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**THE WELSH GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE  
DISABILITY EQUALITY FORUM COVID-19 SUB GROUP  
REPORT**

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## **Foreword by the Minister for Social Justice**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus the continuing existence of deep-rooted inequalities in our society, which I am determined to do more to address. I am grateful to the Welsh Government's Disability Equality Forum for their support during the pandemic to highlight the impacts on disabled people. In light of the testimony from this Forum, and other data which was emerging about the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people, I commissioned Forum members to examine the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on disabled people. This was done in order to shine a spotlight on new and existing challenges which the pandemic brought to the fore, and in order to consider how the Welsh Government's Action on Disability Framework for Independent Living needed to change to better meet those challenges.

The Disability Equality Forum took up the challenge with energy and resolve, establishing a dedicated subgroup and bringing in new representation to ensure as many viewpoints as possible were included. The resulting report *Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19* has been co-produced by Professor Debbie Foster of Cardiff Business School and a Steering Group of disabled people representing Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and charities chaired by Rhian Davies, Chief Executive of Disability Wales. The group's enquiry took place over a six month period, in which a wide range of the available evidence, both statistical and anecdotal, was examined with a view to understanding and learning from disabled people's experiences.

This was not an exhaustive review involving searches of all available evidence on the impact of COVID-19. The focus instead was on capturing the key findings from the information available from a range of sources and stakeholder organisations and considering it along with the lived experience of group members themselves.

Based on this wide-ranging approach, the *Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19* Report has provided us with a wealth of insights and a large number of recommendations upon which to base further action. Indeed, when the report was first received by the Welsh Government, the First Minister convened a meeting with the authors which was attended by the Minister for Health and Social Services and myself, to discuss the findings and to immediately set in motion an appropriate course of action to address them.

The report acutely highlights the toll the pandemic has placed on disabled people, exacerbating inequalities. Last December, on the United Nations International Day of Disabled People, I made a [statement](#) drawing attention to this toll, and in particular the emerging data about the high proportion of COVID-19 related deaths which had been published by the Office for National Statistics.

The Report is structured around 5 main chapters, namely the Social versus the Medical Model of disability; Human rights; Health and Well-Being; Socio-economic disadvantages and Exclusion, Accessibility and Citizenship.

I am pleased to say that Welsh Government has already put in place many of the key building blocks to address inequalities in these areas. We have consistently affirmed our commitment to the Social Model of Disability, which is the subject of the first chapter and provides the overarching ethos for the rest of the report. This is a process and not a one-off statement, however, and we will continue to work across government to instil the model's ethos in all policy areas over the coming Senedd term.

We have undertaken to strengthen the human rights framework by incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People into Welsh law. This represents a significant commitment to supporting and improving the lives of disabled people and will build on the provisions of the Socio-economic Duty which came into force in Wales on 31 March 2021. The Duty will improve decision making and help those who are socio-economically disadvantaged by putting tackling inequality at the heart of decision-making.

We have much to be proud of in Wales. The report calls for far greater participation of disabled people in public life and our Diversity in Democracy programme has been successful in addressing some of the barriers that people from diverse backgrounds face in doing so. We have been working hard to introduce arrangements for the establishment of a fund to support disabled candidates who wish to put themselves forward for elected office and that the expenses they incur, as a result of their access or communication requirements, do not count towards the formal expenses limit.

We recognise the impact COVID-19 has had on employment. Improving employment opportunities for disabled people has also been a priority. By making businesses as inclusive as possible, the aim is to create conditions where all individuals can thrive. To help this happen, the Welsh Government has employed a network of Disabled People's Employment Champions to provide advice, information and support to employers across Wales.

The Welsh Government is also introducing a new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system. Key to the ALN transformation programme is the ALN and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act. Learner focused, it makes the system more equitable, simpler and less adversarial and introduces new statutory Individual Development Plans. Phased implementation begins in September 2021, with a £20 million package of funding.

We know we have further to go, however, and that a good deal of work will be needed to roll back the damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In all of the areas highlighted in the report we undertake to consider further the evidence presented, and to engage in meaningful debate about how best to mitigate harmful impacts on disabled people. Where necessary, we will seek to gather further statistical input to get a true picture of those impacts.

