Review of the support for non-shielding vulnerable people (NSV) during Covid-19

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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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1.   Background

1.1   This paper presents findings from an online survey administered by the Welsh Government to local authorities and county voluntary councils (CVCs) in August 2020 on behalf of Julie James, Minister for Housing and Local Government.

1.2   The aim of the survey was to collect information on how local authorities and 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.

1.3   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.

1.4   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

- Future capacity

- Broader lessons and future priorities

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

2.1   Local authorities generally maintained the day-to-day responsibility for making sure that support was offered to those identified as vulnerable, as well as others who were identified and assessed as needing help. All local authorities were working with community and third sector organisations to provide this support and many emphasised that getting coordination right was an immediate issue during the early stages of the pandemic, as it was essential that vulnerable people did not fall through gaps in the safety net of support.

Ongoing delivery of core services

Local authorities and CVCs maintained core services for its most vulnerable residents and individuals required to self-isolate, in line with Welsh Government advice and guidelines

Care services

2.2   Care services for adults requiring support or protection (including people leaving hospital and carers and their families) continued but were redesigned and refocused towards the provision of distanced, online and telephone-based support. Torfaen County Borough Council reported that a local dementia group operating within the county had set up WhatsApp groups and weekly Zoom chats for residents with dementia. Tailored support was also provided via third sector care groups, supplemented by volunteer support for shopping, prescription collections, welfare calls and to provide general help within the home.

2.3   A number of local authorities reported that many adults receiving social care support within their areas chose to rely on informal care provided by family caregivers during the lockdown period to minimise footfall into homes. This led to a subsequent increase in demand for third sector support. Almost all local authorities had adapted their care support services in response to the increased demand by enhancing their information and advice offer, re-training council staff, using more volunteers and making increased use of digital technology, as the following examples show:

-    Denbighshire County Council and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board brought together community nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social services and carer assessors – working closely with the third sector, primary care teams and

mental health workers – to identify and signpost carers to services and support. Specific support provided during the lockdown period included helping carers with coping strategies and advice on how to maintain and improve their own physical and emotional wellbeing, carrying out regular welfare calls, distribution of food and activity boxes to vulnerable carers and supporting unpaid carers to access PPE from the council.

- The Bridgend Carers Wellbeing Service was established during the lockdown to provide a 24-hour helpline providing information and advice for carers and signposting to community resources and support. The local authority-commissioned service was provided by Carers Trust South East Wales who worked with local third sector groups to provide support on issues ranging from advice on finances, housing, accessing education, training or employment opportunities, to maintaining physical health and emotional wellbeing.

- Carer delivery organisations operating across Flintshire introduced online or telephone-based 'keeping in touch' calls and immediate support for unpaid carers, enabling them to stay connected with organisations and each other, reducing loneliness and isolation risks. The delivery organisations reported that these support services had been positively received and would continue as part of their core offer going forward.

- Gwynedd Council's DementiaGo team, which provides physical activity sessions for residents living with dementia, maintained contact with carers through online and telephone activities, including cuppa and cake sessions.

- The Dementia Support Service run by Carers Trust North Wales was providing bespoke home-based, daytime respite care across Anglesey for individuals living with dementia.

- A number of local authorities noted that they continued to provide carers sitting services for families and carers during lockdown and reported an increase in demand for the services due to the closure of respite care services.

- Denbighshire County Council introduced a new voluntary organisation grant process, co-ordinated by its Community Support Service, which aimed to be flexible and open to alternative service delivery ideas. Through this process, funding was provided to purchase digital equipment and subscriptions to reduce isolation and enhance wellbeing among the carer community.

- Cardiff Third Sector Council facilitated a Learning Disabilities workshop for carers to hear their experiences of accessing support during the pandemic and identify any gaps in provision. A key outcome of this session was the establishment of new support

groups providing digital support and technology for carers to improve access to various services, including food and other needs, and guides and resources for individuals choosing to look after their own care and support needs.

