

Witness Name: Ruth Marks

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 12

Dated: 18/04/2023

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF RUTH MARKS**

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I, Ruth Marks, will say as follows:

#### **Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)**

1. Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) is the national membership body for voluntary sector organisations in Wales. Our purpose is to enable voluntary organisations to make a bigger difference together.

#### **The voluntary sector in Wales**

2. There are around 32,000 voluntary organisations in Wales, 8000 of which are registered charities. This includes the highest percentage of micro charities (income less than £10,000) in the UK – 53%, with another 32% being small charities (income less than £100,000). The Welsh voluntary sector comprises organisations of a smaller size and having less financial resource at their disposal than the UK average.
3. Wales harbors a unique voluntary sector environment. To our knowledge, Welsh Government is the only government in the world with a constitutional duty to engage with and support the voluntary sector. Since its introduction, the Third Sector Scheme has offered the voluntary sector formal routes for engagement, including biannual meetings between sector networks and each Welsh Government Minister, and biannual meetings of the Third Sector Partnership

Council (TSPC). TSPC, chaired by the Minister for Social Justice, comprises voluntary sector network representatives working across 25 areas of sector activity and myself, in my capacity as CEO of WCVA. TSPC ensures the principles set out in the Third Sector Scheme are put into practice and provides an opportunity for the sector to raise issues of interest or concern.

4. In addition, voluntary sector infrastructure organisations in Wales are working in a strong partnership as part of Third Sector Support Wales (TSSW). TSSW comprises WCVA and the 19 County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) – local and regional voluntary sector support bodies across Wales. As TSSW we provide the sector with guidance and advice on matters of good governance, volunteering, sustainable funding, and engagement and influencing; distribute funds on behalf of Welsh Government; host key national digital platforms – Funding Wales, Volunteering Wales, infoengine and the Knowledge Hub.
5. In this context, it is worth noting the voluntary sector in Wales is considered a key partner of government on both a local and a national level, which results in a significant divergence from the way the sector typically interacts with governments across the rest of the UK. This divergence is well explained in MVAin4 working paper 5 (RM/1 - INQ000103065)
6. Partnership working throughout the Covid-19 pandemic deepened pre-existing links within and between sectors in Wales, furthering our commitments to collaboration, co-production and mutual aid.

### **The voluntary sector offer in civil emergencies**

7. The voluntary sector in Wales contributes in a broad range of ways during civil emergencies. TSSW plays a crucial role as a link between government and local communities: sharing information collected from community groups and specialist organisations (e.g. foodbanks) with government, suggesting policy interventions where appropriate, then disseminating advice and guidance from government through its wide networks. It also provides an important feedback mechanism when new policies are implemented.

8. Wales is a home to a wide variety of specialised charities, each bringing valuable insight and expertise at a time of local and national emergencies. It is impossible to provide a comprehensive list of their services within this short statement. Some examples include organisations such as FareShare Cymru distributing surplus food to charities who then turn it into meals for vulnerable people, the Welsh Air Ambulance providing life-saving support to critically ill and injured people anywhere in Wales 365 days a year, organisations like Disability Wales providing guidance, resources and training to ensure the needs of disabled people are always thoroughly considered.

### **WCVA's response to the Covid-19 pandemic**

9. WCVA, alongside our TSSW partners, played an important part in the Covid-19 pandemic response in Wales by:
  - Disseminating crucial public health information to a wide network of stakeholders and partners
  - Developing advice and guidance on key issues such as community centres opening, cash-handling, volunteering, charity governance and finance matters
  - Bringing organisations together through events to maintain a dynamic understanding of sector needs and reflecting those at our regular meetings with government
  - Distributing £15m of funding on behalf of Welsh Government through the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund and Voluntary Services Recovery Fund between March 2020 and March 2021; later managing the Third Sector Resilience Fund, distributing a further £19.5m.
  - Helping connect thousands of volunteer recruiters and volunteers through Volunteering Wales (Wales' volunteering platform)

**WCVA's communication with government in relation to pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience prior to 21 January 2020**

