

Agenda – Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

Meeting Venue:	For further information contact:
Video Conference via Zoom	Naomi Stocks
Meeting date: 2 June 2020	Committee Clerk
Meeting time: 13.30	0300 200 6565
	SeneddCommunities@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.

Informal pre-meeting

(13.30–14.00)

1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

(14.00)

2 Inquiry into Covid-19 and it's impact: evidence session on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence

(14.00–14.45)

(Pages 1 – 22)

Sara Kirkpatrick, Chief Executive, Welsh Women's Aid

Break

(14.45–15.00)

3 Inquiry into Covid-19 and it's impact: evidence session on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence

(15.00–15.45)



Yasmin Khan, National Adviser for Violence against Women, other forms of Gender-Based Violence, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence

4 Paper to note

(15.45)

4.1 Updated Welsh Government response to the Committee's report on Benefits in Wales – 20 May 2020

(Pages 23 – 27)

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

(15.45)

6 Evidence sessions on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence – consideration of evidence

(15.45–15.55)

7 Forward work programme

(15.55–16.05)

(Pages 28 – 31)

8 Fire Safety Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

(16.05–16.15)

(Pages 32 – 40)

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ELGC COV 10
Ymchwiliad i COVID-19 a'i effaith
Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact
Ymateb gan: Cymorth i Ferched Cymru
Response from: Welsh Women's Aid

Name:	[REDACTED]
Organisation:	<i>Welsh Women's Aid</i>
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Address:	<i>Pendragon House, Caxton Place, Pentwyn, Cardiff CF23 8XE</i>
These are the views of:	<i>Welsh Women's Aid (Third Sector) - the national charity in Wales working to end domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women.</i>

About Welsh Women's Aid

Welsh Women's Aid is the umbrella organisation in Wales that supports and provides national representation for independent third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) specialist services in Wales (comprising our membership of specialist services and members of the regional VAWDASV Specialist Services Providers Forums). These services deliver life-saving and life-changing support and preventative work in response to violence against women, including domestic abuse and sexual violence, as part of a network of UK provision.

As an umbrella organisation, our primary purpose is to prevent domestic abuse, sexual violence and all forms of violence against women and ensure high quality services for survivors that are needs-led, gender responsive and holistic. We collaborate nationally to integrate and improve community responses and practice in Wales; we provide advice, consultancy, support and training to deliver policy and service improvements across government, public, private and third sector services and in communities, for the benefit of survivors.

We also deliver the Wales National Quality Service Standards (NQSS), a national accreditation framework for domestic abuse specialist services in Wales (supported by the Welsh Government) as part of a UK suite of integrated accreditation systems and frameworks. (More information on the NQSS can be found here: <http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/our-members/standards/>)



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

Welsh Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence from the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee.

As the umbrella organisation in Wales that supports and provides national representation for independent third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) specialist services in Wales, our response will primarily focus on how the virus and the response to it is effecting survivors of abuse (including children) and how this negative impact intersects with factors such as ethnicity, age, class, sexuality and disability.

During the course of the COVID 19 pandemic the already unacceptable instances of VAWDASV have begun to, and are predicted to further, rise (as below). Due to the gendered nature of VAWDASV, women and their children are, as a result of social distancing and self-isolation guidance, at much higher risk of being trapped with their abusers and will be further cut off from support networks. We have called for swift, cross-Government action since the beginning of the crisis to save lives and protect the safety and wellbeing of survivors, providing the following briefing outlining the solutions from across government that are needed: [Responding to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence during the COVID 19 Pandemic](#).

VAWDASV and COVID 19

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) acknowledges that violence against women tends to increase during every type of emergency, including epidemics¹.
- Evidence from China, as well as learning from other global pandemics, shows potential increases in domestic abuse². Evidence also shows increases in other countries globally³, including France⁴, Italy and Spain.
- VAWDASV specialist services anticipate that acts of VAWDASV will increase, but demand for support will be highest when restrictions start to be relaxed and survivors have more opportunities to safely reach out for help⁵.

