

RNIB

Cymru

Golwg gwahanol

See differently

10th November 2020

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Inquiry: Scrutiny of Covid-19 and its impact on the voluntary sector

1. Introduction

The Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee has requested evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary sector and I have pleasure in submitting a response from the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) Cymru.

2. About RNIB

RNIB is the leading charity dedicated to changing society to be more inclusive for the 2 million people living with sight loss throughout the UK. With a history that spans over 150 years, RNIB seeks to raise awareness of the issues facing blind and partially sighted people, and campaign for improvements to policy to empower them to challenge inequalities and live independent lives.

3. Our work in Wales

In Wales the organisation is represented by RNIB Cymru supporting over 120,000 people living with sight loss across the Principality, as well as their families, friends and carers.

As well as championing the end to inequality for disabled people a key focus of our work is to deliver practical solutions to improve the quality of life for our clients. Some of the ways RNIB Cymru is assisting blind and partially sighted people in Wales include:

- supporting clients, their family and friends throughout the coronavirus pandemic by raising their issues with public bodies including the provision of accessible information;
- providing information on shielding, accessing groceries, healthcare, sources of support for blind and partially sighted people and their families and friends;
- supporting clients through RNIB's Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLOs) who provide emotional and practical support to over 3,000 patients diagnosed with sight loss each year in Wales;
- increasing support through our telephone helpline to provide information, advice and referrals to other services including (but not definitive) advice on independent living products, money, benefits and finance, equality, rights and employment, children young people and education, technology, eye health, reading, home and leisure, and mental health and wellbeing;
- providing daily coronavirus updates, information and support via RNIB's Connect Radio station;
- offering opportunities to connect with others via telephone and online groups, talk and support groups and via RNIB's Connect Facebook groups to stay connected;
- and offering emergency mental health counselling sessions for clients.

Our influencing and campaigning activities include working collaboratively with other organisations such as Age Alliance, Public Health Wales, the NHS Confederation, Local Authorities, and the Wales Vision Forum. We also provide secretariat to the Cross-Party Group on Vision and work with Members of the Senedd to inform them about the issues facing blind and partially sighted people.

4. Key points and Recommendations

RNIB Cymru makes the following key points and recommendations to the Committee:

- To acknowledge and commend the Welsh Government for the emergency funding provided to the voluntary sector during the pandemic.
- To acknowledge and commend the WCVA for the easily accessible emergency grants application process and recommend this as an example of good practice.

- To recognise that many funders have responded by enabling RNIB to adapt its programmes to meet the needs of social distancing challenges.
- To call on the Welsh Government to run a social distancing public awareness campaign to emphasise the different challenges the 'new normal' presents to different people.
- To call on the Welsh Government to establish a priority grocery delivery scheme for disabled people who are not shielding (similar to the Defra/RNIB scheme in England).
- To call on the Welsh Government to appoint an accessibility lead to oversee the production of all key public health and other information in accessible formats.
- To call on the Welsh Government to provide advanced notice of grants that will be available for the voluntary sector in 2021 in order to allow the voluntary sector to plan effectively.
- To call on the Welsh Government to increase funding available to the voluntary sector for mental health services and provision.
- To recognise that funding for the voluntary sector in recovering from the impact of Covid-19 should cover the breadth of organisations operating in Wales.
- To call on the Welsh Government to include guidance on the volunteering activities that can be undertaken in Wales during the coronavirus pandemic to include specific guidance around supporting someone in their own home.

5. Funding and Service Delivery

Like all voluntary sector organisations, RNIB anticipate our finances to be significantly impacted by this pandemic. We are projecting a potential funding gap over the first six months of the 2020/21 financial year as a result of a projected reduction in fundraised income across the board. This includes cancellation of challenge and mass participation events, postponed face-to-face fundraising activities and reduced legacy income. We are working hard to identify and implement cost reductions across the organisation, including measures such as a recruitment freeze and delayed capital work, and have launched an urgent fundraising appeal as well as working closely with many funders and donors to secure much needed funds to help us meet the needs of vulnerable blind and partially sighted people during this crisis.

