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The Brain Injury Charity

Date: 13th October 2021

Response to the Public Accounts Committee Re. Government Covid-19 Response Review

Foreword

I am the CEO of Headway Jersey and I have worked within the charity sector for over a decade.

During the early part of the pandemic, I was seconded to government to work on a Community Task Force which was set-up to secure food stocks, direct resources and assist with wellbeing for the most vulnerable in our society. This extended to directing funding to agencies that were geared up and willing to help.

We are pleased to respond to a letter from Deputy Inna Gardiner, received on 12th October 2021, in relation to the review of the Government Covid-19 Response. During the course of our work over the last couple of years, we have seen the problems directly associated with the pandemic, and how this has impacted the lives of our members, both emotionally and physically. The financial impacts of this crisis are only now really starting to unfold.

In relation to the specific items raised in the letter, I would respond as follows;

1. Please tell us of the impact of COVID-19 response measures on 'business as usual' activities, including:

a. Do you have a 'back-to-normal' recovery plan?

We have been working with our members, staff and volunteers, to produce a recovery plan as we move out of the situation and look forward to a new future where our service can continue to thrive. A large part of that, of course, is to formulate a robust recovery plan and we have been working hard to ensure that our service is as effective as it was in pre-pandemic times. I believe it is very important for businesses to take stock of what they were doing, what they could be doing better in the future, and what we can all take as positive actions from this past 18 months. Having worked within the Civil Service a number of years ago, I was involved in response planning for the Swine Flu epidemic and the fact that this exact situation was on many people's radars a long, long time ago and yet any formulated plans were quickly put on the back burner when the threat of Swine Flu rescinded demonstrates that emergency planning for a health emergency was

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a company limited by Guarantee, Company No 2346893
Registered Charity No. 1025852

Headway (Jersey) Limited
Le Coie Centre
Springfield Road
St. Saviour
Jersey
JE2 7DN

Office Tel No: 01534 505937
Website: www.headway.org.je
E-mail: headwayinjersey@gmail.com



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not high on the risk register. Part of our thinking at the time was to always keep in mind that the Swine Flu situation was very likely to be repeated at some time in the future. What we've all been through in the last 18 months needs to be captured and turned into a blueprint so it can be dusted off again in the future, if the need arises.

b. What help did you get from the Government?

Our organisation relied heavily on the Co-funded payroll scheme. When I was seconded to government to work on the Community Task Force, the initial thoughts were that charities should not be considered for assistance through the Co-funded payroll scheme. This decision was quickly overturned as it became apparent that charities, like any other business, were very important to the local economy, the wellbeing of Jersey's citizens, and a big part of the employment sector. My initial thoughts were that why are charities being held in such low esteem and I can only surmise that those making the decisions at the time, considered that many charities were already directly supported by government. While this may be true for some charities it is certainly not true for the majority and therefore, I was delighted when the decision to include charities in the Co-funded payroll scheme was quickly incorporated. I believe that it is necessary to now give businesses, self-employed persons, and charities, surety and confidence over this winter by continuing the Co-funded payroll scheme, not on a piecemeal monthly basis but with a longer-term view, perhaps increasing it to at least March of 2022 so that businesses can continue to have that fiscal stimulus over what may well turn out to be a very difficult winter for many.

c. What could they have done better?

Being actively involved in the initial planning stages as Covid broke in the Island, it is fair to say that although decisions were made quickly at a time that it was necessary to do so, a decision log and robust decision-making process was always behind each of the major tasks that were undertaken. While I believe it's easy to look back in retrospect and say that things could have been done better, there was huge pressure on many people to make decisions and to get it right first time. I believe that the initial communications could have been better, but this situation quickly improved as it was clear that the public was not being communicated to as affectively as they could have been. It is also fair to say that the Brexit day-one-no-deal planning process helped a great deal in formulating exactly what actions needed to be taken and which personalities needed to be involved.

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d. What key lessons could they learn for pandemic or emergency planning?

I believe that ongoing emergency planning needs to be considered in the round and I'm sure that many risk registers now have a likely recurrence of a pandemic at the front and centre of their thinking. However, I have been involved in the government's emergency planning process in the past and it is clear to me now that the issue of disease was very low down on many of the agendas, preferring instead to consider civil unrest in neighbouring countries, a natural or man-made disaster or financial collapse as being more likely events that needed to be planned for.

e. What would you (or those you represent) do differently next time?

Many of the frustrations that people felt at the time that the pandemic news was breaking were caused by people seeing what was happening in the UK and could see that the same situation would happen here. There was a view that those making decisions were sitting on their hands. While I don't believe this was the case, I do believe that this is the public perception at the time. Reading some of the commentary on social media during the early stages of the pandemic, it was clear that many people were panicking, but many people also had very good ideas that perhaps could have been considered more closely, unfortunately, many of the good and robust suggestions were lost in the maelstrom of the overall noise of social media. Perhaps government could have done more to capture some of this positive commentary.

2. How have you benefited from any support schemes by the Government to ease the negative impact of Covid?

Headway Jersey has been one of the beneficiaries of the Co-funded payroll scheme, and quite simply without it the last 18 months would have presented a very different outlook for our charity. We have also had fantastic support from Health and Community Services by supplying us with PPE, cleaning swobs and other basic materials that would have cost our charity and would have been a strain on our resources to try and get hold off at the time. As we are looking after vulnerable people, many of whom are high risk, this support was much needed and was very much appreciated.

3. What would you advise to help improve communication of Government measures next time?

It is clear both from the government review in the UK and this review locally that neither jurisdiction was in any position to be fully prepared for this event. Having said that, I believe that our government and our Island coped remarkably well given the situation. We were

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fortunate in Jersey that we never got to the position of witnessing civil unrest or other undesirable consequences of a pandemic, and the same cannot be said of the UK.

I do believe that although decisions had to be made at a time of great stress and in a short time frame, that before any communications were announced they should have been double checked to ensure that the message was clear and consistent. There were a number of times where decisions appeared to flip-flop and this does not do much to inspire public confidence or give the appearance that those who are supposed to be in control are actually in control.

Malcolm Ferey

Chief Executive

Headway (Jersey) Limited

Tel (01534) 505937

Mobile 07797 847 498

Email: Malcolm.Ferey@Headway.org.je

Twitter [@MalcolmFerey](https://twitter.com/MalcolmFerey) / Twitter

LinkedIn [\(1\) Malcolm Ferey | LinkedIn](#)

Facebook [\(1\) Malcolm Ferey | Facebook](#)

Web www.headway.org.je



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