



Simon Hart
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30 March 2020

Dear Simon,

I write in reply to your letters of 25 and 27 March.

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation of the way in which we have been able to work closely together in responding to the coronavirus crisis. I have asked the Minister for Economy and Transport to update you this week on economy and business matters, and to keep you updated as needed.

First, on volunteering, we have long-standing infrastructure in Wales, Volunteering Wales, run very successfully through the WCVA, in conjunction with County Voluntary Councils, who provide local hubs and work very closely with other public services, including local authorities, on the ground. They are responding to the huge appetite amongst Welsh citizens to assist in the coronavirus context. Volunteering Wales allows volunteers to register at a local or Wales level, and enables organisations to advertise for volunteers. This is already underway, volunteers have been registered and checked and are out there helping in communities across Wales.

All of this predated the announcement of a scheme in England, which was unhelpfully referred to as a 'UK scheme'. It is therefore completely mistaken to assert that there is a lack of a strategy for volunteers in Wales. We have our own, which works for Wales. Had we had more notice of the UK Government's plans it might have been possible to link up our scheme with the UK call for action in a co-ordinated and accessible way. I understand there are conversations going on between officials from our Governments to see if any Wales-specific data captured by the UK Government's call for help can be shared with us.

Second, on business rate relief, our decision not to provide relief for companies with a rateable value of over £500,000 was based on a careful assessment of the needs of all Welsh businesses, and our intention to prioritise scarce resources on those who need it most. There are fewer than 200 such properties in Wales, occupied by around 50 companies. Yet extending NDR relief to them would have cost the Welsh Government nearly £120 million.

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

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

All of that money will be invested in business support in Wales, allowing us, for example, to be able to provide critically important grants of around £50,000 to 2,400 small and medium sized businesses, many of whom will be unable to access funding from other sources. Given the nature of the Welsh economy, I am in no doubt that this is the right approach. . Of course, 100% NDR relief has been extended to most retail premises in Wales – with some £31.5 million of relief granted to the major supermarket chains alone. In Wales, we will now be able to assist sectors with much less help otherwise available – companies in the manufacturing and other services sectors (for example, financial services, media and broadcasting).

We are also making clear to the handful of independent Welsh-based companies which are covered by this decision that they will be able to apply to the Economic Resilience Fund announced today for assistance.

I would have been very happy to have explained our approach on both these matters in a telephone call rather than in correspondence and I have asked my office to confirm arrangements for us to speak regularly on these issues.

Finally, could I raise with you the issue of communication between our governments. It is understandable that, in a very rapidly moving picture, we have not always received information in advance of announcements made by the UK Government. I have no doubt that there are examples where the Welsh Government might have provided more timely information, for the same reasons of the extraordinary pressure under which we are all working. This leads to presentational problems as you will understand, but more importantly it means that there are missed opportunities to co-ordinate our planning for the benefit of citizens.

I would welcome your assistance in reinforcing the message about the importance of early communication and joint working between our governments on these kinds of initiatives.

Yours sincerely

PD

MARK DRAKEFORD