¹ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331699/WHO-SRH-20-04-eng.pdf?ua=1>

² <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

⁴ <https://www.france24.com/en/20200410-french-domestic-violence-cases-soar-during-coronavirus-lockdown>

⁵ <https://1q7dqy2unor827bjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/An-open-letter-to-the-prime-minister.pdf>



- Specialist services also anticipate increases in demand based on those experienced after periods of time at home, such as Christmas holidays, when demand has historically increased.
- As highlighted in Welsh Women's Aid *COVID-19 Guidance for Perpetrator Services: Key points for practitioners*, expertise from specialist support services suggests perpetrators will utilise COVID-19 measures to further their coercive and controlling behaviour⁶. This is backed up by case studies collected by the Live Fear Free helpline and increases in calls to Respect UK helpline, as well as being referenced in the Welsh Government guidance.
- Children and young people are being specifically impacted by the current climate which provides increased opportunity for perpetrators to monitor and control family members, increased opportunity for online sexual exploitation and results in more children and young people becoming “invisible” to services⁷.
- School closures mean that children at risk or in need of care and support will not be observed everyday by teachers. Equally, children and young people who depend on the stability and relative safety of school will be kept at home.

The increasing prevalence of VAWDASV and additional impact on survivors and services since the Government issued 'stay at home' guidance on 23 March has been recognised by most experts as well as Welsh and UK Government. Live Fear Free data is showing an increase in calls from the public – survivors or concerned others. While contacts to the helpline initially dropped, fluctuating **increases of up to 49%** are now being experienced. A drop in calls from professionals due to adapted working practices and less diverted calls from members who have moved to remote working means that this increase is likely to be attributed primarily to survivors and concerned others. With the easing of lockdown and a likely increase in calls from professionals and diverts, this would be a significant increase in demand for the helpline. Case studies show that calls since the start of the pandemic are also of increased complexity, leading to **call times doubling since lockdown** began.

Local Government

Due to the way specialist services are funded, local authorities will be key in ensuring there is provision available in their areas for VAWDASV. Several pots of funding have been

⁶ <https://www.welshomensaid.org.uk/2020/04/covid-19-guidance-for-perpetrator-services-key-points-for-practitioners/>

⁷ <https://www.welshomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/supporting-children-and-young-people-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>



allocated or repurposed⁸ for mitigating some of the effects on services and the survivors they support caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However as highlighted in an open letter from Welsh Women's Aid to the Deputy Minister and Chief Whip,⁹ little to none of this money has yet reached the front lines. Most of the Welsh Government funding has been capital funding and has yet to be allocated. While it is welcome that this funding will cover some needs for communication devices to move provision online, toys for children in refuge and PPE, it does not cover the provision of support to go along with these items.

Where effective local practice has been reported there are 3 common principles that have helped ensure it:

1. Quick, flexible and practical support based on the expertise of providers

This includes ease of application, swift delivery of funds and resourcing type (capital, revenue, or provision of materials) led by need, identified by specialist services in consultation with survivors.

2. Proactive communication at multiple levels that is joined up

Specialist services engaged in local resilience planning and local mitigation plans in place. These now need to be joined up with national planning and feed into the development of guidance.

3. Focus on keeping people safe and supported

Planning for the increase in VAWDASV made front and centre in COVID planning, with the aim at ensuring all survivors can access life-saving support. From the outset, specialist services are providing essential services and should be clearly recognised as key workers, with access to testing, PPE and childcare to maintain provision. Survivors in refuge provision should also have access to testing to ensure that communal provision can remain open.

Housing

It is widely recognised, by specialist services, Governments, the public and other agencies, that home is not a place of safety for everyone. With people cut off from their personal support networks due to social distancing guidance it is now more critical than ever that survivors are able to access safe accommodation and support.

