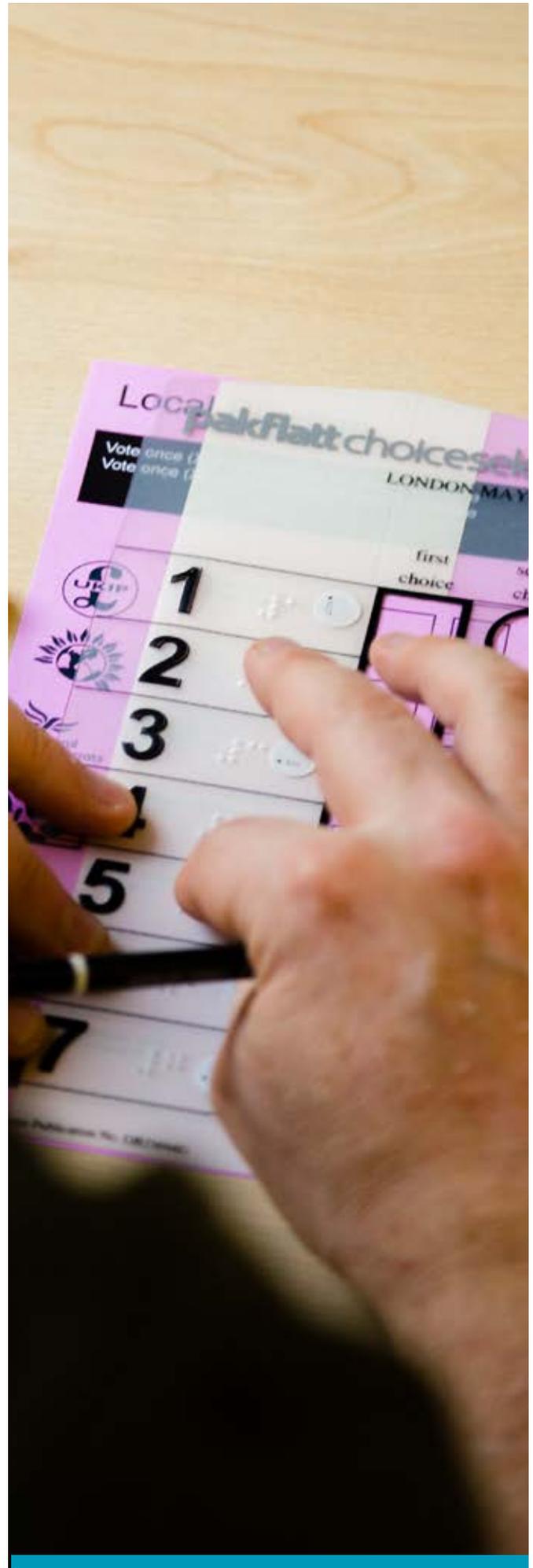
However, based on electoral timelines, we understand from the Cabinet Office that it is impossible for manufacturers to produce individual TVDs for each constituency in the window between candidate lists being finalised and the polls.

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."

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.

Just 12%

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

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."

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.

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.

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

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:

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

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).

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

23rd 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 work¹ 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,

¹ 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 serves as a separator.

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.¹ 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 2011.² Families with children are even worse off, receiving around £2,900 less than ten years ago.³ 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.

¹ 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>

²Ibid, page 4

³ 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 130

Theresa



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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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 11th 2021

Dear Altaf

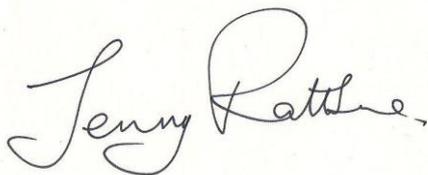
Your meeting with RNIB Cymru

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

Jane Hutt MS

Minister for Social Justice

20 August 2021

Dear Jane,

We share your concern about the situation that is unfolding in Afghanistan. We agree that Wales must play its part in the humanitarian response particularly when it comes to supporting Afghan refugees.

