
Minutes of the ExCovid meeting, 13 October 2020

Present:

Shan Morgan (Chair)
 Andrew Slade (AS)
 Tracey Burke (TB)
 Andrew Goodall (AG)
 Des Clifford (DC)
 Gawain Evans (GE)
 David Richards (DR)
 Natalie Pearson (NP)
 Simon Brindle (SB)
 Liz Lalley (LL)
 Toby Mason (TM)
 Andrew Gwatkin (AG)
 Albert Heaney (AH)

NR

Gareth Williams (GW)
 Helen Lentle (HL)

NR

Reg Kilpatrick (RK)
 Jo Trott (JT)
 Jo-anne Daniels (JD)
 Peter Kennedy (PK)
 Stephanie Howarth (SH)
 Rob Orford (RO)

Secretariat:

NR

Presenters

Robert Hoyle (RH)
 Helen Morris (HM)

Apologies

No apologies received.

1. Welcome and actions

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed all to the meeting, noting that

NR

 was attending to represent the non-executive directors. The Chair reminded all to review the draft minutes from 06 October and that all actions are in hand.
- 1.2 The Chair welcomed Dr Robert Hoyle from the Welsh Government's Office of the Chief Scientific Adviser to present on international comparators. The Chair noted that owing to diary commitments AG would provide his update on the NHS at Item 2.

2. DG update from Dr Andrew Goodall and an update from the Technical Advisory Group (TAC)

DG Update - Health and Social Care

- 2.1 AG began by noting the increasing demands on the NHS in Wales as a result in the increase in Covid-19 cases. There are just over 700 patients in hospital with Covid-19, this is a 50% increase in the last 7 days.
- 2.2 On numbers testing positive for Covid-19, the current figures are not unexpected. There have been some small improvements but most areas have seen number of those testing positive increasing. Some improvements but most areas still deteriorating. Infection and hospitalisation rates across the majority of Wales is not at the level set out in Tier 3 of the UK Government's approach, but many of our measures go beyond those proposed in Tier 3. The performance of the Lighthouse Laboratories has improved in recent days.
- 2.3 NHS plans to deal with an increase in Covid-19 cases are in place but pressures are being felt from hospital-based outbreaks. Six hospitals across Wales are reporting some level of Covid-19 outbreak. As community outbreaks increase, then the chance of patients, visitors or staff taking the virus into hospitals also increases.
- 2.4 If the number of hospital admissions for Covid-19 double within the next 3 to 4 weeks we will see a return to the numbers seen in the spring. AG posed the question on what Welsh Government's intention for the NHS over the winter months is, is it to maintain an emergency response or to keep going in the face of Covid-19.
- 2.5 The number of critical care beds occupied by Covid-19 patients is currently stable at between 25 to 30 beds. This reflects the nature of admissions but numbers are expected to increase in the coming weeks as the age profile of admissions to hospital changes.
- 2.6 AG to set out the position on Covid-19 in Wales at the Welsh Government's press conference on 14 October

Update on TAC.

- 2.7 RO began by noting that public health services are under similar pressures to the NHS particular given the number of Covid-19 clusters.
- 2.8 The proposal to impose a circuit or fire-break is aimed at slowing the exponential spread of Covid-19. The virus is behaving in a similar way to the first wave. The infection rate amongst young people is rising and will in time, find its way into the older population and into vulnerable settings.

