

P-05-1068 Allow socially distanced meets in private gardens to follow science and avoid isolation, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 27.08.21

It is unfortunately the case that the First Ministers' response to my petition came several months after it was first filed, and still did not address the issues I highlighted regarding vulnerable people and those connected to vulnerable people, in light of the Covid 19 restrictions. There was no response that addressed the points highlighted in my original petition.

When the committee met they agreed with the principle reflected in my petition, and there was an action to write to the First Minister to attempt to get him to address the restrictions on this section of society, but again, he failed to do this.

In short, there are two issues:

1. The responses and time taken to address has been inadequate in light of the changing circumstances the pandemic presented Wales with. The process for petitioning change is not fit for purpose when applied to regulation and change that is required for urgent matters. The fact that I am being asked to still provide comments on a petition that has been rendered superfluous by nature of time passing just supports this observation. I request to understand what other process there is to affect change for matters and policy impacting for circumstances such as Covid that required urgent, temporary and frequently changing policy. I believe there should be a fast track petition system for urgent matters, if one does not already exist.
2. Repeatedly the original points were not addressed in any response from the First Minister, and instead generic responses that merely reflected the overarching sentiment behind the restrictions at the time were offered. I believe this falls short of the expectation to seek to address the individual basis of each petition. If the First Minister simply reiterates that which is general address and not specific to the said petition, I see there is little purpose or outcome in the exercise.

Impact

As a result of the First Minister failing to address the points in my original petition, restrictions and policies remained in place which allowed for a situation whereby vulnerable persons, unpaid carers and those fearful of leaving home to go into public places, or those that could not leave their homes to go into public places had a lesser position of liberty as a result of the choices made during Covid. This impacted on the human rights and mental and physical wellbeing of a large section of society. This cannot be an acceptable position, and this cannot be allowed to be repeated. I have been personally impacted by the choices made. A close friend was kept essentially locked up in total isolation from all loved ones by his care provider, for over a year. I believe this is because the government did not do enough to introduce reasonable adjustments to protect the rights of vulnerable and disabled persons, or to introduce policies to force care providers to do more. My friend has declined significantly as a result, and has been at potential risk of harm from his care team. This is not an isolated incident, and both hospital admissions and deaths in the community for vulnerable and disabled persons that are non Covid related, have increased during the pandemic, with the overall health of this section of society thought to be declined in general.

Having worked for Carers UK in Wales as an ambassador, I am also aware that life was made unreasonably tough for the unpaid caring community, who did not have any specific policies tailored to their needs set throughout Covid. This group was left isolated in their homes, with no additional provision for dedicated supermarket slots for example, which were allocated to professional health workers, or any provision to lawfully accept visitors into their homes and gardens, as opposed to exposing themselves to public places, for those that could even leave their homes, as many could not. This section of society was not even recognised or celebrated in the same way the professional health workers were.

Unpaid carers in Wales represented over 12% of the population in Wales in the 2011 census. It is thought that this figure is now much higher, and higher still as a direct consequence of Covid, with around 370,000 unpaid carers in Wales.

There is not just a moral obligation, but a legal obligation to support unpaid carers, as their rights are enshrined in the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. I am aware that there is a Strategy for Unpaid Carers coming in the Autumn, but there have been no interim proposals and the First Minister did not refer to this in his response, and this strategy does not appear to seek to embed, or stretch its' remit to Governmental policy/legal decisions, such as the ones needed during Covid.

There are around 130,000 persons recognised as extremely clinically vulnerable. More alarmingly, as much as a quarter of all Wales residents are disabled. The true figure of those living with and dependent on care systems, either paid or unpaid, NHS funded or privately, is not known, but when taken in full context and including the unpaid carers that support this section of society, this could represent as much as 30% of our population.

During the pandemic, policies, exemptions and specific compensations were made for professional health workers. In one extreme policy change, to allow for meetings with up to six persons in pubs, the First Minister was transparent in his support for the youth population, despite their lessor needs and lessor risk to themselves, but increased risk for others. There has been a continuance of policies that further support school age children. For the older population, unpaid carers, vulnerable and disabled, I have not observed an equal emphasis on measured policies or mitigations (including for example garden visits, and enforcing care homes to do all they can to end isolation where it is safe to do so), for these sections of society, which is those both most vulnerable to Covid and most vulnerable to isolation, no measures were taken.

Next steps

Whilst I appreciate that the Covid position has negated the need for this petition on at least a temporary basis, I do feel that the First Minister needs to provide sufficient answers and assurance that the Government will seek to put in place policies that will permanently protect vulnerable persons, disabled and unpaid carers from isolation or being effectively trapped in their own homes, such that this situation cannot be allowed to be repeated.

I look forward to hearing how this develops.