⁸ https://mcusercontent.com/9b87782914f7a37c55e5e9d41/files/e7084b8f-655f-4360-a5cc-d0e3b4e21d9e/Letter_Support_for_VAWDASV.pdf

⁹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/04/welsh-womens-aid-stresses-urgent-need-for-funding-for-support-services-due-to-covid-19/>



Demand for refuge space

Currently levels on refuge provision continue to remain at a stable level of an **average of 10 spaces available**. However, restrictions and closures are in place across the network as a result of COVID-19, meaning that as of last week there were **only 2 unrestricted places available**.¹⁰ Restrictions mean some services are not accepting pregnant women, children, or those with complex needs as they do not have the resources or capacity to safely provide accommodation. This has exacerbated, what was already an issue we had raised prior to the COVID 19 crisis, with **512 survivors turned away from refuge in 2018/19** due to the service not having the space, capacity or resources to meet their need. This disproportionately impacts survivors with mental health concerns, disabilities and larger families.

Demand for provision is predicted to significantly spike once social distancing guidance is relaxed. This will also increase as restrictions are lifted in England as the network provides support for survivors needing to cross the border.

Managing provision

Refuges have set in place social distancing, including reducing levels so that residents do not have to share bathrooms or can adhere to safer levels of social distancing. This has not always been supported by local authority, who have pushed for refuge provision to remain at its full level. For communal refuges, particularly smaller refuges this has led to them struggling to enable social distancing. The wrap around support and peer support provided within communal refuge are vital to survivors, services need to ensure they can maintain this through enabling social distancing. To improve this many are keeping voids to ensure limited risks to survivors – this will have significant impact on housing support grant (especially if there is claw back) and loss of housing benefit (see next question for more detail on the impact of voids).

Services are reporting that some survivors are leaving refuge support in an unplanned manner due to the stress of staying in refuge during lockdown. There is a real risk of these survivors returning to abusive households, where abuse is likely to continue and escalate. This could lead to increased demand on policing, increased long term impacts on survivors and increased domestic homicides as lockdown continues. Voids in refuge due to self isolation and social distance practices are impacting on VAWDASV services reserves and sustainability as they are having to cover the lost Housing Benefit revenue. For some small services this is £1000s a week at times.

¹⁰ Data taken from Routes to Support



Equalities

Due to the gendered nature of VAWDASV, women and their children are, as a result of social distancing and self-isolation guidance, at much higher risk of being trapped with their abusers and will be further cut off from support networks. Swift, cross-Government action must be taken in order to save lives and protect the safety and wellbeing of survivors. In relation to violence and abuse, **there are three key areas where women are disproportionately negatively affected**, due to the inequalities they face everyday, which are further exacerbated and magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the response measures to it.

1. Experiencing violence and abuse
2. Migrant women with no recourse to public funds
3. Women in the sex industry

Experiencing violence and abuse

VAWG is a cause and consequence of inequality between women and men, which intersects with factors such as ethnicity, age, class, sexuality and disability to impact on experiences of abuse and routes to recovery.¹¹ As a result of this women are far more likely to experience the anticipated increased violence and abuse as well as having less resources to flee this abuse.

The Live Fear Free Helpline has reported in the last week a rise in calls from survivors and concerned others, with great complexity and urgency related to COVID 19, demonstrating how the demand support is already increasing as the lockdown is extended. This is expected to rise significantly once social-distancing guidance begins to relax.

Currently specialist VAWDASV services are doing all they can with limited resources to ensure every survivor seeking help is supported. COVID-19 has created yet more challenges, both for survivors and for specialist services in adapting and continuing the provision of support. Governments across the UK continue to publicise helplines and announce pots of funding. However, if this funding does not soon reach the frontline services supporting survivors then it is unclear how they will continue to operate if current circumstances persist.