- 2.9 The doubling time for the infection is currently around 14 days. Fewer patients are going to ICU, which suggests that hospitals are finding different ways to manage patients. The position in the UK is approximately 2 weeks behind that in France and experts here are sharing information with their French counterparts.
- 2.10 Swansea University are modelling the impact on the spread of the virus of imposing a circuit/fire-break for 2 to 3 weeks. The current infection rate will play through the system and lead to an increase in hospital admissions. Longer-term projections on the behaviour of the virus will depend on how the public responds to non-pharmaceutical interventions imposed to re-set the community response. This is a significant challenge and these behaviours need to become normal behaviour for some time to come.
- 2.11 The Chair thanked RO for his update and invited **NR** to offer his thoughts on how the position in Wales compares with that in England. **NR** responded that the in the south west of England, the increase in the spread of the virus is similar to that in seen in Wales.
- 2.12 JT have a brief overview of the work of the Covid-19 Intelligence Cell and its work with the Joint Bio-security Council. The intelligence cell is working to build a granular picture of the situation around Wales, based on local intelligence, and passing this information to the CMO to inform decisions on imposing additional local measures.
- 2.13 The Chair asked JT for her thoughts on the working relationship with the JBC. JT responded that official-level interactions are very positive, however, work is still needed to get the agency agreement completed.
- 2.14 RK provided an update on plans for a circuit breaker in Wales. Events are moving quickly with additional measures imposed in Bangor on 09 October.
- 2.15 The First Minister is considering very carefully the case for a circuit breaker. Work is underway to consider what this might look like; for example, will schools and colleges remain open, will hospitality and non-essential retail outlets be closed? Consideration needs to be given to the 4 types of harm associated with the pandemic and any measures need to be sufficiently different to what is currently in place, time-bound, and with an exit strategy.
- 2.16 AS thanked colleagues for the briefing. Officials from ESNR are ready to assist with work on understanding the impact on any further restrictions on sectors such as non-essential retail. AS noted that if a circuit breaker is imposed, thought needs to be given to how students will respond. If universities move to more remote learning, then students may choose to return home.
- 2.17 **NR** noted that the any funding from the UK Treasury to mitigate the impacts of a circuit breaker on businesses and households in Wales, will depend on the package offered in England. The option to go beyond this in Wales is modest,

and this needs to be kept in mind when any decisions about imposing further measures are made. It is essential that before we commit to new restrictions, we are clear on how we will mitigate against them and be clear on the support offered to businesses before they are ordered to shut.

- 2.18 GW noted that any decisions on a circuit breaker need to be made following an assessment of both the direct and indirect harms from the virus and any measures that Welsh Government takes, adding that that each need to be considered equally.
- 2.19 GW queried whether Welsh Government was confident that introducing a stricter regime would have the desired effect, noting the difficulty in preventing people from meeting others from outside their household in their own homes. GW added that that there is the risk of legal challenge from businesses in parts of Wales where the infection rate is low if they are forced to shut.
- 2.20 RK commented that there are no easy solutions; compliance and personal responsibility is key to bringing the virus under control.
- 2.21 The Chair ended the item, noting that a number of factors could affect compliance with any measures and that it is not possible to police what goes on within individual homes.

Action: The secretariat to liaise with RO to arrange to circulate regular updates from TAC.

- 2.22 SH provided an update. The latest figures on mobility data show that overall, the number of trips are falling as more areas have local restrictions applied. Residential trips have increased as people stay local, trips to work have remained pretty stable while all other trips have decreased.
- 2.23 On card spending, this peaked in late August but has now fallen. The hospitality sector is reporting the largest drop in card transactions.
- 2.24 The latest labour market figures were released earlier. ONS have re-weighted the labour market statistics to take account of a shift in the methodology of the Labour Force Survey from face-to-face to telephone surveying as this was found to be skewing the sample towards owner-occupiers in full time employment. The re-weighting reflects this and has had an impact on the figures with employment rates decreasing. In Wales, this is compounded by the small sample size.
- 2.25 ONS also have access to real-time data from HMRC's management systems and this provides more timely information on the number in paid employment. The

latest figures up to the end of September show a drop in the number in employment, it will be key to see the figures for after the Furlough scheme ends.

3. Director General updates on key policy and delivery issues

- 3.1 The Chair asked DGs to highlight the most pressing issues for their Group.
- 3.2 **Office of the First Minister.** DC provided an update. On the UK Government's Three Tier approach, Tier 3 is not as strict as restrictions put in place in Wales. DC added that both the UK Government's Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientist have commented that the Tier 3 restrictions will not stop the spread of the virus.
- 3.3 On restricting travel into Wales from other areas of the UK with high infection rates, the First Minister has written to the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland and Northern Ireland. In his letter to the Prime Minister asking that regulations in the other UK nations reflect the call not to travel into Wales. This is of particular concern given the land border between Wales and England and the high infection rates in English areas close to the border. Work is underway to look into how Welsh Government can legislate to prevent travel in these circumstances.
- 3.4 The First Minister is also asking the UK Government to consider collective action across the four nations on a possible circuit breaker to maximise impact.
- 3.5 The Chair thanked DC for his update noting the UK Government's blatant disregard of the expert advice.
- 3.6 **Education and Public Services** - On education, TB noted that there will still too many pupils being sent home by head teachers in response to confirmed or suspected cases of Covid-19 in schools. Officials are working on guidance to support schools when making decisions on sending pupils home.
- 3.7 Current figures show some 423 staff and 427 pupils with Covid-19. Of all schools in Wales, 268 schools with at least one case, eight out of ten schools have no cases of Covid-19.
- 3.8 Contact tracing in schools is working well. Some 35,000 contacts required tracing and 94% have been traced successfully.
- 3.9 Reports suggest that the numbers of Covid-19 cases is levelling off. There is no evidence of this in Wales, with 09 October seeing the largest single increase in cases in schools.

