THE WELSH GOVERNMENT CIVIL SERVICE'S APPROACH TO DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNT FOR GOOD PRACTICES AND AREAS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF APPROACH

June 2022

Introduction

1. With the agreement of the Covid Transition Board and ExCo, a Covid-19 Lessons Learnt Exercise on the WG Civil Service's approach to developing and implementing a cross-government response to the pandemic was undertaken. This report presents the findings from the exercise, drawing out both lessons learnt for good practices and areas for further development of our approach, based on common views and themes as well as specific examples where relevant.

2. It is important to note that this report has mainly been compiled based on personal recollections and views expressed by people in response to questions designed to learn lessons in respect of the specific areas within scope of this exercise. Therefore, it is not a definitive record of activities and should not be relied upon as such.

Summary of key lessons

3. The key lessons emerging from this exercise are:

   - **Structures:** Identify early when a cross-government effort is required in a crisis situation and have arrangements in place which enable a rapid redeployment of people in sufficient numbers.
   - **Capacity to deliver:** Undertake rapid re-assessment of priorities when a cross-government response is required at scale which involves securing Ministerial cover and clarity for staff around any decisions to de-prioritise activities.
   - **Expertise:** Have capability to upscale expert advisory capacity which enables the provision of timely advice supportive of fully rounded policy development.
   - **New policy issues:** Establish mechanisms for senior leaders to take responsibility for prioritising new areas of work from an organisation-wide viewpoint.
   - **Internal communication:** Stand up cross-government communication channels from the outset of a crisis with readouts for those unable to attend meetings.
   - **Ministerial engagement:** Ensure that the whole organisation is working in lockstep with Ministers through Cabinet, maintaining regular and close engagement facilitated by Special Advisers.
   - **Engagement with other UK governments:** Engage fully with clarity around roles, responsibilities and structures.
   - **Engagement with delivery partners:** Develop and utilise strong relationships to work in partnership and align efforts around common goals.
   - **Virtual working:** Capture the benefits while protecting staff welfare.

Scope and objectives

4. The exercise's scope was to seek to learn lessons in respect of the WG civil service's approach to developing and implementing a cross-government response to the Covid-19 pandemic which would be capable of being used to

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manage a future crisis. The exercise considered both central and group level arrangements, bringing into focus:

- Structures utilised
- Capacity to deliver, including impacts on less urgent work
- Input of expertise
- Arrangements for assessing impacts and adjusting
- Management of policy issues arising not linked to a WG team pre-pandemic
- Internal communication channels
- Co-ordination to administer in line with Ministers' individual and collective preferences
- Engagement and communication with external organisations – including the UKG, other devolved governments and delivery partners in Wales
- Implications of virtual working

5. The exercise did not consider the appropriateness of any decisions made by Ministers nor assess the effectiveness of measures. The exercise did also not consider the delivery of specific interventions, with responsible teams having the opportunity to lead individual lessons learnt exercises which have been drawn from where relevant.

6. Within this scope, the objectives for the exercise were:

 i) To capture what worked well internally and how activity evolved with experience

 ii) To explore the effectiveness and efficiency of structures and/or processes linked to the development and implementation of protection measures, and surface ideas for where alternatives might have been beneficial

 iii) To consider the extent to which work to manage the pandemic was balanced with other work successfully

 iv) To review the effectiveness and efficiency of engagement and communications flows with the UK Government and other devolved governments, particularly at key points

 v) To outline how the WG's relationship with key delivery partners has changed and what might be done to embed changes where desirable

 vi) To consider how virtual working facilitated and/or hindered the handling of issues

Methodology

7. Insights were gathered by:

- Conducting 36 semi-structured interviews with colleagues who played key roles in leading the response across all WG groups. Colleagues were categorised as 'policy', 'technical / advisory' or 'Permanent Secretary / Director General' and questions were designed for each category. The questions are presented in **Annex A**.
- Facilitating two focus group discussions - one included 8 staff who have been involved in externally facing delivery / engagement and one included 8 staff

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who have worked in central teams co-ordinating activities or undertaking data analysis work. Individuals working below SCS level were targeted for participation in these group discussions. The questions asked are outlined in **Annex B**.

- Reviewing relevant lessons learnt exercises undertaken within groups and drawing from any lessons relevant to the scope of this exercise. The exercises reviewed are listed at **Annex C**.

