

P-05-1070 Advise all people who are extremely vulnerable or previously shielding in Wales to stay home, not work, during periods of high covid 19 community infection, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 07.12.20

Petitions Committee

Ref P- 05-1070

CEV Shielding in Wales

Petitioner Carol Dent

07/12/2020

I am a 60 yr old CEV clinical nurse working for BCUHB in North Wales. In March 2020 I was shielded by the Welsh government. From August following a covid 19 risk assessment at work I was evaluated at very high risk and categorized as no face to face contact. For a short period of time I was allocated paperwork to be undertaken part work /part home. On completion I awaited a temporary redeployment from clinical. However before that were organized Infection rates for covid 19 increased and with employer support I was advised to stay home which is my current situation.

I consider myself fortunate that my employer has supported me in this way but do have great concerns this support could stop at any time and I have no confirmation at all if this support will continue

The petition is on behalf of the many CEV in Wales I have been in contact with via a Facebook group shielding in Wales. It is very evident within that group that others have been less fortunate than I

Noticeably has been the terror and fear they are living with by going into work every day during high peaks of community infection rates. Many have been forced into taking sick leave for anxiety and stress. Others are struggling in the workplace because they cannot undertake normal duties and are being accused of mental health issues because they fear the infection. Some have been forced to hand in notice and lose their jobs

Overall I don't believe the Welsh government understands the difficulties and pressures the CEV are experiencing in work places. There is a definite contradiction in the advice given to CEV from the government which does not help the situation. We are told to reduce contact, shop late, have no visitors to our homes. Yet we can go to work in poorly ventilated work places with multiple persons in the same work space, sharing facilities such as canteens, rest rooms without masks and in many cases sharing packed public transport to get to work

I ask the committee to consider the massive impact this is having on the mental health of the extremely clinically vulnerable workers in Wales. It's terror and real fear, they are suffering harassment for those fears. These are not people too ill to work in normal circumstances they want to be working but simply can't safely do their jobs

I disagree with the government's statement it was bad for mental health shielding people. I was one of them, these people I am discussing were shielders. It was a shock and difficult to come to terms with but we were safe and on that basis alone it invalidates the claim mental health suffered.

The current situation of facing death every day for eight plus hours in a work place environment that is far from safe is far more detrimental to wellbeing and stability of mental health

I have forwarded six emails from the group Sheilding in Wales , including an email I sent to the first minister I simply ask the committee to consider the views of those who are really experiencing life with CEV during increase infection of covid 19 in the community in Wales and you recognize how harmful the experiences are in the working environment

With Regards Carol Dent

Pp ,to be read with email attachment sent individually PETITION P-05-1070

P-05-1070 Advise all people who are extremely vulnerable or previously shielding in Wales to stay home, not work, during periods of high covid 19 community infection, Correspondence / Personal Testimonies – Petitioner to Committee, 07.12.20

I support the shielding for wales.

I'm at high risk and seeing today's cases in wales are serious , shielding should be advised without fail . Even for workers . It's wrong to have them working in these conditions at moment . Please please I beg you bring shielding back . My partner would be safer at home protecting me and children than be out catching or even spreading it to us .

Please hear us call for help , don't ignore us

I'm a teaching assistant in a mainstream high school. Been doing this for over a decade and support pupils with all kinds of needs. I was previously shielding, most of that time I was on my own, as advised by the Welsh Gov. Then, after 5 months of 'doing the right thing' everything was relaxed and we were told to forget the shielding that had deemed us so vulnerable. I was very anxious to go back into work considering the previous advice I was given but I did this. Risk Assessments are a farce. Social distancing "Where possible" is basically impossible the vast majority of the time. I wore a mask and was just told to wear a visor as well. Anyway, I ended up in a class full of 31 teenagers with little ventilation and no possibility whatsoever to "stringently socially distance by 2 metres". This is advice from my GP and 2 separate consultants. Not surprisingly I had an acute stress reaction, couldn't catch my breath, thought I was having a heart attack, total panic, shaking, sweating and sobbing. The whole experience has totally taken me, a pretty gutsy independent woman, by a devastating 'surprise'.

Through no fault of my own, just bad luck, I have 2 medical conditions. I have been signed off on the sick by my GP since this happened in September. I do not feel safe at work. I am having to take antidepressants and beta blockers. Soon my pay will be halved. I have requested redeployment or work from home but due to the nature of the job this is proving difficult for the school as is stringent 2 metre social distancing.

I understand the mental health issues that have been discussed endlessly but the genuine and very real fear for those of us who are still referred to as extremely

vulnerable yet are being punished for their medical conditions or are having to make a choice as to whether or not to forgo health advice because of money constraints.