Children's services

2.4   The initial weeks of the lockdown were a period of enormous change, both for children and families, and for the social care workforce and organisations that support them. The survey indicated that the immediate response to the crisis involved extraordinary effort, with local authorities, multi-agency partners, community groups and third sector organisations responding positively by remodelling their provision and service delivery and working with a range of partners to ensure that effective support was given to vulnerable families.

2.5   The survey provided evidence across Wales of practitioners working alongside families and across organisational divides, ensuring that assistance was provided promptly and that children's needs were being addressed.

2.6   Local authorities and larger third sector organisations had prioritised the safeguarding and welfare of vulnerable children and sustained the delivery of social care services, while changing the model of delivery in line with government restrictions on social distancing and contact. Priority was given to face-to-face contact with children and families, but with appropriate flexibility in how this was being delivered. As an example, where direct contact could not be provided safely, visits and assessments were allowed to take place over the telephone or via video link, with the aim of maintaining support to children as part of multi-agency plans.

2.7   Multi-disciplinary 'outreach' teams were being used in some authorities to provide practical and emotional care and support to children and their families. It was reported that these teams were responding to a range of issues, such as increased levels of anxiety among children and young people and concerns from parents about finances and access to food and basic necessities.

2.8   As an example, Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations (BAVO) the CVC for Bridgend County Borough secured funding from the Regional Transformation Programme to employ a community navigator based within the council's multi-agency safeguarding hub to support the most vulnerable families, at a time when other services (such as family support and health visiting) were under pressure due to reduced staffing.

2.9   Similarly, Flintshire Council reported an increase in the complexity and frequency of calls through its Family Information Service, as well as a huge increase in traffic to web pages,

during the first half of 2020 compared with the previous year. Early intervention support for vulnerable families was being delivered through the Early Help Hub, an ongoing partnership between the local authority and key partners from the public and third sector.

2.10   In Ceredigion, virtual family groups and courses were made available to children and families across the county, and additional support was provided to families without access to digital equipment. The local authority noted that the virtual sessions had been positively received and well attended.

2.11   A number of local authorities noted that systems were put in place across schools, social services and youth service departments and family support organisations to identify and support vulnerable learners who were not linked to statutory services. As part of this work, educational staff in a number of local authority areas maintained links with children and families on their school registers to provide bespoke learning activities and distribute personal digital devices and equipment where needed. In some cases these were supported by welfare calls or visits to the home.

2.12   Local authorities also reported that families had responded positively to the various approaches to free school meal provision developed within their areas, mainly through food deliveries or the provision of vouchers and financial assistance. In Flintshire, support was provided for children who were eligible for free school meals to ensure that they were not disadvantaged by school closures. This was an initial offer of a doorstep packed lunch delivery which operated for seven weeks during the lockdown period and then moved onto a direct payment model which remained in place throughout the summer up to start of the new school term in September 2020.

Proactive and assertive outreach

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

2.13   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. Processes were also in place to ensure any individuals contacting local authorities for support were signposted to, or offered, appropriate advice and support.

2.14   Local authorities and the third sector were working together to plan and coordinate local area-based teams (variously termed 'locality response teams', 'buddy schemes', 'community navigators', 'community connectors', 'local asset coordinators') providing

support for NSV groups and individuals self-isolating as part of the NHS Wales Test, Trace, Protect service.

2.15 Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations (PAVO), with the support of Powys County Council, Powys Teaching Health Board and other partners, established a Community Sector Emergency Response Team (C-SERT) to coordinate and support the emergency response to vulnerable people through the use of both formal and informal volunteers. The team of volunteers directly supported key health and social care services, including domiciliary, residential and nursing care, through providing support with shopping and medication collection, as well as a befriending service to help tackle loneliness and social isolation among vulnerable residents.

