

Witness Name: Ruth Marks

Statement No.: 2

Exhibits: 24

Dated: 01/09/2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RUTH MARKS

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.
2. We work closely with our partners the local County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) as part of Third Sector Support Wales (TSSW). TSSW provides the sector with guidance and advice on matters of good governance, volunteering, sustainable funding, and engagement and influencing; distributes funds on behalf of Welsh Government; hosts key national digital platforms – Funding Wales, Volunteering Wales, infoengine and the Knowledge Hub.
3. WCVA plays a key role as a facilitator of the voluntary sector's engagement under the Third Sector Scheme (TSS) (RM/1 - INQ000179700). TSS is a statutory piece of legislation setting out how Welsh Government and the voluntary sector will work together and communicate with one another. It offers the sector formal routes for talking to government and raising the concerns of our members and service users. These include biannual meetings with the Third Sector Partnership Council (TSPC), as well as biannual ministerial meetings between sector networks and each Welsh Government Minister.

4. TSPC is also facilitated by WCVA and serves the purpose of ensuring TSS' principles are put into practice. The partnership is chaired by the Minister for Social Justice, Jane Hutt MS, and is made up of representatives of voluntary sector networks working across 25 areas of sector activity, alongside myself, as Chief Executive of WCVA.

5. Liaising with government, supporting the voluntary sector and helping the sector support the people of Wales throughout the Covid-19 pandemic involved all of WCVA's staff and departments. For this reason, I hesitate to identify specific office holders as key to this work, but for the time period specified, our senior management team consisted of myself, Philip Fiander (Deputy CEO with responsibility for European funded projects, grant schemes, and business development, up until 30 June 2020), Anna Nicholl (Director of Strategy and Sector Development), Tracey Marsh (Director of Finance), Matthew Brown (Assistant Director of Operations supporting Deputy CEO's portfolios; acting Director of Operations from 1 April 2020), Sara Sellek (Assistant Director of Operations and Marketing with responsibility for membership, learning and development, and TSSW), Judith Stone (Assistant Director of Sector Development with responsibility for volunteering and health and social care portfolios, seconded out from 1 January 2020 to 24 May 2021; Assistant Director of Volunteering from June 2021).

Partnership working with Welsh Government

6. The constitutional duty of Welsh Government, as set out in TSS, to engage with and support the voluntary sector in Wales has enabled a longstanding and productive working relationship. The voluntary sector is considered a key partner of Welsh Government and we, as WCVA, communicate with government often, at different operational and strategic levels, and through a wide variety of channels, including but not limited to: TSS and TSPC meetings, other national forums (such as Wales Resilience Forum and Wales Community Resilience Group (RM/2 - INQ000179711), through direct topic-specific meetings, via giving evidence to committees and submitting responses to consultations.

7. Our pre-existing relationship with Welsh Government made communication throughout the Covid-19 pandemic quick, easy and seamless as we did not need to establish new communication channels or develop relationships with stakeholders we did not already know. The pandemic has resulted in increased frequency of communication as needed, and strengthening of pre-existing partnerships, built on the principles of The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (RM/3 - INQ000179722)'s Five Ways of Working.

Early interactions with Welsh Government

8. The first conversation in regards to Covid-19 I can recall having with Welsh Government dates back to the last week of February, as we were both due to send representatives to an event in Berlin during the first week of March and had to assess any risks associated with the novel virus.
9. Following that, on 4 March 2020, we received a Coronavirus (Covid-19) Weekly Update (RM/4 - INQ000179723) document from Welsh Government Social Services and Integration Directorate. On the same day, the Deputy Minister and Chief Whip's office requested a telephone call with me, to take place on 9 March 2020. Shortly after we received the request, Welsh Government's Head of Communities and Third Sector Policy, Chris Buchan, emailed me (RM/5 - INQ000179726) asking for any particular issues, concerns or topics of discussion I may want to raise during my meeting with the Deputy Minister.
10. Meanwhile, WCVA's Health & Social Care Facilitator, Sally Rees, began attending teleconferences with Welsh Government's Director of Social Services and Integration, Albert Heaney, and became involved in discussions surrounding the design and implementation of measures to minimise risk in health and social care settings.
11. On 9 March 2020 I had a telephone call with the Deputy Minister during which I was briefed on developments with the virus and we had a discussion on how the voluntary sector may be affected, as well as, how the voluntary sector can help affected individuals and communities.

