

IN THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

Before the Right Honourable Baroness Hallett D.B.E

STATEMENT OF TRACEY BURKE

I, TRACEY BURKE, will say as follows:

Introduction

1. This statement is prepared in response to a request dated 21st March 2023 (the request) that wishes to draw upon my experience as the Director-General for Education and Public Services in the period between 2017 and 2022. I have drawn on support from my office in preparing this statement.
2. I would like to express my sympathies to those who have suffered loss and hardship as a result of the pandemic. I would also like to put on the record my thanks to the many dedicated people who worked in our public services and the third sector supporting people in Wales throughout the Covid -19 pandemic.

Background

3. I was born in Splott in Cardiff and, for the past 30 years, I have been directly involved in the regeneration of Wales and Ireland, working for Welsh, Irish and UK Governments as well as working with the European Commission.
4. I joined the Welsh Government in 2006 from the Welsh Development Agency. Since that time, I have held posts in economic policy and transport policy, as well as a wider strategic

role across the Economy, Skills and Natural Resources Group. I was a Deputy Director for Strategy in the Enterprise, Innovations and Networks Group from November 2006 to February 2008; Acting Director Infrastructure Policy until October 2009, Director of the Economic Renewal Programme until December 2010, Acting Director of Operations for Business Enterprise, Technology and Science until May 2011 and then Strategy Director for Economy, Skills and Natural Resources Group until November 2017. I was appointed to the post of Director-General for Education and Public Services (EPS) from 17th November 2017 until 31st March 2022, when I took up a new role in Welsh Government for Climate Change and Rural Affairs.

5. My role as Director General for the EPS Group was broad in scope compared to UK Government Director General roles, covering a wide range of policy areas across eight Directorates. One of the Directorates within the EPS Group was Local Government and within this sat the civil contingencies and resilience function. The Director for Local Government had responsibility for this function.

The R.9 request

6. I understand that a number of requests for information, under r. 9 of the Inquiries Rules 2006, have been made by the Inquiry in relation to Module 1. I also understand that the substance of the Welsh Government's preparedness arrangements has been set out in statements, provided by senior officials, in response to those requests.
7. The request asks that I address a number of areas which I have endeavoured to answer below.

Operational Responsibility for Civil Contingencies

8. Operational responsibility for civil contingencies did not follow a standard line management structure where the Director for Local Government, reported into a line-management chain, rather the reporting of matters around civil contingencies arrangements would directly be made to the Cabinet and Welsh Ministers. This is because in a civil contingency response there needs to be a clear command, control and co-ordination structure based on strategic, tactical and operational commands – not one that follows administrative management chains. This is to ensure there are swift, informed and

effective operational channels and decision making within the governance structure; between local, sub-national and national levels. Through this structure the Director for Local Government (who was responsible for civil contingencies) led planning arrangements and provided advice to inform Welsh Ministers during emergencies.

9. As a consequence of this necessary command structure, my position as the Director General for the EPS Group did not play a role in terms of operational responsibility for civil contingencies. Therefore, I was not personally involved in the development or implementation of civil contingency policies taken forward by the Directorate, nor was I part of the resilience fora, strategic co-ordinating groups or wider Welsh resilience partnership arrangements.
10. As Director General, my role was to provide strategic leadership and management for the whole EPS Group (of which the civil contingencies function formed one part). The whole EPS Group comprised 1200 staff and a budget of nearly £7bn. In terms of leadership across the Group, this covered leading staff to ensure their expertise and energy were directed towards Ministerial priorities and maintaining our statutory functions, providing effective staff communication, being a line manager to the Directors within the Group, providing management or interpersonal support as required. For example, in the Local Government Directorate, this meant working with the Director to try to maximise the number of staff we would redirect to Covid response work at the start of the pandemic, whilst maintaining work on our statutory functions.
11. In terms of management, my role was to oversee good financial management and the smooth running of the Group. As an Additional Accounting Officer, I was responsible for the Group operating within the overall governance framework laid down by the Permanent Secretary, consulting the Permanent Secretary on issues which might be novel, contentious or repercussive, or which would have a negative reputational impact. It was also my role to ensure compliance with corporate values and the required standards of ethical conduct. As an example, in the Local Government Directorate, this included working with the Director to enable funding to flow as quickly as possible to Local Government for their front-line response to the pandemic whilst maintaining appropriate standards in the management of public funds. More generally, as a Director General, I was part of the Welsh Government's Executive Committee (ExCo) helping to ensure that

the Welsh Government's resources, its corporate systems and processes, and the work of the Civil Service were aligned to priorities.

12. In the first few weeks of the pandemic, I supported the Director for Local Government in securing additional resources to staff the Emergency Co-ordination Centre (Wales) (ECC(W)), but as the scale of the pandemic became clearer, and therefore the scale of Welsh Government response required, the allocation of resources was taken on as a central function within the Welsh Government, so that this could be managed across the Welsh Government as a whole, and not just within the Local Government Directorate or EPS Group.

What was done correctly, key lessons from the pandemic, and lessons for future pandemics?

13. I am asked to provide my views on what was done correctly in relation to civil contingency planning, pandemic preparedness and resilience during my time in office and why I think this is the case.
14. As I have set out above, due to the structures for civil contingencies and resilience fora, of which I was not a part, I was not close enough to offer the Inquiry a contribution on the merits or lessons in terms of civil contingencies and resilience planning. However, I would be happy to make an observation on two positive features that could be considered 'lessons for the future' from my personal perspective. The first was the importance of having an experienced Director in charge of civil contingencies and the second was the benefit from this role being so closely linked with that of leading Local Government, given the pivotal role of Local Authorities throughout the pandemic. In the Welsh Government we had both of those two key features in place. I note for clarity that responsibility for pandemic preparedness sat with colleagues in the Welsh Government's Health and Social Services Group.
15. As a general observation, the fact that we have been through this pandemic makes us better prepared for future pandemics, ensuring that we adopt the practices that served us best. So for example, managing the intense workloads of staff through a flexible approach; assigning quickly the ownership of cross-cutting work that did not 'belong' to a specific

team; ensuring best efforts at forward planning in terms of when and how decisions needed to be taken by Ministers or communicated; and co-designing and working on specific schemes with partners.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: 4 May 2023