

**Statement by the Minister for Housing and Local Government: Coronavirus (COVID-19), Plenary 17 March 2020**

**The Minister for Housing and Local Government:** *It was with great sadness that yesterday we learned of the first confirmed death in Wales from COVID-19. My sincere condolences go to the family and friends of the deceased and to all whose lives have been so seriously and tragically impacted by this on-going and fast moving crisis.*

*The Welsh Government is taking far reaching, cross-government action to combat COVID-19 and its wider impacts. We are working closely with other administrations across the UK and partner organisations in Wales, including our local authorities.*

*The Minister for Health and Social Services and Minister for Economy and Transport set out earlier the action being taken in their portfolios. In addition, we have deployed new measures to relax supermarket delivery hours to help maintain the supply of food stuffs and other goods; including those goods which are currently in particularly high demand.*

*The Emergency Co-ordination Centre Wales is in operation to help effectively coordinate our response, working closely with our counterparts in the UK Government, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We have well established arrangements, tested and exercised over many years and these are now up and running.*

*The Welsh Government Cabinet is now meeting on a weekly basis to discuss COVID-19 and our response to it and the First Minister and / or Minister for Health and Social Services continue to attend meetings of COBR.*

*Our Local Authorities have a key role to play in keeping critical services running and we are working closely with them and our four Local Resilience Forums to ensure they have the support they require. This morning, I held a joint press conference with the Leader of the WLGA, Cllr Andrew Morgan, where we set out the joint action we are taking.*

*Clearly, COVID-19 will impact on public services. There will be fewer people available for an indeterminate period to deliver services that will have seldom if ever been in greater demand – this presents a major challenge.*

*However, we have been working with our colleagues in local government to plan and prepare for COVID-19 and this Government will ensure that our local authorities have the resources they need to continue to deliver much needed public services over the coming weeks and months of this crisis.*

*It is beneficial that we will soon be able to make use of additional, time-limited powers, to be delivered through a four-nation Bill. These powers will help make our response to COVID-19 more effective.*

*In my meeting with Cllr Morgan, and I wish to repeat it here this afternoon in the Chamber, I thanked local government for its considerable contribution, for providing the day-to-day services that the people of Wales rely on so heavily but also for their incredible response to the recent flooding in parts of Wales. And of course, the work going on across local government dealing with the aftermath of the floods is not yet complete before other important work has started on COVID-19.*

*There are of course some specific groups for whom this virus presents particular risks and challenges. I am focused on finding practical ways to support these groups and those who work with them. In particular those who are homeless, especially at the most acute end of the homelessness spectrum; rough sleepers, need our support more than ever. My officials*

*are working with the sector to bring forward proposals to support the vital work that already happens in this sector and to extend the options available to help people off the streets, give them access to sanitation and support and enable isolation where necessary. This will include ensuring the Local authorities have access to the funds necessary to facilitate this. I am also conscious of the need to support and protect those who work for this vulnerable group, and to ensure we work effectively with our 3rd sector partners to maintain core service provision through joint working. I will provide further details on this later this week.*

*Work is also ongoing with the WLGA and the 3rd sector to ensure that volunteers are strategically mobilised. The Welsh Government is working tirelessly, alongside others, to slow down the spread of COVID-19 in Wales and to protect our most vulnerable people, it is important to recognise that every one of us, every person in Wales, has a role to play in helping to make this happen. Advice on what to do and not to do has been published on the Welsh Government website. The advice is kept under constant review and updated as necessary.*

*It is abundantly clear that the COVID-19 crisis will be with us for many weeks, if not months, and that it will bring with it a range of serious and long-term impacts on individuals, on families, on the economy and beyond. We will continue to engage with local government and all parties in Wales, to plan and implement measures that will keep our public services operating effectively at this critically important time.*

**Mark Isherwood AM** noted her press conference with the WLGA this morning where it was reported that Cllr Andrew Morgan said that bin collections would be reduced during the crisis and she said that was being considered for the weeks and months ahead and asked her to expand on that.