Whilst we are taking steps to mitigate the risks, we face we are also acutely aware that the financial impact of coronavirus may extend well beyond this current period and we are currently mapping the longer-term impact on our financial position.

Welsh Government Emergency Funding

The emergency fund provided by the Welsh Government through the WCVA has been well received and RNIB would like to acknowledge its gratitude for the information and communication about the Third Sector Resilience Fund provided by WCVA. This has included daily updates in relation to Covid-19 which cover a wide range of relevant areas of interest and importance to the sector. The information provided in relation to funding opportunities, changes to existing schemes and new funding pots has been timely and comprehensive. The grants application process administered by WCVA has been straightforward and easily accessible via their online application portal. RNIB would like to acknowledge and recommend this as an example of good practice.

RNIB Vision Friends programme

In addition, RNIB runs a programme funded by the Welsh Government's Sustainable Social Services Third Sector Grant entitled Vision Friends. This project creates a network of Vision Friends across Wales based in sheltered and supported community housing settings, and residential homes. Through a training programme, Vision Friends are provided with the knowledge, confidence and skills to be able to identify and recognise undetected sight loss, help assess mobility of tenants, reduce risk of falls, and support changes in everyday practical and social living skills, as well as signpost and enable people to access RNIB and other local services.

The Welsh Government has responded flexibly to enable RNIB to make essential changes to the programme to ensure successful and safe delivery of the programme during the pandemic. This is to be commended and acknowledged.

Non-Welsh Government Charitable funding and grants

Shape and Share Cymru programme

In response to the Covid-19 challenges some funders have been very responsive in working with RNIB to revise and extend our existing funding programmes such as the Shape and Share Cymru programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF). The programme provides opportunities for children and young people (0-25 years) with a vision impairment to come together with their families to share their experiences, support one another, learn new skills and have fun. The programme is available to all children and young people in Wales and enables them to build their confidence and independence in a friendly, supportive environment.

The commencement of the programme was extended due to Covid-19 and allowed delivery to be moved to an online system whilst social distancing restrictions continue. These events are now being run virtually with live interactive sessions for children and families to attend. RNIB Cymru has welcomed this responsive approach by the National Lottery. RNIB is in continual contact with the NLCF about existing projects and future opportunities. Understandably, NLCF is prioritising projects, via its existing schemes, that are addressing the issues that Covid-19 presents during this current time.

6. The effectiveness of support from the UK and Welsh Government and local authorities

Welsh Government funding

RNIB applied for, and was granted, funding from the WCVA's Voluntary Services Emergency Fund for a programme that covered core areas of our delivery that we enhanced and adapted to account for Covid-19 risks including assisting blind and partially sighted people to access the trusted information and services they urgently needed via RNIB's Sight Loss Advice Service; liaising with key professionals across the health and service sectors to promote safety and wellbeing; and maintaining voluntary peer led virtual support networks to combat isolation.

Mental health funding in Wales

The Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund administered by Mind Cymru was a very welcome initiative, but the programme had a limited pot of funds and was subsequently oversubscribed.

During the pandemic, RNIB has experienced a fourfold increase in demand from existing clients who have found their usual coping mechanisms of friends, family, neighbours and local sight loss face to face services unavailable, and/or altered dramatically, and with a 15% increase in calls to our helplines during periods of lockdown, it is essential to be able to cover the potential increased demands that the next six months will present our counselling service.

UK furlough scheme

RNIB has also utilised funding from the UK Government's national furlough scheme across RNIB (including Wales) to support a small number of staff roles (office receptionist, office property functions). These staff are expected to resume their normal roles once restrictions ease and it is safe to return to the office.

