



26 March 2020

Annwyl First Minister,

Re: Covid-19 and people living in poverty

As the Coronavirus continues to spread, we are writing this open letter as Wales' Anti-Poverty Coalition to outline our concerns for people in poverty in Wales, and to offer recommendations to inform Welsh Government's response. We are in a fast-paced environment, and recognize that new policies are announced daily, and we appreciate what a challenging time this is. We stand ready to help you fight this virus.

This letter outlines both immediate and longer-term challenges facing the groups with whom we work and advocate for. Certain groups are at particular risk, and this list is by no means exhaustive: unpaid and underpaid carers, children and young people in low income households, those in low paid and precarious work, women, black, ethnic and minority groups, pensioners, those with learning disabilities and underlying health conditions. Loneliness is of course a huge concern given stringent social distancing measures. We are cited on a range of correspondence already sent to you and officials outlining the risks to these groups; and this letter seeks to consolidate our position and bring into one framework recommendations to be adopted. We hope this will be helpful in providing a coordinated and coherent message from the sector.

We are deeply concerned about the impact the pandemic will have on the health of the poorest people in society. The links between poverty and health inequality are well documented; people living in poverty are approximately ten times more likely to have a chronic health condition, and suffer poor mental health. Diet, both in terms of food options available and food consumed, play a part in this story. It is widely acknowledged that children in receipt of free school meals (FSM) often go hungry during the school holidays. During periods of school closure, families often need to provide equivalent meals themselves - some estimate the cost of doing so is significantly higher than the cost of FSM, with families having to spend as much as an extra £30/40 a week on food in holiday periods. The associated stress this can cause for many families must be taken into consideration. In this context, the need to secure nutritious food to disadvantaged groups during Covid-19 becomes ever more important. This is particularly important as the population's diet is likely to worsen during the outbreak with malnutrition and obesity likely to increase. We are already seeing reduced access to basic food items which will have a longer-term impact on food prices, cost of living, and access to emergency food aid. As a result of pressure on the food system from demand (panic buying), availability of resource (staff and

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volunteers), and closure of public services (children accessing FSM, day centres for older adults) there are three main challenges:

1. People being unable to afford food in crisis
2. People who are unable to access food (self-isolation, service closures etc.)
3. Local food businesses unable to open (having knock-on effects on food supply, workers' income etc.)

To address these challenges, we are calling for the following:

- A National Food Aid Coordination Mechanism to oversee food aid for the sick and vulnerable – this needs to be accountable and fast-moving;
- Pay cash grants to frontline charities providing meals for especially vulnerable people, so that charities can buy food they need – for example, homeless shelters and domestic violence refuges;
- Support local authorities to: utilise facilities to produce / deliver food; provide a quality service with the latest information on food-related schemes; support for families to maximize income;
- Ensure that no child goes hungry during school closures by providing an FSM Allowance – an emergency payment equal to the cost of a child's FSM. The easiest way to administer the payment would be via local authorities (given they already administer FSM and have significant experience of handling payments to parents e.g. Pupil Development Grant – Access);
- Relax the requirements of Education Maintenance Allowance to ensure young people continue to have access to vital education now that schools are closed;
- Provide financial support to food organisations to enable them to provide more families with emergency help – a national coordinated response is key;
- Consider other ways to maximize household financial resilience, for example, by capping or freezing utility bills or Council Tax, as we understand has been introduced in Italy;
- Amend the eligibility criteria for the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) and increase its scope to ensure anyone who is facing financial pressure as a result of Covid-19 is eligible. There is precedent this, e.g. with the fund used to support families affected by the recent flooding; and
- Consider removing the requirement for a signature on Healthy Start voucher application forms to enable those in need to access vouchers for fruit and veg urgently.

