

Written response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, entitled *Inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, and its management, on health and social care in Wales: Report 3 – Impact on the social care sector and unpaid carers*

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government must, as an urgent priority, ensure that care homes have access to all the necessary equipment and facilities (e.g. pods and lateral flow testing for visitors) to enable visits to be resumed

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

The Welsh Government will continue to work with care home sector stakeholders to ensure homes are supported to resume visiting. This has included developing visiting guidance to help care home providers plan for risk assessed visits, supported by webinars attended by care home managers where Public Health Wales colleagues presented in detail on the factors to consider when carrying out risk assessments. The Welsh Government is also providing direct financial support to assist providers with the costs of accommodating visits.

The Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services announced a pilot of care home visitor pods on 23 November to support Covid-secure visiting. As part of this pilot the Welsh Government is providing a total of 100 temporary visitor pods to adult care homes free of charge on a hire basis for a period of up to 26 weeks. They have been installed at care homes across Wales. The pilot included £1 million funding to reimburse providers choosing to hire their own visiting pods. This scheme closed on 26 February and was fully subscribed. A total of 54 visitor pods were funded on a hire basis under this scheme. The pilot will be evaluated.

As more routine visits have been able to resume, in line with Welsh Government guidance, providers are also receiving support with the costs associated with accommodating Covid-secure visits. This included a contribution towards staff time in facilitating visits and testing visitors, as well as the costs for providers in creating secure areas for testing visitors.

Welsh Government made £3,045,000 available to care homes via the hardship fund for this purpose in February and March which included a contributory payment towards the additional staff costs associated with the lateral flow device (LFD) visitor testing and a £600 contribution towards the cost of physical adaptations to support the creation of safe testing areas. This financial support has now been extended with a further of £6,824,572 being made available to care homes and some of the wider social care sector for the 13 week period 1 April - 30 June 2021.

Financial implications: None - Funding for this programme of work is being accommodated within existing group and Covid budgets.

Recommendation 2. The Welsh Government must, as a matter of urgency, strengthen its guidance to care home providers to ensure that allowing safe visits becomes the default position

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

The Welsh Government will continue to work closely with stakeholders through Care Inspectorate Wales's stakeholder care homes visiting group and keep its care home visiting guidance under close review. The current version of the guidance (version 6, published on 23 March) supports regular indoor visiting from two designated visitors, as well as additional visitors for an outdoor visit, or a visit in a visiting pod or similar enclosed space.

Any visit currently taking place within a care home poses a level of risk as a result of visitors entering care homes where there is still a level of community transmission. However the guidance sets out a range of mitigations homes can take to reduce this risk (testing for indoor visits, risk assessments etc.) and is clear in stating that 'we expect and encourage providers to facilitate visits wherever possible to do so, in a risk managed way'.

We will continue to emphasise our expectation that visits are facilitated as part of our regular engagement and communications with the sector. Prior to the updated guidance being issued in March allowing for more routine indoor visiting the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services met key stakeholders including Care Forum Wales, the Association of Directors of Social Services, Welsh Local Government Association, the Older People's Commissioner, Environmental Health Officers and representatives from Incident Management Teams (IMTs) and reinforced the importance of a consistent message from all partners to support and enable care home visits. This was followed up with another meeting on 30 March with the same group to assess how the introduction of indoor visiting was being implemented.

In response to issues raised during engagement with the sector Albert Heaney, Deputy Director General and Dr Frank Atherton, Chief Medical Officer also wrote to care home providers on 1 April giving further clarity on several matters. This included reinforcing Public Health Wales's advice that there is no compelling public health reason to wait until all residents (and/or staff) had completed both doses of the vaccine before resuming indoor visits. It concluded by emphasising that the expectation was that the vast majority of care homes would now be resuming regular, risk-assessed indoor visiting, unless there were exceptional circumstances which would mean this cannot take place.

The Welsh Government continues to engage closely with the sector to encourage risk-assessed visiting and will continue to do so as the position evolves.