12. On 10 March 2020 we received a Guidance for social or community care and residential settings on Coronavirus Covid-19 (RM/6 - INQ000179728) from Welsh Government's Department for Health and Social Services, which my colleague Dr Sally Rees was involved in the development of. We shared the guidance with relevant networks.
13. On 15 March 2020 I, myself, had a telephone call with Albert Heaney, during which we discussed implications for individuals in care homes and I relayed feedback we have received from community organisations in the sector.
14. On 17 March 2020 I took the decision to close our offices and WCVA began operating remotely. On the same day, I received an email from Chris Buchan notifying us about a financial package of support being made available to business in Wales (RM/7 - INQ000179729). We alerted Welsh Government to the similar financial difficulties faced by voluntary sector organisations and a meeting to discuss financial support for the sector was scheduled for 19 March 2020.
15. On 18 March 2020 I attended a roundtable meeting with Welsh Government representatives at the Senedd, where immediate risks and future plans were discussed. On the same day, Dr Sally Rees and I arranged an emergency meeting of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Planning Group (part of our TSS infrastructure networks) and gathered feedback from voluntary sector stakeholders, which we then shared with Chris Buchan and Albert Heaney.
16. On 19 March 2020 a meeting between Welsh Government civil servants and WCVA's Assistant Director of Operations, Matthew Brown, took place. Matthew presented a briefing document (RM/8 – INQ000179731) outlining our concerns about the financial position the sector is in, highlighting risks for service users, many of whom would fall under the categories of 'at-risk' or 'vulnerable' groups. Following this meeting, WCVA was asked to help draft the parameters and eligibility criteria for packages of support for the voluntary sector in a series of meetings with civil servants. This resulted in the announcement of two packages of support we delivered on behalf of Welsh Government - the Third Sector Resilience Fund (TSRF) and the Voluntary Services Emergency Fund (VSEF), launched at the beginning of April 2020.

17. This is a brief overview of the initial interactions we had with Welsh Government in regards to Covid-19 preparedness and ensuring at-risk groups are supported.

Overview of key meetings between WCVA and Welsh Government

18. For a long period of time, Covid-19 dominated nearly all meetings we had with Welsh Government. Key meetings included:

- Welsh Government Cabinet Covid-19 meetings (weekly meetings, where I provided evidence from and advocated on behalf of the voluntary sector)
- Welsh Government Covid-19 core group meetings (First Minister briefings to the leaders of Plaid Cymru and Welsh Conservatives; I was invited as an observer and contributor at various occasions, with a further role in providing links with specialized voluntary sector organisations who were invited to present data and recommendations)
- Shadow Social Partnership Council (SSPC) meetings (regular meetings where Ministers and officials provided briefings and engaged in wide-ranging discussions with us, WLGA, CBI, FSB Wales and Wales TUC)
- Covid-19 Planning Group for Social Services (weekly meetings chaired by Welsh Government's Director of Social Services and Integration, attended by voluntary and citizens sector representatives)
- Weekly warning and information meetings (hosted by Welsh Government for local government and key community facing organisations in the voluntary sector)
- Bi-weekly funders roundtable with Welsh Government (sharing intelligence and coordinating our response according to current needs)
- Weekly post grant panel meeting updates (where we shared information on funding allocated and data which helped inform government of emerging

trends in support needs, based on applications we had received for the funding we were distributing on behalf of Welsh Government)

- TSPC and TSS meetings (our meetings with Ministers increased in frequency and had a primary focus on Covid-19 measures and impacts for the majority of the period specified)

WCVA's contributions to Senedd committees

19. Aside from our regular meetings with Ministers and civil servants, we were also invited to provide evidence and feedback to Senedd committees:

- In July 2020: we submitted written evidence (RM/9 - INQ000179732) to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak and its management on health and social care in Wales.
- In August 2020: we submitted written evidence (RM/10 - INQ000179701) to the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee for their consultation on the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the agriculture and fisheries sectors, food supply, animal welfare, climate change and the environment.
- In November 2020: I, alongside my colleague Fiona Liddell (Helpforce Cymru Manager), gave oral evidence (RM/11 - INQ000179702) to the Senedd's Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee.
- In November 2020: we submitted written evidence (RM/12 - INQ000179703) on behalf of The Equality and Human Rights Coalition (EHRCo) (RM/13 – INQ000179704) to the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on equality, tackling poverty, and human rights in Wales.