No recourse to public funds

¹¹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Annual-Membership-Report-2018-19-FINAL.pdf>



There is currently limited support available in the UK for women with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) fleeing abuse or violence. Perpetrators regularly exploit this lack of provision to further trap and control the women they abuse. Many migrant women are unable to leave an abusive relationship for fear of being deported as their visa may be dependent on a violent partner or family member. They may also fear destitution if they are economically dependent on a partner or relative who is also their sponsor.

Services have raised concerns regarding women with NRPF following the pandemic and the removal of access to homelessness emergency funds. Having supported the women during lockdown they will not be able to remove the support due to the risk she will have to return to her abuser or face destitution. If the women are to be supported in refuge rent and support costs will need to be covered. If not covered by funders services will be burdened with the cost, this will have a disproportionate impact on smaller organisations as the costs are not recovered. Allowing for the use of the grant to support NRPF clients is welcome but this needs to be recognised during non-pandemic times as it exposes the inequity in the provision of protection and support.

Women in the sex industry

Women exploited by the sex industry are often overlooked. Many women engaged in the sex industry face multiple disadvantage, are being exploited, and living and working in situations dangerous to their health and wellbeing.

Our membership of independent specialist services working with women exploited by the sex industry (Swansea Women's Aid SWAN project in Swansea, Cyfannol in Newport, Safer Wales' Street Life project in Cardiff) are taking specific precautions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, many are reporting a number of concerns including access to safety and safe accommodation. This is outlined in the attached paper:



Supporting women exploited through tl

Current concerns and points to raise:

- Heightened risk of infection.
- Additional support may be needed for self-isolation, social distancing or access to healthcare.
- Access to condoms, other health and wellbeing supplies, and to share ugly mug information could be reduced if outreach support is limited.

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- Women who are engaged in street prostitution are likely to be disproportionately impacted by any fines or arrest if stricter restrictions on leaving the house are implemented.
- Consideration of the need of women engaging with substance use must inform the response with substance use services.
- Provision of personal protective equipment will be crucial for services to continue to provide outreach support to women in the sex industry that may have COVID 19 symptoms.
- Disproportionately impacted by the pressure on food bank and charity services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Greater consideration from Governments must be given to the health and wellbeing of women in the sex industry when planning COVID-19 provision.

Poverty

The violence, abuse and disadvantage faced by women intersects with factors such as ethnicity, age, class, sexuality and disability, meaning these women experience these atrocities in a different, often more severe way. In a recent position statement Imkaan cite research by Cambridge University which shows that women have been hardest hit by job loss during COVID-19 and are more likely to be working in industries where it is not possible to work from home e.g. hospitality, cleaning and caring.¹² There are also significant concerns about the safety of undocumented migrant women who are more likely to face destitution.

80% of people employed in human health and social work activities in Wales are women.¹³

There is further over-representation of BAME women filling these roles and frontline keyworker roles in supermarkets and cleaning services across the UK. There is an obvious increased risk to the health and wellbeing of themselves and their family. Though no one is immune to COVID-19, structural inequality reproduces disproportionately across diverse communities and exacerbates existing racialised inequalities. For women and girls with protected characteristics, the two pandemics increase the risks at multiple interlocking levels.¹⁴

¹² <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/covid19-position-paper>

¹³ <https://wenwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Feminist-Scorecard-Report-2020-Eng.pdf>

¹⁴ https://829ef90d-0745-49b2-b404-cbea85f15fda.filesusr.com/ugd/2f475d_2c6797da42c6454f933837a7290ffe21.pdf

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A report from Welsh Women's Aid and Disability Wales found that disabled women are more likely to be in poverty as well as being much more likely to experience both sexual and domestic abuse.¹⁵ Poorer households and renters are particularly vulnerable to a loss of regular income caused by the COVID-19 pandemic,¹⁶ meaning this a threat that will have a significant impact on disabled women.

In the Welsh Women's Aid report [Cheques and Balances](#), we highlighted that Women's poverty keeps them trapped in abusive relationships whilst delays in benefits, cuts to welfare grants, cuts to legal aid and specialist VAWDASV services makes it impossible for them to leave abusive situations and rebuild their lives.¹⁷ These issues can only be further magnified by COVID-19 and social-distancing.