Financial implications: Not applicable

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should work with Care Forum Wales to gain and maintain a clear picture of the position across Wales with regard to care home visits on an ongoing basis, and to facilitate the sharing of good practice between care homes with a view to increasing the number of homes that are supporting safe visits.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

The Welsh Government continues to work with key partners, including Care Forum Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales and the office of the Older People’s Commissioner, to monitor the position on care home visiting across Wales. The Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services meets Care Forum Wales representatives regularly, and they are also a member of the Social Services Planning and Response Group chaired by the Deputy Director General for Health and Social Services, Albert Heaney.

The Welsh Government’s regular residential care home group meeting attended by Public Health Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales and Local Authority and Health Board Environmental Health Officer (EHO) colleagues, is also a key mechanism for monitoring progress on visiting. During these meetings regular ‘on the ground’ feedback is provided by EHO colleagues, including on visiting and CIW and PHW also offer a strategic oversight of the position from the perspective of their organisations. Furthermore, Care Forum Wales are also members of the care home collaboration group that considers the care home action plan; this represents a further mechanism to hear from the sector.

CIW has also reinforced the Welsh Government position on visiting via their statement of 10 March: https://careinspectorate.wales/sites/default/files/2021-03/210312-Statement-visiting-care-homes-en_1.pdf

This sets out the importance of visiting and cautions against blanket visiting bans (where there is no active outbreak), and regular visits in line with national guidance being facilitated (unless advised it is unsafe to do so). These issues are specifically raised as being factors which could trigger an inspection.

Financial implications: Not applicable

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should write to all health boards to re-emphasise their responsibilities on hospital discharge and the procedures that must be followed in the event of an unsafe discharge taking place.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

In line with *A Healthier Wales*, which is about ensuring we have an holistic system of health and social care where we place patients in the appropriate settings for their care need, trying to avoid obstacles and boundaries, the need to ensure that

vulnerable people do not remain in hospital beds when they no longer need medical interventions has been a constant focus of the Welsh Government's guidance on patient discharge. We have been very conscious that the associated risks of Hospital Acquired infections and deterioration in mental health and wellbeing will have been heightened by the pandemic..

The importance of safely transferring people out of hospital beds and into more appropriate care settings was central to the COVID-19 Hospital Discharge Services (Wales) guidance, which issued in April last year. We updated the guidance in December to reflect the advice of the Welsh Government Technical Advisory Group (TAG) in relation to infectivity. The advice is that it is safe for people who have had Covid-19 to be discharged to a care home or other care setting when they are no longer infectious (i.e. a negative or low positive RT-PCR test (with Cycle Threshold (Ct) value of 35 or above and other specified criteria around lapse of time and cessation of symptoms). The guidance remains that patients who are infectious, but no longer need acute care, should move to a Covid-infectious step-down facility. For patients who have not had evidence of Covid-19 in hospital, the previous requirements for a negative test prior to discharge and an isolation period remain in place, to address the risk of acquiring infection after the test is taken.

We wrote to all partners in October to emphasise the need to discharge patients safely, in compliance with the guidance, and also wrote in respect of the December update. Most recently, we conducted a survey to gauge the impact of the guidance. In general compliance is good and we will continue to work closely with partners to support its implementation, resolve differences in interpretation that have come to light and support effective communication between partners. We encourage providers to report any suspected breaches of guidance on returning residents to their care homes, either directly to us, or via the Care Forums.

We understand all health boards have procedures that must be followed in the event of an unsafe discharge taking place. We will continue to support improved communication between all relevant parties to help to avoid further such incidents.

It is worth noting the report produced by Public Health Wales and Swansea University Medical School: [Risk factors for outbreaks of COVID-19 in care homes following hospital discharge: A national cohort analysis](#). This analysis showed that large care homes were at considerably greater risk of outbreaks throughout the epidemic, and after adjusting for care home size, a discharge from hospital was not associated with a significant increase in risk. The report highlighted other sources of outbreaks, including the risks to and from staff and the overlap with other community transmission. We will continue to appropriately support testing of care home staff and the supply of PPE for social care staff (see also responses to Recommendations 5 and 6) to promote the safety of care home environments.

