

Witness Name: Jo Trott

Statement No: 1

Exhibits: 11

Dated: 17 October 2023

UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JO TROTT

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 18 April 2023 and referenced M2B/WG/JT/01.

Preface

1. I extend my sympathy to those who lost loved ones and who suffered in other ways as a result of the pandemic.

My background and my role

2. I am a career civil servant who joined the Department for Education in England in 1991 as a direct entrant Executive Officer. I subsequently returned to Wales, securing a 'compassionate transfer' (as was) to the Welsh Government, which I joined in 1995.
3. Prior to the pandemic, my roles included:
 - a. Lead on EU Transition for Education and Public Services Group (June 2018 – March 2020)
 - b. Head of Public Sector Workforce Partnerships Policy (Sept 2016 – June 2018)
 - c. Head of Curriculum and Assessment Review (September 2012 – Sept 2016)
 - d. Head of Flying Start (January 2011 – September 2012)
 - e. Head of Partnerships and Programmes (September 2010-January 2011)
 - f. Family Support Team (July 2010 to September 2010)

- g. Head of DCELLS Children and Families (Wales) Measure Team (October 2009-December 2010)
- h. Career Break – (2001-2006)
- i. Deputy Clerk to the Economic Development Committee (1999-2001)
- j. Department of Education, Whitehall (1990 – 1995)

Covid-19 related roles

- 4. I was appointed head of the Covid-19 Project Team in March 2020, as a Grade-7 on temporary promotion to Grade-6.
- 5. From late May, I was asked to move across to lead for Welsh Government on our relationship with the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC). I was subsequently seconded on a part-time basis into the JBC and was given a temporary SCS1 (Deputy Director) allowance in respect of that role.
- 6. None of these roles involved decision making. Rather, their focus was on facilitation, collaboration and sharing of situational awareness as I set out below. My role meant that I was not working on the 21 Day Reviews nor on any decisions in relation to NPIs.
- 7. It might also be helpful for me to also set out what I was not involved with at this stage. I had no role in public health communications. I had no role in public health and coronavirus legislation, and I was not involved in decision making. I am not aware of any advice, evidence or data that was not provided to core decision makers.
- 8. In terms of Special Advisors' engagement in the process, from my limited vantage point I would say that they were well integrated and worked well with civil servants. This included attendance at key meetings such as the Health Protection Advisory Group Outbreak Sub-Group (HPAG OSG) which I understand is described in detail in other statements submitted to the Inquiry.
- 9. I was not a member of any WhatsApp group. I recollect that I may have sent or received text messages of a purely administrative nature: they would not have related to advice or decision-making.

Covid-19

10. I first became aware of the scope and scale of the Covid-19 risk when I was asked by Reg Kilpatrick, (who at that stage was the Director for Local Government, and also had responsibility for the Welsh Government civil contingencies and emergency planning function), to head-up the Covid-19 Project Team in late February 2020, formally taking on the role in March, alongside my colleague Liz Lalley who was asked to join the team to ensure resilience at a time when we still had very limited understanding of how the pandemic might spread. Reg reported to Tracey Burke as his line manager in respect of civil contingencies and emergency planning.
11. I understand that the establishment of the team was endorsed by ExCo. ExCo (short for Executive Committee) is the operational and strategic decision-making forum that supports the Permanent Secretary as Principal Policy Adviser to the First Minister, as Principal Accounting Officer and as Head of the Welsh Government Civil Service. I understand that ExCo is described in more detail in Andrew Goodall's statement in response to Rule 9 request M2B-WG-01. I cannot comment on the extent to which Welsh Government was prepared for the pandemic prior to March 2020, but by the time of my appointment the organisation was clearly taking the threat extremely seriously with the organisation pivoting, at pace, towards response.
12. Similarly, I cannot comment on Welsh Government's initial strategy in relation to Covid-19 in early 2020 nor in relation to alignment with the UK Government as I was not in post. I am not aware of any discussions in Welsh Government about herd immunity during this time.
13. I did not provide any advice to the First Minister or others during the early stages of the pandemic, or indeed thereafter, on use of lockdown measures or other NPIs. I did not have any role in relation to NPIs and so I cannot give any direct evidence on questions relating to, for example, the timings or appropriateness of the introduction of the first and subsequent national lockdowns, or the nature and timings of any divergence.