What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in three weeks' time

[Specialist services need rapid access to ring-fenced emergency funds.](#)¹⁸ Much of what we would like to highlight to the committee is detailed in a recent [letter](#) Welsh Women's Aid write to Welsh Government, backed by our membership, but the need is apparent across the UK.

Our key calls include:

- A **ring-fenced pot of funding for VAWDASV specialist services** at least equivalent to funding being invested elsewhere in the UK.
- A **clear plan to replace the funding that has been repurposed** to meet the impact of COVID-19.
- **Funding that can be flexibly utilised for revenue and support costs** – current funding only covers capital costs and not the additional costs to meet the support needs of survivors.
- **Swift access to funding.** In Scotland, £1.5 million was provided with immediate effect to invest in support needs as and when they developed, recognising that services have to be responsive to changing needs and do not have capacity to fill in endless application forms.

¹⁵ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/WWA-and-Disability-Wales-2019-report-Final-ENG.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/commentary/which-welsh-households-are-most-vulnerable-to-a-loss-of-income-because-of-covid-19/>

¹⁷ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WWA-Cheques-and-Balances-Economics-of-Abuse-Report.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-VAWDASV-Funding-Public-Letter-to-Deputy-Minister-22.04.2020.pdf>



The letter also details activities which necessitate emergency funding.

Additional flexible funding must now be provided directly to the VAWDASV specialist sector to cover:

- Loss of housing benefit revenue for refuges – one small service reports losing approximately £1,500 a week which is currently coming out of reserves. Another, reports that despite requests they have had no assistance from the local authority to meet costs that run into the levels of £15,000. For small services these costs ongoing will impact on the sustainability of provision.
- Need for new technology and digital capabilities, recognising the increased cost of equipment and digital tools at present.
- To provide survivors with access to technology in order to receive remote support where appropriate.
- The increasing costs and logistics of accessing PPE.
- Training of staff on new technology or differing support methods.
- Additional costs of sourcing alternative accommodation, including the use of dispersed units/B&B if refuge becomes full due to longer stays self-isolating/infection containment if required.
- Increased staffing costs such as to cover additional on-call as staff may have to double or treble their on-call commitments to cover staff who are off sick or self-isolating. A number of services have had to utilise agency staff, which is significantly costly for small, under-resourced services.
- Increased expenditure as services are having to cover costs of staff working from home such as heating, phone bills and additional equipment.
- Increase funding for children's workers as there are likely to be more children in refuge and other settings for longer due to school closures.
- Anticipated increase in demand following lockdown when survivors will have the space for action. Services are anticipating a significant increase in support needs across all forms of VAWDASV, as see in the evidence from past pandemics and around the world. Sexual violence services anticipate this could come 6 months or more post lockdown as it can take a significant time for some survivors to access support.
- For BME specialist services who are faced with additional costs associated with maintaining social distancing and minimising the spread of infection by replicating provision to meet religious and cultural practices.

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- Meeting increased complexity of needs. Cases presenting to the Live Fear Free helpline are already demonstrating increased complexity of need, this is likely to continue post lockdown and increase capacity and resource needs. As the Welsh Government £1.2million pot announced in December was to go some way in addressing the level of provision for complex needs, if this fund is now covering COVID-19 related costs, there needs to be further investment including funding to cover support costs for the anticipated level and complexity of demand. Services working with survivors of sexual exploitation, who present with the most complex needs, report an absolute dearth of housing provision and appropriate housing responses to meet women's needs.

The current funding situation, where services are going through local authorities, bidding for small pots of money for specific activities, or using re-allocated funds which were depended on for base running costs, is stunting support provision. Survivors and specialist services are the experts in conditions on the ground. Every day is throwing up new challenges, complexities in demand and increased strain on maintaining provision. Flexibility and swift action are needed to react effectively to the rapidly changing situation caused by COVID-19 and the unique circumstances of each survivor seeking help in these unprecedented times.