As a national charity RNIB has also been able to access England specific funding from the UK Government. This includes support from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) Loneliness Fund and the Mind/DCMS programme in England.

7. Volunteering and Community Resilience

RNIB could not operate the breadth of its activities without the dedication and commitment of our community of volunteers who support the charity via a wide range of activities such as befriending, fundraising and campaigning.

RNIB's volunteers largely consist of older people and approximately one quarter of our volunteers have some form of sight loss. These two groups have been hardest hit by the pandemic. For many of our volunteers, particularly those with some form of vision impairment, their volunteering roles boost their confidence, self-esteem and keep them connected with their community.

The pandemic has adversely affected our fundraising activities as our community fundraising volunteers have been unable to attend events etc which are having a direct impact on the volunteers involved as well as the funds raised.

Another impact of the pandemic on volunteering has been in terms of where and when volunteering activities can take place. As a result, RNIB

has adapted agilely to the needs of our beneficiaries with volunteers now facilitating telephone groups which were previously conducted face to face and an increasing number of groups are being established by volunteers with staff support.

In addition, some areas of volunteering activity have seen an increase in the number of hours volunteers commit to each month. For example, volunteering in RNIB's Transcription Service which transcribes books and magazines into accessible formats for blind and partially sighted people (such as Braille, large print, and audio CD) have seen an increase from 220 average volunteering hours a month from April 2019 to the end of March 2020, compared to 426 hours a month in the first six months of 2020 (April 2020 to the end of September 2020).

Our Wales Advisory Group of blind and partially sighted people is responsible for taking forward our Communities connection work and inputting and supporting our campaigns and influencing work. The Group now meets monthly and online, to inform our work in Wales. Some of the planned focus areas have changed in response to the pandemic such as the accessibility of streets.

During the lockdown RNIB has continued to support the wellbeing of volunteers and keep them connected and informed via a variety of channels including newsletters, webinars and via conference calls. Despite the difficulties, we have been astounded by their resilience and ability to move from face to face roles to remotely supporting blind and partially sighted people.

For instance, our sister Charity SightLife, previously called Cardiff Institute of the Blind, has a large number of community volunteers who would ordinarily visit the homes of blind and partially sight people. They have been redeployed and instead use their skills to make hundreds of outreach calls, checking in, and reassuring blind and partially sighted people. These calls have been a lifeline to many of our clients. However, there are a number of extremely vulnerable deafblind clients who need face to face support which our volunteers are unable to support during this time. As a consequence, staff are continuing to provide a small number of home visits to these clients.

Another key role RNIB's volunteers have undertaken during the crisis is to campaign and voice their concerns to their local authorities regarding

street accessibility, in light of the changes brought about by the pandemic.

However, there are a number of extremely vulnerable deafblind clients who need face to face support which our volunteers are unable to support during this time. As a consequence, staff are continuing to provide a small number of home visits to these clients.

8. Community Resilience

Since March 2020 we have responded agilely to the changing needs of our beneficiaries during the Covid-19 pandemic including increasing our helpline capacity so our team of advisors can offer advice and support to anyone with sight loss to the increasing number of calls from blind and partially sighted people who are struggling with different aspects of the lockdown.

At the beginning of the crisis it was clear our customers' main concern was accessing groceries. Access to supermarkets and online delivery slots was limited as many blind and partially sighted people are not on the Government's priority list for shopping delivery slots. RNIB has been proactively discussing with both the UK Government and the Welsh Government solutions to address this and in England, through a partnership with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), RNIB has been able to directly refer blind and partially sighted people through to dedicated priority delivery slots from two major national supermarkets. To offer this solution in one part of the UK but not in another is unfair and puts Welsh people with sight loss at a disadvantage. With Wales already having entered another period of lockdown we are therefore calling on the Welsh Government to establish a priority grocery delivery scheme for disabled people similar to that established by DEFRA and RNIB.