Covid-19 Project Team

14. In terms of my role as Head of Covid-19 Project Team, this was a new role and a new team established at pace (by securing temporary resources from across a range of Welsh Government Groups including Education, Economy, Governance, Finance etc)

as a central coordination team, the Covid-19 Project Team. Although the team reported to me in a formal line management sense, most of the team's work was directed by others involved in the pandemic response, such as Liz Lalley and Tim Render.

15. The team was established by Reg Kilpatrick (and formally signed off by ExCo), in part, in recognition of the fact that the pandemic response required central co-ordination and could not be managed through civil contingency arrangements and/or health officials alone. The purpose of the team evolved over time, but its initial role was to support cross-Welsh Government and four nations interfaces, both at official and Ministerial level, required in the context of a pandemic. I exhibit at **M2BWGJT01/01-INQ000321238** an organogram which broadly represents roles and responsibilities across the team at the beginning of the pandemic although it evolved over time according to need.
16. Much of March 2020 was taken-up with building the team at pace and, in particular, understanding the scope and scale of the ask and what functions we were to take on. These included supporting and facilitating COBR(M), ExCovid, Cabinet (although input here was minimal as the Cabinet team continued to provide secretariat as usual) and above all the new Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs), for which my team provided the secretariat. I describe this role further below.
17. I was also charged by Reg Kilpatrick with spotting any gaps in our immediate response and working with him to ensure they were filled by identifying SROs for, amongst other matters, Shielding, volunteering in the community, 21 Day review etc (although Tom Smithson, who led on the 21-day review, sat in the Project Team, he worked directly to Reg on the reviews). Tim Render, a Director in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Directorate who had taken a role in coordinating the overall Welsh Government response, led on portfolio related matters including the thrice weekly Preparedness meetings, a 'daily critical issues' note and production and dissemination of the dashboard, amongst other things. I understand that Liz Lalley's statement in response to M2B-WG-LL01 provides more information about the development of the dashboard.
18. From what I am able to recall, Liz Lalley was the lead on ExCovid and engagement with Cabinet Office during this period. Both Tim and Liz drew on the resource within

the Project Team to deliver across their portfolios – with clear leads being identified for each area.

19. During this period, I ran a daily Project bird table with the whole team to determine the battle rhythm for the day, establish priorities across the team, identify any issues and ensure sufficient resource was allocated to each area as necessary. This was a very operational meeting, with rough notes and actions being recorded but not shared beyond the team. I exhibit one such example at **M2BWGJT01/02-INQ000299065** from the meeting which took place on the morning of 25 March 2020.

Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs)

20. Apart from leading the Project Team, my primary focus throughout late March to the end of May was on the MIGs: liaising with the UK Government to try to get ahead on the MIG agendas, and with private offices to ensure the appropriate Ministers were able to attend, and that they understood the purpose and format of the meetings and were sighted on the most up to date agendas.
21. This also involved providing Ministers with daily, comprehensive briefing, working at tremendous pace with colleagues across Welsh Government to address key issues on the agendas (which could sometimes change right up to the start of the meeting). I exhibit at **M2BWGJT01/03-INQ000299177** a note of the General Public Services (GPS) MIG from 17 April 2020, and at **M2BWGJT01/04-INQ000299218** a commission to policy colleagues on the 14 April 2020 for a briefing contribution for a MIG agenda item on DEFRA proposals for food for the non-shielded, by way of examples.
22. This was an extremely busy period for the team as the GPS MIG ran every day (and occasionally at weekends), with the Economy and Business MIG usually about twice a week. My team had less direct engagement with the Health MIG as this was supported more directly by colleagues in the health department. I understand that the Health MIG is described briefly in Andrew Goodall's statement in response to M2B-WG-01.
23. Outputs from my team included daily briefings to Ministers for what were, essentially, UK Government Cabinet sub-committee meetings, a daily update to colleagues with an interest in the discussions as well as any actions (including tracking) emerging

from the MIGs. I exhibit an example of this briefing, for the meeting of the General Public Services MIG on 17 April, at **M2BJT/05-INQ000300174**. I also provided a read-out from the MIGs at the Preparedness meeting chaired by Tim Render.