Financial implications: Not applicable

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should monitor the turnaround times for test results for care home staff and residents to ensure results are received as soon as possible. This should ideally be within 24 hours of testing, and certainly not later than 48 hours

Welsh Government Response:

Accept in principle

The Welsh Government will continue to monitor turnaround times across all channels from both Lighthouse (LHL) and NHS Wales laboratories. This includes daily checking, weekly situation reports and updates to the TTP Programme Board. We have seen significant improvement in performance. We will continue to assess the system with the Department for Health and Social Care and Public Health Wales and will make necessary improvements to ensure performance is maintained and improved.

Recent engagement with the sector has indicated that care homes are satisfied with turnaround times from the LHL system. Where there are delays we will continue to follow these up on a case-by-case basis, although these issues are now rare. The cause of any delays may be due to a number of factors, including effective care home administration of the testing process prior to sending to the laboratory, delays with couriers and laboratory processing.

Financial implications: Not applicable

Recommendation 6. The Welsh Government must continue to maintain adequate and sustainable supplies of PPE that meet the recommended quality standards, monitor its efficacy in light of emerging new variants, and communicate effectively with the social care sector to provide assurance that the available PPE provides appropriate protection.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

The Welsh Government maintains a Pandemic Influenza stockpile, in line with the provisions of the UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011, which sets out the need for the four UK countries to maintain stockpiles of antivirals, antibiotics, consumables and personal protection equipment for front line health and social care staff. From the outset of the pandemic we made sure that these stockpiles were made available to the social care sector at the earliest opportunity. However, the statutory responsibility for the supply of Personal Protective Equipment to staff falls on employers (principally, within social care, these are local authorities, independent providers and the third sector). It is therefore the legal responsibility of the care provider to ensure that suitable PPE is available for their staff to use and that they are able to access this equipment when required.

In order to assist employers in the discharge of their statutory responsibility for the supply of Personal Protective Equipment to staff and the protection of those in their settings, the Welsh Government determined, so as to address supply difficulties within the sector, that it would undertake an additional role in procuring and then supporting the distribution of PPE through the NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership (NWSSP), Joint Equipment Centres and Local Authorities. In this context, the Welsh Government has committed to providing social care with the recommended PPE, free of charge, for the duration of the pandemic. We continue to work with local authorities and the NHS Shared Services Partnership to maintain appropriate procurement and distribution plans which will ensure the needs of social care are met.

The guidance on what PPE is recommended for use in social care has been developed by public health experts and is regularly reviewed as information regarding new variants becomes available. If the guidance were to change as a result of this new information, our plans for procurement and distribution would be amended accordingly.

Financial implications: None - Funding for this programme of work can be accommodated within existing budgets.

Recommendation 7. The Welsh Government should set out how the work being undertaken by Social Care Wales to professionalise the social care workforce will secure parity of esteem with the health care workforce, and the establishment of clear and properly-remunerated career pathways for social care workers.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

In “A Healthier Wales” we recognised the need for parity of esteem between health and social care professionals. Parity of esteem requires support for training, development and services available to the workforce, supporting health and wellbeing and improving working conditions.

Last year, the joint Social Care Wales and Health Education Improvement Wales Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care was launched. This strategy has seven high level themes covering seamless working models, recruitment and retention, skills, workforce supply and shape and education. The strategy sets out a joint ambition for a health and social care workforce that is motivated, engaged and valued, and that has the capacity, competence and confidence to meet the needs of the people of Wales. Delivery plans under the seven high level themes will support progress against that ambition.

A key component of the professionalisation of social care workers is the requirement to register with Social Care Wales. Registration ensures greater consistency in terms of the level of qualification required to be a social care worker, enables workers to better evidence their skills, sets out clearer expectations of workers and employers

through national codes of practice and helps provide greater public assurance on the quality of care. Registration enables better data to be collected to support future policy development relating to professionalisation and parity of esteem. It also enables better communication with the social care workforce and forms a significant step towards promoting a greater sense of identity as part of a wider social care profession.

A further pillar in relation to parity of esteem is workforce terms and conditions. Established in social partnership, the Social Care Fair Work Forum brings together government, employers and unions to define what fair work should look like and how it should be applied for social care workers in Wales. Social Care Wales is a member of this Forum. The Forum's position statement published at <https://gov.wales/social-care-fair-work-forum/position-statement> provides a clear vision of the Forum's priorities and how this work might be taken forward. This includes a particular focus on career development pathways and fair reward.