2.16 In Rhondda Cynon Taff, seven Community Resilience Hubs were established across the county in March to provide support for residents on the NHS shielded patients list and vulnerable people over the age of 70. The teams contacted all individuals and matched their needs to local volunteers, community groups and third sector organisations which offered a range of support, including shopping, prescription collection, dog walking and befriending services. By June, over 2,800 vulnerable residents within the county had been supported by the resilience teams and nearly 11,000 residents on the shielded patients list were contacted by telephone and offered support.

2.17 In Pembrokeshire, a multi-agency community hub involving a partnership between the CVC, local authority, Local Health Board and Delta Wellbeing (a multi-function, 24-hour call handling service operating across south-west Wales) was set up. The hub provided a one stop shop for vulnerable residents on the shielded patients list or self-isolating and matched those in need with a community support group for a range of tasks, such as shopping and prescription collections. It also provided bespoke solutions to support contact with families at end of life and referrals to statutory organisations.

2.18 BAVO directly managed a pool of volunteers who worked closely with Community Navigators and local community and third sector organisations across the county to respond to varying needs within communities, such as providing support for shopping, prescription collections, food bank vouchers, befriending services and welfare visits to vulnerable residents. The Community Navigators scheme covers the whole of the county and is funded through the Welsh Government's Integrated Care Fund.

2.19 The Môn Community Link service operating on Anglesey and coordinated by Medrwn Môn acted as a single point of contact for vulnerable residents to obtain information and advice on third sector organisations and support provided within their local areas. The scheme, in

partnership with the volunteer-led area support teams delivered 1,800 prescription to vulnerable residents, carried out 8,426 'keeping in touch' calls and made 160 referrals to food banks during the lockdown period. The service also offered support through the 'Good Turn' scheme, a volunteer-led local community transport service run by volunteers who used their own cars to provide access to medical appointments and shopping and other services for vulnerable residents across Anglesey. During the 20 week period from the start of lockdown to the first week in August, over 12,000 'good turns' were facilitated for 1,689 residents across the county.

2.20   Overall, local authorities and CVCs reported that these support mechanisms had been positively received within their areas. Many noted that they enabled effective triage and referrals to appropriate services, were more responsive to community needs and provided greater clarity, making it easier for residents to identify where they needed to go for support and to access that support quickly. They also enabled lower level support (such as doorstep delivery of food boxes and shopping, prescription collection and drop-off services, telephone and face-to-face befriending services) to be met by volunteers and redeployed council staff, freeing up contracted service providers to continue to support those with higher needs.

Sign-posting support

Nearly all local authorities were continuously mapping local and national support services provided by public services, community groups and voluntary organisations to provide up-to-date directories and menus hosted on council homepages

2.21   A number of CVCs also noted that they were providing advice and information to third sector and community organisations within their areas through virtual forums, online training courses and briefing documents. As an example, Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Service (NPTCVS) had continued to facilitate a number of third sector forums, including the Third Sector Strategic Forum, Neath Port Talbot Voluntary Sector Children and Young People's Forum and the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Forum. The forums, which are open to all third sector organisations based or operating within the Neath Port Talbot area, including national voluntary organisations, had moved online since the beginning of the pandemic and enabled organisations to discuss or seek advice on issues relating to Covid-19, share information with key partners and wider groups, and work together to support vulnerable residents.

2.22 In addition, in response to increased demand from third sector and community groups for signposting opportunities, access to funding and health and safety advice, Cardiff Third Sector Council developed a series of online courses and briefing documents on a range of topics, including:

- Supporting vulnerable people and at risk groups;

- Volunteering and working with volunteers;

- Funding and support to groups;

- Guidance and Support for groups and organisations planning to return to the workplace or open to the public;

- Easing of Lockdown FAQs (following a session on reopening offices and services).

