

The longest year: life under local restrictions

Wales briefing, February 2021

Background

- The British Red Cross recommends in its new report, [The Longest Year](#), that more needs to be done to ensure people facing hardship can access the practical, emotional and financial support they need under Covid-19 restrictions, local and national.
- This briefing summarises the report and sets out recommendations for the Welsh government and local authorities.
- It includes insights from qualitative and quantitative research exploring the experiences of people and organisations living and working in areas that have been under tighter local restrictions in Wales and across the UK.
- The Longest Year is the latest report from the British Red Cross's growing body of evidence around the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on people across the UK. It adds to [Access to food in emergencies](#) which examines food insecurity and [Lonely and Left Behind](#), exploring the experience of loneliness among shielders and those who are 'chronically lonely'.

Summary of recommendations

- We are calling on governments and councils across the UK to fully meet the humanitarian needs of the individuals and communities most vulnerable to hardship during Covid-19 restrictions, and in recovery.
- As in any emergency, everyone living under Covid-19 restrictions should have access to clear and accessible information, financial support, shelter, emergency food, psychosocial support and connections.
- To achieve this, the Red Cross recommends that the Welsh Government should:
 - Widen the criteria for the Self-Isolation Support Scheme to ensure maximum take up amongst those on low incomes.
 - Minimise the steps needed for people notified by the NHS Covid-19 app to access the Scheme.
 - Maintain increased investment in the Discretionary Assistance Fund and review issues around lack of awareness of the Fund.
 - Ensure that all local health boards have the capacity, resources and skills to meet the individual mental health, loneliness and emotional support needs of those most at risk of falling into crisis.

About the report

- The Longest Year explores the experiences of people living and working under additional Covid-19 local restrictions in the UK.
- Twenty-three in-depth interviews were carried out with members of the public, and six in-depth interviews were conducted with professionals between October and December 2020, from across the UK. In Wales, this included one adult in Swansea and one adult in Cardiff.

- We also carried out polling with a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults in the UK and boosted to a representative sample of 504 adults in Wales. Fieldwork was conducted from 8 to 22 December 2020.

Our findings

Mental health and wellbeing

- Both the qualitative and quantitative strands of this research suggest the biggest impact of living under local restrictions is on people's mental health. The most common triggers for this were isolation and feelings of loneliness.
- Whilst people from all backgrounds have been struggling with their mental health, this has particularly been the case for people living on their own and those caring for others.
- People said they valued single household support bubbles, describing them as a "lifeline."
- Too many people in Wales don't know where to go for help:
 - Over a third of people (37 per cent) disagree that they would be confident in knowing where to go for mental health or emotional support if they needed it under local restrictions.
 - Three in ten people (30 per cent) disagree that they would feel comfortable speaking to a professional or organisation about their mental health or emotional support needs, right now.
 - Half of people (50 per cent) agree that it is hard to talk about their problems when so many people are having a difficult time due to Covid-19.
 - However, almost three quarters of people (72 per cent) say they are confident that they can cope with such changes.

The Welsh Government should:

- > Ensure that all seven local health boards have the capacity, resources and skills to meet the individual mental health, loneliness and emotional support needs of those most at risk of falling into crisis. This should include those living alone, the clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable, as well as their carers and others in their household.
- > Ensure that everybody has the advice and information they need in order to overcome loneliness and support friends and family members that may be struggling emotionally.
- > Work with local authorities, the NHS and the voluntary and community sector to attach psychosocial support, including support for loneliness, to other public services that are likely to encounter those most in need, such as services providing food support.
- > Build on their commitment to support the development of social prescribing schemes, set out in the new Connected Communities Strategy, by rolling out social prescribing link workers across Wales. These link workers should prioritise supporting people who are chronically lonely to grow the confidence and independence they will need to reintegrate when measures are lifted.