The First Minister has agreed to establish a Minister-led Taskforce to take forward this work to address the inequalities highlighted by the report and oversee the implementation of actions. Some of these actions will be for the Welsh Government to implement and others will need to be undertaken in conjunction with our partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

I am pleased to be able to publish the Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19 report and to outline some of the actions we in the Welsh Government are taking to address its findings. I look forward to engaging fully with the Taskforce to explore and set in motion further action to ensure that we reach our ambition to build a stronger and fairer Wales.

## **Introduction**

The Disability Equality Forum's COVID-19 Impact Report Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19 brings together the results of an intensive enquiry into disabled people's experiences during the pandemic.

A number of issues were raised during Disability Equality Forum meetings in the early months of the pandemic as the impacts were becoming known. It was becoming increasingly evident that disabled people were being negatively affected by the pandemic to a disproportionate degree. Those initial discussions were the starting point for several months' detailed work undertaken by a subgroup of the forum, chaired by Rhian Davies of Disability Wales and leading to a report co-ordinated by Prof Debbie Foster of Cardiff University.

To produce the report, the group drew on its own members' lived experiences as well as considering a wide range of evidence sources, most from Wales but in some cases from further afield. It was not possible for the group to conduct a detailed appraisal of the accuracy and robustness of all of the information gathered, some of which was anecdotal or qualitative in nature.

The report's authors have drawn out a range of powerful findings and a large number of recommendations, structured around 5 main chapters:

1. The social versus the medical model of disability
2. Human rights
3. Health and Well-Being
4. Socio-economic disadvantages
5. Exclusion, Accessibility and Citizenship

The report forms an important foundation for a future iteration, or potentially a totally new version of the Welsh Government's Framework for Disabled People Action on Disability – the right to Independent Living. The framework was published in September 2019 and sets out Welsh Government's commitments to improving the independence of disabled people in Wales, and our plans to work with disabled people themselves as well as partners in the public, private and third sectors, to deliver these commitments. Although still valid, the framework was launched just



before the start of the pandemic so needs to be reviewed in light of COVID-19 and the new challenges it has created, as well as the existing ones which it has amplified.

At the end of the last Senedd term, the First Minister announced the establishment of a Taskforce to address the inequalities highlighted by the report and to oversee the implementation of actions to address them. The Taskforce will build on the report's findings and continue the discussion on the important issues it highlights.

It will also build on the significant action already taken by the Welsh Government to mitigate the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on disabled people.

These actions include:

- Establishing a Taskforce to examine the issues raised in the report and beginning the work to address them alongside our partners in Health Boards and Local Authorities.
- Introducing the Socio-economic Duty which came into force in Wales on 31 March 2021 and puts tackling inequality at the heart of decision-making. The guidance stresses the need for public bodies to consider lived experience when making strategic decisions
- Suspending Schedule Twelve under Section Fifteen of the Coronavirus Act which permitted easements of Local Authority care and support provision. This was done following consultation with stakeholders including the Disability Equality Forum.
- Establishment of the COVID-19 Moral and Ethical Advisory Group for Wales (CMEAG-Wales) which offers ethical advice and support to policy makers in relation to issues caused or affected by COVID-19.
- Scoping an Equality Data Unit within Welsh Government which will be integral to pressing forward with actions to promote equality for disabled people in Wales.
- Taking forward the public appointments strategy, launched shortly before the pandemic which has actions to address the under-representation of disabled people in public appointments.
- A commitment by the incoming Welsh Government to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People into Welsh law.
- Improving the accessibility of our COVID-19 communications, as seen in the suite of accessible materials available for our Test, Trace, Protect campaign.

Some of these actions provide a response to recommendations in the Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19 report. The list outlines some of the actions that have been undertaken and those which have been committed to, with more actions and more detail in the body of this document. Other recommendations are also already being addressed, whilst many are longer term ambitions and are noted as such in the report. They will require further discussion and may also need to be refined as Wales comes out of lockdown and circumstances change.

A significant number of the recommendations are to be captured within the priorities of the Taskforce. Where responsibility is not devolved, we will use the levers at our disposal to influence the UK Government and others to address those

recommendations. We will build relationships to ensure we are sighted on relevant issues and can effectively challenge where necessary.

