

Module 1

Witness Name: Julie Williams

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 31

Dated: May 2023

IN THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

Before the Right Honourable Baroness Hallett D.B.E

STATEMENT OF PROFESSOR JULIE WILLIAMS

I, JULIE WILLIAMS, will say as follows:

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 Chief Scientific Adviser for Wales between 2013 and 2017. I have drawn on support from the Welsh Government in preparing this statement.

Background

2. I was born in Merthyr Tydfil and grew up in Cefn Coed. I attended Vaynor and Penderyn Comprehensive School. I graduated from Cardiff University in 1978 with a degree in Occupational Psychology. I was awarded a PhD in Psychology from the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology in 1987.
3. I have been a Professor of Neuropsychological Genetics since 2001. I was Chief Scientific Adviser to the Alzheimer's Research Trust between 2009 and 2012 and was appointed a CBE in 2012 for my contributions to Alzheimer's research. I am currently Director of the Dementia Research Institute at Cardiff University.

4. I acted as Chief Scientific Adviser for Wales (CSA Wales) from September 2013 to September 2017. The role involved providing scientific advice to the First Minister, his Cabinet, and the wider Welsh Government.
5. Historically the post had sat within a portfolio where 'Science' was explicitly referenced in the Ministerial title.
6. The CSA Wales has the following strategic and policy responsibilities:
 - a. Lead, influence and support the setting of the scientific priorities for Wales.
 - b. Work with science, research and innovation policy leads across the Welsh Government and lead on developing proposals for a coherent and strategic approach to Welsh Government's Science and Research policy.
 - c. Work proactively with policy and science leads across the Welsh Government to develop proposals on the role of science and research in tackling global challenges such as, climate change, human health care, protecting ecosystems, provision of sustainable energy supplies linked to de-carbonisation goals.
 - d. Enhance the scientific and research reputation of Wales through promoting research, innovation and its commercialisation through more effective links between the Welsh Government, UK Government and other Governments and through working with research providers and industry.
 - e. Identify, facilitate and collaborate on new means and opportunities for attracting inward investment to Wales.
 - f. Represent the Welsh Government internationally on science and technology issues.
7. The nature of the CSA Wales role has always been a cross-cutting one. Key activities include: representing the Welsh Government internationally on science and technology issues; working with other science and technical leads across the Welsh Government to help develop scientific research priorities and consider the best means and avenues to deliver and realise the benefits of such work; encouraging and facilitating the promotion of Welsh research, innovation through more effective links between the Welsh Government and its various policy

interests, research providers and industry and by facilitating new opportunities for attracting inward investment to Wales.

8. There are several key differences between the UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser and the CSA for Wales role which I consider are useful context for the Inquiry. The UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) provides scientific advice to the Prime Minister and members of cabinet and advises the government on aspects of policy on science and technology. Each UK Government department has their own Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), and the GCSA works with the departmental CSAs on cross-cutting issues.
9. The GCSA is a Permanent Secretary level post. While I was in post, the CSA Wales was a Director level post (two levels below the Permanent Secretary level).
10. Unlike the UK Government, the Welsh Government did not have a series of departmental Chief Scientific Advisers supporting specific Ministerial portfolios while I was in post. The exception was the Health Department where the Chief Scientific Adviser for Health reported through to the Director of Health Protection while working closely with the Chief Medical Officer as required.
11. From the first CSA Wales appointment in 2010 and certainly during my time in post, the focus and direction of the CSA Wales was dominated primarily by support to the economy, building capacity and capability for science and research in Wales and to supporting science in STEM, including addressing equality and diversity.

My time as CSA for Wales (CSAW): preparedness and resilience

12. I was a permanent member of the Welsh Resilience Forum (WRF) and I sat on the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG). During my time as CSAW, there were Ebola and MERS outbreaks, Exercise Cygnus was run at both a UK and Wales only level and there was a 4 nations Ebola exercise. I was involved in the response to the outbreaks and in the exercises.
13. I was also involved in zoonotics during my time as CSAW. The Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) regularly involved me in correspondence to do with the response to concerns and outbreaks.

14. Early in my tenure there was a discussion during one of the UK CSA meetings of creating a College of Experts for CSAs. I discussed this with **Name Redacted** (Head of Science Resilience, Risk and Government Business) and asked him to take it forward. At the point when this was discussed at UK level, I had already asked Richard Rossington to arrange a body of people that I could seek advice from on a routine and emergency basis **[Exhibit JW01 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187487]**.