8. Follow-up work to engage directly with Ministers and Special Advisers is now underway.

Findings and lessons

9. In respect of each of the areas in scope of the exercise, the findings and lessons emerging from them are as follows:

<u>Structures utilised</u>

10. In the context of a very high level of uncertainty around Covid, the initial response was public health led with civil contingency structures mobilised as the scale of the situation became clearer. These initial arrangements placed considerable responsibilities on health officials as well as others who were involved in big decision making early on and, while seen as a situation to be managed as a public health matter, did not result in ECC(W) structures being mobilised in the initial weeks when they had the potential to contribute effectively. While the initial structures enabled agile working and provided the essential support required for Ministers, it was clear that the response could not be managed by small teams while the wider organisation continued to focus on business-as-usual. At the early stages, there was an overall feeling that with focus on other pressures, ExCo's agility to move at pace into lockstep with Ministers' intensified focus on the pandemic was hindered.

11. The situation was addressed centrally by securing temporary resources to establish a co-ordination team, with this structure being normalised over time with the creation of dedicated posts. It became clear that the scale of the crisis needed people across the WG to be mobilised. The central team was successful in commencing this mobilisation, with the situation becoming more stable and satisfactory following the appointment of a Director General for Covid Crisis Coordination in October 2020.

12. At a group level, examples of adjustments which were considered to be successful and should be considered for wider adoption are where:

- HSSG set up some new structures with a Covid-19 Planning and Response Group being established from February 2020 and new structures in the CMO's office.
- ESNR established a dedicated team for co-ordinating the higher education response and specific structures for developing and delivering the Economic Resilience Fund. A group of senior colleagues were also given a remit to scrutinise advice that was being compiled for Ministers on major decisions.

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Non-covid work was re-prioritised to enable focus to be given to the response, including in respect of business support and the acute challenges associated– for the tourism and hospitality sectors in particular.

- EPS set up a dedicated team to co-ordinate the response for schools and re-prioritised work to deal with implications for local government and communities.
- OFM established a core team of lawyers to develop covid-specific legislation and focused communication work on the very substantial upturn in communications activity.
- PSG utilised existing skill sets held among Welsh Treasury staff to co-ordinate finance work. They also established a 'Star Chamber' to consider major expenditure decisions, though there were mixed views about its effectiveness.

13. As the pandemic progressed, the central team developed and focused activity around the 21 day review process. Although events did not always make it possible to limit changes to the 21 day cycle and changes to international travel could not be aligned, there is consensus that this process worked very well. However, weaving the process into the wider organisation's functioning required considerable effort and became smoother over time.

14. There is a widespread feeling that the structures operationalised from October 2020 have been effective, but people working within them have faced considerable pressures. There were many single points of failure so success would have been compromised by certain key individuals becoming unwell or being less resilient. Needing to attract additional people through a volunteering approach or personal contacts was considered to be unsatisfactory and sometimes people found it easier to bring additional resources into the Welsh Government from, for example, the NHS or ONS than to recruit people internally.

15. A consistent theme throughout reflections on this extraordinary period has been the scale of effort made by our people to deliver the response to the pandemic. Colleagues undertook new and very challenging tasks, often at a very fast pace, with multiple stakeholders and delivery partners, and dealing with considerable uncertainty and risk. At times the burden has fallen upon a small number of people who worked very long hours.

16. It is clear in this area that **good practice** has been to:

- Recognise that the pandemic response required central co-ordination and could not be managed through civil contingency arrangements and/or health officials only.
- Where possible, enable people to be fully dedicated to working on the pandemic.

17. **Further development of our approach** is needed by:

- Designing resourcing arrangements which can direct the right people, in sufficient numbers, to the right places at the right time – while fully considering safeguarding and wellbeing, and enabling staff to take breaks.

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- Ensuring that our approach to emergency response can support a sustained, nationwide effort which galvanises the whole organisation at the right time.

<u>Capacity to deliver, including impacts on less urgent work</u>

18. People contributing to this exercise have reported that, during the initial phase of the pandemic, they needed to dedicate the vast majority – or all - of their time to Covid-related work. However, it is important to note that those invited to contribute are among those who have been most focused on the pandemic response so may not be representative of all staff across the WG.

19. In order to dedicate the time needed for undertaking Covid-related work, other work needed to be de-prioritised. In some instances, this required explicit ministerial agreement (e.g. where progress of a Bill needed to be paused) and in other instances officials needed to make judgements aligned with the stated or understood wishes of Ministers. ExCo agreed a prioritisation matrix, but people would have welcomed more specific cover for pausing work in certain areas. Legal Services also developed a prioritisation framework which was agreed by the First Minister and applied effectively to make decisions on priorities across all areas of its work.

20. As the pandemic progressed, the implications of pausing non Covid-related work grew in general and Ministers' focus on those areas increased. Other competing priorities also came into focus such as the end of the Brexit transition period on 31 December 2020. This resulted in the challenges of dealing with the pandemic alongside other work increasing for some from the summer of 2020.