In its first year the WeCare.Wales campaign led by Social Care Wales reached out across a range of platforms - through news outlets, on-line and through social media – and its video stories have been viewed by over 100,000 people; this generated over 35,000 direct engagements between the sector and people interested in working in it. The campaign has been adopted by all seven regional partnerships and the materials are being used to promote roles in social care right across Wales. Social Care Wales continues to support the delivery of a sustainable social care workforce through attraction, recruitment and retention, and workforce wellbeing including the WeCare.Wales campaign.

Social Care Wales has made available a package of wellbeing support for social care workers, which includes access to mental health services including an Employee Assistance Scheme. Social Care Wales continues to build on this support.

Financial implications: Funding for this work can be accommodated within existing budgets.

Recommendation 8. The Welsh Government must, as a matter of urgency, work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission and Older People's Commissioner for Wales to ensure the human rights of older people are protected and upheld. We further recommend that the Welsh Government writes to the Sixth Senedd committee with responsibility for older people at the start of the Sixth Senedd to provide an explanation of what has been done to resolve the concerns raised by the EHRC and Older People's Commissioner.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

Throughout the pandemic, Welsh Government has worked closely with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Older People's Commissioner to understand their concerns relating to the rights of older people and take appropriate action. We have provided three detailed written responses setting out the scientific evidence and stakeholder engagement that informed our decision making processes;

how we complied with our legal duties to protect and promote the rights of older people living in care homes and how we are embedding lessons learnt into future practice. In addition, the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services continues to meet weekly with the Older People's Commissioner and both the Commissioner and the EHRC have met with the Minister for Health and Social Services and senior officials at different points during the pandemic.

We remain committed to, and will maintain, this open dialogue to ensure the rights of all older people in Wales are upheld and protected, including through the work we are taking forward on our Strategy for an Ageing Society.

Financial implications: Funding for this work can be accommodated within existing budgets.

Recommendation 9. The Welsh Government should work with the Ministerial Advisory Group and carers organisations to develop more creative ways of delivering respite and short breaks. This should include learning from best practice elsewhere.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

We would like to thank the Committee for highlighting this important issue. During the pandemic, officials held weekly meetings with carers' organisations to understand how carers were coping without the support of their usual networks. The First Minister and Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services also attended virtual meetings with unpaid carers. This engagement, along with responses to the public consultation on the Strategy for Unpaid Carers and advice from our Ministerial Advisory Group, demonstrated a pressing need to diversify and improve access to respite services in Wales.

In March 2021, the Welsh Government commissioned Carers Trust Wales to work with academics from Swansea and Bangor Universities to deliver a report setting out a roadmap for the future of respite and short breaks for unpaid carers in Wales. The report will be finalised by July 2021 and will identify exemplar local and regional models of respite services which have the potential to be scaled up at pace.

Our new Strategy for Unpaid Carers was launched by the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services on 23 March. We are currently working with the Ministerial Advisory Group on Unpaid Carers to co-produce a supporting delivery plan which will detail how we intend to take forward each of the four renewed national priorities for unpaid carers, including priority 3:

Supporting life alongside caring - all unpaid carers must have the opportunity to take breaks from their caring role to enable them to maintain their own health and well-being and have a life alongside caring.

Financial implications: None - Funding for this programme of work can be accommodated within existing budgets.

Recommendation 10. The Welsh Government must ensure sustainable funding for young carer services and prioritise the safe re-opening of face-to-face support for young and young adult carers.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept in Principle

The responsibility for provision of young carer services rests with local authorities, who are statutorily responsible for managing their financial affairs, reflecting that they are best placed to judge the local needs of their communities and to fund and commission services accordingly. Local authorities also have the flexibility to make decisions, informed by their assessment of the needs of their local populations and the sufficiency of the services available.