Digital inclusion support

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

2.23   In response, a number of local authorities and CVCs had taken practical steps to address the issue of digital exclusion within their respective areas. Since the beginning of the pandemic, many of the support services and social interactions provided by local authorities and the third sector had moved online, which led to an increased use of the internet and online video-conferencing platforms to enable people to access the help and information and advice needed to cope with the crisis.

2.24   Yet 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 information, accessing local health advice and services, and buy essentials online, or connect with family, friends and support networks. This was often because these residents either did not own or could not afford devices, did not have access to the internet or mobile data, or did not have the skills to manage online communication.

2.25   It was widely reported that older people and low-income groups were less likely to own suitable digital equipment and devices such as a computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone and be able to afford internet or mobile phone data packages. With public libraries and local community centres closed, it was noted that there was a lack of access to alternative provision. Authorities reported that there were are also large numbers of households with children without access to electronic devices and equipment, which severely limited home learning, as well as social interaction.

2.26   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. A number of rural authorities emphasised that 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.

2.27   In the face of these barriers, many authorities and community and third sector groups developed approaches that aimed to reduce digital exclusion through improving access to the internet, increasing the availability of digital and assistive technologies within local communities, and providing personalised support to help vulnerable people to develop their digital skills and understand the benefits of getting online. These initiatives were often

organised in very short time periods. The survey highlighted initiatives to provide access to digital technology to supply devices to vulnerable groups to enable them stay independent and manage their daily lives during the pandemic.

2.28   Anglesey Council, in partnership with Age Cymru Gwynedd a Môn and Medrwn Môn, had secured funding to develop a virtual community hubs programme alongside the community hubs and area support teams, allowing vulnerable and isolated residents to take part in online group activities, virtual tours of local landmarks and online events. At the time the research was carried out, the programme had distributed 120 electronic devices and 90 day data bundles to members of the hubs who were not connected to the internet, and was providing online and telephone-based digital support via 'digital champions'. The role of these volunteers was to share and pass on their digital skills, provide general advice, such as how to use a tablet and install and use video calling and messaging software, and also increase the confidence of those who were struggling to get online. They also provided welcome social interaction for vulnerable and isolated rural residents.

2.29   As well as meeting people's practical needs, community and third sector organisations and groups and local authority teams in Pembrokeshire and Monmouthshire were delivering projects that aimed to reduce social isolation and loneliness among vulnerable rural residents. These new projects enabled people to stay in contact online and were often developed and delivered within short timescales.

Volunteering

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

2.30   The survey indicated that volunteers were offering their time informally, as well as through third sector and community organisations, and playing a key role in supporting vulnerable people. The pandemic had resulted in more and new forms of volunteering, including:

- Informal volunteering support provided at a local community level or within a local area;

- Formal volunteering through community and third sector groups.

2.31   Two rural local authorities suggested that volunteering roles within their areas had become less structured and more embedded within local communities during the pandemic, with residents choosing to volunteer informally to support neighbours rather than through more formal structures led by the local authority or third sector organisations. There appeared to be a strong emphasis on community-led support and activity within both of these

authorities, as evidenced by the introduction of the 'Good Turn' scheme in Anglesey and the 'Connect to Kindness' campaign in Pembrokeshire.

2.32   Wider support for volunteering also appears to have increased during the crisis, with examples being given in the survey of employees who were furloughed giving their time to work as volunteers and local authority staff also being encouraged to volunteer outside their normal roles.

2.33   Most local authorities had taken on the role of coordinating formal volunteering at a local level, working closely with third sector and community organisations and groups in their areas. Volunteers were recruited using a combination of approaches, for example through local authority-led recruitment campaigns, CVCs, community and mutual-support groups and via the Volunteering Wales website. At the time the survey was carried out, ten local authorities and one CVC noted that they had more volunteers available than was needed, and a further eight local authorities noted that they had enough, but not an excess of volunteers within their areas.

Self-organised or mutual support groups

2.34   Local authorities and CVCs noted that groups of people had worked together to provide support to vulnerable members of their local community.