He noted he had been approached by many people wanting to offer their help to volunteer and the Welsh Office yesterday stated they were getting more information about getting volunteering centralised by today to ensure they can help get volunteer to where its needed and asked where they were with that.

He noted her response to issues raised with Local Authorities at her summit with Local Authorities earlier this month. He referred to comments that Directors of Public Health and leaders in Local Authorities needn't be notified of cases, she said she was liaising with PHW on this issue and he asked for an update on that.

On introducing flexible staff arrangements, he also noted that the Minister referred to the established relationship with the Workforce Partnership Council and as part of the new Shadow Social Partnership Council, this will enable social partnerships across Welsh Government, public bodies and trade unions to progress swift and effective dialogue on matters linked to Covid-19. He noted the Minister said they were also activating a virtual network and asked where they had reached with that.

In terms of the disclosure service, he noted she was exploring what can be done to achieve a consistent approach without compromising people's safety. He noted concern over resilience in the environmental health teams in managing 24/7 expectations and asked if they were considering powers as in England to restrict individual movement. He also referred to death registrations and asked about urgent planning relating to this.

He noted guidance on dealing with issues in ports such as Holyhead and Pembroke, and that she said she was going to ask UK Border Force whether guidance would be provided to them and asked for an update.

**The Minister** said on waste collections, that was given as an example to a question by a journalist when he said services may be scaled back in the week ahead and he was trying to demonstrate that it may be necessary to move people around to maintain central services but it was only an example. She said where was advice available on various Local Government websites and from health, Swansea Council, they're advising that personal health waste can be stored within disposable rubbish bags and can be placed in another bag, tie securely and kept separate from other waste and should be put aside for 72 hours before being put into the normal black bag waste.

On volunteers, she said they would be meeting tomorrow with WCVA, partners and others to discuss the issue of third sector involvement and coordination of volunteers and they had useful meetings with WCVA about coordination. She also noted that anyone wanting to come out of retirement, they were welcome to come forward to offer their help but reminded them that this was an ongoing thing as well and not just now, so they will be needed for the duration.

On cases notified, she said they were going past that phase now and she would still undertake to ensure Local Authorities know when there are extreme cases in their areas.

She said the Workforce Partnership Council meetings are going ahead next week and will be mostly virtual. On regulation of volunteers, she said the emergency bill has a series of proposed provisions in it around faster registration and relaxation of some rules. She noted one example may be that if someone hasn't had the DBS checks necessary they might be able to work alongside a volunteer that has been checked and supervised.

Regarding environmental health teams, they are in ongoing discussion with WCVA on a number of issues.

**Delyth Jewell AM** said it was pointed out that crisis situations can bring out the best in society and noted the amazing community support efforts and asked if she could announce financial support for community groups to buy equipment or support to help tackle loneliness amongst those self-isolating. She asked if they would support schemes to provide vouchers for groups to go out to buy food and supplies for people self-isolating.

She noted testing would be available for frontline clinical staff and she noted social care workers were on the frontline. She said there should be obligation to count them as key workers in this regard and wanted to check they were included in this. She noted the UK Government said the NHS has a blank cheque to deal with this crisis and asked if she agreed the social care sector also needed a blank cheque to help care for people.

She asked whether there would be relaxation of any Local Government financial controls during this time.

On housing, she said the coming weeks would be difficult for everyone but especially those who don't feel safe in their own home. She asked if Welsh Government would bring forward emergency repair work to make homes damaged by flooding liveable again, particularly given need for self-isolation.

More generally, she asked if Welsh Government would mandating councils to give council tax and rent relief for anyone self-isolating and unable to get to work. She said those who face the terror of the virus and potential homelessness, she asked if they would bring forward legislation to suspend Section 21 of the housing Act so people can't face evictions during this period.

She asked what provision would be made available to children if schools close who would have been reliant on Free School Meals. She also raised concern about people who are experiencing domestic abuse and are potentially facing self-isolation with perpetrator and asked if there was anything they could do to provide targeted support for victims.