- 3.10 Regarding the 2021 summer exam series, England has announced its plans, the approach in Wales will be decided on following receipt of the independent report in to the 2020 summer series.
- 3.11 Officials are working on the detail of proposals for self-isolation payments. Originally it was planned to use the mechanism of the Discretionary Assistance Fund to make payments but following a request from the Minister for Housing and Local Government, officials are looking at options to use local authorities as the delivery agent.
- 3.12 On a possible circuit breaker, TB noted the distress caused to children by not being in school together with the impacts on employment and childcare. Although schools have been provided with funding to support remote teaching, there are still inconsistencies in the delivery of blended learning. Further school closures will hit the more disadvantaged learners hardest and the Minister for Education is calling for the minimal disruption to learners in any new restrictions.
- 3.13 **Economy, Skills and Natural Resources** - In terms of the wider economy, AS began by noting that business support teams are increasingly dealing with businesses laying off staff with the React scheme being drawn on heavily.
- 3.14 Regarding Higher Education, imposing a circuit breaker may have the unintended consequence of encouraging the movement of students around the UK as they return home in advance of increased restrictions. The DG's for Higher Education from the four nations are due to meet on 14 October and these concerns will be discussed.
- 3.15 The hospitality and food service sectors are facing increased pressures, UK Government arrangements for supporting these sectors only come into play for those establishments forced to close.
- 3.16 The Culture Recovery Fund has been significantly oversubscribed, AS asked whether there was additional money available to supplement the fund.
- 3.17 AS noted that the impact of Covid-10 was playing out against the impact of EU-transition, resulting in leadership and prioritisation challenges.
- 3.18 The Chair agreed and added that the situation is intensifying and becoming more complex.

5. Communications

- 5.1. TM provided an update. Recent focus group discussions suggest a change in public attitude with feelings of anxiety, frustration and a lack of hope increasingly

expressed. Results from opinion polls also reflect this shift in attitudes. TM observed that these findings highlight the challenge in striking a balance between communicating messages about the challenges ahead while offering some degree of optimism.

- 5.2. The focus groups suggest that people are looking closely at the measures put in place by Welsh Government and, where they exist, noticing inconsistencies in the rules. TM commented that these inconsistencies are impacting on compliance, and undermining actions to reduce the transmission of Covid-19.
- 5.3. On a possible circuit breaker, as much lead in time as possible is needed to ensure that supporting information and infrastructure are in place. For example, information on support packages, frequently asked questions, first point of contact all need to be ready for an announcement.
- 5.4. Although work has been done to lay the ground for a possible announcement on a circuit breaker, people may not be supportive of new restrictions. Public trust in Welsh Government's handling of Covid-19 remains higher than trust in the UK Government's approach, but it has fallen in recent weeks. There are some positive signs however; public attitude to face coverings has changed with compliance now relatively high. If there is clarity on what we are asking people to do, and why we are asking them to do it, then they are more likely to comply.
- 5.5. Trust in government handling of the response to Covid-19 drives compliance with any measures put in place. When the first local health protection areas were announced, they were portrayed as temporary measures but increasingly they are seen by people as the first steps towards greater national restrictions and this is undermining trust in Welsh Government. If a decision to introduce a 'circuit breaker' is made, then there must be simplicity and consistency in the messaging around it.
- 5.6. The Chair asked for further clarification on what has sparked disillusionment in the response to Covid-19. TM responded that although people expected a second wave of Covid-19, increasingly people are concerned about the economic impact. In the first wave, people were fearful of catching Covid-19 but with the second wave, people are very anxious about job losses and the impact on their personal finance. Any announcement on a 'circuit breaker' will need to be clear on what the financial support package is available.
- 5.7. HL added that the legal landscape around Covid-19 measures is becoming increasingly complex for people to understand with different rules applying in different areas. People need access to simple comprehensive information on the rules they need to follow. HL added that the coming week is perhaps the most difficult in terms of decision making since the start of the pandemic. TM supported the points made by HL, noting that the stricter the measures then the easier they