2.35   Some of these 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. Their activities varied; some of the groups had organised online social activities such as weekly online coffee mornings, general catch-ups and telephone befriending services to reach vulnerable people who needed help, and others offered practical support for shopping, prescription collections, dog walking and days out for individuals who had been shielding.

2.36   In Powys, 112 Covid-19 support groups had been established between March and August, with support from PAVO. The groups had developed organically and the type of support provided was built around networks already in place across the county. Similarly, over 100 community support groups were established across Pembrokeshire along with the Pembrokeshire Community Support Network (PCSN), both of which were supported by PAVS.

2.37   In Wrexham, community networks were established within the Polish and Portuguese communities and since the start of the pandemic, 22 food provision schemes had been established to distribute food parcels to residents who were shielding and to vulnerable

families across the county. Only four of the schemes had been in operation before the pandemic.

2.38   In Cardiff, a number of mutual aid groups were quickly established across the city at the outset of the pandemic, including Cardiff Covid-19 Mutual Aid Network; Pentwyn & Llanedeyrn Covid-19 Help; Llanishen Good Neighbours and Rumney Coronavirus Support Group.

2.39   A number of rural authorities also noted that local businesses, such as village shops and butchers, were also continuing to offering support such as essential deliveries to meet demand for support within their local areas.

Communication

Local authorities and CVCs used a wide range of communication channels to distribute bilingual and easy to read key messages to residents

2.40   The communication channels used by local authorities and CVCs included:

- Digital media - videos, websites, social media

- Print media - information booklets distributed to local households (Ynys Mon), volunteers distributing calling cards (Anglesey), door-to-door delivery of 'good neighbour' cards (Merthyr), leaflet drops by elected members (RCT), infographics

- Broadcast media (media releases and radio / digital advertising and local press)

- Council websites were key sources of information for residents during the pandemic, providing daily updates on Covid-19 support; directories of local support services and information on grant funding

- Local authorities working closely with key partners such as the local health boards, the Welsh police forces and town and community councils to disseminate information, and also voluntary / community support partners by using council communication channels to share information.

Changes in the provision of support post-lockdown

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

2.41   Many of the area-based support teams or community hubs that were set up to provide support during the lockdown period were set to remain in place throughout the autumn and winter period, but at a reduced capacity. For example, providing volunteer-led support for only part of the week or focusing support on the most vulnerable residents or those required to self-isolate as part of the Test, Trace, Protect service.

2.42   Alongside this, most local authorities noted that they were signposting vulnerable residents to support services available within their localities and encouraging greater reliance on family and friends and neighbourhood support to help with the transition back to independent living. Some key activities included 'hand-holding' support for those who were less confident; helping individuals to re-connect with previous support networks; guidance and signposting advice to specialist services, including financial, befriending and mental health support; and support with developing digital skills and literacy.

2.43   It was reported that respite care services for both adults and children, including supported activities in day centres and other community settings that were suspended during lockdown, were returning to a 'new normal', with a phased approach to re-opening and reduced capacity to enable social distancing requirements to be met. Some local authorities were looking to resume residential respite care services by providing a limited number of in-county short breaks for adults and children in the autumn 2020.

2.44   In Flintshire, short term care and day care services for residents under the age of 65, particularly those supported by Learning Disability and Mental Health services, were re-opened from late August. It was reported that the new arrangements were working well, with a reduced number of support staff meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and complex and providing respite for families and carers. In the county of Caerphilly, existing day support provision was being re-shaped, so that in the event of a second wave respite services for adults and children would remain open to support carers.

2.45   Information provided by local authorities and CVCs suggested that the lockdown and associated measures and policies introduced to manage the pandemic were having a disproportionate socio-economic impact on the most vulnerable groups within their areas. Local authorities and CVCs noted an increase in demand for specialist support, not only

from individuals defined as vulnerable or high-risk from Covid-19 on medical grounds, but from individuals who were vulnerable due to multiple and complex risk factors. These factors ranged from age, substance dependency, poor mental health, unemployment, financial insecurity to housing instability resulting from high housing costs, poor housing quality, unstable home environments and overcrowding or homelessness.