This initial response to the Report is not an exhaustive list of actions being undertaken but captures our progress so far against its recommendations. Progress will be revisited regularly as the Taskforce begins its work and as many of the recommendations become further developed and embedded in a newly reshaped Framework for Disabled People.

Beyond individual actions, however, is the intention that the Report and the evidence which it highlights will form the basis for a series of multi-sectoral discussions through the work of the Taskforce. This is in line with the wish of the report's authors that the report represents not a finished article with recommendations which are fixed, but as the beginning of a wider conversation across all government departments and involving a range of partners and delivery organisations. Such a conversation will put the perspective of disabled people at its centre and ensure that the Welsh Government's ambition to make the Social Model the organising principle for action is visibly and continually re-affirmed.

## **Progress Update**

### ***The social versus the medical model of disability***

The Social Model of Disability is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People and was adopted by the Welsh Government in 2002. That means it is the basis for how we develop policy and deliver our services, and also what we do as employers, managers, and colleagues of disabled people.

The model makes an important distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability'. It recognises that disabled people are disabled by the actions of our society, and not by their impairments. It is people, and the systems they make and implement, that disable people. These disabling actions can be driven by organisational culture, ignorance, prejudice, or simple indifference. They result in disabled people being excluded or marginalised from many areas of life.

The recommendation for the Welsh Government to re-affirm its 2002 commitment to the Social Model of Disability was addressed immediately upon receipt of the report, when the Deputy Minister and Chief Whip gave a clear and unambiguous commitment to the Social Model in a Written Statement in which she welcomed this important report.

As noted in the report, the fact that the Welsh Government's current framework and action plan Action on Disability: the Right to Independent Living acknowledges the importance of the social model is significant. It should also be noted that within the work done to produce the Independent Living framework, published in September 2019, a considerable amount of attention was given to producing a definition of the Social Model to further promote understanding and advancement of its principles.

The report takes issue with use of medical model language, such as the term 'vulnerable'. The Welsh Government shares this reservation about medical model language. People with impairments, who have the right support in place, should not be assumed to be "vulnerable". Anyone (disabled or non-disabled), at different times in their lives, may become "vulnerable" for different reasons. Failure to provide the right support or reasonable adjustments to disabled people may place them in vulnerable situations.

It is naturally a cause for concern that the group has brought attention to evidence of instances where the medical model of disability and also medical model language undermined the progress being made towards the embedding of the social model in decision making, both at a UK and a Welsh level. It is particularly concerning that this has left disabled people feeling 'locked out' as the title of the report suggests. As we emerge from Lockdown we will undertake to work with the Taskforce to more fully demonstrate the Welsh Government's commitment to using the Social Model in all aspects of our work, and in particular in planning for any future emergency situation.

### ***Human rights***

The concerns raised in the report around the erosion of disabled people's human rights by emergency measures taken to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wales are noted. Despite these concerns, it's important to emphasise that the views of disabled people were given prominence and taken account of throughout the pandemic as the national situation evolved. Most notably this was through the work of the Disability Equality Forum, of which the report's Steering group formed an important part.

The role of the Forum is to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to advise the Welsh Government on the key issues that affect disabled people in Wales. This became increasingly important during COVID-19 as the Forum met more frequently, ensuring the voice of disabled people was heard at the highest levels. The Deputy Minister and Chief Whip chaired seven meetings of the Disability Equality Forum to date during the COVID-19 pandemic, at times she was joined by Dr Frank Atherton, Chief Medical Officer for Wales and Dr Gill Richardson who led on the Vaccination Programme. Topics discussed included the COVID-19 ethical framework for adult social care; annual changes to social care charging and Direct Payments, social isolation, shielding restrictions and lockdown easement, test, trace protect and use of face coverings. There were also several additional meetings to feed into consultations, including on the new Transport Strategy for Wales. The Forum also informed important pieces of work such as the COVID-19 Social Care guidance.