We would welcome a statement from you at the earliest opportunity on the assistance being provided by the Welsh Government to Afghan refugees. We have a number of specific questions:

- How many Afghan refugees do you anticipate will be given sanctuary in Wales and is there a timeline for their resettlement?
- What assessment has the Welsh Government made of the adequacy of accommodation arrangements for refugees arriving in the UK, particularly in light of the tragic death of an Afghan child in Sheffield earlier this week?
- Has the Welsh Government secured the additional funding needed from the UK Government, as described [in your comments to the BBC](#)?
- What arrangements are being made for the UK's four-nations' summit, [confirmed by the Prime Minister](#) to Parliament on 18 August?
- How many Welsh local authorities have offered support and can you please provide details of the types of support offered by each local authority?
- How do plans to support Afghan refugees compare to the support offered to Syrian refugees in 2015?
- What is the Welsh Government's view on the eligibility criteria for priority support for Afghan refugees and do you support the UK Government position to give priority to women and girls?

We would welcome a response to our letter at your earliest convenience. The Equality and Social Justice Committee is also likely to explore these issues with you further in our planned ministerial scrutiny session on 20 September.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Rathbone MS

Chair of the Equality and Social Justice
Committee

Delyth Jewell MS

Chair of the Culture, Communications,
Welsh Language, Sport and International
Relations Committee

Jane Hutt AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Cyfiawnder Cymdeithasol
Minister for Social Justice



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref JH-/10435/21

Jenny Rathbone MS & Delyth Jewell MS
Chairs
Welsh Parliament

Government.Committee.Business@gov.wales

10 September 2021

Dear Jenny & Delyth,

Thank you for your letter of 20 August on behalf of both Senedd committees regarding the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and support being provided by the Welsh Government to Afghan refugees.

On 26 August, I published a Written Statement setting out what we know and what our next steps are in relation to supporting those evacuated from Afghanistan, you can read more in the link below;

[Written Statement: A distinctive Welsh response to the Afghanistan evacuation \(26 August 2021\) | GOV.WALES](#)

I intend to also address the Senedd next week to provide a further update on our work so far. Wales is a Nation of Sanctuary and we must do all that is possible to ensure Afghan interpreters, refugees and their families are able to find a warm welcome and integrate effectively in our communities.

We are working closely with the Home Office, Welsh local authorities and others to help sufficient accommodation and ensure appropriate integration support is put in place. Two weeks ago, the First Minister and I met and listened to key stakeholders across Wales, including representatives of the Afghan community, to look at how we can all work collaboratively to provide the best support possible for those fleeing Afghanistan. This work will continue over the coming weeks.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
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Gohebiaeth.Jane.Hutt@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Jane.Hutt@gov.wales

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

How many Afghan refugees do you anticipate will be given sanctuary in Wales and is there a timeline for their resettlement?

It is important to note that there are two schemes with different eligibility criteria being progressed. The Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) provides accommodation and support to those who worked directly alongside British Armed Forces in Afghanistan. Separately, the UK Government has announced an Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) the scope of which is yet to be defined. Only the ARAP is currently in operation and, although families arriving could be said to have a well-founded fear of persecution if they remained in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (the UN definition of a refugee), the UK Government does not bestow 'refugee status' upon these arrivals.

We understand that approximately 8,000 people have arrived in the UK with ARAP eligibility and the UK Government has also announced that 5,000 people per year will be supported under the ACRS. We intend for Wales to play a full part in both of these schemes and every Welsh local authority has pledged to provide support. As with most asylum dispersal and refugee resettlement operations, Wales will seek to embody our commitment to being a Nation of Sanctuary by at least meeting, and aiming to exceed, our 4.7% population share of the UK. This means a minimum expectation of supporting 611 individuals within the first 12 months of operation of the schemes. At this point it is not possible to give a more accurate number on those we intend to resettle as a nation.

It is important to note that Welsh local authorities all supported families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and our asylum dispersal areas have been in the top areas of asylum seekers supported per head of population for many years. Wales is committed to the Nation of Sanctuary vision and only the challenging availability of larger properties will limit our progress.

Resettlement operations have already begun in Wales and the initial work to relocate ARAP eligible families will continue throughout September. The timetable for resettlement work for the ACRS cohort will depend on UK Government decisions for when the scheme becomes operational.

What assessment has the Welsh Government made of the adequacy of accommodation arrangements for refugees arriving in the UK, particularly in light of the tragic death of an Afghan child in Sheffield earlier this week?