To support this, the Welsh Government has continued to place health and social care at the top of its priorities for the 2021-22 budget. In 2021-22, local authorities will receive £4.65 billion from the Welsh Government in core Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and non-domestic rates, to spend on delivering key services. This equates to an increase of 3.8% or £172 million on a like-for-like basis. The RSG covers funding for carers' services, whether delivered directly by local authorities or via their commissioned third or private sector providers.

Our new Strategy for Unpaid Carers was launched on 23 March 2021. This reaffirms our commitment to improving the recognition of, and support for unpaid carers, including young carers and young adult carers. We will work with the Carers' Ministerial Advisory Group, local authorities, the third sector and unpaid carers to develop a supporting delivery plan which will be published later this year.

Decisions on the resumption of face-to-face support for young and young adult carers sit with local authorities and service providers, having had regard to Welsh Government guidance. We were pleased that so many services responded swiftly to the pandemic and continued to provide help and support in a variety of ways to unpaid carers, and those they care for. We understand it has been difficult for young carers to access peer support groups or take a holiday, because of the closure of face to face services and the public health restrictions.

In the coming weeks we do expect community based and other forms of face to face provision, such as young carers' services, to be reopened as soon as it is safe to do so. More people should also be able to start taking or planning a break as we start to ease restrictions, with self-contained holiday accommodation in Wales permitted to open from late March and the easing of travel restrictions within Wales. We also continue to keep all of our coronavirus guidance under regular review, including that for community centres, and office premises.

For many young carers school and college plays a key role in helping them connect with friends and gain emotional and peer to peer support, as well as respite from caring

responsibilities at home. As more pupils return to school and learners to college this will help many young carers re-establish contact, and provide them with support from friends, teachers, school counselling services and other support as appropriate. As has been the case throughout the pandemic, children of key workers and vulnerable learners including young carers, have been able to receive face to face learning on the school site, with Special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) remaining open wherever possible.

Financial implications: None.

Recommendation 11. The Welsh Government should reconsider its response to Recommendation 26 of our report into the impact of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 in relation to carers—which called on the Welsh Government to provide long-term, sustainable and streamlined funding for third sector organisations delivering essential services to carers—with a view to implementing it as a matter of urgency.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept in Principle

We understand it can be challenging to plan and deliver support to unpaid carers, when services are commissioned on an annual basis, however the promised longer-term comprehensive spending review has been delayed because of the pandemic. Welsh Government has an annual budget process and therefore many spending decisions have to be made year on year.

As outlined in our response above, in 2021-22, local authorities will receive £4.65 billion from the Welsh Government in core Revenue Support Grant funding and non-domestic rates, to spend on delivering key services. This equates to an increase of 3.8% or £172 million on a like-for-like basis.

We greatly value the support provided to unpaid carers by third sector organisations, particularly their work over the past year to adapt existing provision and deliver at pace. However, Welsh Government funding to the third sector concentrates on providing additionality to statutory services - responsibility for the delivery of essential services to unpaid carers rests with local authorities.

Through our three-year Third Sector Sustainable Social Services grant scheme (2020-23), we continue to fund a diverse range of organisations, including carers' organisations, to deliver activity that supports the implementation and embedding of the key principles of the 2014 Act. Four carer-specific projects commenced on 1 April 2020, and will receive funding of £2.6m over the three years of the scheme. We also provided £1m funding in 2020-21 to local health boards and their carer partnerships, which include a number of third sector partners. This funding is again available in 2021-22.

The Integrated Care Fund is another source of support, including from the third sector, for unpaid carers, who continue to be identified as one of the priority groups within the

guidance for Regional Partnership Boards. In 2020-21 we invested £89m revenue funding in the ICF, and recognising the positive benefits of the ICF and building on success to date, we are investing another £89m revenue funding in 2021-22. The extension of the ICF for a further year until March 2022 will enable many vulnerable people across Wales, including unpaid carers and young carers, to continue to benefit from this important fund. The annual report on ICF for 2019-20 was recently published: <https://gov.wales/integrated-care-fund-icf-annual-report-2019-2020>.

It indicates that in 2019-20 regional partnership boards reported that 16% of their ICF funding was being invested in the social value sector, aiming for at least 20% by the end of March 2021.