WCVA's role in meetings with Welsh Government

20. WCVA played a variety of different roles at meetings with Welsh Government. We attended some meetings simply to receive information, helped set the agenda for others, made contributions, presented data, shared intelligence, made recommendations, facilitated connections.
21. Overall, meetings were held in the spirit of co-operation and there was a sense all stakeholders are motivated to lean on each other's strengths, learn from each other and work together to solve problems.
22. The all-encompassing nature of the crisis meant that a wide variety of sectors, communities and subsections of society were being affected by the spread of the virus and their specific (and sometimes competing) needs had to be considered when decisions were being made. We consulted with our networks to ensure that we provide Welsh Government with a balanced picture and brought in specialist organisations to give evidence and further detail as needed. Balancing the needs of different groups and taking steps to mitigate negative impacts for communities at risk was frequently discussed at TSS meetings with Ministers as well as at other engagements we had with Government.
23. WCVA has kept its own records of numerous meetings with Welsh Government, chiefly those held with Welsh Government Ministers under the TSS. Meeting notes from all TSPC meetings and individual Ministerial meetings held throughout the period specified are publicly available and can be provided to the Inquiry upon request.

Identification of at-risk and vulnerable groups, informed by sector needs

24. As a sector, our role often is to highlight the needs of the service users and communities we support. WCVA itself does not work with at-risk and vulnerable groups directly. We receive information from our member organisations and wider networks through general and topic-specific meetings, surveys, via email and other types of engagement. In addition, through our role delivering funding, we have a panoramic view of sector activity and needs based on the number and types of applications submitted for grants and loans. We have been asked and provided data and evidence on sector needs to Welsh Government all throughout the

pandemic. The information we provide can sometimes be used as a proxy to estimate risks and anticipate needs of different subsections of society, but we always strive to give voice to and link decision-makers with specialist organisations who work with service users and communities directly, and are therefore able to provide much more detailed first-hand data and insights.

25. Overall, we have felt Welsh Government has taken into account the concerns we raised in regards to sector needs. The sector needs we reported on were informed by feedback received from organisations working with a wide variety of service users, which in turn has helped identify groups in need of support or special adjustments. We were pleased to be able to distribute funding on behalf of Welsh Government, which helped organisations continue and expand their services to support those in need and at-risk.

26. Particular examples of when we have reported on sector needs in relation to support of at-risk and vulnerable groups include:

- Feedback on PPE supplies availability for the sector, given at Covid-19 Planning Group for Social Services
- Our initial conversations about emergency funding (RM/8 – INQ000179731)
- Subsequent weekly grant panel meetings, where we gave live updates on the number and types of applications received for TSRF and VSEF, identifying trends and mapping out emerging needs
- Insights shared at bi-weekly roundtable meetings with Welsh Government and other funders

27. VSEF was a grant fund designed for the explicit purpose of enabling organisations to pro-actively support vulnerable and at-risk individuals during the pandemic (RM/14 – INQ000179705) . This fund needed to be delivered quickly and reach the broadest possible audience in order to achieve its goals. We co-designed this fund with Welsh Government and, considering the time-sensitivity as well as many unknowns early on in the pandemic, we came to the conclusion that the best approach would be not to limit the fund to organisations supporting specific groups designated as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at-risk’, chosen by us based on the limited information we had at the time, but rather open it up to applications from any

organisation that has identified a group in need. We went on to systematize all applications received on a simple priority scale, where 'A' was the highest priority category, with organisations directly providing or sustaining crucial services in the community, ensuring the safety of vulnerable individuals or communities; 'B' – medium priority, for organisations looking to improve or sustain services that support the well-being of the most vulnerable individuals or communities; and 'C' – lower priority, for applicants seeking funding to enable them to continue engaging, supporting and developing volunteers and activities in their communities.

