

Witness Name: Carys Evans

Statement No: 1

Exhibits: 14

Dated: 2 October 2023

UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CARYS EVANS

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/CE/01.

I, Carys Evans, will say as follows: -

Preface

1. I extend my sympathy to those who lost loved ones and who suffered in other ways as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

2. I have worked in the Welsh Government since 1999.
3. I have been a civil servant for 45 years. I have held senior roles in the Welsh and UK governments, including three postings to Ministerial private offices.
4. I joined the Welsh Office in September 1978, where my roles included Assistant Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Wales, Nicholas Edwards.

5. In 1984 I transferred to the Treasury where I worked on public expenditure and fiscal policy. From 1988-1990 I was head of the Chief Secretary's private office, working for Cabinet Ministers John Major and Norman Lamont.
6. Following a career break, I returned to the Welsh Office and held senior policy roles in the devolved government of Wales established in 1999.
7. In 2013 I became Deputy Director, Constitutional Affairs and Inter-governmental Relations, which involved advising Ministers on the devolution settlement and relations with the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.
8. I was appointed Principal Private Secretary to the First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, in February 2018 and continued in the role when Mark Drakeford became First Minister in December 2018.
9. My statement relates to the period from 1 January 2020 to 28 February 2021. On 28 February 2021 I tested positive for covid and became very unwell. From that date, I was on sick leave and no longer involved in the Covid-19 response. I remained on sick leave until 15 November 2021 when I started a phased return to work in my current part-time advisory role with the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales.
10. Having returned to that new role, with new colleagues and responsibilities, I have not had an opportunity to de-brief or re-introduce myself to the issues that were of significance when I left the First Minister's office in February 2021 in a practical sense. I have reviewed the First Minister's diary and the notes of the Ministerial calls mentioned below from April-July 2021 for the purpose of this statement.

My Role

11. My role as PPS was to support the First Minister in exercising his responsibilities, including ensuring that he had the information and advice he needed to take timely and well-informed decisions, and to account for those decisions to the elected members of the Senedd and to the public. I led a team of six staff in the First Minister's private office, comprising myself, a senior private secretary, two private secretaries, a diary secretary, and a team support officer.

12. As a team, we planned and managed the First Minister's diary, commissioned briefing for meetings, statements, speeches, and replies to correspondence. Before Covid-19, our preparation focused on a weekly pattern of meetings including the Welsh Government Cabinet on Mondays, First Minister's questions on Tuesdays, internal and external meetings and engagements on Wednesdays and Thursdays. The First Minister usually devoted most of Friday to constituency business.
13. Within this broad pattern, the First Minister's schedule typically included attending (usually as chair):
- a. internal-facing meetings, usually planned in advance and supported by officials, such as Cabinet, Cabinet sub-committees, meetings to monitor progress on the Legislative Programme and the Programme for Government; meetings on policy issues and briefing meetings, for example ahead of the weekly questions to the First Minister in the Tuesday Senedd plenary meeting;
 - b. bilateral meetings with Ministers and with the Permanent Secretary;
 - c. external-facing meetings including with the Llywydd, visiting Ambassadors, senior businesspeople, giving evidence to the Senedd Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister and other Senedd Committees;
 - d. meetings with public service leaders including in response to urgent events such as Storms Ciara and Dennis in February 2020;
 - e. meetings of partnership forums such as the Shadow Social Partnership Council and the Faith Forum;
 - f. inter-governmental meetings, including meetings of the British-Irish Council and the Joint Ministerial Committee;
 - g. party commitments such as the constituency surgery and meetings of the Senedd Labour Group.
14. It was my role to plan and prioritise meetings and engagements, to ensure that agendas and papers reflected the First Minister's expectations and priorities, to check that papers would be ready in good time, identify who needed to be involved, and ensure recording and follow-up.
15. I worked closely with the First Minister's senior special adviser, Jane Runeckles, his comms special adviser, Madeleine Brindley, Will Whiteley (head of the Cabinet Division), Toby Mason (the Welsh Government's Director of Communications), Simon Jenkins (Head of News), and with the Director General responsible for the First

Minister's office, Des Clifford. I was in regular contact with Ministerial private offices, the private secretary to the Permanent Secretary, and with senior officials as needed to convey information or feedback.

