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Jenny Rathbone MS
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Letter sent via email to: Jenny.Rathbone@senedd.wales

Date: 10 November 2022

Dear Jenny,

I am writing to you in your capacity as Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee to highlight RNIB Cymru and RNID's concerns around the failure by Welsh Government to appoint a lead for accessible information as agreed following a recommendation made by the Equality and Social Justice Committee's report 'Into sharp relief'.

We are particularly concerned that blind and partially sighted people and people who are deaf or have hearing loss are unable to access healthcare information independently like their sighted and hearing peers. A survey conducted by RNID in 2021 shows that 42% of respondents (who were either deaf or had hearing loss) in Wales

reported that they had difficulties contacting or booking appointments with health services. This has serious practical, health and emotional consequences and puts patients at serious risk of harm. It also compromises patient confidentiality if they have to rely on a third party to relay information to them.

The All Wales Standards for Accessible Communication and Information for People with a Sensory Loss were launched in December 2013, making the Welsh government the first in the UK to take steps towards ensuring healthcare is accessible. The Standards set the level of service delivery that people with sensory loss should expect when they need healthcare.

The Standards themselves recognize that “There is a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to deliver equality of access to healthcare services for disabled people” and recognize the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the international standard for disabled people’s human rights.

In 2018, the Welsh Health Circular “Sensory Loss Communication Needs (Accessible Information Standards) mandated GPs to ensure effective capture and communication of patient’s sensory loss communication and information needs between healthcare professionals in Wales.

The [Senedd’s Equality, Local Government and Communities August 2020 Inquiry into Covid-19](#) “Into sharp relief: inequality and the pandemic” found deficiencies in the provision of information and guidance in accessible formats during the pandemic and exemplified the importance of making accessible information standard practice. For example, the first shielding letters, which were sent to 130,000 people in Wales at the highest risk of severe illness from Covid 19, were not sent out in accessible formats despite containing potentially life-saving information. Likewise, one in four (26 per cent) of respondents to RNIB’s Coronavirus Impact Survey had struggled to get written information in a format that they could read and 17 per cent said that they had struggled to access information online.

As a result, we were pleased that the Committee's report recommended the appointment of “... an accessibility lead within the Welsh Government to oversee production of all key public information in

accessible formats.” This recommendation was [accepted](#) by Welsh Government on 23 September 2020.

In April 2022, the Health and Social Services Committee report, 'The impact of the waiting times backlog on people in Wales' referenced RNIB Cymru evidence, which “shone a stark light on how inaccessible much of NHS communications is”. It noted that important communications about shielding and vaccination had not always been provided in accessible formats, with implications for patient safety. The committee then called for Welsh Government to provide an update on progress made on the implementation of recommendation 37 in the 'Into sharp relief' report. Once again, this recommendation was [accepted](#) by the Welsh Government.

The Minister confirmed in a letter to us that there is no capacity in Welsh Government to appoint a dedicated lead for accessibility, despite the fact that this recommendation was made in two separate inquiries and was accepted by Welsh Government.

This is a patient safety issue, and we believe that without the appointment of a Welsh Government lead to drive the implementation of the Standards, little will change for patients.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in December and would be grateful if you could support our campaign by writing to the Minister to query why resources have not been allocated to the appointment of an accessibility lead.

Kind regards

Ansley Workman, Director, RNIB Cymru

Liz Williams, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, RNIB Cymru

Ayla Ozmen, Team Lead Expertise and Policy, RNID