2.46   It was suggested that the nature of the support being provided was changing, with CVCs reporting 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 anecdotal evidence of increased demand for information and advice around finance and debt, housing-related support services and support from food banks in a number of counties.

2.47   A number of local authorities were anticipating further pressures in these areas during the months ahead and expressed concern about the capacity of services to adapt to rising demand. Third sector organisations based in Merthyr Tydfil were developing new approaches to respond to the increase in demand for emergency food supplies, for example through the development of community pantries across the county and using mobile food cooperatives in rural wards affected by poor public transport and limited services.

3. The positive effects of Covid-19

3.1 The survey indicated that the pandemic and its associated measures had given rise to some positive changes to the work and activities of institutions, organisations and groups across the public, private and third sector, as well in the behaviour of the residents and communities they were working with.

Coordination between statutory services and the third sector

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

3.2 The survey has indicated that public sector bodies at local and national level, and the community and third sector organisations and groups, are all working together to achieve a common aim of providing support to those who required it.

3.3 Flintshire County Council noted that teams were working together across different departments within the authority and more closely with the community and third sector during the pandemic to ensure that support was available for vulnerable people.

3.4 Menter Mon had worked closely with the local Test, Trace, Protect team based in Anglesey County Council to ensure that clear referral pathways were in place for individuals required to self-isolate. The authority also reported close collaboration between GP clusters and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to deliver social prescribing interventions to link patients in primary care with sources of support within the community, with the aim of supporting the social recovery of communities.

3.5 In Cardiff, a wide range of new and established third sector organisations, charities and community groups had worked closely with the public and private sectors to provide support during the pandemic. A Volunteer Anchor Organisation was set up by the local authority in March to map provision and identify gaps in support for vulnerable people across the city. The group was continuing to meet to share information and provide guidance for small local organisations and groups on issues ranging from safeguarding and risk assessments to funding and training opportunities. Members included Cardiff Third Sector Council, Action in Caerau & Ely (ACE), Women Connect First and South Riverside Community Development Centre.

3.6 Other benefits that were mentioned included working with improved efficiency, and adapting normal working practices in order to benefit from greater use of technology.

3.7   Several local authorities mentioned that the additional flexibility allowed through the Coronavirus Act 2020 has enabled them to respond quickly to changing needs and priorities. They reported that reduced bureaucracy and streamlined processes had facilitated quick and effective action within their respective areas and also enabled resources to be re-focused and diverted to vital services.

3.8   In Cardiff, action was taken by the local authority at the start of the pandemic to address the immediate and urgent need to provide more suitable accommodation for single homeless individuals and couples. Two city centre hotels were block-booked from the end of March until the end of June to create additional supported housing provision to meet the needs of the city's vulnerable homeless population, many of whom have complex needs and multiple co-occurring issues, such as substance misuse and mental health issues.

3.9   The local authority was continuing efforts to capitalise on the progress that was made during lockdown to support those who are street homeless within the city. In September 2020, the authority was planning to implement the first stage of its recovery strategy with the opening of a new 42-apartment unit and had signed an agreement with the Youth Hostel Association to continue to use its hotel in the city centre until December 2020, with the option of a further extension to March 2021, subject to funding.

3.10   Local authorities 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, the broader health and care community and with local communities.

3.11   Digital advances had 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. As an example, Denbighshire County Council worked with North East Wales Carers Information Service to coordinate a series of online events as part of Carers week in June 2020, which successfully engaged with new carers who had not previously accessed services on a local or county level.

3.12   One authority noted that the pandemic had highlighted the importance of addressing vulnerable residents' experiences of loneliness and social isolation through measures such as befriending services and keeping in touch visits and calls, which were not provided before the crisis due to resource constraints.

