

Ministerial Discussion Paper

An assessment of the support from Local Authorities to non-shielded vulnerable people (NSV) in Wales

Purpose

The purpose of the paper is to summarise the provision local authorities are currently making for people who are not shielding but who are isolated without family, friends or neighbours to support them. It assesses the adequacy and coverage of the provision available at a local level in order to enable Ministers to make decisions on what further support, communications or encouragement might be appropriate.

Background

Ministers discussed NSV people at a meeting on Good Friday and requested a paper that was provided on 14 April. The analysis within this demonstrated there were up to 1.2 million people in the stringent social distancing and the disadvantaged groups, of which 400,000 – 500,000 may be without additional support.

Although regular discussions with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) have taken place at both official and political level, there has been a lack of clarity on how local authorities were responding to the needs of the NSV group. The WLGA was reluctant for the Welsh Government to encourage people outside the shielded group to contact their local authority for fear that local call centres could not cope with demand. However, they also reported that most local authorities were supporting the NSV group.

The Minister for Housing and Local Government wrote to local authority Leaders on 17 April to ask them to provide information on their services to the NSV group so the Welsh Government could see what interventions, if any, would be helpful in meeting the needs of isolated people who would not otherwise have support networks in place. Local authorities were asked to provide the information in a phone call to officials or to provide written responses. Responses were received by telephone and/or in writing in the week beginning 27 April. This paper presents an initial analysis and initial recommendations, and further analysis will be undertaken to inform ongoing work.

22 responses have been provided – **6** local authorities have provided both written responses and had a conversation with officials, **12** have provided only written responses and **4** have had a phone call with officials.

Analysis of current Local Authority provision

Annex 1 sets out analysis of local authority service offer (food provision, medicine delivery, befriending etc). It demonstrates that all local authorities are providing this to some degree, with variations in local service provision. This provision is being met free of charge unless it involves collection of food from a supermarket (where the cost of the food is met by the person in receipt of the food).

A number of local authorities told us that they are building up invoices so that people can pay them for supermarket shops when they have access to cash again.

Annex 2 sets out the communication support tools and interventions currently offered by local authorities in Wales. This demonstrates that while all authorities offer a telephone service, the type of digital support and communication methods varies considerably, from 4 local authorities who have identified and written out to their vulnerable residents, with 2 further authorities saying they had some form of targeted campaign. This means that most local authorities relied on isolated people proactively getting in touch with them. Officials have begun an analysis of websites and initial impressions are that it is not clear how someone not in the shielded category would know that they would be provided with help if they had no other forms of support. None of the local authorities mentioned provision in languages other than English and Welsh or accessible support (large print, easy read etc).

Annex 3 sets out the obstacles which local authorities have overcome and are facing in providing a service to isolated residents. It also includes suggestions for Welsh Government support, where these have been identified through the responses or phone calls. The most commonly raised obstacles relate to volunteers, data/digital issues (identifying the right cohort, digital exclusion), food/cash (supermarkets slots, handling cash), sustainability (when LA staff return to their day jobs, if volunteering reduces/stops as people return to jobs, if more people emerge needing support). It is not possible to tell if local authorities feel they have engaged with the full cohort of isolated people. While there was a confidence that services were being provided, the challenge around identifying people through different data sets and the lack of a proactive approach amongst some local authorities means that more work is needed on whether everyone who is isolated is actively being supported.

Analysis of Volunteer Provision

The responses from the local authorities in relation to using volunteers are very positive. However, the degree to which volunteers registered on Volunteering Wales are supporting key functions and central teams is varied, with a number of local authorities relying on their own redeployed staff in the first instance. However, significant signposting to third sector agencies is also taking place. Volunteers registering on Volunteer Wales have increased by 16,000 since March 2020 and 6,000 volunteers are matched to opportunities. All local authorities have seen a ground swell in relation to volunteers coming forward and the formation of informal networks. Local authorities with field hospitals have also received significant numbers of people applying to volunteer.

The relationships between the local authorities and the Community Voluntary Councils (CVCs) are reported as being strong, with the exception of small number of local authorities that are using other voluntary organisations within their area or their own recruited volunteers. Volunteer roles are focused very much on food access and delivery, collection of medication and befriending. In some cases volunteering has been hampered by the lack of systems for money handling but these have been reduced significantly by the supermarket voucher scheme.

A number of CVCs have stated they have further available volunteer capacity and as the planned support for pharmacies develops, there is scope to accommodate this.