Additionally, we have been working with retailers to understand the challenges blind and partially sighted people are facing and developed guidance for supermarkets on how to help make shopping accessible both in-store and online. Guidance has also been provided for retail and the leisure industries and on how to support employees with sight loss in work.

Inaccessible Information

During the lockdown accessing information particularly around shielding, lockdown rules, and hospital appointments is vital for blind and partially sighted people but it can be extremely challenging if it is not provided in a suitable way that they can read (where applicable) and understand. As the lockdown rules eased during the summer and changes were introduced to street layouts and public transport to maintain social distancing many of our clients found it challenging to plan their journeys and maintain their safety and independence.

RNIB has previously provided written and oral evidence to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry into Covid-19 on this issue and indeed the Committee included the recommendation that the Welsh Government should appoint an accessibility lead to oversee the production of all key public health and other information in accessible formats, in their final report 'Into sharp relief: inequality and the pandemic'. However, we have yet to see these recommendations being actioned in a meaningful way.

Social distancing challenges

In addition, as lockdown conditions were eased in the summer, and Wales adapted to a new socially distanced world, a wide range of changes have been implemented at short notice, but not all essential information and services are accessible.

RNIB is continually campaigning for a more accessible society and raising issues such as inaccessible government updates on coronavirus with both the UK Government and the Welsh Government.

Moreover, the changes to street layouts and public spaces were made without consideration of the potential impact they would have on people with disabilities.

9. Good Practice and Future Opportunities and Challenges

The ongoing pandemic, combined with the significant economic challenges facing Wales, as well as the rest of the UK, will mean that the services the voluntary sector provides to thousands of low income and vulnerable clients throughout Wales will be relied upon as never before. The impact on fundraising activity is also likely to continue for some time as the need for social distancing continues. Brexit and the end of EU structural funds threatens a further reduction and also the prospect of

increasing reliance upon state, rather than European funding, which provided more independence.

Sustainable funding

Given the already precarious situation and current lockdown measures in force in Wales RNIB would welcome an early indication of future grants that will be available in Wales for the 2021 financial year and beyond. For example, the Welsh Government's Sustainable Social Services Third Sector Grant and Section 64 mental health renewal. This would enable RNIB to forward plan effectively. Current Covid-19 emergency funding streams are short term in nature and RNIB would recommend a longer term-approach is required.

In addition, funding pots need to be responsive and flexible and present longer-term funding to take account of the recovery of vulnerable clients and communities in Wales and allow for the development of robust solutions, continuity of staff engagement and skills retention, and certainty of delivery for beneficiaries.

Mental Health

Research¹ has shown that people with sight loss are more than twice as likely to have experienced difficulties with unhappiness or depression compared to the UK average. Many blind and partially sighted people have faced anxiety and even fear about the unique challenges they have experienced since the pandemic reached the UK in March 2020.

Amongst the initiatives RNIB has introduced include free emergency mental health sessions delivered by experienced counsellors over the phone. The service provides emotional support for anyone with a visual impairment who is experiencing anxiety and stress as a result of the pandemic. A range of clients are being referred into the service and it is

¹ Understanding Society longitudinal study, University of Essex, 2016-18. Available at www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/.

clear that social distancing presents huge challenges for people with sight loss.

Given the issues that blind and partially sighted people in Wales have faced during the pandemic we believe that additional funding is needed in this area to help vulnerable communities recover sufficiently. This includes a greater focus on funding for projects which address isolation, community engagement and mental health issues as this will be an ongoing requirement to meet the continuing impacts of Covid-19.

RNIB's experience shows that funding that has been specifically made available during the pandemic in Wales has been geared towards smaller organisations rather than larger organisations like RNIB who operate at a national level and serve a large and geographically dispersed client base. It is positive that funding has been made available to help assist with preventing the worsening of Covid-19's impacts in the community but it should be recognised that larger voluntary organisations also have the same funding challenges as community-based organisations.