28. By not limiting the grant to pre-determined beneficiaries and pro-actively promoting it to as broad audience as possible, we were able to learn about a wide variety of issues and individuals impacted by the pandemic, wider than we would have been aware of, have we limited the grant to specific groups from the beginning. Grants were allocated in part by us as WCVA, with pots of funding also distributed to all CVCs across Wales, to help reach hyper-local groups. We consider the data on the numbers, locations and types of applications we collected and shared with Welsh Government weekly as a useful contextual base upon which categories of individuals needing support could be further explored. We further used those finds to inform the design and delivery of the Voluntary Services Recovery Fund (VSRF), VSEF's replacement fund focused on addressing inequalities highlighted or exacerbated by the pandemic (RM/15 – INQ000179706) .
29. In total, we distributed £7.5m through VSEF, benefitting an estimate of 764,073 individuals through the support provided by the funded organisations Funding was allocated to projects operating across 17 different areas of activity (RM/16 – INQ000179707). At the time we were planning for the funding programme and delivering the funding, it was impossible to estimate with good accuracy who, where, and how much support would be needed as the pandemic progressed. So we decided to let the sector lead the way in showing us where help was most needed. The impact of the programme was assessed in several ways post and during delivery, both in its own right by an external evaluator (RM/17 – INQ000179708), and as part of the assessment of wider funding packages available, by Audit Wales (RM/18 – INQ000179709) and another external

evaluator commissioned by us (RM/19 – INQ000179710). All evaluations described positive outcomes and good overall distribution of funds across a diverse range of projects, especially given the unprecedented circumstances and speed of delivery necessary. The Voluntary Services and Emergency Fund Initial Trends and Mapping Analysis document (RM/17 – INQ000179708) offers the most detailed breakdown of funding allocations and compares them against existing data on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, employment vulnerability, national and location-based rates of violence against women, distribution of BAME communities, among others. This report outlines an overall positive assessment but further points out a next round of funding should seek to address inequalities present in particular categories and areas where support is needed, but not many strong applications were received in the first round. We, alongside Welsh Government, took this recommendation into account, and designed VSRF with a specific focus on tackling inequalities.

30. I hope I was able to demonstrate how we were able to advise Welsh Government through our sector needs-driven approach, and display their responsiveness to the information we presented.

Identification of at-risk and vulnerable groups, informed by sector intel and facilitating connections

31. Since the very beginning of the pandemic, we have been passing on information received from our members and wider networks to Welsh Government civil servants and officials.
32. We collected information from the sector through regular network meetings, such as TSS preparation meetings [example: (RM/20 - INQ000179712)], on social media, via direct phone calls and emailing, and through specific sessions, such as our series of events under the banner of Preparing For Different Futures.
33. We relayed information to Welsh Government through direct phone calls and emails, at Welsh Government Cabinet Covid-19 meetings, Welsh Government Covid-19 core group meetings, SSPC meetings, Covid-19 Planning Group for Social Services meetings, and others.

34. Wherever possible, we invited specialist organisations to directly present evidence and raise concerns with Welsh Government. We acted as a link and enabled those conversations to take place at TSPC meetings [example: (RM/21 - INQ000179713)], TSS Meetings with Ministers [example: (RM/22 - INQ000179714)], Welsh Government core group meetings [example: (RM/23 - INQ000179715)], and others.

35. We have found Welsh Government staff and officials to be receptive of the information presented by organisations we linked them with, and for issues and concerns raised during meetings to be then reflected in policy decisions.

WCVA reports relating to pandemic impacts on at-risk and vulnerable groups

36. WCVA, in collaboration of over 60 members of The Equality and Human Rights Coalition (EHRCo) (RM/13 – INQ000179704), produced a detailed summary report (RM/12 - INQ000179703) of impacts on at risk and vulnerable groups in Wales in November 2020. This report was brought to Welsh Government's attention through a submission to the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on equality, tackling poverty, and human rights in Wales.

WCVA's influence on Welsh Government decision-making

37. As part of our partnership working practice, WCVA's advice and opinion was frequently sought out by Welsh Government at different stages of decision-making processes. Our thoughts and insights gathered from our members and wider networks were generally taken into account and reflected in policy-development. Particular instances I can recall when our advice has directly influenced Welsh Government include:

- The timely development and announcement of emergency funding for the voluntary sector
- The inclusion of unpaid carers and people with learning disabilities in vaccination priority categories

- Forgoing the development of a new national medicines delivery service in view of evidence we provided to showcase local prescription pick-up and delivery services have already been arranged and successfully ran by the voluntary sector in most areas

Difficulties caused by differing approaches adopted by the Welsh and UK Government

38. The primary difficulty our sector faced as a result of differing approaches adopted by the Welsh and UK Government (or the potential for differing approaches) was linked to delay in communication and lack of clarity on the scope of UK Government announcements. Voluntary organisations in Wales would learn about policy changes from Downing Street press conferences, at the same time as the general public, with no prior briefing or warning and often felt uncertain whether particular announcements only related to England, or the whole of the UK. This put organisations in an uncomfortable position, not being able to provide certainty and answers for their service users. Welsh Government announcements on the approach to be taken in Wales would often come with a delay of several days, leading us to believe policy changes were perhaps sometimes not communicated in advance with devolved administrations either. This confusion was not helped by unclear reporting in mass media – with Downing Street announcements relating to UK-wide regulation and England-specific rule changes reported together without any distinction or reference to differing rules that may apply in the devolved nations.