In October 2020, Forum members gave their views on Welsh Ministers' decision to maintain or suspend the provisions of section 15 of, and Part 2 to Schedule 12 to the Coronavirus Act 2020. These provisions change certain duties under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) 2014 regarding assessments and meeting needs for care and support. Forum members committed to submitting responses to the rapid review consultation which had been convened. Following this rapid review a



decision was made in January to suspend the social care provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020. This decision shows the impact that listening to disabled people's voices through consultations and rapid reviews had on the Welsh Government's decisions made during the pandemic.

To further protect and enhance the rights of disabled people, the government has committed to incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People into Welsh law during the current Senedd term. This provides a positive response to one of the key recommendations in the COVID-19 Impact Report, and will ensure a legislative framework is put in place to further support disabled people's rights.

The report makes further recommendations around strengthening human rights, such as creating a Ministerial post and in the longer term a Commissioner for Disabled People. These recommendations, as noted in the report, will need to be considered in light of ongoing research into strengthening and advancing human rights in Wales, which is due to report soon. The Taskforce will provide an opportunity for the results of the research to be discussed and for disabled people to feed into any decisions in light of its findings.

The group members report that confusing and inaccessible information during COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on disabled people's human rights. Work is already underway to address these concerns. In 2020, we set up an Accessible Communication Group to discuss and overcome the barriers stopping people from accessing information. The Group includes a wide range of organisations, who have testified to the difficulties that those who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or visually impaired, with learning difficulties or are autistic experience when trying to access clear and concise information during the coronavirus pandemic.

As well as providing a live interpreter at public broadcasts, information has been produced in a range of accessible formats and languages. Further work is ongoing to set out the various barriers to communication that different groups face, and how to overcome those barriers to ensure all Welsh citizens receive clear and comprehensible information.

### ***Health and Well-being***

The wealth of evidence collected in the report is sobering and powerful, and the undeniable impacts are recognised. Indeed, many of them were explored in the Ministerial Disability Equality Forum over the course of the pandemic. There have been opportunities for Forum members to discuss concerns directly with Ministers, the Chief Medical Officer, the Counsel General and senior officials dealing with shielding, vaccination and other key aspects of the pandemic.

Many of the recommendations will be captured within the work of the Taskforce. This will facilitate further conversations about service user concerns and foster the spirit of co-production in addressing them which the report calls for. Such discussions will include the recommendations in the report around issues like diagnosis, shielding and maternity services.



The call for a national enquiry into factors affecting the deaths of different groups during the pandemic, including disabled people, is noted. Since the report was drafted the UK Government has announced that an independent public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic will be held in spring 2022. The Welsh Government will of course be making a full contribution to this inquiry.

In addition, the Senedd's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee undertook an inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, and its management, on health and social care in Wales.

The inquiry, which closed on 19 March 2021, considered the impact of the outbreak, and its management, on health and social care services in Wales. As part of this, the Committee examined the response by the Welsh Government and relevant public bodies, as well as considered the impact on staff, patients and others receiving care or treatment in both clinical settings and the community. It also considered the Wales response in the wider, UK context. A number of [reports](#) were published in the course of the inquiry.

In several places the Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19 report calls for more research into particular issues such as the mental health impacts of COVID-19, and for data disaggregation to shine a light on the particular experience of those who share protected characteristics. The interrelation between socio-economic and health related factors is highlighted as a further research need and there is also clearly a need to be able to disaggregate data on a Wales level where it is sometimes only available on a UK basis.

The Welsh Government has worked tirelessly to build a picture of COVID-19 impacts across Wales, including through the work leading up to this report and others such as the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Advisory Group and is actively considering how to further support the collation of data and evidence. A repository of evidence and data about COVID-19 impacts has been created to bring together evidence related to protected characteristic groups, and work to develop questions based on the Social Model of Disability to include in the National Survey for Wales is taking place.

In addition, research is being undertaken to scope out and explore the establishment of an Equality Data Unit in Wales. A series of interviews, focus groups and workshops have been held to develop an understanding of existing structures and barriers and the needs of stakeholders, including through the Disability Equality Forum. The research will pull together a range of key considerations for the Unit, as well as options around structure and resourcing.