Recommendations

Volunteers

In moving forward, the sustainability of the model adopted in each local authority will need further consideration. All authorities have redeployed staff to central support functions, who will need to return to their substantive roles at some point. In addition volunteer numbers are likely to reduce, when the lockdown restrictions are relaxed. Currently out of 30,000 registered volunteers on Volunteering Wales, 28,000 are under the age of 60.

It is recommended Welsh Government encourages local authorities to work with urgency with the third sector and local health boards to establish how changing needs might be met and the optimal balance between local authority deployed staff, third sector engagement and volunteers is achieved.

Communications

A key message from local authorities is that delivery of services to the isolated and NSV group is something they have got on with and delivered – they have looked to their own staff first and then supplemented their services with volunteers. They have used existing project management and logistics skills to put services in place. However, it appears that only 6 local authorities have communicated this proactively, and neither they nor Welsh Government have a way of knowing how many people have not contacted their council but need help and are struggling alone.

It is recommended there is clearer communication and consideration of the case for a communications campaign to signpost isolated people to their local authority. It is further recommended that Welsh Government asks local authorities to make it clearer on their websites and phone line triaging services how this group of people can find help by having a dedicated phone line or e-mail address.

Provision of services to people whose first language is not English or Welsh

We have not asked local authorities about how they are equality impact assessing their services and do not have a picture of the provision to people who require culturally appropriate services or need to use a different language (including BSL). The Race Forum, attended by the Deputy Minister and Chief Whip, heard feedback that people with poor English skills were reluctant to contact their local authority because of fears they would not be understood. A potential gap in service provision is therefore is to people whose first language is not English or Welsh.

It is recommended that Welsh Government works with local authorities and BAME communities and disabled people to ensure information and support is accessible.

Improved understanding of services provided by food retailers

All local authorities are actively supporting isolated residents to access food retailers, either through using their own staff or working with volunteers. Various methods are in place to pay for shopping including using click and collect, e-payments and volunteer cards. There is not a single point of information which local authorities can go to in order to find out about what is on offer. They are all having to check supermarket websites and share this information with their volunteers. Therefore, we have no assurance that they are aware of everything which supermarkets are offering in terms of methods of payment, special opening hours and food boxes. This information is already collected by officials together with information on how credit unions and post offices can help access cash.

It is recommended that Welsh Government shares the information it collates around services provided by food retailers with local authorities and third sector partners.

Food provision to those who cannot afford it

Many local authorities are providing free food to isolated people, managing food donations from members of the public and putting people in touch with local community food banks. This has emerged as a key aspect of their service provision in responding to the pandemic crisis. We do not yet have an understanding of who the recipients are – whether they are people whose circumstances have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 or those who were already experiencing economic disadvantage which has been exacerbated. A separate paper setting out different cohorts of economically vulnerable people has been provided.

The need for food supplies for the independent food bank network and local community food distribution groups/venues across Wales is currently being assessed, working with the Independent Food Aid Network. A short survey has been sent out to over 50 of these venues seeking urgent information regarding the current level of food supplies. Officials are also working with key stakeholders to build a broader understanding of what has happened in relation to affordability and accessibility of food in this current crisis. This is examining impacts such as people missing meals; the large increase in the scale of demand on food banks and other local community food distribution groups; and the logistics of getting food to where it is needed and when it is needed.

It is recommended that Welsh Government takes a decision on what to do next in relation to food banks once the separate work on food banks is complete.

Setting expectations and sharing good practice

Although the contact with local authorities has shown that isolated people across Wales are receiving support, this has been done independently by each local authority and there were no examples of local authorities sharing good practice or benchmarking against each other. We know, however, that some are putting case studies together.

It is recommended that the Welsh Government identifies priorities for the provision of support and actively encourages the sharing of good practice. This would be linked to ongoing work to improve outcomes for disadvantaged people in the longer term.

Conclusion

The responses received from local authorities have provided a rich source of information and data on the support currently being provided to isolated people, the challenges faced and areas where communications and support should be strengthened.

While this paper provides an initial analysis and recommendations, officials will draw on the evidence gathered to inform ongoing work. It is likely that further issues will emerge with more time to consider the data collected.

29 April 2020

List of Annexes

1. Local Authority Service Offer by each Local Authority



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2. Communication support tools and interventions in use by each Welsh Local Authority



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3. Obstacles / issues faced by Local Authorities and WG support requirements



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