21. In areas where workloads were most affected by the pandemic (e.g. public health), it has only been possible to turn significant attention back to non Covid-related priorities recently and this is highlighted as an implication of prioritisation decisions in many instances occurring at team – rather than organisation – level.

22. In this area, **good practice** has been:

- Colleagues acting individually to demonstrate flexibility and willingness to adjust priorities.

23. **Further development of our approach** is needed to:

- Determine what governance should be used to ensure Ministers and senior officials are sufficiently sighted on reprioritisation decisions and longer term risks/impacts, recognising that priorities are likely to change as a situation moves from immediate crisis to sustained emergency and beyond.

<u>Input of expertise, and arrangements for assessing impacts and adjusting</u>

24. During the pandemic, there has clearly been a step change in the extent to which evidence and expertise have informed policy making across the WGUK-level sources (e.g. SAGE) were heavily drawn from throughout, and were particularly important in the initial phase when expertise was being built rapidly to advise the

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CMO drawing on PHW resources. It soon became apparent that wider evidence sourced in Wales was needed so TAG and TAC were developed at pace starting from a low base, led by the Chief Scientific Adviser for Health. KAS made a number of analysts available to support TAC. TAC was regarded as successful in corralling expertise both internally and externally, and filtering evidence for consideration by the CMO and Ministers in a Welsh context, including for 21 day reviews. However, there were some reflections that as a matter of routine, technical and scientific advice should have been presented to Ministers as part of rounded policy advice rather than in isolation so that it could have been considered in the wider context. The work undertaken to gain behavioural insights was also informative.

25. More specifically, policy teams drew from sources available to them with – for example - in-house economists advising the Economic Policy Team, a directorate-based knowledge team informing Culture, Sport and Tourism-related decisions, and higher education policy colleagues reaching out to expertise in their sector.

26. Alongside the arrangements developed within the WG which provided considerable coverage, engagement with the JBC proved to be extremely effective throughout to facilitate understanding of the wider UK situation and the position internationally. The JBC's willingness to involve the WG in its activities and engage fully was extremely valuable.

27. Engagement in other fora also proved to be highly productive with notable examples being the four nation CMO, CNO, CSA and Senior Clinician meetings – as well as engagement with the ONS.

28. People recognised that scientific advice needed to be considered alongside operational delivery expertise so colleagues engaged with their delivery partners and stakeholders – including the NHS, local authorities and the business community. Professional judgement and sector-specific knowledge was also considered to be very important, especially in the social care arena, so these aspects were fed in alongside scientific advice. Consequently, expert advice contained a number of elements which needed to be considered while analysing options for Ministers.

29. Clearly, more evidence became available as the pandemic progressed – especially on impacts in areas of unprecedented activity (e.g. school and business closures). This resulted in an increasing ability to take evidence-led decisions. People feel that the inability to assess the full range of harms in the early stages made decision making more difficult and that any similar decisions needing to be made in the future could be better informed based on the now lived experience. To support delivery of this, those leading TAG suggest retaining a core of some subgroups and considering how science can be applied more broadly to future planning and decision making - supported by clearer processes for commissioning advice.

30. Within the context of an overall success story, some have reflected that:

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- Alignment between TAG/TAC outputs and the 21 day review cycle was not always optimal.
- Providing access to data in draft form could have better facilitated timely decision making.
- Sometimes it was not clear where accountability within the Civil Service lay for advice submitted to Ministers which had been signed off by TAG as a group.

31. Based on this experience, particular aspects of **good practice** are:

- Identifying sources of expert advice and operational expertise, and building relationships to enable those to be utilised.
- Enabling policy makers and analysts to work closely together to provide well-evidenced and rounded advice to Ministers - including facilitating access to external expertise and Wales-level, rather than UK-level, data gathered and used as soon as possible in an emergency scenario.

32. **Further development of our approach** would be provided by:

- Fine turning of administrative practices to choreograph outputs alongside key decision making cycles and clarify senior official sign-off and accountability.
- Ensuring that technical and scientific advice is presented as part of rounded policy advice.
- Embedding from the outset consideration of wider harms beyond health during a pandemic insofar as possible, and seeking appropriate input from across affected policy areas to ensure decisions are robust and can be implemented successfully using processes developed and embedded for assessing equality impacts.

Management of policy issues arising not linked to a WG team pre-pandemic

33. During the pandemic, a number of new policy issues arose – such as social distancing, ventilation, extended households, international travel and vaccine certification – which did not fit within any team's stated responsibilities. There was also a need to engage with stakeholders in a completely different way around protection measures and the implications of them.