For those self-employed, on insecure contracts, or working for businesses forced to close due to the crisis, their ability to pay for essentials such as food and accommodation will be severely compromised. These financial hardships combined with the isolation from social networks and face to face services, will have a negative impact on people's mental health and wellbeing. We certainly welcome the announcement of an additional £1million into the DAF, but this increase was announced pre-pandemic. Recent school closures and temporary closure of some businesses will force individuals and families into financial uncertainty and even crisis. It is for times like these that the DAF can be a vital lifeline, so it is crucial that there is enough capacity to meet demand. We also welcome the £10million emergency fund for rough sleepers, and would like to see further measures to support early intervention and ensure people do not fall into homelessness in the first place. We ask the Welsh Government to protect individuals' income and the associated risk of homelessness by working with local authorities and social landlords to:

- Halt all actions over this period including any re-possession actions in the pipeline;

- Adopt a ‘no evictions into homelessness approach’ within a longer-term sustainable approach to tackling homelessness;
- Accelerate the implementation of the Renting Homes (Amendment) (Wales) Bill and the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016;
- Work with partners to establish whether payment holidays can be introduced on a temporary basis for tenants - such costs include social housing rent, Council Tax and utilities costs;
- Support families by ensuring pay for people who can’t work normal hours because of caring commitments and guarantee no family will lose their home as a result;
- Provide financial support to parents who will struggle to provide the necessary resources, to carry out school work that is set; this will mitigate against the longer-term risk of a widening attainment gap for children from poor households. The poorest children are likely to experience problems keeping up with the online only learning being provided resulting in a significant loss of learning for some pupils. School Holiday Enrichment Programmes could play a role here;
- Protect jobs through statutory retention pay and make government support to business conditional on keeping staff on;
- Ensure that the DAF is able to absorb the increased number of applications and provide the support needed for those in crisis. This is important in mitigating against longer term risks of individuals facing pressure to pay back crippling loans and the associated increase in dangerous borrowing practices;
- Work with government departments to ensure our welfare system is fit for purpose at this time of crisis by providing expedited and improved access to payments; and
- Ensure all information and guidance from government and local authorities is clear, concise and direct, available in different languages and accessible formats.

We know that it tends to be women, who are concentrated in jobs which provide low income, insecure contracts, and poor (or in some cases no) sick pay. They are most at risk of losing their jobs, having to take unpaid leave, or being exposed to the virus due to their role in front-line services. Women also bear the majority of responsibility for child and elder care, and are forced to balance this with work responsibilities. Covid-19 will have a different and distinct impact on women. During this crisis, women are at risk of: falling into poverty; being left without pay to depend on inadequate social security; and of experiencing domestic abuse and violence while everyone is advised to stay home. We urge Welsh Government to address these risks, and do everything in its power to protect and provide a safety net for women. We are calling on the Welsh Government to take a gendered approach in its response by:

- Ensure women’s voices are in the room and involved in decision making;
- Ensure women are protected in the workplace to ensure they can continue to work in essential services where possible, and where not able to work they should be provided with adequate support;
- Ensure employers do not financially penalise women balancing work and care needs. There is a risk that through this crisis the stereotypical role of ‘breadwinner’ and ‘carer’ is carried forward into the future; and
- Encourage shared caring responsibilities - the changes in our ways of working (increased home working) must benefit both women and men, and address inequality, rather than reinforcing it.

These steps will be important in protecting our social care workforce which is dominated by women and is currently under-valued and under-resourced, yet will be relied heavily upon during this outbreak. Increased pressure on providers will pose further risks to social care workers living within poverty who are already struggling to pay for the essentials. In addition, a tremendous amount of care and domestic work is undertaken by unpaid carers. We urge the Welsh Government to do everything it can to protect our carers by:

- Adopting a longer-term approach which adequately values both paid and unpaid care within our society by appropriately: recognizing, rewarding and redistributing care;
- Ensuring paid carers receive appropriate sick pay and the arrangements to work flexibly; and
- Ensuring those working within the social care sector are poverty aware.

The Coronavirus poses a genuine threat to the lives and human rights of all individuals but particularly to those living in poverty; this should be explicitly recognized, and a commitment made to a swift return to our freedoms post-crisis. We urge Welsh Government to take into account the risks and issues raised in this letter and consider our policy recommendations as a matter of urgency.

We thank you for your tireless efforts in helping to safeguard our nation and stand ready to support you towards this aim. We are happy to discuss working solutions further with your officials. Please direct any return correspondence to Claire Cunliffe at Oxfam Cymru ccunliffe1@oxfam.org.uk.

We won't live with poverty.

Cofion gorau,

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Tom Davies, The Children's Society
Steffan Evans, Bevan Foundation
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Katie Palmer, Food Sense Wales
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