



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Review of the support for non-shielding vulnerable people during COVID-19: summary

This report presents findings from an online survey administered by the Welsh Government to local authorities and county voluntary councils in August 2020.

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1. Background

The aim of the survey was to collect information on how local authorities and county voluntary councils (CVCs) were providing services for non-shielding vulnerable people (NSV), including their use of volunteers, and capacity to scale up if demand for services increased.

All 22 local authorities across Wales submitted responses to the survey, 10 of which had prepared their responses jointly with the CVC operating in their area. In addition, two CVCs submitted individual responses. The survey responses were analysed in-house by social researchers in the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services to identify key themes and experiences.

The rest of this paper presents key findings under the following topics:

- work and activities to support non-shielding vulnerable people
- the positive effects of COVID-19
- broader lessons and future priorities

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2. Work and activities to support non-shielding vulnerable people

Local authorities and civil society organisations responded rapidly to provide support to the most vulnerable and isolated people

All local authorities were working with community and third sector organisations to provide a range of support. Many emphasised that getting coordination right was an immediate issue during the early stages of the pandemic to ensure vulnerable people did not fall through gaps in the safety net of support.

Care services for adults requiring support or protection continued but were refocused towards the provision of distanced, online and telephone-based support.

Local authorities and larger third sector organisations prioritised the welfare of vulnerable children but changed the model of delivery in line with restrictions on social distancing and contact.

Many local authorities adopted a proactive ‘assertive outreach’ approach to identify shielding and NSV residents over the age of 70

Individuals were contacted and assessed via telephone and offered bespoke packages of support delivered by a range of public and third sector partner organisations, community groups and volunteers.

Local area-based teams were established within most local authorities to provide support for NSV groups and individuals self-isolating as part of Test, Trace, Protect. This enabled effective triage and referrals to appropriate services, and made it easier for residents to identify where they needed to access support quickly.

Nearly all local authorities reported that the lockdown had reinforced the importance of digital inclusion

Many local authorities reported that large sections of their populations were unable to access critical online services, such as finding up-to-date and accurate

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information, accessing local health advice and services, and buy essentials online, or connect with family, friends and support networks.

Limitations in broadband connectivity and mobile cellular signal and a lack of digital skills and confidence, especially among the more vulnerable and isolated older population, was highlighted as a particular problem in rural areas. These issues, together with the lack of access to appropriate digital equipment had meant that many vulnerable people had been unable to, or chose not to access the online support that was available.

Local authorities and CVCs had developed practical initiatives aimed at reducing digital exclusion. This included improving access to the internet, increasing availability of assistive technologies within communities, and providing personalised support to help vulnerable people develop digital skills.

The pandemic appears to have increased levels of volunteering at the local level

The survey indicated that volunteers were offering their time informally, as well as through third sector organisations and community support groups, providing supporting for vulnerable people.

The pandemic had resulted in more and new forms of volunteering. Some support groups had been established in response to the crisis, while others had existed before the pandemic but evolved their key objectives in order to organise community support.

As restrictions eased, there was a reported fall in requests for support for services such as befriending, keeping in touch calls and delivery of food boxes and prescriptions

Most local authorities noted they were signposting vulnerable residents to support services within their localities and encouraging greater reliance on family, friends and neighbourhood support to help the transition back to independent living.

CVCs reported an increase in demand for mental health support, particularly

among children, young people and the older population, and those affected by bereavement, social isolation and loneliness. There was also some evidence of increased demand for information and advice around finance and debt, housing-related support services and support from food banks.

The pandemic and its associated measures had given rise to some positive changes across the public, private and third sector, as well in the behaviour of the residents and communities they were working with

Local authorities and CVCs reported improved partnership working with public and third sector bodies.

Digital advances enabled local authorities and community and third sector groups to reach a wider range of individuals, including those not previously engaged with services and those who were not engaged with online activities. It was also reported that advances in agile working and homeworking efficiencies and effective use of IT, as well as enhanced use of social media, had enabled stronger links to be forged with primary care settings and the broader health and care community.

There was a common view among local authorities and CVCs of the pandemic being a catalyst for increased community cohesion, with people supporting their neighbours by shopping for food or collecting prescriptions, providing donations to food banks and helping vulnerable people access digital services.

Local authorities and CVCs noted that they had developed services and responses during the last six months that could be scaled up at short notice if required. Local authorities were preparing recovery plans in close partnership with key partners across the public, private and community and third sectors within their areas.

The local authority workforce had proved to be highly flexible and robust over recent months, but there were concerns over 'burn-out' among some staff groups due to the pressures placed on departments and teams delivering critical services.

3. Broader lessons and future priorities

There is a need for early engagement with local authorities on shielding guidance and arrangements

Respondents called for clear guidance on any changes to the national COVID-19 response and support for local authorities on developing clear, up-to-date and appropriate messaging to residents using a range of communication methods.

Mental health was a commonly raised issue in relation to the short, medium and long term priorities

Some common concerns included:

- the effect of restrictions on loneliness and isolation
- the impact on individuals with existing mental health problems, especially young people
- anxiety among vulnerable residents as restrictions were eased

CVCs called for wider recognition of the capabilities within the community and third sector to deliver support services tailored to local needs

Some of the issues raised by local authorities and CVCs included:

- concerns about cuts in funding
- a reduction in the range of services and its impact on local communities
- the challenge of finding new ways to respond to changing needs and priorities

More support is required to improve digital skills and access among vulnerable and disadvantaged groups

It was emphasised that funding to support digital inclusion work has been very useful and effective during the pandemic. However, participants reported a need for more funding to support upskilling and training activity, particularly among vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to ensure they can take advantage of the

financial, health and social benefits of getting online.

The momentum that has built up around volunteering needs to be maintained

The COVID-19 crisis has seen a large increase in the number of volunteers coming forward to offer practical and social support to vulnerable and isolated people. Many of the self-organised and mutual support groups that were set up in response to the pandemic have the potential to further increase levels of social connection at the local community level.

It was suggested that the public sector and third sector organisations and groups should continue this work to maintain the positive momentum.

4. Contact details

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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