**Consultation response to: Rapid Engagement on Draft Guidance Consequent to the Coronavirus Act 2020**

Response from: **Wales Vision Forum**

The Wales Vision Forum, comprising local, regional and national charities supporting people with sight loss in Wales. The purpose of the Forum is for organisations representing people with sight loss to come together to share, discuss and outline work programmes and priorities to enhance joint working and reduce duplication to maximise our collective reach and impact.

The Forum is a platform for sharing information, sharing good practice and expertise, consulting and identifying opportunities to support service and campaign planning.

Comments sent to SocialCareCoordination@gov.wales.

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While we are not responding to the questions posed in your consultation directly, the sight loss sector in Wales would like you to consider the following observations.

We know that people are not receiving face-to-face support from local authorities and third sector organisations due to the Covid19 measures. We know that Rehabilitation Officers for the Visually Impaired (ROVIs) have been contacting clients by telephone, as have local, regional and national organisations for blind and partially sighted people. Wales Council of the Blind has coordinated weekly sight loss sector meetings to share information and to map the services being delivered at this time.

There are approximately 16,000 people in Wales who are registered as sight impaired and severely sight impaired with local authorities. While the majority of these may not be considered vulnerable people in ordinary times, the current situation places them at greater risk. This is because social isolation, the breakdown of informal care and the difficulties of maintaining social distance mean that their normal strategies for getting help with aspects of daily life are not workable. The challenges with obtaining essential shopping, along with limited access to accessible information concerning services that might help them in the current crisis should not be underestimated.

To explain this in more detail: We are pleased to note that the guidance upholds the principles of the UN Convention, but we would stress that the methods by which we, and local authorities, would normally support the wellbeing of people with sight loss are now very restricted. People with sight loss use familiar routes for walks and shop in areas where they are comfortable with the layout and where they are often known by staff who help them get the items they need. The current restrictions make getting this help difficult or impossible, and opportunities for exercise are far less than in normal circumstances - vision impaired people cannot assess how close they are to others, and we have examples of people being shouted at because they have inadvertently got too close to another person on a pavement.

Under the Wales Vision Forum, the sight loss sector has approved a document that has been sent to the Welsh Local Government Association to be distributed to front line staff to assist them with signposting clients to support in their communities.

The attached resource has been sent to each of the ROVIs to assist them, in a version specific to their local authority. This resource is being updated online through our website at <http://www.wcb-ccd.org.uk/coronavirus.php>

Another consideration is communications. If social care staff are to be communicating effectively with their clients, some of whom will be new, we recommend the following guidance on communication is observed: <http://www.wcb-ccd.org.uk/coronavirus.php#accessibility>. Although this was compiled for health workers, it is equally valid for social care staff.

We also support RNIB Cymru’s Consultation response and would like to draw to your attention the need for timely access to Rehabilitation services, as referenced within their response. We are aware that some Rehabilitation Officers of Visually Impaired people (ROVIs) are already being redeployed away from rehabilitation duties in response to front-line pressures.

The Wales Vision Forum, State of the nation report – services for adults with sight loss in Wales, identified that there already exists a substantial backlog of people with sight loss in Wales waiting for vision rehabilitation assessment and support; upwards of 12 months in some areas.

Should the modifications be used, waiting times for new assessments are likely to increase dramatically. This has the potential to disadvantage people with preventative service needs, such as vision rehabilitation, if they are not seen as an equal priority to those with assessed care and support needs. This is particularly the case within wider adult care services that were already under-resourced before the pandemic struck.

Blind and partially sighted people are more likely to live alone and are heavily reliant on people from outside the household for support. Many people living with sight loss rely on the services provided by Local Authorities to maintain their personal wellbeing and independence. Assistance and/or equipment to help with daily tasks such as meal preparation, maintaining personal hygiene, dressing appropriately and toileting enable blind and partially sighted people to live safely.

Any delays to accessing these vital services will have significant implications for people with sight loss, who will be left increasingly isolated and at greater risk of unnecessary harm and declining mental health.