Financial security

- Those participating in this research had experienced a range of challenges under local restrictions, including recent and long-term unemployment; reduced income; difficulties making low income, benefits or asylum seeker support payments stretch to cover increased living costs; and food insecurity. This was having a significant negative impact on their mental health. Some of those we spoke to had to make extremely difficult decisions between paying an energy bill, getting food for the week, or buying clothes for their child.
- **Too many people don't know where to go for financial support**, with two fifths of people (41 per cent) disagreeing that under local restrictions, they would be confident in knowing where to go for this if needed.
- The uplift to **Universal Credit** and **Working Tax Credit** is welcome and should be extended to ensure that families can make ends meet and afford essentials while the economic effects of the pandemic are still being felt. Similarly, the income support schemes, such as the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), should remain in place in order to support Covid-19 recovery. We welcome the recent extension of the CJRS until 31 March 2021.
- The Welsh Government has taken the welcome step to invest more in the **Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF)** and to relax its rules. Between 18 March 2020 and 7 January 2021, there were 136,168 Covid-19 related Emergency Assistance Payments with a total paid value of £8.96 million¹. However, evidence heard by the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee highlighted that a lack of awareness of the scheme still exists for those eligible to claim².
- Research by the Child Poverty Action Group into the replacement of free school meals has found that **cash** transfers provided directly to families have helped people make ends meet and avoid destitution while providing for dietary, religious and medical needs³.
- The **Self-Isolation Support Scheme** is a key form of assistance for people during local restrictions. Initial findings in Wales suggest that there is gap between the number of applications and successful awards, and a further gap between awards and completed payments. Up to Friday 11 December 2020, local authorities across Wales had received 9,041 applications, of which 4,616 were eligible for the Self-Isolation Payment, and 2,151 payments were made⁴.
- We welcome the Welsh Government's announcement that from February 2021, **Covid-19 App** users who have been notified as being exposed to the virus, are on low income and at risk of financial hardship are eligible to apply for the self-isolation support scheme⁵. This will expand the reach of the app in Wales⁶ but the process can

¹ Welsh Government, Summary Data About Coronavirus and Response to it, 14 January 2020: <https://gov.wales/summary-data-about-coronavirus-covid-19-and-response-it-14-january-2021.html>

² Welsh Parliament Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, 'Into sharp relief: inequality and the pandemic, August 2020 <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld13403/cr-ld13403-e.pdf>

³ Child Poverty Action Group, 'How cash transfers in lieu of free school meals helped low-income families cope during the first period of school closures' 18 June 2020:

<https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/cost-learning-lockdown-family-experiences-school-closures>

⁴ Welsh Parliament, Written Questions, tabled 23 December 2020: <https://record.senedd.wales/WrittenQuestion/81792>

⁵ Welsh Government, Press Release: Users of the NHS Covid-19 App now eligible to apply for £500 self-isolation payment, 1 February 2021: <https://gov.wales/users-nhs-covid-19-app-now-eligible-apply-ps500-self-isolation-payment>

⁶ Paul Martin, BBC News, Covid in Wales: No grant despite NHS app isolation request, February 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-55707833>.

be streamlined further to minimise the number of steps users have to take, including by verifying users as part of the app notification process.

The Welsh Government should:

- > Expand the criteria of the Self-Isolation Support Scheme to maximise its reach to people on low incomes, recognising the widened criteria in Scotland which has been extended to all workers earning the Real Living Wage or less, those in receipt of a council tax reduction and people with caring responsibilities for adults who meet the eligibility criteria⁷.
- > Ensure payments are issued in a timely manner.
- > Minimise the steps needed for people notified by the NHS Covid-19 app to access the Scheme.
- > Increase awareness of the DAF to inform people that they can make a claim for Covid-19 reasons.
- > Maintain increased investment in the DAF to ensure that families can make ends meet and afford essentials while the economic effects of the pandemic are still being felt.
- > Implement a cash-first approach to emergency assistance for families wherever possible, including in guidance to local authorities.

Financial support for people seeking asylum

- The people seeking asylum that took part in this research spoke of the difficulties making their asylum support payments of £39.63 per week stretch to cover their living costs.
- **Asylum support payments** were increased by £1.75 per week in June 2020, and by a further 3p in October 2020 (totalling £1.78), a significantly lower increase than the £20 uplift to Universal Credit.
- Asylum seekers' ability to spend this money is also restricted as a result of the fact that the **ASPEN** card, which is how asylum support payments are made, cannot be used online, and in some cases cannot be used to take out cash, either.
- In Wales, people who have **no recourse to public funds** (NRPF) status can access the DAF if they are experiencing destitution. This was in place before the pandemic. In light of Covid-19, increased investment has been provided for homelessness and rough sleeping. We welcome the Welsh Government's increased funding to help to secure accommodation and support for people experiencing homelessness, including those with NRPF status.

The Home Office should:

- > Increase Asylum Support rates in line with the £20 per week increase to Universal Credit and enable ASPEN cards to be used online.

The Welsh Government should:

⁷ More people supported to self isolate, Scottish Government, 2 February 2021: <https://www.gov.scot/news/more-people-supported-to-self-isolate/>

- > Continue to offer additional hardship support for people with NRPF status, such as providing additional funding to secure accommodation and support for people with NRPF status.
- > Review further support options for people with NRPF status, such as further financial support, mental health, and emotional support.