15. I set out below in more detail my involvement in preparedness and resilience in the period 2013 – 2017.

Zoonotics

16. I was involved in discussions around the Welsh Government Plan for Exotic Animal Disease 2014. On the 1st September 2014, I was emailed a link to the draft plan by **Name Redacted** of the Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer (OCVO) who indicated that he wished to determine what engagement I would want to have so that this could be reflected in the plan **[Exhibit JW02 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187488 and Exhibit JW03 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187611]**. We met on the 3rd September 2014 and agreed that: the notifications section of the Contingency Plan would publicly record the fact that I should be personally notified and that the threshold for notifying me would be that the suspicion is considered sufficient to warrant any further action **[Exhibit JW04 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187490]**.

17. My department would have liaised with OCVO in circumstances where zoonotic disease outbreaks would have affected Wales **[Exhibit JW05 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187495]**. I was copied into an update on avian influenza in England by OCVO **[Exhibit JW06 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187496, Exhibit JW07 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187613 and Exhibit JW08 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187612]** which the Deputy Minister for Farming and Food was being asked to approve. I was also copied into a report of suspected brucella outbreak in Wales **[Exhibit JW09 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187502]**; Avian Influenza H5 **[Exhibit JW10 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187503]**; and a H5N9 strain confirmed in Llanelli **[Exhibit JW11 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187507, Exhibit JW12 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187540]**. I would also hear about updates from OCVO on zoonotic outbreaks at CCG

meetings (for example a confirmed case of HPAI in a duck breeding unit in East Yorkshire **[Exhibit JW13 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187551]**, and Bluetongue and Avian Flu outbreaks in France **[Exhibit JW14 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187552]**.

18. I was copied into Ministerial Advice to do with zoonotics, for example on the publication of the 2013 UK Zoonoses report **[Exhibit JW15 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187501]** and on the ban on bird gatherings and Avian Influenza Prevention Zones put together by OCVO **[Exhibit JW16 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187505]** and **Exhibit JW17 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187614]**.

19. I had a meeting with the then Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs (Lesley Griffiths, MS) on the 7th November 2016 at which I presented a report on TB which was drafted by OCVO **[Exhibit JW18 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187504]**.

Ebola

20. I was copied into briefings on the Ebola Outbreak **[Exhibit JW19 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187493]** and attended Ebola Update meetings with Department for Health and Social Services (DHSS) **[Exhibit JW20 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187498]**. I was a signatory to a letter which was sent with the aim of recruiting volunteers for UK funded diagnostic laboratories in Sierra Leone **[Exhibit JW21 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000177201]**.

21. I was party to discussion between the GCSA and several UK scientists sharing their expertise and advice throughout the Ebola crisis and were able to share this intelligence with relevant people within the Welsh Government. My impression that the Welsh Government was prepared to deal with the Ebola event and any upscaling if a greater number of infected people travelled to Wales. As it was the effects in Wales were limited.

22. I also took part in a 4 Nations Ebola Preparedness Exercise which took place in December 2014 **[Exhibit JW22 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000184260, Exhibit JW23 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000184220 and Exhibit JW24 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000184251]**.

Exercise Cygnus (2014 and 2016)

23. I was invited to and attended both parts of Exercise Cygnus in 2014 – the first part in May which was a UK level exercise and the second part in October 2014 which ended up being a Wales-only exercise [Exhibit JW25 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187529, Exhibit JW26 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187491, Exhibit JW27 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000184261, Exhibit JW28 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000187492, Exhibit JW29 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000184262, Exhibit JW30 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000184265 and Exhibit JW31 M1WILLIAMS01 – INQ000107162].
24. I was pleased with the thoroughness of the Welsh exercise which dealt with several important practical issues which would have helped prepare people to respond to the subsequent Covid-19 crisis.