There are several recommendations around accessibility of services, including those which are tendered by the Welsh Government. Where services are tendered a procurement strategy risk assessment is undertaken that includes consideration of accessibility as part of the contract to be established. Changes to the method of service delivery would be subject to assessment of this nature as well as Integrated Impact Assessments, which include mandatory Equality Impact Assessment prior to procuring. The Taskforce will give an opportunity to further consider how effectively accessibility is factored into contracts across the wider Welsh public sector and to better understand this.

The report calls for increased funding for advocacy services to support disabled people in dealing with health and public service providers. Through the Single Advice Fund, over £8.1m was available in 2020 to 2021 and over £9.6m is available during the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 to provide advice on Social Welfare issues. The advice services delivered through the Single Advice Fund last year helped over 127,813 people to deal with 286,666 social welfare problems, with additional financial gain of £43,718,464 for the people helped, which include disabled people.

To support third sector organisations, including Disabled People's Organisations providing advocacy, an additional £3m of COVID-19 funding has been secured for 2021 to 2022. The Welsh Government is currently tendering for a replacement of the Third Sector Resilience Fund which will provide support for third sector organisations who have experienced a loss of income, including those who provide advocacy services.

There are arrangements in place to engage and consult with the third sector in terms of mental health provision, as called for in the report. The Welsh Government engages routinely with the third sector through the Wales Alliance for Mental Health to ensure service user needs inform policy development. We also support the National Mental Health Forum which includes service users and carers to ensure engagement with programme and policy development. The Forum is also part of our Together for Mental Health Partnership board.

The Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan 2019 to 2022 includes commitments to strengthen third sector and service user engagement and progress against these actions is included as part of the routine updates against the Delivery Plan.

The need to tackle loneliness and isolation experienced by disabled people as a result of COVID-19 is fully acknowledged. The publication of 'Connected Communities: A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections' in February 2020 was a crucial first step in tackling loneliness and social isolation in Wales.

An advisory group of key stakeholders from the statutory and third sectors and grass-roots organisations was established to help develop the strategy and, as we implement the strategy, is helping us to better understand the impact of loneliness and isolation. Key issues raised by the group during the pandemic have included:

- digital exclusion
- overcoming barriers to re-engaging
- types of ongoing support required
- sustaining community based support
- ensuring information is accessible to all.

Disability Wales, the Wales Autism Lead, Wales Vision Forum and a learning disabled person are group members.

## ***Socio-economic disadvantages***

The Welsh Government is committed to improving the lives of everyone in Wales. We know COVID-19 is having a severe impact, but as a Welsh Government, we are doing all that we can to mitigate its effects. We recognise the key levers for tackling poverty sit with the UK Government with tax and welfare spending central to improving outcomes for low-income families.

The Welsh Government has regularly highlighted the importance of providing adequate financial support to all individuals, families and businesses in Wales to help mitigate the impact that COVID-19 is having on our communities. We will continue to do this as we move into the recovery.

The Welsh Government has called upon the UK Government to maintain the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and the continuation of financial support programmes (such as the furlough scheme and support for the self-employed) which were introduced in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on household income. We would also like to see the £20 per week payment available to low income households receiving legacy benefits, such as Income Support or Income Based Jobseekers Allowance.

As this 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 as a result of the Coronavirus crisis and we will continue to do all that we can to continue to support people in Wales.

The Welsh Government welcomes the strong focus on socio-economic disadvantage within the Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19 report. This mirrors the current emphasis on recognising and mitigating socio-economic factors within Welsh Government equality policy, in particular through the enactment of the Socio-economic Duty which came into force on 31 March 2021. We agree with the report's call for the Duty to be a key part of Wales' commitment to build back stronger, greener and fairer.

As noted in the report, the Duty requires relevant public bodies, including Welsh Ministers, to give due regard to the need to reduce inequalities experienced as a result of Socio-economic disadvantage when taking strategic decisions.

The Duty will improve decision making, ensuring that evidence is considered to understand inequalities and the impact that decisions will have on people living in Wales.

The Duty has newly come into force and the importance of effective engagement is already emphasised in statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Government. Work is underway with third sector partners on how best to establish effective engagement and co-production with those affected by decisions. The Taskforce, along with the Disability Equality Forum will provide an important means of feeding into this work.