Our **key recommendation** is that a portion of the £750 million announced by The Chancellor of the Exchequer is ring-fenced specifically to resource VAWG specialist services, to continue supporting survivors in these rapidly changing times.

What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in 6 months' time

There is a unique opportunity to ensure there is sufficient provision for survivors of VAWG in the UK.

Learning from other nations allows us to anticipate that that demand for support will be highest when restrictions start to be relaxed and survivors have more opportunities to reach out for help.¹⁹ There is a pressing need for consideration of the ongoing impact it will have on increased demand and services' sustainability post lockdown. The current situation with COVID-19 has demonstrated even more strongly that we need to ensure a plan for secure and sustainable funding of the VAWDASV sector as its provision of essential services in normal times becomes even more critical during and post a national crises such as this.

¹⁹ <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/An-open-letter-to-the-prime-minister.pdf>



However this opportunity can be used to create a cross-Government plan, ring-fence, sustainable funds and truly support the safety and wellbeing of survivors.

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Hannah Blythyn AS/MS
Y Dirprwy Weinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol
Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government

Agenda Item 4.1

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

John Griffiths AM
Chair
Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

20 May 2020

Dear John,

As promised in my letter to you of 13 January 2020, I would like to update you on the actions we have taken since the Equality, Local Government and Communities (ELGC) Committee published its report and recommendations *Benefits in Wales*.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has created unprecedented challenging times for everyone, and ensuring that support is provided wherever needed in Wales, and in particular to the most vulnerable individuals and families, is of critical importance. This has required the UK Government Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) to make rapid and significant changes to the financial support on offer, and the way in which that support is delivered, so that the UK social security system can provide the safety net in this time of utmost need.

The Welsh Government is using all its powers and working collectively with the UK Government to support the people of Wales throughout this difficult time. Officials in the Welsh Government are working together and at pace with UK Government officials, particularly with those from the DWP, to ensure all measures being taken by the UK Government to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis are integrated with all current and new support being provided by the Welsh Government. The DWP has been able to respond, in some cases, through flexible administration of social security for those ill, self-isolating or unfortunately displaced from work.

As this Covid-19 pandemic crisis is showing, the social security system needs to be sufficiently robust and flexible to respond to challenges both large and small. There will be many lessons to be learned from our response to Covid-19, and it is difficult to predict how the substantial emergency changes that have been, and may yet be made to the UK Government's social security system to mitigate this crisis may permanently alter this safety net during the recovery, and post-recovery period.

Against this backdrop of such uncertain times now does not appear to be the best time, both in terms of available resource and availability of evidence, to consider fully long-term changes to social security.

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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.

Therefore, I will revisit this important issue again when we have been able to fully consider any changes that have been made to the UK social security system, how the UK Government's social security system has been able to meet the challenges in Wales of this global crisis, and had the opportunity to review any evidence for how this crisis has been met by the different models operating for devolved social security arrangements in other devolved nations. I note the work of the Committee with the current inquiry on Covid-19.

I have set out below an update on the Welsh Government actions against the *Benefits in Wales* ELGC inquiry's recommendations.

Recommendation 1

The immediate priority for Welsh Government 'benefits' is ensuring they are fit for purpose and adapt with pace to meet the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

The cross-government Review of our existing programmes and services (to ensure that they have maximum impact on the lives of children, young people and families living in poverty) is nearing completion. The Review has drawn on the evidence base of what works in tackling poverty, as well as a range of Welsh Government evaluations and external research. A significant programme of engagement was also undertaken with external stakeholders, representatives across Government and children and young people directly. We're currently in the process of finalising actions to take forward following the Review. When implemented these will bring greater coherence and integration to relevant Welsh Government 'benefits'.