My time as CSAW: non preparedness and resilience

25. When I took up the post of CSAW in September 2013, I was appointed on secondment which meant I did not have any direct budget control or any direct line management responsibilities. I was also appointed on a part-time basis. My main reporting line was directly through to the Permanent Secretary although the Division remained as part of the Economy portfolio.
26. On appointment, I identified the overriding issue facing science in Wales was one of capacity and developed a science strategy 'Ser Cymru 2' to address this, which was adopted as policy by the Welsh Government. Ser Cymru (Welsh Stars) focuses both on building current research strength by attracting international fellows to partner excellent researchers in Wales and on establishing new research, attracting early career researchers and stellar scientists and their groups to Wales. My team in Welsh Government was successful in winning the largest Marie-Sklodowska Curie Fellowship grant, amounting to over €23m, to fund 90 fellows across STEMM research into Wales and we also won funding from European Structural Funds to co-fund rising stars and stars, bringing the total package to over £60m over five years. I developed a governance structure comprising an independent Assessment Board chaired by **Name Redacted** to advise on funding excellence, a council made up of stakeholders and

University representatives, chaired by the CSA, to make the final funding decisions. I also established my own Scientific Advisory Council (chaired by **Name Redacted**)

27. As CSAW, I commissioned a report on women in science published in 2016 (Talented Women for a Successful Wales). This work was commissioned to help address a gender imbalance, particularly in the areas of STEMM. The resulting report covers issues such as making the study of STEMM subjects relevant and rewarding for girls, recruiting more women into STEMM retaining women in the STEMM workforce and encouraging women into leadership roles.
28. My role as CSAW required regular meetings with the then First Minister, RT Hon Carwyn Jones, Ministers and Secretaries of State covering Science, Health, Energy, Education, European Funding, Environment, Housing and the Economy, as well as close contact with Westminster. I advised on several issues, including genetically modified crops, e-cigarettes, photovoltaics, the steel industry, nuclear energy and disease in cockles. I sat on the Advisory Board for the Stern Review. I am a Fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences, sat on Council, appointed their Champion in Wales and sat on a variety of associated committees and panels.
29. In 2017 I established a Centre for Dementia Research, as part of the UK Dementia Research Institute funded by the MRC, ARUK and the Alzheimer's Society. Since we have built a vibrant research team of around 140 scientists comprising 7 Group Leaders, 4 Emerging Leaders and their teams, 11 Fellows and 53 PhD students. We have already published over 250 scientific papers many in top Journals including several Nature publications, Science and others. Several of our findings are being developed in collaboration with industry, we engage with the general public and stakeholders on a regular basis and have a vibrant Forum for early career researchers. Recently, the Centre for Dementia Research at Cardiff was awarded £9.8 million to support a further 5 years of research into mechanisms and therapies for neurodegeneration.
30. Throughout my tenure, my main focus was on expanding the research capacity and capability in Wales, utilising Structural Funds to supplement the funding available from the Welsh Government. By the end of my period as CSAW I had seen the Sêr Cymru Programme recruit over 190 Research Fellows and PhDs, including four Re-capturing Talent Fellows, attract seven Rising stars and eleven Star Research chairs with their teams to Wales, supporting

strategically important areas, including compound semi-conductors (CS); nuclear and green energy; life sciences (including expertise immunity/immune related diseases) and climate change.

31. I also set up the Science Strategy Network (SSN). The purpose of the SSN was to provide a high-level strategic forum to consider opportunities for a joined approach to improving the use of evidence in current and future policy across the Welsh Government (Science for Policy), and to help shape and influence future policy direction (Policy for Science). The SSN was set up to:

- a. Advise and support the Welsh Government on developing and implementing an effective and efficient strategy for obtaining and using evidence and scientific advice.
- b. Review specific policy landscape in Wales to ensure policies are joined up effectively.
- c. Taking account of statutory commitments of the Well Being of Future Generations Act and its delivery and consider the review of the current 46 national indicators and need for refreshing/revising.
- d. Harness the relevance of science related aspects in current Welsh Government policies, encompassing Prosperity for All and Economic Action Plan, with a view to informing and shaping actions for its implementation.
- e. Consider major cross-cutting themes and associated impacts, risks and opportunities, e.g. Health (human and animal), Brexit, energy, infrastructure, UK's strategic position, Industrial Strategy & Funding, etc. To gather and share information from Wales, GB/UK and international networks to help inform approach.
- f. To undertake horizon scanning on new or emerging issues and trends to inform policy and approach.

Response to the questions in the R9 request

32. I have set out the detail of my role as CSAW in the context both of preparedness and resilience and my work more generally as CSAW. Below, I respond to the specific questions asked by the Inquiry as comprehensively as I am able.

What are your general views on the systems, processes and structures for pandemic preparedness in Wales? To what extent, and how, was it integrated with the UK's systems, processes and structures for pandemic preparedness? How, in your view, could they be improved?