Access to appropriate housing is identified as a major factor in the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by disabled people. Several actions to address this are already included in the Action on Disability Framework, as it is recognised that living



in a good quality, well designed home brings a wide range of benefits to health, learning and prosperity. For this reason the Welsh Government will continue to work with Local Authorities, and other partners like Tai Pawb to improve the lives of disabled people living and working in Wales.

Wales already has a diverse housing stock meeting a wide range of needs but we acknowledge more needs to be done to improve the availability of accessible homes.

Currently, in Wales all new grant funded homes have to meet Lifetime Homes Standards, designed with features like wide stairs capable of taking a stair lift, generous circulation space, accessible ground floor shower room, wide doors and convenient external paths. This provides flexibility and can be used by a wide range of occupants in the lifetime of a home and respond to changing needs. The Social Housing Grant also funds Extra care housing and other bespoke housing designed specifically for use by disabled people including wheelchair users.

The Welsh Government has recently introduced a new technical scrutiny process which means all new grant funded housing projects are reviewed before designs are finalised to ensure they meet standards, are well designed and meet the needs of occupants. The new process will also include a post occupation review and homes will be critically evaluated to check they have met the standards and any lessons learnt used to refine standards going forward.

On the basis of evidence from the Wales Centre for Public Policy, the Minister for Housing and Local Government announced on 10 March an uplift of £400,000 to Local Authorities' Enable grant so that they no longer apply the means test to small and medium Disabled Facilities Grants. Removing the means test on the most common adaptations is a significant step that will benefit disabled people across Wales.

Care and Repair agencies helped disabled people receive over £1.2 million in additional means tested benefits in the period April 2020 to the end of January 2021, and we know many local authority adaptations teams do similar work.

Priority work to meet the needs of disabled people has continued throughout the coronavirus pandemic, with the Integrated Care Fund capital programme, worth £145 million over 4 years, designed to enable Regional Partnership Boards to meet the housing and accommodation needs of priority groups including adults and children with a physical or learning disability.

For the duration of the public health emergency, the Welsh Government encouraged an urgent and increased focus on housing adaptations that support hospital discharge, and which support individuals who are vulnerable to the Coronavirus to continue to live independently and safely at home. We are committed to this sector wide approach and will consult on further guidance during 2021 to 2022, including what constitutes priority work, such as facilitating hospital discharge and adaptations for people with life limiting conditions.

The report's call for more research and analysis in the housing field has been fed into the Welsh Government's housing evidence planning process. Regular data



collections from adaptations providers already take place, and work is currently underway to analyse the current levels of spend of each housing adaptation funding programme and identify how each supports the delivery of housing adaptations in Wales. We will consider ways to build on this work and to explore the issues qualitatively, thereby increasing the evidence base to support future housing policy.

Employment is another area where the report points out disabled people can experience socio-economic disadvantage. Since the publication of the 'Action on Disability – the Right to Independent Living' Framework and Action Plan in September 2019, disabled people's employment has seen many positive advances in Wales.

Under the Independent Living Framework's Action Plan a package of support has been developed to enable employers to attract, recruit, develop and retain disabled employees. This includes the appointment of six Disabled People's Employment Champions who are working with businesses to change attitudes about the employment of disabled people. They will increase awareness of the availability of talent and skills provided by disabled people, help employers adapt their recruitment practices for their workforce, and demonstrate how to effectively access support available to help disabled people into work.

A toolkit containing advice on employing disabled people has been produced to guide employers through the recruitment and retention of a disabled person. There are also additional Apprenticeship Incentives to employers for hiring disabled apprentices. As part of the COVID-19 commitment to help people back to work, a £1.2m business start-up Barriers Grant Fund has been made available to support unemployed individuals to start a business in Wales, with priority in allocating funding given to those most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, including disabled people.

There is a commitment to increase the take-up of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Access to Work Scheme in Wales. The scheme aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work and Welsh Government continues to actively promote it to employers and disabled people via our employment support networks.

A stakeholder-led forum is being set up, owned by stakeholders in Wales and developed in collaboration with Access to Work to support joint working, help develop new policy initiatives and promote the scheme.

The Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19 report has a strong emphasis on workplace wellbeing, and there are specific programmes such as Healthy Working Wales which support disabled people's wellbeing in work. This programme helps employers to develop and sustain environments, policies and cultures that promote good health and support the appropriate and timely return to work of those who are absent from work due to sickness or who have fallen out of employment due to periods of ill health. Healthy Working Wales is well placed to provide support and encouragement for the development of wellbeing policies and promote further discussion on this subject as the Taskforce begins its important work.

### ***Exclusion, Accessibility and Citizenship***

The report offers a powerful description of the many barriers which COVID-19 has ushered in for disabled people, and of the importance of inclusion and accessibility at all levels and across all sectors in order to overcome those barriers.

Physical accessibility on our streets and in open spaces has been a challenge for some disabled people with temporary redirections and new signage put in place in many places. The Welsh Government worked with Local Authorities to remind them of their duty to ensure any changes to physical environments are implemented in a way that does not cause any inadvertent issues for disabled people. In June 2020 we published guidance entitled “Creating safer public places: coronavirus”. The guidance states that legal obligations to ensure that policies, practices, procedures and working arrangements should support the equality and well-being of disabled people as set out in the Equality Act 2010 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The importance of accessible travel became even more apparent during the pandemic, and Llwybr Newydd – the new [Wales Transport Strategy 2021](#) has been developed with a view to putting accessibility front and centre alongside sustainability.

During the first year of COVID-19, significant engagement was undertaken with all groups who share protected characteristics and the views of disabled people feature strongly in the resulting document. Alongside the strategy an additional report was published which reflects that engagement which is entitled ‘Mobility in Wales report’.

As a result of the strategy work is underway to develop an equality pathway which will set out the milestones and actions needed to deliver a more accessible transport system.

Immediate issues thrown up as a result of the pandemic were also dealt with as they emerged. A bus working group has been established together with the bus industry and Guide Dogs for the Blind. The group is looking at specific issues facing disabled passengers during COVID-19 such as barriers to catching a bus and around social distancing whilst travelling.

Passenger Assist services for train travel were enhanced through the work of the Transport for Wales Accessibility and Inclusion Panel which continued to operate virtually and by post. A number of improvements were made to staff guidance, briefings and risk assessments with an emphasis on proactive support for anyone in need of support.

The pandemic has also highlighted the challenges in addressing digital exclusion – and that connectivity and access (both devices and infrastructure) alone aren’t the solution. The Welsh Government recognises that we must make clear our commitment to support everyone to gain the motivation, confidence and skills in

order to make informed decisions and choose how they participate in, and make the most of, our increasingly digital world.

The Digital Communities Wales programme is providing training and support to front line staff and volunteers from organisations to engage with and develop the digital skills of citizens. Whilst not designed to develop specific education and skills programmes tailored to individuals, the programme is actively engaged and working with a range of organisations. These include Disability Wales, Learning Disability Wales, RNIB Wales, Action on Hearing Loss Cymru and Sight Cymru.

The impact of the kinds of barriers outlined above in increasing loneliness and isolation is fully acknowledged. We can all experience loneliness and isolation, but we know there are certain groups within society for whom these issues are a greater risk; disabled people are one such group.

Understanding and improving people's resilience, making them less susceptible to the harmful effects of loneliness and social isolation and ensuring they have access to appropriate support services are all crucial in maintaining health, well-being and independence.

The publication of 'Connected Communities: A strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections' in February 2020 was a crucial first step in tackling loneliness and social isolation in Wales.

An advisory group of key stakeholders from grass-roots organisations including Disabled People's Organisations as well as the statutory and third sectors was established to help develop the strategy and now as we implement it is helping us to better understand the impact of loneliness and isolation.

Key issues raised by the group during the pandemic include: digital exclusion; overcoming barriers to re-engaging; types of ongoing support required; sustaining community based support and ensuring information is accessible to all.

The Welsh Government is aware of the impact the pandemic is having on the mental health and well-being of disabled people and their families and carers and will work with the Loneliness and Isolation Advisory Group to consider what more can be done.