3.13   A number of local authorities noted that children and families had responded particularly positively the use of digital contact, which in many cases had enabled them to increase and

maintain contact. One authority emphasised that whilst this would never be a full replacement for direct face to face work and observational practice, it had provided important lessons on how both the public and third sectors could become more efficient in the use of digital technology as an integrated part of their work.

3.14   Flintshire County Council noted that the profile of its digital channels had increased considerably during the pandemic and had enabled the council to develop and implement support services quickly and encourage take up of initiatives such as Business Relief Scheme, key worker accommodation requests, free school meal payment requests, Non Domestic Rates State Aid Declarations and Playscheme 2020, all of which attracted an increased number of applications and were well over-subscribed.

Social capital and community cohesion

There was a common view among local authorities and CVCs of the Covid-19 pandemic being a catalyst for increased community cohesion

3.15   Although the survey indicated evidence of higher levels of loneliness and isolation among vulnerable groups during the pandemic, local authorities and CVCs provided numerous examples of positive impacts on community support and strengthened connections within communities.

3.16   As mentioned previously, there was also strong evidence of an upsurge of willingness to volunteer. This included people supporting their neighbours by shopping for food or collecting prescriptions, increased donations to food banks and supporting the wider use of digital services among older people. A number of local authorities also reported that communities within their areas that were well supported and empowered before the pandemic appeared more resilient and less dependent on external support.

4. Future capacity

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

4.1 The two CVCs that provided individual responses to the survey noted that they had processes and the necessary infrastructure in place to support public and third sector bodies and local community groups to scale-up activities in the event of a second wave.

4.2 All local authorities noted that they were preparing recovery plans in close partnership with key partners across the public, private and community and third sectors within their areas. Areas of work that were being prioritised within these plans included:

- staff recruitment and retention strategies, staff re-deployment frameworks and ongoing work to retain and recruit volunteers (including internal local authority staff, Local Health Board staff and external community volunteers);

- strengthening and building on existing partnerships; and

- identifying lessons learned from the first wave of the pandemic and sharing best practice to ensure positive changes was embedded in future service delivery structures.

4.3 In Pembrokeshire, community and third activity was recognised as key to the county's future recovery, with organisations and groups being encouraged to pilot innovative ways of supporting residents and communities during the recovery period, building on lessons learned during the crisis. Funding was made available to support this work through the Covid-19 – Supporting Community Action Fund, which was established at the start of the pandemic with joint support from Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (PAVS), Pembrokeshire County Council, West Wales Care Partnership and the Welsh Government. The second round of funding from the scheme, which received additional support from Comic Relief, was made available in August and was focused around the theme of 'Planning for the Future'.

4.4 Similarly, BAVO was working with Bridgend County Borough Council on a recovery plan, which included retaining a pool of community emergency response volunteers and establishing a resilience network within the third sector to ensure that more community groups were able to support the delivery of support services in the event of a second wave.

4.5 A number of authorities emphasised, however, that recovery plans were highly dependent on support from other council departments through re-deployment which will, in turn, have

an impact on wider capacity within local authorities. Additional pressures and risks such as the redeployment of staff and volunteers to support the delivery of the Test, Trace, Protect service on a local and regional level also meant it was difficult to establish if existing levels of resources were sufficient to cope with any future increase in demand for support.

4.6   It was emphasised that local authorities, service providers from the public and third sectors and service users should all be involved in planning prevention and recovery phases so that public services were built around the needs, capacities and skills of residents and local communities.

4.7   The local authority workforce had proved to be highly flexible and robust over recent months, but there were concerns from a number of local authorities over 'burn-out' among some staff groups due to the pressures placed on departments and teams delivering critical services. It was emphasised that many redeployed staff had not had time to recover and would be under further strain as they returned to their substantive roles.