33. As can be seen from the information above, I took part in meetings of the WRF and the CCG and was involved in both the response to outbreaks and exercises that were conducted to prepare for future outbreaks.

34. My view overall was that the systems, processes and structures for pandemic preparedness worked well. Although Wales had minimal exposure to Ebola during the outbreak, the response illustrated that the Welsh systems of communication and working together functioned well. From the perspective of providing and considering scientific advice, my view is that the processes and systems functioned well. The interaction between the UK government and the Welsh Government also functioned well from what I saw at the time.

35. I would suggest that an improvement could be made by having a closer relationship with scientists working in the field of immunology. I started the process of strengthening links with the science community whilst in post and it may well be that this has already been actioned.

What are your general views on the Pan Wales Response Plan?

36. I don't recall seeing the Pan Wales Response Plan during my tenure as CSAW and can't comment on it. However, having looked through the plan in the course of preparing this statement, it appears to address the requirement for scientific advice adequately.

Which key policies, in respect of public health and science, had a material effect on Wales' pandemic readiness? What effect did they have?

37. I do not recall any specific policies which may have had a material effect on pandemic readiness. In terms of the way we operated whilst I was CSAW, the office was well integrated with the Welsh scientific community and with the UK scientific community. This was apparent during the Ebola outbreak during which the CSAW office was party to, and contributed to, the discussion on the science.

What effect did policies that were implemented, in particular, on the funding and structure of health and social care have on the preparedness and resilience of Wales?

38. I am unable to comment on the funding of health and social care. I do consider that the funding of science in Wales especially in the area of health was less than it should have been during my tenure. That limited the potential for speedy advice and support when those issues arose.

39. We have high calibre scientists in Wales who punch above their weight internationally but we have too few of them, especially medicine, engineering and computing. Greater funding for science in the areas of medicine, engineering and computing is something to consider for preparedness in the future in my view.

What, do you consider, has been done correctly in relation to pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience during your tenure in office?

40. The exercises I was involved in for Ebola and pandemic flu which I set out above (Exercise Cygnus in 2014 and 2016 and 4 Nations Ebola in 2014) were excellent and good practice in my view.

41. I also consider that Wales put in place good practical measures such as stockpiling antivirals and PPE in anticipation of a possible future pandemic.

Based upon your experience, what changes could be made to the specialist structures, systems and processes in Wales to better prepare it for a pandemic?

42. As I have stated above, I consider that more investment in science, especially medical science, would prepare Wales better for a future pandemic. Scientists in Wales responded incredibly quickly during the Covid-19 pandemic, putting aside their own research to contribute to helping develop tests for example. This expertise could be harnessed more effectively in advance of the next pandemic.

43. I also consider that we should establish a separate body for research and innovation – to bring industry and science in Wales together. The focus of this new body would facilitate speedy development of novel tests, new strategies to address future and unprecedented circumstances and focused research aimed at addressing gaps in our knowledge.

Which lessons had been learned from past simulation exercises, in particular Winter Willow and Cygnus, and potential pandemic events which made Wales ready for the Covid-19 pandemic? Which lessons had not been learned from these events?

44. I was not in post for the Winter Willow exercise in 2007 and I left post in 2017 before the bulk of the implementation of lessons learnt from Exercise Cygnus. As I have stated above, I was impressed with the exercises I participated in. The value of scientific advice was accepted and, for the most part, well-integrated into the exercises.

45. The key lesson I remembered from the 4 nations Ebola exercise was that we needed a closer relationship between public health and the science. A more joined up approach between the scientists and Public Health Wales would help with communication and deal more effectively with novel events. I left post in 2017 and cannot comment on whether steps were taken to strengthen the relationship.

What are the principal developments in public health and epidemiology that the Welsh Government should now be taking into account when preparing for a pandemic?

46. This is difficult to respond to because I am not aware of steps that have been taken within the Welsh Government since I left in 2017. However, as I set out above, it would be sensible to have a closer relationship between the public health side and the scientific side.

47. Expert groups of scientists should be brought together in a timely fashion, before pandemics happen. Expertise should be brought into the Welsh Government in a more formal sense including expert groups:

- a. on aspects of immunology and climate change;
- b. around predicted risks so that the discussion is already underway so that when a pandemic arises, these groups are already familiar with each other and have been in discussion already.

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: 15th May 2023