are to communicate. TM suggested that in some cases the argument of the rules being too complex to understand may be used as a reason for non-compliance.

6. Deep Dive – international comparators

- 6.1. RH gave an over view of the work of the International Intelligence sub-group of TAG.
- 6.2. The picture from Europe is worrying with the number of Covid-19 cases increasing. For example, the virus is spreading rapidly in the Czech Republic and Poland is recording record daily cases. Slovakia has declared a state of emergency in response to a spike in cases.
- 6.3. In Spain, the most rapid increase in cases is amongst the young. Overall, the positivity rate has been rising since early August, but there is some levelling off. The number of hospital admissions has also begun to decline after a rapid rise early in the summer.
- 6.4. France has seen a huge rise in the number of cases, with the number of deaths increasing. There has been a large increase in the positivity rate. In Paris, the infection rate is 800 cases per 100,000. Paris was declared a Red Zone 2 weeks ago, a further five cities will also be declared a Red Zone shortly. Cases from the cities are beginning to leak out to the suburbs and on to rural areas with an increase in hospital admissions expected to follow in time.
- 6.5. Denmark has seen a large increase in cases with younger age groups most affected. Testing has increased but the positivity rate has remained relatively level. Hospital occupancy is rising, but not yet back to the level seen in April.
- 6.6. In Netherlands, the situation is worsening significantly.
- 6.7. Italy is seeing the positivity rate increasing again. The prolonged good weather in the early autumn helped suppress the pandemic.
- 6.8. In the UK, positivity rates are increasing, and this is reflected in the number of hospital admissions and ICU cases. Advancements in treatments and the younger age range being infected is currently keeping the number of deaths down.
- 6.9. Globally, there is positive news from Australia and New Zealand on controlling the spread of the virus. In India, the incidence of the spread of the virus is starting to decline, as is the case in some South American countries.
- 6.10. The Chair asked if any of the European countries were useful comparators for Wales, for example, Estonia or the Czech Republic. **NR** replied that Wales is a

little behind these countries in terms of virus. **NR** added that caution is needed when comparing the position in the UK with that in Sweden, given the differences between the countries. Sweden has seen good adherence to the voluntary system of social distancing measures it introduced, which are very similar to the measures introduced in the UK. Sweden also benefits from lower population density and more single person and small households which naturally help limit the spread of the virus.

ACTION: The secretariat to liaise with RH to arrange to circulate regular updates form the international intelligence sub-group.

7. Covid-19 stocktake and lessons learnt exercise

- 7.1 HM took the group through the proposed approach to undertaking a stocktake and lessons learnt exercise to demonstrate accountability in Welsh Government's response to Covid-19. The 'plan on a page' circulated to the group aims to put a structure around the work that needs to be done to maintain a record of decisions made and actions taken to implement them.
- 7.2 The 'plan on a page', gives an overall framework to demonstrating accountability; and will help in the preparations for any future public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic. Discussion are underway with KAS on creating an area of iShare to store files relating to Covid-19 in one place.
- 7.3 HM proposed bringing together a small group of officials to take this work forward.
- 7.4 The Chair noted the proposed approach and commented that simplicity and avoidance of duplication is key. The Chair asked HM to establish a group of officials to take this work forward

ACTION: HM to bring together a group of officials to take forward this work.

8. Any other business and close.

- 8.1 The Chair closed the meeting, noting the relentlessly difficult period ahead, compounded by the end of the EU transition period approaching. The Chair added that that Welsh Government has three assets to help tackle the situation ahead; the First Minister's reputation for integrity and the trust he is held in by the public, the good working relationship Welsh Government has built with its stakeholders and, the commitment of Welsh Government officials.