The tragic death of 5 year-old Mahammed Munib Majeedi on 18 August was a sobering reminder of the need to ensure temporary accommodation arrangements are carefully considered and risks are minimised. We have worked closely with all partners over recent weeks to seek accommodation standards which will provide good quality temporary support for families. On 16 August, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Communities, Housing and Local Government to make clear that any hotels procured in Wales would need the consent of both Welsh Ministers and the relevant Welsh local authority. Unfortunately, we are aware that one hotel has been procured in Wales and the consent of neither key stakeholder was sought. We are working at pace to assess the adequacy of support arrangements at this location and work with partners to put in place the support needed.

Has the Welsh Government secured the additional funding needed from the UK Government, as described in your comments to the BBC?

We have written to the UK Government to pledge our commitment to help in any way that we can and to seek urgent clarity on a number of important issues, from potential

consequential funding for health and education, to contingency accommodation planning arrangements to the scope and support to be provided under the new Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme. I have also raised these matters directly with UK Government Ministers at recent Four Nations meetings but we are yet to receive satisfactory responses to our queries. On 6 September, the Prime Minister gave a commitment in the House of Commons to write to Devolved Administrations setting out the funding details available in Wales and we await that letter.

What arrangements are being made for the UK's four-nations' summit, confirmed by the Prime Minister to Parliament on 18 August?

On 27 August, I attended the Four Nations meeting, chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove MP. I raised the concerns expressed by members of Welsh Afghan community members about the evacuation efforts and worries about the safety of their families, urged the involvement of Welsh Government officials in the design and operational planning of new schemes, and sought urgent clarity on a number of matters.

A second Four Nations meeting was held on 6 September with the new UK Afghan Resettlement Minister, Victoria Atkins MP, to provide an update on recent developments. Further engagement with Devolved Administrations has been committed but our officials are yet to be engaged properly in the design or operational planning of these schemes. We also note that the Prime Minister committed to meeting with representatives of the Welsh Government during his statement to Parliament on 6 September.

How many Welsh local authorities have offered support and can you please provide details of the types of support offered by each local authority?

Every Welsh local authority has pledged support for these schemes and work is underway to ensure pledges turn into firm property offers as soon as practicable. Around half of our local authorities have already welcomed in at least one Afghan family under these schemes and will be working carefully to put in place the wider support package needed – as they have done so well under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. It is also worth noting that our asylum dispersal areas will also be supporting many more Afghans in their areas and have done so consistently throughout the conflict in Afghanistan.

It is a source of great pride that every Welsh Local Authority has committed to supporting Afghan nationals. Wales has a long tradition of supporting those seeking sanctuary and we will continue that tradition under these new schemes.

How do plans to support Afghan refugees compare to the support offered to Syrian refugees in 2015?

We have yet to receive any firm details from the UK Government about how the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) will operate. We have urged the UK Government to effectively mirror the arrangements which operate under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in terms of funding level and method of operation.

We have also asked that the UK Government consider the ACRS as part of the UK Resettlement Scheme (also known as the Global Resettlement Programme) which Welsh local authorities had already signed up to support. The UK Resettlement Scheme was intended to provide a more generic and responsive scheme to ensure crises in any part of the world could be directly linked to a safe and legal route to sanctuary. Establishing yet another new scheme may mean that local authorities have to navigate democratic processes again before placements can be offered.

What is the Welsh Government's view on the eligibility criteria for priority support for Afghan refugees and do you support the UK Government position to give priority to women and girls?

I have already urged the UK Government to ensure that the newly announced Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme takes special consideration of the vulnerability of women, children (including boys), LGBTQ+ individuals, religious and ethnic minorities (including the Hazaras), and those with family members already resident in the UK. Inevitably, given the scope of the ACRS (5,000 beneficiaries per year) and the number of those who may fear persecution at the hands of the Taliban, some more nuanced eligibility criteria are likely to need to be employed to ensure those most at-risk can be supported in the UK. We want the UK Government to engage with us on this and also seek the advice and support of the UNHCR.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jane', with a horizontal line above it.

Jane Hutt AS/MS

Y Gweinidog Cyfiawnder Cymdeithasol
Minister for Social Justice

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