It is so wrong. At least give us the choice to do the right thing, Mr Drakeford!

I hope we see some compassion soon.

Best wishes,

For the attention of the Welsh Government

I understand all of the arguments about the effect on mental health of shielding but I would also point out that shielding was advisory and not mandatory and was never intended as a prison sentence and I feel that the vast majority of shielding people understood this but this was not acknowledged in the media. My real problem with the Welsh Government's refusal to reintroduce formal shielding is that it leaves those working on frontline jobs at the mercy of their employers. In order to illustrate this I will tell you about my own recent experience. I have worked for my employer for the last 21 years, it is a not for profit organisation and we provide respite breaks for carers very often at incredibly short notice. To cut costs most risk assessments are done over the phone and sometimes via a third party agency and this has been the case for some time- not ideal at the best of times. They have no HR department and my line manager and the CEO. have made it clear that the needs of the business come first. They have told me that they will not put me on furlough again because they have clients waiting in my area and they cannot recruit while they have me on furlough it is against HMRC rules. I have checked on this with HMRC, ACAS and an employment officer at the CAB and all of them did not know what they were talking about. They have made no attempt to find an alternative role for me even though their website shows they are offering welfare phone calls to clients I do not trust them to complete a covid risk assessment and I now believe they are using this situation to force my hand i.e. force me to return to work or to resign. I might add that they have experienced long term problems with staff recruitment and retaining staff. I have been forced to go cap in hand to my GP to request sick leave as I am petrified about what would await me at work He has signed me off for a month but he feels this should be between me and my employer and I think he, like the Welsh Government, imagines everyone's employer will play by the

rules which they would in an ideal world So there you have it I feel completely abandoned by the Welsh Government which is a crying shame when you consider how good they have been compared to Westminster.

Yours

I'm writing with a plea for the Senedd to please relook at the shielding process for the clinically extremely vulnerable.

Working in mental health services in North Wales, I fully understand the impact of isolation on mental health however the stress, anxiety and worry of having no choice but to be in an at-risk environment is having a detrimental affect on overall well-being.

For me personally, I reside and work for the BCU Health Board in areas where local restrictions apply and I came off maternity leave early to try help however I could in March. Due to being CEV I have worked from home throughout and contributed well to the team. Now, there are talks of being back in the office despite cases reaching higher levels than when we entered lockdown. This seems to be decisions made daily at the whim of employers; could the working from home guidance be more legislative to give added protection. I can work from home and have proven this fir the past 7 months yet it seems soon this guidance maybe ignored. The daily figures, lack of protection and indecisiveness from work policy is severely heightening anxiety and stress.

Rather than a blanket shielding policy is it a possibility to consider some form of protection for the CEV. Those who do not want to; don't. But those who felt safer with those measures, do, and have the support from employers to complete any work from home. Those who cannot work from home undertake other works; TTP, welfare calls as examples- therefore safe and contributing to the pandemic. It feels ironic that us in health etc. who are CEV, have contact with individuals who admit themselves to not adhering to social distancing measures are attending high risk work places whereas some of the fit and well remain at home financially supported.

In a way it feels like a choice between go to work to survive, support families and be at risk..or not work, protect health and be at risk from economical and social issues.

I think the Senedd have done a good job in these unprecedented times and I thought it may be helpful to see a point from someone on both sides of the shielding debate. To conclude; for me, I would much rather be protected, save spaces in intensive care units, putting less pressure on overall health services and lessen stress and anxiety on myself and my loved ones by having a form of legislative protection.

Diolch yn fawr

Dear Mr Drakeford

I apologise for taking up your time, as I appreciate you're very busy at the moment and as a result, this email may not even reach you. However, in case it does I wish to raise my concern with you below.

Well, let's start with why shielding was initially introduced.. To protect those vulnerable? Protect our NHS? Or both? Please can someone clarify when this changed as from listening to briefings and government guidelines alone, people are still very vulnerable to this virus (perhaps even more now) and our hospitals are getting fuller therefore at risk of getting overrun (This is all taken from daily briefings, not even media which could be exaggerated!)

My husband was one of those written to previously to shield as he has an immune condition (his body doesn't produce antibodies).

We understood the decision previously made to "pause" shielding as the number of cases were decreasing at the time, so we felt reassured by this decision. However, the case numbers are dangerously back on the rise again (along with the increase in deaths), so much so we have had a few lockdowns now (both local and national) and are still left under various strict restrictions. And yet, the government are still not reintroducing shielding! And why? to protect the mental health of those vulnerable and other 'reasons' such as understanding the virus better etc.

Personally, I feel to use mental health as a reason is extremely vague and quite patronising - why? Because you clearly underestimate how people not having the option to shield is effecting that very same thing! People's mental health is at an all time low, as they're extremely anxious and fearing for their lives (and this isn't being dramatic!).