She noted a number of by-elections are due to be held in coming weeks and asked if they would definitely be postponed.

**The Minister** said they had already contacted Local Authorities with impending by-elections to say the emergency bill will contain provisions to postpone them.

On free school meals and what else children receive in schools apart from education is a very difficult issue and an issue why they're urging schools to stay open until at least the Easter holiday to get plans in place to ensure children can still receive meals in whatever provisions they put in place and they needed to ensure safeguarding provisions for other children.

On domestic abuse victims, they would need to put helplines in place and the Live Fear Free helpline would still be available.

On housing and homelessness, she said they were already putting arrangements in place to ensure those at the sharp end of homelessness were getting help. She noted that the English Minister announced an initial £3.2m today for help for homelessness and wasn't sure if there was anything in that for Wales but they were looking at measures to pick that up.

She said they that they were urging residential landlords with Buy to Let mortgages where the lender is being encouraged to give them a mortgage holiday, to pass it on to their renters and they were urging Rent Smart Wales to do that and noted the Residential Landlords Association had been asking their landlords to do that. She said they would be writing out to Social Landlords about what they should be doing and councils in the next day or so. She noted a further statement would be made available later this week and this included provision for those affected by floods.

She didn't know what the NHS blank cheque meant and they would obviously need to include social care in that. She noted that she put out an appeal for anyone with social care experience or think they can help to come forward to their Local Authorities to offer their assistance. She said they were looking to relax pension rules through the emergency legislation.

**Alun Davies AM** asked if she would be looking at providing additional support for Local Authorities in terms of resources available to them and said many would be looking to them for support in coming weeks and months. He also raised concern about social enterprises who were facing a real issue to maintain their services in future and he said they needed to ensure support in place for them to ensure social infrastructure of communities isn't lost.

He said it was fantastic to see how people are responding to the crisis and it would be great if Welsh Government can help to share best practice. He said it would be useful if a helpline was created where people, particularly older people will be able to phone a single number across Wales, answered locally, for help and support.

**The Minister** said they hadn't done this yet, but she was interested to speak to providers about what can be provided by BT, and so on, on conferencing facilities and for voluntary groups to be able to set up at home for people to talk to the locally.

She said they would ensure all Local Authorities in Wales have support and resources they need to respond to the crisis. She said in the meeting of third sector and social enterprise tomorrow, they would be talking about social enterprises there and agreed they were part of our fabric. She said Hannah Blythyn AM was looking at what we can do with Citizens Advice bureaux and so on.

**David Melding AM** welcomed the promise to bring forward more detail about how rough sleepers would be helped as the most vulnerable group in society and wanted the highest resources made available to them.

He said many people on the edge of rough sleeping sell the Big Issue and their sales will drop considerably and asked if there was any possibility for them to look at how that income stream could be supported because you could end up with more people on the street.

**The Minister** said that was an issue and she hadn't yet spoken to the Big Issue but they were on the list of people to contact and they would want to be able to support them and they were alert to this concern. She said in normal times, they had been running a campaign to get people to recognise themselves as homeless and were concerned this will happen. On rough sleepers, she would make statement later this week but they were trying to get people in where they can get in and they have cohort services for those infected and not and other issues as well. She said there would be big issues about whether they can secure hotel or B&B accommodation and there will be a big cohort they can't get in so they will be looking to create areas of safety in the four big areas of rough sleeping to provide tents and try to get people in. She welcomed the UK Ministry announced this initial £3.2m and were anxious to see what would come to them.

**Rhun ap Iorwerth AM** noted there might be acute need for beds of key workers in coming weeks and months. He noted a key worker whose father had to self-isolate and he couldn't go home and would need somewhere to live at the moment. He asked whether they could reach out to those with empty properties, second homes, Airbnb's and so on to house them.

**The Minister** welcomed the idea and was something they would consider.

*A full transcript will be available [here](#).*