We recognise that the third sector in Wales has played a vital part in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and will have an equally valuable role in our fair, just and green recovery. Currently we do not yet know what challenges recovery will bring, and the level of additional support which might be required. In recognition of this we have allocated an initial £2.5m to establish a third sector Resilience Fund for 2021-22.

Our third sector infrastructure has been instrumental in enabling the volunteer-led response to Covid. Having the infrastructure in place meant that the response was delivered quickly and was well co-ordinated. Third Sector Support Wales (TSSW) members have worked with voluntary sector organisations, Welsh Government, local authorities, health boards and others to help ensure the vulnerable were supported. Recognising this, we have provided a 10% (£450,000) uplift in the core funding for TSSW in 2021-22. This represents the first real terms increase in funding for the sector in over a decade. We hope that this increase will be maintained in the next Senedd term.

Financial implications: None. Assessment of potential future funding implications in relation to changes in government policy which might impact government budgets and statutory bodies or other organisations, will be considered as part of the ongoing development of unpaid carers policy, which we are taking forward in co-production with stakeholders.

<p>Recommendation 12. The Welsh Government should ensure that its communication and public awareness campaigns in respect of the COVID-19 vaccination programme includes effective targeting of information for unpaid carers, and makes sure that they are aware of their eligibility for vaccination.</p>
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Welsh Government Response:

Accept

A detailed communications and engagement strategy to promote uptake of the vaccination among all those eligible is in place, and we will continue to work closely with stakeholders to understand the needs of audiences and how best to reach them. We recognise the need to ensure as many unpaid carers as possible know they are eligible for a vaccination as part of priority group 6. National communications are important, as are targeted communications via stakeholders.

From 8 March, unpaid carers who were not already registered as an unpaid carer with their GP have been able to fill in an online self-referral form hosted by each local health board: <https://gov.wales/get-covid-19-vaccine-unpaid-carer>. We worked closely with Carers Wales, Carers Trust Wales, All Wales Forum of Parents and Carers to develop guidance regarding the Covid-19 vaccination of eligible unpaid carers as part of priority group 6: <https://gov.wales/covid-19-vaccination-unpaid-carers-html>.

We held a Q&A session for third sector carer organisations and unpaid carer leads in health and local government to explain unpaid carer eligibility and the self-referral form. Those who attended the Q&A session are key points of contact for unpaid carers who have questions regarding their eligibility and how to access an appointment.

We issued a press notice announcing the self-referral form and media coverage followed: <https://gov.wales/self-referral-online-form-unpaid-carers-launched-covid-19-vaccination>. Health boards have published information regarding unpaid carer eligibility on their websites alongside the self-referral form. A number of third sector organisations have published helpful guides explaining eligibility and the self-referral form process and have promoted the eligibility of unpaid carers for the Covid-19 vaccine through their social media channels.

Financial implications: None. Activity can be accommodated within existing budgets.

Recommendation 13. The Welsh Government should work with its partners to develop and implement an awareness-raising campaign to improve knowledge about the support available to carers, particularly in respect of financial support. This should include ensuring that people who have been identified as unpaid carers during the COVID-19 vaccination programme have access to information about their rights and the support they are entitled to.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

The Welsh Government has allocated £100,000 to Carers Wales and Carers Trust Wales to develop and deliver an awareness-raising campaign to improve knowledge about the support available to unpaid carers and their rights under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act. The campaign will be delivered in 2021 and we are working with both organisations to agree its aims and desired outcomes for unpaid carers.

We are conscious of the financial pressures being faced by many unpaid carers and are aware of the difficulties of balancing sustainable employment alongside caring responsibilities. The changes to the Welfare Benefits and Social Security system have raised issues here in Wales and Welsh Ministers continue to make representation over these changes and implement policy to protect those most at risk in our communities.

The unprecedented situation we now find ourselves in means many more people across Wales will need additional financial support to help them through this current crisis and beyond. It is more critical than ever that all those eligible for support are aware of, and are accessing, the full range of entitlements available, including benefits and services funded by Welsh Government and those delivered by local authorities in Wales. That is why we are now working to increase the take-up and raise awareness

of entitlements in accessing both devolved / non-devolved benefits. During January 2020 to September 2020, the benefit advice services delivered through the Welsh Government's Single Advice Fund helped households to claim over £20 million of additional welfare benefit income.