16. Working with these and other colleagues, my role was to ensure effective two-way communication between the First Minister's office and officials, by email, in person and on the phone.
17. I attended most of the First Minister's meetings, including Cabinet, inter-governmental meetings, and bilateral meetings with the Permanent Secretary.
18. My role was not to provide advice, but to ensure that advice was commissioned and received promptly, that the First Minister's decisions and views were communicated to officials, and to ensure follow-up action as needed. I exercised no decision-making functions.
19. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic my role remained essentially the same in terms of tasks, but the focus of the First Minister's office shifted to the pandemic response. To summarise, my role in respect of relationships, communications and joint decision making in response to Covid-19 involved:
 - a. planning, preparation, organisation and facilitation;
 - b. communication and follow up of agreed actions.
20. I had no role in the advice and decision making on NPIs. As described above my role was to ensure and facilitate the provision of advice from officials, not to provide advice in my own right.
21. I had no role in the advice and decision making on divergence; firebreaks; furlough issues; medical and scientific expertise and data modelling.
22. Apart from my role in editing and drafting First Minister statements, I had no role in public health communications.
23. Apart from the private office role of ensuring the consideration of, and response to advice, as mentioned above, I had no role in the public health and coronavirus legislation and regulations.

24. I played no role in discussions about the Wales vs Scotland rugby match or the Stereophonics concerts.
25. On initial strategy and decision making, as I have explained it was not my role to provide advice to Ministers. We were aware of the debate about Sweden's adoption of a 'herd immunity' strategy but I don't recall advice on this as an option for Wales. I understand that the First Minister refers to it in his statement to for Module 2 of the Inquiry.

Initial pandemic response: January 2020 to March 2020

26. During this period, the First Minister's diary included 'business as usual' engagements (including meetings of the Cabinet, Cabinet sub-committees, the Legislative Programme Monitoring Group and shadow Social Partnership Council), responding to scrutiny by the Senedd and Senedd Committees, including the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister, conducting external visits and responding to urgent external events.
27. In the period leading up to the UK's exit from the EU on 31 January, preparations for departure had been a major pre-occupation for Ministers and officials, and the First Minister gave a speech on exit day. In February, storms Ciara and Dennis required a strong Welsh Government response. The flooding caused major disruption to transport, affected large numbers of properties (including two Welsh Government offices) and raised questions about the safety of coal tips across south east Wales. Following a visit to the affected areas on 18 February, the First Minister convened a summit jointly with the Secretary of State for Wales on 19 February, which led to a substantial programme of work.
28. I first became aware of the virus in an official capacity around the end of January 2020. The First Minister's diary for Monday 27 January includes a meeting with Andrew Goodall which I think was a discussion to update on NHS preparations. On 18 February, the First Minister was invited to attend a meeting of COBR (a virtual meeting from the emergency co-ordination room in CP2). The Minister for Health and Social Services updated Cabinet on 25 February, and we learnt of the first Welsh case on 27 February. I exhibit the Cabinet minutes from 25 February at **M2BCE/01-INQ000129852**. Cabinet on 4 March was devoted to the Covid-19 response across the UK; I exhibit the minutes at **M2BCE/02-INQ000216456**.

29. The weekly First Ministers' Questions session in the Senedd was the focus of extensive preparation each Friday through to Tuesday morning. Members tabled questions on any subject within devolved competence (and sometimes beyond that competence) and the First Minister required detailed briefing in order to respond. For Questions on 24 March, the majority of questions tabled by Members related to some aspect of the Covid-19 preparations and response. On 24 March, the Senedd agreed to the suspension of the Standing Orders requiring the First Minister to answer questions once per week: the Oral Questions were transferred for written answer, and the First Minister's Questions sessions were replaced by weekly Covid-19 statements by the First Minister and other Ministers until they were restored on 24 June. I exhibit the minutes from the Plenary session on 24 March at **M2B/CE/03-INQ000271920**.

30. My recollection of what happened in my workspace between January and March 2020 is that we were dealing with other urgent and important government business in the normal way, but the response to Covid-19 was increasingly becoming the over-riding priority. From a private office perspective, this meant that Covid-19 related meetings took priority in the First Minister's diary, that public scrutiny of the First Minister's actions and decisions was intense, that we needed to be alert to key public health information that changed daily, and deal with a substantial increase in correspondence to the First Minister by post and email.