Public health communication

39. WCVA received timely and clear updates from Welsh Government on restrictions and other public health communication relevant to social services. These updates were communicated via direct mailing, as well as, at weekly warning and information meetings hosted by Welsh Government for local authorities and key community facing organisations in the voluntary sector.

40. We, alongside expert organisations from the sector, were involved in the development of public health messaging through a variety of channels but most notably through the Covid-19 Planning Group for Social Services where we provided advice on accessibility – advocating for the use of Plain English/Cymraeg Clir to ensure communication is easy to read and understand, with no complex medical terminology, and the language used is culturally appropriate.

Consideration of at-risk and vulnerable groups; significant meetings between WCVA and Welsh Government to discuss potential impacts; compliance with public sector equality duty

41. We were not able to locate records of meetings with a sole focus on the impacts of regulation on at-risk and vulnerable groups. However, discussions about potential impacts on a wide variety of groups would often accompany any policy-development conversations we were involved in.

42. It is our view an effort was made for at-risk and vulnerable groups to be considered by core political and administrative decision-makers. We observed representatives from specialist organisations from the public and voluntary sector advising Welsh Government on potential impacts, and on occasions highlighted risks ourselves. Insofar as the meetings we were a part of and observed, consideration was always given to impacts on at-risk and vulnerable groups.

43. It is not within our expertise to determine whether core political and administrative decision-makers have complied with their public sector equality duty when making decisions about Welsh Government's response to Covid-19.

Difficulties encountered by WCVA when working with Welsh Government and how they were resolved

44. We did not encounter many difficulties working with Welsh Government during the pandemic. One occasion we were able to recall relates to the difficulty we experienced trying to keep track of developments and the numerous staff and officials involved in Covid-19 response work during the very early stages of the

pandemic. We were concerned about a delay in clearing an announcement about one of the funds urgently needed to help support the voluntary sector. While it appeared we have received confirmation from all relevant parties that the fund would be announced soon, there was an unexplained delay. Following a conversation with Gareth Williams, Special Adviser to the First Minister (RM/24 - INQ000179719), the announcement was coordinated with other departments and cleared in a timely manner.

Lessons to be learned from consideration given to at-risk and vulnerable groups by core political and administrative decision-makers

45. We believe the partnership working approach Welsh Government has harbored with the voluntary sector has proven to be beneficial for identifying at-risk and vulnerable groups, making adjustments to accommodate them or mitigate potential negative impacts. We are not sure whose role it would have been to continuously highlight risks and provide specialist insights if we were not frequently invited to contribute. We appreciate the role of public sector advisors, but do believe the voluntary sector provides an additional, much valued perspective and our involvement in this work can be taken as a lesson and replicated in administrations where such involvement is less common.

46. The second lesson to take is that despite Welsh Government and our efforts, some groups were still disproportionately affected by the pandemic, as detailed in our report with EHRCo (RM/12 - INQ000179703). While every emergency is different, we should take into consideration those groups we were not able to reach fast enough, with enough support, the right support, or through the right channels, and ensure we are in a position to deliver for them in the event of a future crisis.

WCVA's data-retention policy and documentation storage

47. With the exception of Personal Data, which we do not keep in an identifiable form for longer than necessary for the purposes for which the data is processed, we do not have policies and procedures in place to delete files containing other types of information.

48. With the exception of TSPC and Ministerial meetings under TSS, unless specifically requested or agreed, staff is not required to take notes of internal or external meetings, including meetings with civil servants.

49. We retain and make publicly available the agendas, meeting papers and minutes from all TSPC and Ministerial meetings under TSS, our consultation responses, and reports.

50. Our documents are stored within SharePoint within our Microsoft 365 tenant with teams only given access to information that they need in order to carry out their work

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: 1 September 2023