Barriers to accessing support

- **Despite an increase in practical, emotional, and financial support needs under Covid-19 restrictions, for the most part people don't know where to turn for help.** This was particularly true for those who have never accessed support before, and professionals expressed concern about those who are digitally isolated.
- When asked what types of support, information or resources would have been helpful to them during the Covid-19 local restrictions, in Wales:
 - 34 per cent of people said healthcare or medical services.
 - 6 per cent said financial support for essentials such as food, clothes and toiletries.
 - 7 per cent said financial support for longer-term needs such as for unemployment, mortgage or rent payments.
 - 8 per cent said financial support to self-isolate would be helpful to them.
- **A third of people (33 per cent) in Wales disagree that they would be confident in knowing where to go for help getting food** if needed, if they needed to under local restrictions.
- The majority of participants in our research expressed reservations about seeking support, whether that be from local government, voluntary and community sector organisations or from family and friends. This was for a variety of reasons, including stigma, not wanting to burden others, fears of ineligibility, and a reluctance to use certain channels or services they had found unsatisfactory before.

The Welsh Government should:

- > Ensure that all local authorities are fully resourced to continue to support the clinically vulnerable, clinically extremely vulnerable and non-shielded vulnerable, with access to essentials such as food. Emotional support, such as support for loneliness, should also be attached to this provision.

Local authorities should:

- > Work with the voluntary and community sector to identify areas and individuals most at risk, to target support.

Accessing and understanding information about local restriction rules

- People are struggling to access and understand information about local restrictions in their area.
- People whose first language isn't English were even more likely to struggle to understand information about local restrictions.

The Welsh Government should:

- > Ensure any guidance on the rules and restrictions during Covid-19 is provided in multiple languages, as standard, based on assessments of local language use.
- > Ensure it provides timely and easy to understand guidance on Covid-19 and local restrictions to those with a disability, impairment or sensory loss in line with the aims of the Accessible Information Standard.

Local authorities should:

- > Work with voluntary and community organisations to regularly disseminate both online and offline, easy to interpret information that is tailored to the local community.

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Case Study: Faith, 35-44, Swansea

Faith is a lone parent in her 30s, living in Swansea. She is originally from South Africa and was an asylum seeker. She has been through a lot since arriving in the UK, including domestic violence and homelessness, and she appreciates now having a roof over her head and clothes for herself and her son. Faith didn't go out much even before Covid-19, as she has a young child and little income. Under local restrictions, she only leaves her house to take her son to school and to do food shopping once a week. Her friends don't live nearby, and she has no family in the UK, but she keeps in touch with them over the phone.

"Before Covid I relied on those friends... I don't have family around, I am the only person from my family who is in this country. It can take its toll sometimes but I've learned to live with it."

Faith is currently on benefits and income support. Now her son is at school she is looking for work, as she will lose her income support next year when he turns five. She would like to work but has felt that it has been difficult to find a job so far. She is not aware of support around finances, food or mental health being publicised under local restrictions. She says she is coping, but that if it was possible to get some support with groceries that would be helpful, as she is just about managing to cover food bills at the moment. She loves food and wants to have good food but in order to make ends meet she often has to make changes or cut things out, such as meat. She has got some food from a local food bank before but says that the quality isn't great.

Faith makes a conscious effort not to watch the news as it is too negative, and she doesn't want to hear how many people have died from Covid-19. When she wants to find out what the rules are and what's happening, she searches online. She also has a Facebook account where she follows the local council and government bodies for updates. Faith feels fairly informed about what is happening but can sometimes feel unsure about some of the terms used and what "Tier" she might be under*. The strictness of the circuit breaker lockdown in Wales came as a shock to her, and Faith found herself stuck trying to get home when the bus station closed at 6pm.

Faith finds it very confusing that there are different rules in different parts of the UK and that the different leaders of the UK share different messages. She doesn't think anyone is deliberately trying to be confusing, but she would like there to be awareness that not everyone listening to the updates is a native English speaker or understands what rules apply where.

"My problem is, as not a British person, it gets confusing when someone is talking for England, Scotland and Wales - I take myself out of the confusion and focus on my local council."

"The Government is not trying to confuse us [non-native speakers] when they speak, it's just that we start from a [lower] reception level to understand what is being said."

Faith lives in Wales, where there is not a Local Restrictions Tier system, unlike in England and Scotland.