31. Events that stand out in my memory during this period are:

- the First Minister attending COBR (remotely) on 18 February 2020 (the Minister for Health and Social Services having attended previous meetings in January and early February) and a meeting of the UK Government Cabinet in a meeting room in the House of Commons on 24 February (the invitation to the three First Ministers to attend the UK Cabinet was unprecedented).
- Andrew Goodall reported to the First Minister in the week before the first lockdown that he'd met NHS Chief Executives to confirm the suspension of all NHS targets so that the service could prioritise the Covid-19 mobilisation.
- in the days leading up to the first lockdown, the First Minister met officials including the First Legislative Council, Dylan Hughes, to discuss the drafting of coronavirus regulations, and the requirement for 21-day review of the restrictions. This was when I understood the process that would dominate our schedule in subsequent months.

32. During this period my impression was that the Welsh Government did appreciate the seriousness of the threat of Covid 19. I saw that Ministers and officials were highly focused on ensuring urgent practical action, such as creating extra NHS capacity and generating and distributing additional PPE supplies (and this focus on practical action continued throughout the period when I was involved). Then the 21-day reviews became the focus for intense work to review the restrictions against the latest evidence, and to decide on immediate next steps, and explain Ministers' decisions to the public.
33. My experience of the First Minister's way of working is that he is someone with long and broad experience in government, central and local. He has many contacts and a deep understanding of local services and the experience of vulnerable people. As a result, I would say that he is a creative lateral thinker and problem solver. This was apparent during the pandemic response when he would suggest that a certain individual, organisation or group could be consulted about certain issues. That mindset contributed to what seemed to me a very wide conversation about the impact of the pandemic and the policy options which were developed in partnership with the Welsh public sector and the private and third sectors, including through the Shadow Social Partnership Council and sector specific groups directly impacted by the pandemic.
34. One example that I recall is that the First Minister and the then Deputy Minister and Chief Whip Jane Hutt (whose portfolio responsibilities included equality matters) recognised early in the pandemic concerns that people of some ethnic groups were disproportionately impacted by Covid-19, with consequent adverse health outcomes. There was a quick response, with the establishment of the First Minister's Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic Covid-19 Advisory Group, which was convened in April 2020. I understand that the work of this group is covered in other statements, including Andrew Goodall's statement in response to M2B-WG-01, and that the Terms of Reference are exhibited to that statement.
35. In the same way, the First Minister was very alert to the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable people. For example, the budget for the Discretionary Assistance Fund (which provides emergency payments to supplement Universal Credit for people in urgent need) was increased, there was consideration of how to protect children on the at risk register who could not be seen by social workers or other professionals during lockdown and action was taken to provide food for children entitled to free school meals who would no longer be able to receive them at school. Ruth Marks,

Director of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, was invited to join the meeting of the Covid Core Group on 8 April, when she reported on the positive response to the call for volunteers to support vulnerable people, the importance of the County Voluntary Council and local authority partnership, and acknowledged Welsh Government support for the voluntary effort. I understand that the Discretionary Assistance Fund is described in Tracey Burke's statement in response to M2B-CTP-01.

36. On co-operation, co-ordination and information sharing between the Welsh Government and the UK Government, I was aware of information sharing at a number of levels, including:

- Meetings of COBR and the UKG Cabinet at which the First Ministers of the devolved governments were invited to provide updates, and listen to briefings by senior UKG officials (I understand that Welsh Government attendance at COBR is covered in more detail in other statements, including the First Minister's statement to Module 2);
- Meetings of the UK Government and the three First Ministers convened by the then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL), Michael Gove, who was the lead UK Minister for liaison with the devolved governments. These meetings were often arranged at short notice dictated by the UK Government's timetable. As was typical of this form of engagement, the governments updated each other on their latest intelligence and planned next steps but there was little time for discussion.. As an example, I exhibit at **M2BCE/04-INQ000271554** the note of a meeting between the CDL and the First Ministers of the devolved governments on 23 June 2020;
- The SAGE Committee was a key group for sharing the latest analysis by scientists across governments- our officials, Rob Orford and Fliss Bennee, briefed the First Minister and other Ministers on this intelligence;
- Officials in the Welsh Government and Whitehall departments, worked at speed to co-ordinate advice and guidance to the public. There were frustrations relating to the timing of public announcements and other presentational issues, but in general my impression was that official relations were constructive.
- On matters such as PPE, the NHS App, testing and vaccine development, my impression was of civil servants in the UKG and the Welsh Government sharing information and overcoming practical problems such as Welsh access to UKG lab capacity.