We continue to monitor the evidence to understand the impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions on mental health and well-being. Levels of anxiety are higher now than pre-pandemic levels and we also know that some groups have been disproportionately affected. For some, the easing of the restrictions and the ability to see loved ones and do the things they enjoy will improve their mental health, but we recognise that some people will need access to more specialist support. We are committed to ensuring that this support is equitable and accessible, and that services are delivered in line with the all Wales standard for communication and information for people with sensory loss.

Disabled people's involvement in decision making and better representation in public life are identified as key drivers for change. The Welsh Government is committed to increasing diversity across all aspects of public life including tackling the barriers which prevent an individual's active participation in local democracy through standing for elected office.



The Access to Elected Office Wales Fund was established, as a pilot, to provide support to disabled candidates standing for election at the May 2021 Senedd elections and the May 2022 Local Government elections. These are the elections which are devolved to Wales. This fund is designed to support individuals to play a full role in supporting and representing their communities. We recognise that disabled people are likely to face greater costs when seeking elected office and this fund will help to reduce some of the financial barriers faced.

As an employer the Welsh Government has a range of equality, diversity and inclusion learning and resources in place for staff, aimed at embedding inclusion in all that we do and supporting staff to challenge discrimination should they encounter it. Over the next twelve months, we'll be working with staff diversity networks, colleagues and expert learning practitioners to design and deliver a new suite of equality, diversity and inclusion learning, ensuring that people with lived experience are part of the process from the outset.

Reasonable adjustments have been placed more prominently within the Welsh Government's recruitment processes to encourage candidates to contact us. Additional support is provided as required. Language has been updated and strengthened to better reflect our commitment to the Social Model of Disability, and a new recruitment inclusion and diversity team is being created that will take this work further.

The report focuses on the role of the media in improving attitudes and understanding. Promoting diversity across the creative industries is a key priority for the Creative Wales programme. We work closely with stakeholders who are also committed to delivering improvements, including Disability Arts Cymru. We will look to identify opportunities to promote and encourage the enhanced collection of diversity data, as called for in the report, including through grant mechanisms and stakeholder engagement activity.

Finally, we fully recognise the crucial role of the third sector in providing support to disabled people to access services and play a full part in society. This has been particularly apparent during COVID-19. Through third sector funds such as the Voluntary Service Emergency Fund, Voluntary Service Recovery Fund and County Voluntary Council fund which enabled organisations respond to the crisis, we have supported forty-eight organisations self-identifying as supporting disabled individuals with £1,342,000 of funding and a further seventeen organisations self-identifying as providing advocacy services with £434,000. In addition we have provided support to a wide range of disabled organisations who have experienced a loss of income.

The Welsh Government boosted the Wales allocation of the National Emergencies Trust COVID-19 Emergency fund, which is being administered by Disability Wales and is supporting a range of innovative projects by Disabled People's Organisations across Wales. We have secured an additional £3m of COVID-19 funding for 2021 to 2022 and are currently tendering for our replacement of the Third Sector Resilience Fund. This fund will provide support for third sector organisations who have experienced a loss of income, including those which provide advocacy services.



## **Conclusion**

This response sets out actions underway and our intention to further consider the findings and progress the recommendations set out in the Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19 Report. The actions are not exhaustive and will be built upon further. The ambitions of the report's authors for the Taskforce to facilitate a cross-departmental and multi-sectoral set of conversations around the experiences and perspectives of disabled people during COVID-19 and more widely as citizens and service users is fully acknowledged.

It is also recognised that although individual recommendations are important, the report's authors want the main focus of their work to be on the evidence upon which those recommendations are based. In particular the report provides an opportunity to consider and discuss experiences from a disabled person's point of view and to input to policy and service provision accordingly.

Work on the Taskforce has begun and this will be an important vehicle to carry forward not only these recommendations but to identify and deliver changes that will address the deep rooted inequalities experienced by disabled people. As part of its work, there will be a focus on assessing Welsh Government's *Action on Disability Independent Living Framework and Action Plan* in light of the inequalities highlighted by the pandemic. There will be a need to revisit and refresh its content and actions, to make them fit for purpose in the world in which we now live.

In this important work, the insights and advice of the Disability Equality Forum will continue to be essential to the effective development and subsequent delivery of the new plan to address the inequalities faced by disabled people in Wales.