We will be building on action already undertaken in response to the current crisis when progressing this work. This will include further developing a set of principles and values on which a 'Welsh benefits system' will be based, taking account of feedback received during engagement for the Review, and building on the core principles the Welsh Government has already outlined of compassion, fairness, dignity and understanding.

Children, young people and families in need remain a high priority for this Welsh Government and we will continue to focus on what more can be done for this significant proportion of the people in Wales.

Recommendation 2

The single site which provides information on eligibility to Welsh Government programmes and schemes has been updated to include where relevant information regarding expenditure on devolved benefits, where this is possible and practicable to do so.

<https://gov.wales/eligibility-criteria-passported-benefits-and-schemes>

Recommendation 3

The Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) is being kept under constant review during the Covid-19 emergency. Welsh Government is investing an extra £11.2m into this fund to help support the increasing demands caused by the crisis. Families across Wales are turning to the fund for additional support to help them with some of the financial pressures and challenges they are facing. To provide more help to individuals facing significant additional hardship due to the Coronavirus crisis, including those who have suffered income shocks and are waiting for first Universal Credit Payments to be paid, during the period 1 May to 31 of July 2020, Welsh Government has asked DAF Service Centre personnel to apply greater

flexibility and discretion with regard to the number and frequency of EAP payments that clients may require.

The UK Government has made a number of changes that may mitigate some of the impacts of the so called '5 week wait' for Universal Credit as a result of Covid-19, and the UK Parliament's Work and Pensions Committee launched an inquiry into the '5 week wait' at the request of the Secretary of State for Works and Pensions. I am concerned that the UK Government's main tool for supporting those struggling with the 5 week wait remains repayable advances, which are widely recognised to be a weak and, for some, damaging 'solution' and I have written jointly with the First Minister to the Secretary of State for Works and Pensions requesting that these advances are made into non-repayable grants. The UK Government has shown throughout the Covid-19 pandemic crisis that it can rapidly make changes to the social security system where it chooses to do so. It is difficult to predict which of these changes the UK Government will leave in place in the longer-term, and how the social security system will need to evolve to meet ongoing challenges throughout the recovery period and beyond.

Please find attached a copy of our letter to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and our written submission to the Work and Pensions Committee on the five week wait for the first payment of Universal Credit.

In respect of the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF), guidance for the Emergency Assistance Payment (EAP) has been updated to further ensure that claimants, or support agencies, are aware that it is a grant to help with essential costs after an emergency, following a disaster such as a flood or fire in the home, or extreme financial hardship for reasons including delays in benefit payments.

<https://gov.wales/discretionary-assistance-fund-daf>

The DAF's Decision Makers Guidance is currently being reviewed and I will update you when this is completed.

Recommendation 4

The Single Advice Fund remains a significant pan-Wales approach to promoting and increasing the take-up of all devolved and non-devolved welfare benefits, with a range of partners who work seamlessly to ensure advice services reach deep into communities, and are delivered from the places where people most in need go. Individual schemes, such as the Council Tax Renewal Scheme, also promote take-up through their bespoke networks and stakeholders.

In November 2019 officials established a Working Group comprising of representatives from key stakeholders, officials from the DWP to consider how to end the cycle of under-claiming so more older people can access their legal entitlement to Pension Credit, and other Welfare Benefits.

The coronavirus crisis has demonstrated clearly the importance of the welfare benefit safety net. It is important that we continue working in partnership with the DWP in order to deliver the appropriate advice and support to communities in Wales to ensure that no-one falls through any gaps. Many more people are likely to be in need of help not during the current crisis but also beyond. Partnership work is critical in raising awareness of the financial support available from the welfare benefit system. The Working Group continue to meet during this time maintaining to convey the message on the take-up of Pension Credits and other benefits to help those most in need.

We are now looking to broaden out the work of this group to look at all welfare benefit take-up, both UK Government and Welsh Government to maximise the financial support on offer to vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 5

We are continuing to explore with the UK Government the best mechanisms to improve Wales's voice in UK Government decisions on social security policy. Welsh Government officials have drawn this recommendation to the attention of counterparts in the other governments of the UK with a view to exploring it further as part of the machinery workstream of the joint Intergovernmental Relations Review commissioned at the Joint Ministerial Committee (Plenary) in March 2018. We continue to press for progress on this Review.