37. On 17 March 2020, the First Minister made a statement to the Senedd on Covid-19, delivered on behalf of the Minister for Health and Social Services (who was unable to deliver the statement because the technology failed). From then on, it was agreed that the First Minister would make a weekly statement on the emergency. This was drafted by the First Minister and his private office. I exhibit at **M2BCE/05-INQ000271921** his first weekly statement.
38. Following the lockdown on 23 March, the Welsh Government introduced a weekly First Minister Press Conference, with a statement followed by questions, on Friday mornings. The statement was prepared by Special Adviser Madeleine Brindley, with my role one of editing, and fact checking. I understand that Madeleine Brindley has received a Rule 9 request and has submitted a statement to the Inquiry.
39. Preparing for these First Minister press conferences and Senedd statements, and the follow-up questions, was a high priority for the private office. The First Minister was under continuous scrutiny on the Covid-19 response, and we needed to make sure that he had the most up to date information on infection and transmission, including numbers of cases and deaths, and on the response, including the provision of PPE, NHS capacity, Test and Trace performance and laboratory capacity. For example, from early April we received (at around 8 am each day) information from Public Health Wales which included the latest figures on infection rates and which the First Minister scrutinised closely.
40. In terms of the understanding of the disease and the options available to reduce its transmission, we were working from the same scientific information base as the UK Government and there was much common ground in our responses. But (and this became more important after the first lockdown when we moved into consideration of the scope for easement at local level) we were responding to the facts in relation to Wales and conditions in each local authority. So it was less a case of divergence or non-divergence than of the Welsh Government tailoring its response to the particular conditions in Wales.

Decision-making committees, groups and forums dealing with the response to Covid-

19

41. The First Minister recognised that we would need new structures for oversight and decision-making on the response to Covid 19. These were managed by the First Minister's office (including scheduling, setting agenda, issuing invitations etc).
42. These structures were put in place during March-July 2020 and are summarised below.
43. I attended most of these meetings some were not decision-making meetings but provided intelligence which informed decisions.

Covid Core Group

44. From March until September 2020 this group met on Wednesday mornings at 8.30 am. It began as an internal co-ordination group of the Ministers most closely involved, along with the CMO and Director General, NHS Wales. At the First Minister's instigation, we expanded the Group to include the leader of the Welsh Local Government Association and Rhondda Cynon Taf council, Andrew Morgan, as a standing member. Leaders of other public services, including the Director of the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action, Chief Constables and Police and Crime Commissioners, military personnel and others were invited on an ad hoc basis to brief the meeting on their organisation's input to the response. Meetings generally included an update from the CMO and others present as needed. The purpose was to share information and build common purpose across the public services in Wales.
45. To build a cross-party approach, the First Minister invited the then Leader of the Opposition, Paul Davies, to join the Group subject to confidentiality requirements set out in correspondence. This was agreed, and the same invitation was later extended to the then Leader of Plaid Cymru, Adam Price. I exhibit the First Minister's letters (dated 27 March 2020) at **M2BCE/06-INQ000271490**,/ **M2BCE/07-INQ000271466**, and the responses at **M2BCE/08-INQ000271469** and **M2BCE/09-INQ000271486**. I understand that the First Minister has described his approach to his meetings with the leaders of the opposition in his statement reference M2B-WG-01.
46. This group continued to meet until 10 September 2020, and was replaced by an Opposition Leaders Weekly Briefing, which met for the first time on 16 September

2020. I exhibit the First Minister's letters to Adam Price MS and to Paul Davies MS, setting out the rationale for the change, at **M2B/CE/10-INQ000271573**, and **M2B/CE/11-INQ000271575**. Both leaders agreed to the approach; I exhibit their responses at **M2B/CE/12-INQ000271577**, and **M2B/CE/13-INQ000271576**.

Cabinet Calls

47. Formal Cabinet meetings (usually on Monday afternoons) continued as before, and agendas included decisions on the 21-day reviews of the Covid-19 restrictions.
48. To strengthen communication and co-ordination across the Ministerial team, the First Minister initiated morning meetings of the whole Cabinet and Deputy Ministers to focus on the Covid-19 response, held on most days at 8.30 am (during the working week, and when required at weekends).
49. These meetings included updates from the First Minister, for example on inter-governmental meetings, and from Ministers on developments in their portfolios, for example on support for business, on school closures and exams, on public transport, on local government, as well as the NHS and care homes. The First Minister's office was responsible for organising these meetings, setting agendas, recording discussions and ensuring follow-up. I exhibit at **M2BCE/14-INQ000271473** an example of the record of these calls, from 6 April 2020.