10. The majority of WCVA's direct engagements with Welsh Government on emergency planning, preparedness and resilience pre-date the time frame outlined for Module 1 of this inquiry. The groundworks for Wales' emergency preparedness were laid in 2004 with the introduction of the Civil Contingencies Act. At that time we partnered with British Red Cross to devise a paper on emergency planning (RM/2 - INQ000103069) for the voluntary sector in Wales, held cross-sectoral events, met with Welsh Government ministers and aided the establishment of a Civil Contingencies Network (CCN). Since the introduction of the act, WCVA has been a member of the Wales Resilience Forum (WRF), chaired by the First Minister of Wales. WRF discusses extreme weather incidents, preparation for significant mass events taking place in Wales (e.g. NATO meetings, world sporting events), health emergencies, such as pandemics, as well as wider health and social care preparedness for winter pressures and more minor mass health concerns, like flu season. Our CVC partners sit on the four Welsh Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) alongside public sector representatives. These forums work in partnership to strengthen preparedness, build collective capability and enhance resilience.
11. Following the introduction of UK Government's National Security Strategy (2008), a Wales Community Resilience Group (WCRG) was established by Welsh Government. WCVA, alongside other key partners, such as the Cabinet Office, were invited to join. The group, co-chaired by WCVA and the Red Cross, brings together LRF representatives and the broader voluntary and community sector to discuss emergency preparedness. The input from this group helps inform our contributions to WRF meetings. (RM/3 - INQ000103070 ; RM/4 - INQ000103071)
12. These pre-existing links and partnerships enabled us to quickly take action during the onset of the 2009 Swine Flu Pandemic. WCVA surveyed CVCs across the country on their preparedness and we were pleased to report to the Minister for Health and Social Services that all CVCs were involved in local community

resilience planning. We further worked with government to distribute information, guidance and assistance, where necessary.

13. Between 2010 and 2020 our interactions with Welsh and UK Governments did not often have a specific focus on emergency response and preparedness. We continued to meet as part of WRF and WCRG; worked with Public Health Wales to promote flu vaccinations and other public health and prevention messaging; raised any issues arising from imminent emergencies such as floods through our regular mechanisms of engagement (e.g. TSPC meetings). In 2019, we were invited to attend two of the Cabinet Office's Communities Prepared National Group (CPNG) meetings, which we found informative and benefitted from the opportunity to exchange ideas with other attendees.

#### **Welsh Government's response to WCVA's pandemic preparedness suggestions**

14. Throughout our discussions with Welsh Government, we have found that our suggestions and expertise are ordinarily appreciated and incorporated into preparedness planning. Welsh Government's Third Sector Unit has frequently sought our advice on campaigns and strategies to build voluntary sector capacity and promote volunteering. Certain issues involving multi-agency working, such as consistent and equal involvement of CVCs in LRFs, have had to be raised on multiple occasions at different forums, such as at WRF and TSPC meetings. We have seen progress over time in that regard – from when we first asked for CVCs to be included in 2005 (RM5 – INQ000103072), to 2009 (RM6 – INQ000103073) when nearly all CVCs reported being involved in LRFs, with only a few reporting partial difficulties engaging as much as they would like. While some issues around LRFs are still present – notably, they cover rather large geographical areas which means the number of stakeholders in each LRF is high and priorities are not always easy to align, the model is generally working.
15. In recent years, LRFs in Wales have produced remarkable work, such as a comprehensive 'Involving Spontaneous Volunteers in Emergencies' guidance, co-produced in 2019 by Dyfed Powys Police, the four CVCs and County Councils within the area, and other partners on the Dyfed Powys LRF. (RM7 – INQ000103074) This document was very well received by both Welsh and UK

Government and has now been adopted as a best practice example across the UK.

**Civil emergency documents and guidance brought to WCVA's attention by government**

16. We have been involved in the adoption of the relevant elements of the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) and the National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom (2008) in Wales. We were made aware of The UK Pandemic Preparedness Strategy (2011) but, to my knowledge, were not directly involved in its rollout in Wales. It is my understanding voluntary sector infrastructure colleagues (CVCs) were involved with the latter on a local level.

**Local government emergency preparedness engagement with WCVA prior to January 2020**

17. We have good communication channels with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and collectively discuss broad emergency preparedness as part of WRF. More detailed, direct engagement between local government representatives and voluntary sector infrastructure organisations typically happens on a local level – local authorities keep in touch with their local CVCs to discuss emergency preparedness through LRFs and other channels of communication.

**The state of Wales' pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience at the time Covid-19 pandemic struck**

18. I would assess the state of Wales' pandemic preparedness as of March 2020 as adequate. We were still dealing with the aftermath of Storm Dennis and Ciara when Coronavirus Act 2020 came into effect on 25 March. Despite that, frequent and easy communication between Welsh Government, WCVA and the TSPC structures meant information and guidance in regards to the Covid-19 pandemic was devised and distributed quickly. Welsh Government invited WCVA to help design a lifeline grant scheme for the voluntary sector and we were already distributing the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund by 1 April 2020. The already

established channels of communication and partnership working – both through forums dedicated to building our nation’s resilience, such as WRF and LRFs, and those serving wider purposes, such as TSPC, were an invaluable asset at a time of crisis.