We also continue to press the UK Government to reverse the damaging policies they have implemented through welfare reform and austerity that have significant negative impact on families most in need. Ahead of the UK Government Budget Statement in March 2020, the Minister for Finance and Trefnydd wrote to the UK Chancellor requesting that the UK Government prioritises helping those most at risk, particularly people who are on low incomes or otherwise disadvantaged, including making significant changes to Universal Credit. We will continue to press the UK Government to deliver a social security system in Wales that delivers our core principles.

Recommendation 6

I have met Rachel Cable, the Chief Executive of Oxfam Cymru, to discuss how the Sustainable Livelihoods Toolkit can be adapted and start to be best used across Welsh Government programmes. Oxfam Cymru staff have agreed to deliver a poverty awareness raising session for Welsh Government policy leads initially within Financial Inclusion, Homelessness and Advice Services. During my meeting we also agreed to explore the practicalities of applying the toolkit in local authorities delivering homelessness interventions, and with 'Approved Partners' applying on behalf of their customers accessing the Individual Assistance Payment of the DAF. It is our ambition with this approach and using Oxfam's toolkit's flexible approach that we will be able to identify those most at risk before they are at a crisis and support them in ensuring they are receiving their full entitlement to both UK Government and Welsh Benefits, and develop improved signposting and referrals to other key service provision.

Recommendation 8

I will be writing to the Rt Hon Therese Coffey, Secretary of State for Works & Pensions to commend to her your inquiry's statement on informal kinship care. I will be asking that she reviews the definition of kinship care across all non-devolved benefits, with a view to broadening it to include family members and others who are closely connected to the family but are not parents who are caring for a child or young person in an informal, full time capacity. The social security system delivered in Wales needs to be compassionate and fair, providing greater support for informal kinship carers.

Recommendation 9 - 17

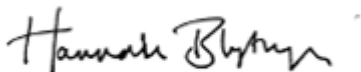
The Wales Centre for Public Policy has published its rapid evidence review *Administering Social Security in Wales*. As the report states, this preliminary analysis is to help inform discussion about any additional analysis and evidence related to devolving the administration of social security in Wales. The report highlights that focussing on those parts of the social security system that could be considered 'administration' is likely to require at least primary

UK Government legislation to secure any transfer of powers, as the design of security is set out in detail in UK legislation, such as via Regulations. An initial investigation of the feasibility of securing powers over one part of one social security benefit (over Universal Credit flexibilities (Recommendation 9) as has occurred in Scotland) would at least require the UK Government to be willing to undertake the development of primary legislation and potentially opening discussions on the devolution settlement. I want to stress that the Scottish Choices regarding the payment of Universal Credit are not available until after the first payment has been made to a claimant and therefore the five week wait for the first payment of Universal Credit is the same in Scotland as in Wales and England.

In my evidence to your inquiry, I confirmed the commitment of this Welsh Government to the social union and the important role that a UK-wide social security system plays in meeting significant challenges. How the UK can work collectively to meet very significant challenges is in all of our minds at this time, and only further highlights the need for Wales to proceed with caution when considering the devolution of social security.

In relation to recommendations 9 to 17 I will be considering further the direction that will be taken in this Government term over the devolution of any parts of the social security system. It is crucial that we explore this further to ensure that the social security safety net is there for all and particularly that in furthering any discussions on this matter with the UK Government that we establish a clear set of principles for social security, that we assess the implications for the devolution settlement, and that any funding transfers and negotiations are informed by a good, sound evidence base.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hannah Blythyn'.

Hannah Blythyn AC/AM

Y Dirprwy Weinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol

Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government

Agenda Item 7

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

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Agenda Item 8

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

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