In response to the recommendations from the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee for 'Better Benefit Delivery in Wales' the Welsh Government accepted that more needs to be done to improve the take-up of both devolved and non-devolved welfare benefits and that this should be addressed through cross-government approaches and by joint working with local authorities and other key partners.

A Wider Income Maximisation and Benefit Take-up Working Group has since been established with the aim to promote and support a sustained increase in the take up of devolved and non-devolved welfare benefits and welfare payments. As part of this Working Group we are currently developing sub-groups to focus on specific areas. This will also include the take-up of Carers Allowance in Wales.

The Welsh Government ran a *National Welfare Benefit Take-up Campaign* from 1 March to 25 March to encourage people to check and claim the benefits they are entitled to. The campaign targeted low-income families across Wales as well as a wider audience of people who may now need support due to the financial impacts of the pandemic.

In conjunction with the National Campaign we are also taking forward:

- *Frontline Worker Awareness Raising* – free awareness raising sessions are being delivered to frontline workers to increase their understanding of welfare benefits and their ability to encourage people they support to claim their entitlement to welfare benefits.
- *Targeted Welfare Benefit Advice and Support* - test and learn projects are exploring how to best to engage with the groups who consistently fail to access the entitlements from the welfare benefit system. One of these projects is for older people and carers.

From 8 March, unpaid carers who are not already registered as an unpaid carer with their GP have been able to fill in an online self-referral form, with the option of completing the form over the telephone. On submission of the self-referral form, unpaid carers are asked whether they agree to their local health board sharing their details with their GP. This is intended to ensure GPs have the details of those unpaid carers who wish to have their caring role known, so that the GP can provide support as required.

The self-referral form has been designed for the specific purpose of registering eligible unpaid carers for the Covid-19 vaccine under Priority Group 6. The forms and the data submitted by unpaid carers are hosted by each local health board, rather than the Welsh Government. Importantly, unpaid carers have not explicitly agreed to their data being used for the purposes of an awareness-raising campaign. Due to UK GDPR data protection rules, the self-referral form is not a suitable mechanism for capturing

information regarding unpaid carers for a targeted awareness-raising campaign of this nature.

We do, however, have action in hand and planned to promote wider recognition by carers of their rights. Since 2018-19 we have provided £1m of annual funding to local health boards and their carer partnerships, to provide a range of support for unpaid carers of all ages. This includes supporting carers in general practice. From 2018 to 2020 a focus was on implementation of schemes supporting health professionals working in primary care and community care, to develop their carer awareness and understanding of how to identify carers, the issues that carers face and ways of working to better support carers. For 2020-21 the eligibility criteria were made more flexible but eligible activity continues to include work with GPs in 2021-22.

In addition, Carers Trust Wales and Carers Wales are currently working in partnership to transform carer recognition, respect and support across health and social care settings in Wales. This three year "Carer Aware" project is funded via the Sustainable Social Services Third Sector Grant and aims to strengthen and enhance implementation of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 by raising awareness of unpaid carers and the impact of caring, with the general public and relevant professionals. We will write to all partners in receipt of the funding outlined above to request that they work closely with GPs so that they are better able to support, or signpost to appropriate information, advice and assistance, any unpaid carers newly identified via the vaccination self-referral form.

Financial implications: None. Costs for this activity can be accommodated within existing budgets.

Recommendation 14. The Welsh Government should undertake equality impact assessments of decisions taken during the COVID-19 pandemic in respect of support/funding for unpaid carers to ensure that no groups or communities are being disproportionately impacted in the short or longer term.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept

Throughout the pandemic, the Welsh Government has been mindful of the requirement to comply with its statutory duties, including the Public Sector Equality Duty, as well as the need to ensure decisions made are compatible with the Convention rights.