4.8   It was noted that a proportion of the local authority workforce were continuing to shield, while others were suffering or recovering from Covid-19, as well as having to self-isolate, all of which will have an impact on staffing levels.

4.9   Added to this, there were concerns that a combination of a second wave of coronavirus, a potential flu epidemic, together with other respiratory infections and other non-virus-related cases, could leave the NHS facing unprecedented strain on top of the usual, annual winter pressures.

5.   Broader lessons and future priorities

5.1   Survey respondents were asked for their views about the priorities for local authorities and community and third sector organisations, and the people and communities they worked with in responding to, and recovering from, the pandemic, and also their views about what further support was required from Welsh Government. There was consensus about the importance of effective co-ordination and delivery structures, mental health support, a strong and viable community and third sector, digital inclusion and a stronger enabling environment for voluntary activity.

Effective co-ordination and delivery structures

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

5.2   Local authorities also noted that recognition was needed that one set of guidance was not appropriate for all settings (for example, respite care and long-term residential care).

5.3   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.

5.4   A number of local authorities reported difficulties with using and sharing data from the shielded patients list owned by the NHS, which hampered the delivery of support services, such as the food parcels scheme. They called on the Welsh Government to address issues around data ownership and sharing to facilitate joint-working between the public and voluntary sectors.

Mental health support

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

5.5   Some common concerns included: the effect of restrictions on loneliness and isolation; the impact on individuals with existing mental health problems, especially young people; and anxiety among vulnerable residents as restrictions were eased.

5.6   Ongoing support for NSV groups will continue to have a strong focus on preventing isolation and loneliness among most vulnerable community members, through keeping in touch by phone or having a chat on the doorstep. Local authorities emphasised that despite the pause in shielding this support remained crucial.

Supporting a strong and viable community and third sector

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

5.7   CVCs also called for long-term financial support and guidance for the sector to strengthen and build on this work. Several participants shared their thoughts on the future of third sector and community organisations and highlighted issues such as concerns about cuts in funding; a reduction in the range of services and its impact on local communities; and the challenge of finding new ways to respond to changing needs and priorities.

5.8   CVCs noted that uncertainty around future arrangements for funding programmes such as the Integrated Care Fund (ICF) and Transformation Funding meant that the community and third sector were facing an uncertain and challenging future, which could result in a reduction of essential community services. It was emphasised that providing ongoing support to community and third sector groups and organisations and volunteer-based area support teams was vital to ensure that they could continue to operate and support residents in the current climate. It was emphasised that the ability of local authorities to divert these funding streams had been crucial in supporting the delivery of essential services during lockdown period and in the recovery period, reducing demand for higher care packages and referrals to statutory services.

Digital inclusion support

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

5.9   It was emphasised that funding to support digital inclusion work, such as providing digital equipment and devices, 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.

5.10   The digital inclusion support and 'digital champion' schemes were positively received and local authorities recommended that these should be extended, using some of the individuals who have signed up as volunteers. It was emphasised that connectivity remains a barrier for many households, particularly in rural areas, and should be addressed.

Support for volunteering

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

5.11 There has been a large increase in the number of volunteers offering support to vulnerable and isolated people during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the support groups that were established in response to the pandemic offer the potential to increase community connections at the local level. It was suggested that the public sector and third sector organisations and groups should continue this work to maintain the positive momentum.

5.12 Local authorities and CVCs called on the Welsh Government to put in place a new programme of work to strengthen local volunteering and increase its levels in specific areas and among specific social groups, particularly those who were less likely to volunteer. Furthermore, it was emphasised that the momentum that has built up around volunteering during the pandemic should be maintained through supportive policies, structures and capacities for effective volunteer engagement and management, including adequate resources.

5.13 Local authorities and CVCs emphasised the need to continue and build upon local volunteering support in future. The challenge for the coming months and in the longer-term was to ensure that the infrastructure and capacity was in place to sustain this work.