24. I also had some limited engagement with COBR(M) – but was not an active participant. My role was as an observer, supporting Reg and disseminating any pertinent information to the Project Team.
25. In terms of whether the cooperation, coordination and information sharing between Welsh Government and the UK Government was sufficient during this initial period, a significant amount of information was shared in the MIGs by senior UK Government Ministers, although Welsh Ministers were mainly in ‘receive’ mode rather than active participants in discussion and/ or policy development. Welsh Ministers were left to determine their own policy in devolved matters, although in many cases the overarching approach had already been determined by the UK Government.
26. I would say the ambition at the very beginning was to align with the UK Government rather than to diverge, not least because Ministers were very much alive to the need not to add to public distress and confusion by having different messages in play across the four nations. When arrangements did start to diverge, and the question as to whether the territorial aspects of decisions were sufficiently well communicated and if there were any concerns about public confusion, from my attendance at HPAG OSG I would say Welsh Government was very well aware of the potential for confusion and I understand that this was something that our communications team, working closely with local authorities and other parties, worked extremely hard to avoid. I understand that detailed evidence has been provided to the inquiry about the Welsh Government’s communications, but this was not work that I or my team were closely involved with.
27. I was neither aware of nor involved in discussions about the Stereophonics concerts, nor the Scotland v Wales six nations match. I was not aware of any request from the Secretary of State for Wales to join Welsh Government Cabinet meetings.

The Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC)

28. The MIGs were wound down by the UK Government towards the end of May 2020 as the initial pace and pressure of the response began to slow somewhat, and by

mid-June the role of the Covid-19 Project Team had begun to pivot much more toward delivery of the 21 Day Review. At this stage I was asked by Reg Kilpatrick to move across and take the lead on Welsh Government's relationship with the JBC and consequently my focus switched to engagement with officials in that newly formed organisation.

29. The JBC had three core functions:

- a. collection of data,
- b. provision of analysis and decision-making advice, and
- c. setting of the Covid-19 alert level.

30. As its website states: *"The JBC provided analysis and assessments to decision-makers and did not take or direct operational decisions on outbreak response in any nation"*.

31. The benefits, as the Welsh Government understood them to be, of the JBC were:

- a. Drawing on a richer body of data than any of the four nations would be able to establish independently.
- b. Providing relevant, timely and authoritative situational awareness, analysis, and assessment products, including responding to bespoke commissions, to ensure local and national decision makers had access to the best possible information when responding to outbreak.
- c. Offering a forum to ensure responses to outbreaks in areas close to national boundaries were managed in a consistent, effective way at local and national levels.
- d. Collecting and distributing good practice guidance and learning from outbreaks across each of the four nations, so they can all benefit from the latest understandings of what works.

32. Initially, my role was focused on working across the four nations to put in place formal structures for collaboration around the issues identified above. This included close working with lawyers and line by line negotiations on the terms of the two key strategic documents – the Political Agreement and the Agency Agreement - that would underpin four nation membership of that organisation.

33. These negotiations took a number of months to conclude, as elements of the negotiations inevitably proved complex and time consuming, as is generally the case

when working across four nations on devolved matters. Initial Ministerial advice to support our joining the JBC went to Ministers in July 2020, with final sign-off of key documents by Ministers across the four nations in November.