### **Governments involving the voluntary sector in pandemic planning and preparedness in Wales**

19. As WCVA, we have, overall, felt Welsh Government has made a conscious effort to include us in relevant strategic conversations through TSPC, WRF and WCRG meetings.
20. In contrast, we have not felt UK Government has frequently and proactively tried to involve us in the design of emergency response policies. We have, more often, found ourselves in a position of learning about strategies as they become publicly available.
21. Local Government engages with the voluntary sector primarily on a local basis. The feedback we receive from CVC colleagues suggests engagement is very good in some areas and less so in others.

### **Wales’ pandemic planning and emergency preparedness and the consideration of pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities**

22. The TSPC engagement structure, which has allowed the sector to have direct meetings with ministers twice a year, has meant that specialist organisations are able to frequently raise issues and concerns, make suggestions, and provide feedback on policy proposals. Continuous communication relating to barriers and vulnerabilities different groups are facing has built a deeper understanding of social inequalities for Welsh Government ministers and civil servants. We have observed a careful and considerate approach towards policy development which seeks to avoid having a negative impact on already vulnerable communities.
23. Welsh Government has more recently made specific commitments to ensure policy decisions are helping and not invertedly disadvantaging vulnerable groups through

outputs such as The Race Equality Action Plan for Wales and The LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales, both of which were heavily influenced by the voluntary sector.

**A list of key emergency preparedness reports WCVA has produced prior to January 2020**

- 24. Emergency Response/Emergency Planning and the Voluntary Sector in Wales – A Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2005)/ Strategic proposal paper with British Red Cross (RM8 – INQ000103075)
- 25. Pandemic flu and the third sector status update (2009) / Briefing for the Minister for Health and Social Services (RM5 – INQ000103072)
- 26. Pandemic Flu and the Third Sector (2009)/ Information sheets (RM9 – INQ000103076; RM10 – INQ000103066)

**What WCVA considers governments should have done differently in response to the Covid-19 pandemic**

- 27. With the benefit of hindsight, we believe messaging about different lockdown rules and regulations could have been clearer. UK Government announcements could have featured more explicit distinctions between rules which apply to all four nations and regulations UK Government only has jurisdiction to implement in England. In addition, Welsh Government announcements on decisions made following UK Government announcements were often delayed by several days, causing uncertainty. Overall, we felt communication between UK and Welsh governments could have been better, resulting in better outcomes for the sector and the general public.

**Lessons for future pandemics and other whole-system civil emergencies**

- 28. The benefit of Welsh Government's investment through the Third Sector Scheme (TSS) has become particularly apparent during the pandemic. Maintaining a core infrastructure for the voluntary sector, with long-term and geographically universal investment has meant the voluntary sector, alongside government, was able to respond to the crisis right away. We did not need to waste valuable time to establish mechanisms for distributing instructions or support, as we already had



tried and tested national and local systems for delivering grants, information and services. We believe the success of the support model for the sector in Wales could be taken as a useful case study and replicated where such support does not exist.

29. We have found pre-existing relationships and partnership working to be instrumental for a quick and effective response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The time and resources invested in building trust between public institutions, voluntary sector organisations and local communities at a time of relative stability really pay off at a time of crisis. Within Wales, regions where collaborative projects took place regularly prior to the pandemic were reporting quicker, easier, and more comprehensive local emergency response. The Wales Centre for Public Policy reported on a similar correlation with community cohesion (RM11 – INQ000103067). In our recent report, 'The future we create: lessons from pandemic volunteering in Wales', we have made a recommendation to government and funders to facilitate the adequate resourcing of organisations, which would enable more long-term partnerships (RM12 – INQ000103068).

30. The urgency and scale of the Covid-19 crisis meant many bureaucratic barriers were lifted – funders were more flexible and public bodies simplified their administrative procedures. This is a very positive development which we have reflected in another recommendation for the public and voluntary sector – reviewing administrative processes and ensuring they are proportionate to the activities they relate to must not only happen at a time of crisis, but will certainly help for any future civil emergencies.

31. Multi-agency public appeals for volunteers during the pandemic were very effective. Unfortunately, large and sudden spikes in interested individuals are difficult to manage for many organisations. We are currently re-developing Volunteering Wales (Wales' volunteering platform) with this lesson in mind. The new platform will be able to field large numbers of volunteers more effectively, a helpful feature for any future emergency calls to action.

**Entities WCVA believes may hold relevant information in relations to this inquiry**

32. We recommend making contact with local and regional volunteering infrastructure organisations as well as specialised networks and bodies representing communities with pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities to gain a better understanding of their experience of the pandemic preparedness and actual response in Wales.

### **Statement of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

**Personal Data**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Dated:** 21 April 2023