We have undertaken a comprehensive equality impact assessment (EIA) of the Strategy for Unpaid Carers which was drafted during the pandemic via engagement with stakeholders and a public consultation. A summary of the EIA has been published and will inform the development of a delivery plan and ongoing policy decisions relating to unpaid carers:

<https://gov.wales/strategy-unpaid-carers-equality-impact-assessment>

All equality impact assessments have been undertaken on the following Covid 19 related decisions which impacted on unpaid carers:

- The provision of free PPE to unpaid carers meeting a specified criteria
- The allocation of £1.25million to Carers Trust Wales to administer the Carers' Support Fund. Carers Trust Wales will also publish an evaluation of this fund in spring 2021.
- The allocation of £60,000 direct funding to Carers Wales in 2020 – 21 to extend online psychological support to unpaid carers. Carers Wales will provide an end of project report to Welsh Government in the spring.

The EIA relating to the Welsh Government's *Strategic Digital Inclusion Framework* was utilised to inform the distribution of 440 laptops to young adult carers aged 16 – 18 and is published on our website:

<https://gov.wales/digital-inclusion-framework-equality-impact-assessment>

This initiative was delivered by Digital Communities Wales as part of Welsh Government's *Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being programme*. This contract commenced in July 2019 and runs until June 2022, with an option to extend by a further three years. An independent evaluation has been commissioned, with the Stage 1 report being published in February 2021:

<https://gov.wales/digital-communities-wales-digital-confidence-health-and-well-being-process-evaluation-and-theory-change>

There will be a further two stages of the evaluation which will help develop advice to Ministers for triggering the option to extend.

A series of equality and children's rights impact assessments have been undertaken for all learners and published on the Welsh Government's website. We fully accept that any change to education arrangements has a varied and broad impact on different groups including learners, staff, families, communities and young carers. Since the start of the pandemic, young carers have been identified as vulnerable learners and are referenced within the EIAs. Assessments to date have included: *Assessing the impact of the initial policy decisions taken in relation to the provision of education in response to Covid-19*

https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/integrated-impact-assessment-covid19-provision-for-education-children_0.pdf

There were also assessments of initial school closures; increasing operations in July 2020; learners returning to education settings in September 2020 and the autumn "firebreak" lockdown. Most recently assessments have been undertaken to consider how, from 12 April 2021, the remainder of secondary aged learners return to onsite teaching and learning. This completes the return of all learners to onsite provision.

There has also been an impact assessment on the COVID-19 alert levels and restrictions and their effects on children's rights. This was recently updated and published on 19 February 2021:

<https://gov.wales/alert-levels-and-restrictions-wales-childrens-rights-html>

Welsh Government followed the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) that unpaid carers should be included in cohort six of the Covid 19 vaccination programme.

Based on the recommendations of the JCVI, the 4 nations of the UK agreed to a largely age-based programme of roll-out for the vaccine. This approach is helping to ensure those at the highest risk are protected as soon as possible. More information on how the JCVI reached its conclusions and details on at-risk groups (including those who have been shielding and/or have underlying health conditions) can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020>

Annex A to the paper sets out the JCVI's analysis on 'COVID-19 vaccine and health inequalities: considerations for prioritisation and implementation'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/annex-a-covid-19-vaccine-and-health-inequalities-considerations-for-prioritisation-and-implementation>

It should be noted that these documents are regularly reviewed and both webpages were most recently updated by the JCVI on 6 January 2021. Previous versions can be accessed by selecting the link on the page headed "see all updates".

Financial implications: None.

Recommendation 15. The Welsh Government should make a statement early in the Sixth Senedd on its proposals to strengthen the arrangements for the social care sector and the outcome of the consultation on its White Paper: Rebalancing care and support, and how it will take account of relevant recommendations made by this and previous Senedd Health Committees.

Welsh Government Response:

Accept in Principle

It will be for the next Welsh Government to determine how to engage with the Senedd Health Committees on this matter. Officials are in the process of summarising the consultation responses to the White Paper: Rebalancing care and support. This summary will be published on the Welsh Government website within 12 weeks of the consultation closing. It will be important for the incoming Government to consider the consultation responses and all other available evidence, including recommendations from this and previous Senedd Health Committees, to make a clear statement of proposals to strengthen the arrangements for the social care sector early in the Sixth Senedd.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.