34. I exhibit at **M2BWGJT01/06-INQ000176794** the Ministerial advice document I drafted (MA/FM/2430/20) providing commentary on the final draft agreement and the proposed next steps, which was submitted to the First Minister on 27 July 2020. I exhibit at **M2BWGJT01/07-INQ000144848** Ministerial advice document MA/VG/3535/20 which sought the agreement of the First Minister and the Minister for Health and Social Services to the final version of the Agency Agreement, which is included in the MA document as an annex. I exhibit the final version of the Political Agreement at **M2BWGJT01/08-INQ000299825**.
35. At the same time as developing the foundations for collaboration in the form of the Ministerial and Agency agreements, officials across the four nations were also working on the formal structures for engagement. These included the establishment of a four nations Ministerial Board, a Steering Group made up of senior civil servants from across the four nations and the JBC Technical Board to be attended by CMOs and CSAs.
36. We subsequently worked on Terms of Reference for these groups ahead of the first meeting of the Ministerial Board on 30 Nov 2020. I exhibit at **M2BWGJT01/09-INQ000299747** the Terms of Reference for the Steering Board.
37. My role was very much centred around securing engagement and collaboration with people in the organisation. I am not a data analyst nor a statistician and so I was not dealing with the data per se. The JBC was an entirely new organisation, and all the roles, functions and relationships within the organisation were equally new, including those relating to the devolved governments. There was therefore a need to establish, at pace, ways of working across the four nations. Once the structure described above was agreed, a weekly four nations meeting was put in place (TIGAA – The Implementation Group for the Agency Agreement) to support the Steering and Ministerial Boards and to discuss prioritisation of work, potential four nations projects and data sharing, and to reflect and take action on any elements of four nation collaboration that were perhaps not working so well. For example, in the early days there were some challenges around making sure the Devolved Governments were involved in the analysts' discussions about international travel restrictions. This was due in the main to the pace at which they were having to work. Flagging this through

TIGAA meant that the right connections were able to be made across the four nations and our analysts fully engaged in the process of review and sighted on documentation. I exhibit as an example at **M2BJT/10-INQ000299958** the agenda and read-out for the meeting of 14 July 2021.

38. We also worked across the organisation to ensure there was a good understanding of devolution and partnership. We did this by developing a joint presentation and delivering it at the JBC's 'show and tell' sessions – to which there was an open invitation to attend and present latest developments in data analysis for example. It was also presented to some of the key team meetings across the JBC. As a result, we were able to ensure: our analysts were embedded in the work around assessment of risk for international travel and in a wider four nations modelling team which shared learning and good practice; that our CMO and CSA were part of the JBC Technical Board which was responsible for – amongst other things – the Covid-19 alert level assessment; that our Ministers and senior officials were fully engaged with and prepared for the JBC Steering and Ministerial Boards; and that colleagues in Public Health Wales were sighted on and had the opportunity to engage with the organisation. There was also consistent sharing of JBC reports on topics such as enduring transmission – although these were, in the main, England-centric.
39. There were other successes with genuine collaboration across the UK and Welsh Waste Water Teams – both in terms of securing strategic engagement but also at a very operational level with the sharing of some sampling equipment at a particular pinch point for Wales.
40. During this period, in early September, the UK Government had also stood-up the National Covid Response Centre (NCRC) which introduced a bird table meeting including a detailed sit rep. These took place twice a day, 7 days a week. The cast list for these meetings was extensive, and included the devolved governments so, as lead official for the JBC, it fell to me to attend and provide a daily, written read-out to colleagues with an interest across Welsh Government. I provide an example at exhibit **M2BWGJT01/11-INQ000299630** from 17 October 2020.
41. Whilst the focus of the bird tables was very England-centric – with PHW giving a read-out on daily case rates etc – it was nonetheless a very useful mechanism for understanding the wider context and the 'mood music' in Whitehall – soft intel which cannot always be understood from a 'written' sit rep. Hence, I was invited to Welsh

Government's Health Protection Advisory Group Covid-19 sub-group (HPAG-OSG) meetings to update orally. In my opinion both the daily bird tables and the JBC worked well in terms of four nation join-up and sharing of detailed sitreps.