Shadow Social Partnership Council (SSPC)

50. This forum, chaired by the First Minister, was created before Covid-19 to work on the Social Partnership Bill. Its membership included trade unions and representatives of the third sector and business. During Covid-19, it became an important forum for information sharing and engagement due to the breadth and diversity of its membership. I understand that the work of the SSPC, and the importance the First Minister placed upon it, is described in the First Minister's statements in response to M2B-WG-01.

Briefing meetings

51. From mid-April, the First Minister held weekly meetings with the Minister for Health and Social Services, the Chief Medical Officer, Frank Atherton, the Director General and

Chief Executive of NHS Wales, Andrew Goodall, Chief Scientific Adviser for Health and co-chair of TAG, Rob Orford and co-chair of TAG, Fliss Bennee, to discuss the latest information on the science, the discussions in SAGE and the Welsh Government's Technical Advisory Group, and experience from other countries., He also met the Director General for Local Government and Covid Recovery, Reg Kilpatrick to discuss the preparations for the 21-day reviews.

Progress meetings

52. The First Minister convened regular meetings to check on action on the most urgent aspects of the response. For example, on the supply of PPE to front line staff in the NHS and care homes. This involved securing the NHS Wales share of supplies available to the NHS UK-wide, and supplementing this with supplies from industry providers in Wales and overseas. The latter project was run by a team of economy department officials which the First Minister asked the Deputy Minister Lee Waters to lead. This was the CERET group which I understand is described in detail in Andrew Slade's statement in response to M2B-WG-BRD-01. The objective was to ensure that we used all possible routes to provide the equipment required, and we collaborated with local government to ensure that the distribution of equipment free of charge to care homes was fair and effective.
53. Later examples are the First Minister's meetings (weekly initially and then fortnightly) on the Test and Trace and vaccine rollout process, to consider updates from the team led by Jo-Anne Daniels, Director Test, Trace, Protect. The First Minister asked about the performance of teams across Wales and how barriers could be overcome. The team reported on holdups in the system and remedial action taken.
54. My role in respect of relationships and communications with the UK Government and the other devolved governments involved liaison with the respective private offices about logistics and agendas and providing readouts to our officials as needed.
55. In relation to local authorities, the relevant meetings were mainly about restrictions, or easing of restrictions, at the level of individual authorities, or groups of authorities. These meetings were convened to support decision-making on the 21-day reviews, to provide local intelligence and enable local leaders to be consulted. My role was to oversee the practical arrangements, confirm agendas and ensure the right people were involved.

Informal communication: WhatsApp

56. I was not involved in, or aware of, any What's App group forming part of the decision-making process during the pandemic.

Lessons learned

57. I have not been involved in any formal lessons learned reviews. Due to my period of absence and thereafter returning to work in a different role there is increased separation between my current position and my role at the time.

58. However, having reflected upon matters from the perspective of the First Minister's office, in drafting this statement, the areas I saw working well were:

- **IT:-** Ministers and officials had the equipment needed to move seamlessly to home working from the beginning of lockdown. This technology enabled the convening of internal, inter-governmental and cross-public service meetings at very short notice;
- **Agile communication** with partners through online Teams meetings of the groups mentioned above, and ad hoc discussions, for example a meeting with North Wales leaders arranged at short notice to discuss local restrictions in their counties. This process worked well because we were building on the Welsh Government's well-established partnership model, structures and relationships, and at the First Minister's instigation, we tried to involve all those with something to contribute, including, for example HE representatives, when student transmission was being discussed.
- **Public health and scientific advice-** the First Minister had regular meetings with officials and paid close attention to the latest information and analysis;
- the **speed at which new teams of officials were created**, for example, to lead on the 21-day reviews, to plan and execute delivery of PPE, Test and Trace and the vaccine rollout. These teams comprised Welsh Government civil servants drawn from across departments, as well as NHS staff.
- Ministers' **sensitivity to the societal impacts** of Covid-19 and the restrictions, for example on residents in care homes and their families, on ethnic minority groups as mentioned above, the mental health impact of restrictions, and the financial impact on business, particularly hospitality and tourism, and the efforts they made to mitigate these impacts.

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.

Personal Data

Signed: _____

Carys Evans

Dated: __2nd October 2023_____