Could you not reintroduce shielding with the following measures to aid mental health:

* Advise people to bubble with another household (as previously done and which is the current rule for every resident in Wales now anyway)

* Advise daily exercise (as done previously)

Shielding to a lot of vulnerable people right now would give a lot of ANXIOUS people who work (especially in frontline jobs) huge peace of mind and the relief of being able to be furloughed once again. These people (like my husband) cannot just choose to stay off work themselves, due to the financial loss this would lead too.

For us personally, my husband isn't able to work from home as he's a patrolman. Therefore sees multiple people a day on his 11hr shifts getting in and out of their cars to assist them. Although his works have put overall measures in place to try and reduce the risk - I cannot put into words how worried/paranoid I am by this.

Please, please reconsider shielding for the extremely vulnerable? Afterall, as the CMO always states it is infact only his advice! But that advice would mean the world to so many families. As I am not alone in worrying about my loved one and feel it very heartbreaking they're almost left feeling they have to choose between their health or wealth!

Thank you for reading, these are such worrying times for everyone - I just wanted to feel like I tried to do something.

Stay safe!

Kind regards,

I am a senior support worker in a mental health and learning disability hospital where 2 metres is impossible. Challenging behaviour means I can be attacked, spat at, need to restrain or simply due to communication issues saliva is constantly airborne. I feel so so unsafe there and there is nothing I can do about it. I have a history of mental health issues anyway and this situation is much more anxiety provoking and detrimental to me than shielding ever was! In fact I have now been signed off on the sick because I have had a complete breakdown. When shielding was introduced we still had a choice not to do so! Now we have no choice at all! By bringing shielding back people can choose which scenario works best for them! I know there are people who would want to continue working and could still do so, give us the choice back to choose how we keep ourselves safe. Now I am not only at risk because of the virus but because of my own mental health too!

Dear Committee,

I right to, to express my concerns as a Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) member of Public. Back In March we were all safeguarding from the Covid-19 virus. In August this shielding was paused however we were informed shielding can be re-introduced should cases rise again.

The current situation in Wales is one of the worst affected areas of the UK. 69% of the current deaths in Wales are of those classed as CEV.

You're reasoning for not re-introducing shielding as quote by Dr Atherton, Vaughan Gethin and Mark Drakeford, is that it causes extreme harm especially to people mental health. However, you have greatly underestimated the severe adverse effect in not re-introducing shielding is having on the CEV.

The Government's latest guidance is to work from home and minimise contact with those outside your household. However, there are many of us who work in frontline jobs where this option is not available at all.

For example, I work for the Welsh Ambulance service, I am unable to do my job from home. I have been advised by my work that should my GP provide a letter for me to shield against this would be un-sanctioned absence. I have unfortunately seen many patients as well as colleagues in the NHS die because of this virus. I am deeply concerned as I am seeing more and more patients present with COVID, and indeed I am now seeing rising cases in my workplace again.

I am suffering severe anxiety due to not being able to make an informed choice to safeguard myself and my family. I cannot afford to have no wages should I decide to stay home. This with the real risk of catching COVID-19 it is having severe effects on my mental health. And before a comment is made, I should speak to my employer and GP to help with my anxiety I have done this on a regular basis, but again if I chose to stay home, I have no support to do this from my GP, Employer and more importantly you the Welsh Government

Shielding was always a **choice** not law, however for us as individuals to be able to exercise our autonomy we need the support from the government to enable us to approach our employers and advise them we need to shield without have financial repercussions in doing so.

We plead with the government to advise those who cannot work from home to stay at home. The guidance thus far seems to completely bypass our vulnerability. I have worked in Healthcare for many years and would want to do so for many more years to come. I currently am having to make a choice between financial stability and my life.

The government have never in my experience governed how we care for our patients, but when I speak to many colleagues and my own GP who advise they cannot advise us to shield until the Government instruct us to, I find totally unacceptable.

Myself and thousands of frontline workers in; retail, NHS, hospitality, local government roles and many more, need the government to do the right thing and re-introduce shielding guidance to allow those who want/need to have support and evidence to produce to their employers. Every individual has a right to autonomy, but you failing to allow us to do this without this clear guidance.

I do not want to see many of my CEV colleagues, friends and family, suffer long term health complication on top of already complex health needs or even worse lose their life to this virus because the Welsh Government seem to be lacking the full scale of how the virus is affecting the CEV community.

Many of us have emailed Mark Drakeford, Vaughan Gethin, Dr Atherton expressing our serious concerns and had no reply acknowledging this.

It is time for the Welsh Government to really start to look after their most vulnerable members of the nation before it is too late.

Yours sincerely