42. There were also invitations to cross-Whitehall groups and other meetings including a JBC policy forum, JBC prioritisation panels and 'Show and tell' sessions where analysts across the four nations demonstrated and discussed emerging modelling etc. All of this very much enhanced our wider situational awareness. Similarly, the commitment of the original JBC team to working in equal partnership was commendable – and demonstrable through, for example, the sharing of JBC laptops with analysts to support collaboration, and the introduction of the 'embed' model – with myself and others from each devolved government being formally or informally seconded into the JBC on a part-time basis (in practice, in my view, this had more of a symbolic impact than a material one partly because, by the time the embed mechanism was established, strong working relationships and collaborative working were already in place).
43. The original ambition was somewhat overtaken by events when the organisation was merged with the UK Health Security Agency. Time and energy were necessarily invested in this change agenda: for example, there were extensive discussions about how the four nations governance arrangements might work and the JBC, including the Devolved Government representatives, pressed for existing governance arrangements around data and analytics to be 'rolled-over' into the new organisation, and underpin wider engagement, rather than reinventing the wheel. I understand that engagement with the UKHSA subsequently picked-up pace, but I had changed jobs by then (changed role in March 2022 to a non-Covid role) and cannot comment further.
44. In terms of my role in facilitating, enabling access to or providing information and advice to key decision makers in relation to medical and scientific expertise, data or modelling - I had no role in relation to medical and scientific expertise. Consequently, I do not have a view on whether Welsh Government was curtailed or prevented from understanding the full scientific picture between January and March 2020 due to access to medical or scientific advice.
45. In terms of my role in relation to data and modelling, the primary function of the JBC was to provide objective analysis of the data (case rates, morbidity etc) to UK Ministers and more broadly through the daily sit reps, to help them with decision

making. As I have said, this data was essentially English data and therefore not directly applicable to Wales – although providing very useful context.

46. On a separate point, in September 2020, our Chief Scientific Officer stood up the Covid Intelligence Cell (CIC) which he co-chaired with Fliss Bennee. The CIC's remit was to undertake surveillance with regard to Covid-19. Membership was drawn from across the Welsh Government, Public Health Wales, and other public health and local authority partners. CIC provided an authoritative source of situational awareness of transmission, along with a comprehensive overview of the incidence of COVID-19.
47. I was also asked to informally co-chair - although in practice – as a non-expert – my role was mainly focused on providing support to the secretariat with meeting read-outs and intel flow both out of the JBC and into HPAG OSG if the formal chairs were unable to attend.

Lessons Learned

48. Overall, I would say that the ambition behind the stand-up of the JBC across the four nations was genuinely about collaboration in the context of shared goals. In particular, the individuals involved in the original stand-up were extremely open to this new way of working. In my view the Welsh Ministers, including the First Minister, were equally committed to this operating model.
49. We certainly had some 'wins' – some of which I have described above - but in my view the time taken to negotiate the political and agency agreements, the extreme pressures on the data analysts, and ongoing challenges with data sharing meant that we were not always able to maximise the opportunities theoretically in play in this context. For example, it proved very challenging to agree a joint project which would benefit all four nations equally and justify use of their limited analyst capacity. Similarly, because of the pace at which JBC analysts were being asked to work it proved extremely challenging to ensure our analysts were in at the beginning of a new project and part of the scoping process. Because of the pace at which they were working, if we were not in at the start it was essentially too late to join-in. This was compounded to some degree by technical issues because in practice, analysts from different organisations use different software and/or programming languages etc.

50. Ultimately, with the stand-up of the UKHSA which subsumed the JBC, events overtook. I hope that officials and Ministers involved in the work of the UKHSA have been able to take the learning about genuine collaboration and partnership working from the JBC and apply and develop it in the context of that organisation, so that we are not starting again from scratch should this situation ever arise again.

51. I contributed to an internal lessons-learned exercise and, as I understand it, this was considered by ExCo. The key point which comes to mind when I review the Covid-19 period and my role in particular is that the data and intelligence with which I was engaged through the JBC was, as the above makes clear, essentially England-centric and therefore, whilst providing useful context for decision making and advice, it did not have direct bearing on any Welsh decisions. As far as I am aware this did not impact upon the ability of the Welsh Ministers to take decisions because advice was also available to them from the Welsh Government and their advisors.

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:

Jo Trott

Personal Data

Dated:

17 / 8 / 23