34. Groups either formed new teams (e.g. post compulsory education and schools) or prioritised new work within existing teams (e.g. hospitality and wider economy) to engage with stakeholders in the very different way required and this enabled a collaborative approach which aided decision making. This is discussed in further detail below.

35. However, it was very difficult and sometimes not possible to secure agreement for new substantial areas of policy to be 'owned' within the group structures which resulted in the small central team needing to cover these on top of co-ordinating the 21 day review process. This caused significant pressure for those involved.

36. It follows that in this area, **good practice** has been apparent in:

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- Prioritising work to engage with stakeholders to inform policy developments specific to stakeholder groups.

37. **Further development of our approach** is needed to:

- Establish mechanisms for allocating responsibility and resources for new work areas which are not initially perceived as falling within the remit of established teams.

<u>Internal communication channels</u>

38. People described a mixed picture in respect of internal communication, with a general recognition that significant improvements were made over time. In the early days, those working in ECC(W) did not receive the information about matters such as NHS pressures in the way they felt they needed to. As HPAG OSG developed and a very frequent birdtable meeting attended by policy leads across the WG was established, people felt much better able to keep abreast of developments and built up contacts with colleagues leading on each aspect of the response. This greatly facilitated a joined up and co-ordinated response. Some commented that a fuller readout of the birdtable discussions, rather than action points only, would have been helpful in circumstances where attendance at the birdtable was not possible for people.

39. Within teams and groups, arrangements for communicating regularly – involving daily/weekly meetings were stood up – and working relationships with colleagues often strengthened as a result.

40. Colleagues reflected that circumstances did not always provide scope for the usual processes around Cabinet meetings to be operationalised. This sometimes resulted in policy leads having little time to brief Ministers prior to Cabinet meetings being held, and minutes of Cabinet discussions and decisions were not provided rapidly enough for some. In a small number of instances, people learnt of decisions affecting their policy remit in the media before being informed internally. This resulted in some difficulties for those leading engagement with stakeholders.

41. It is clear from experiences that **good practice** has been:

- Standing up lines of communication as quickly as possible so that decisions can be communicated as widely, swiftly and frequently as needed, and so that there is clarity about how and why decisions are being made.

42. In order to more fully achieve this good practice in the future, it has been suggested that **further development of our approach** would be supported by a

- Proportionate uplift in Cabinet Secretariat resources to administer rapid communication around Cabinet meetings when they are needed more frequently and/or at shorter notice.

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<u>Alignment with Ministers' individual and collective preferences</u>

43. Without exception, people have appreciated the level of constructive two-way engagement they had with Ministers throughout the pandemic. The time Ministers have spent engaging with the evidence and meeting with officials has been especially valuable while advising on very difficult and often finely balanced decisions. Ministers' willingness to engage with officials and external stakeholders, and make difficult decisions, has helped civil servants progress their work. Also, through being calm and approachable – as well as patient and respectful to colleagues working through difficult times – Ministers facilitated the civil service's functioning and supported the wellbeing of staff.

44. In the initial stages of the crisis, Ministerial involvement in decision-making was understandably fluid, with an early focus on the First Minister and the Minister for Health and Social Services. Processes settled over time, for example with the establishment of the 21 day review process which was overseen by Cabinet as a whole. Future action will be supported by the outcome of work undertaken to review governance with the establishment of arrangements for bronze, silver and gold level responses.

45. The role played by Special Advisers was also appreciated by people. They helped analyse options under consideration and were able to prepare the ground for smooth and timely Ministerial decision making. This support was invaluable while working in highly pressurised circumstances, although colleagues acknowledge the level of effort and commitment which needed to be made by Special Advisers to provide this level of support over a long period of time.

46. It the light of reflections in this area it transpires that **good practice** occurs by:

   - Ensuring Ministers are supported to engage in decision-making, recognising the important role played by Special Advisers, and using insights from this exercise to articulate what helps Ministers engage with officials in a crisis and vice versa.

47. It is expected that further insights in this area will emerge from the follow-up work planned to engage with Ministers and Special Advisers.

<u>Engagement and communication with the UKG and other devolved governments</u>

48. People had widely varying experiences while engaging and communicating with the UKG. While Ministers attended COBR meetings during the initial phases, engagement on overall UKG strategy at the political level was generally very limited throughout. Where attendance at meetings was limited to one WG Minister and one official, this caused difficulties given the cross-cutting nature of discussions attended by Ministers across the UKG.

49. The situation improved when the UKG Cabinet Minister responsible for inter-governmental relations started to hold regular meetings with the devolved governments' First Ministers which provided a forum for discussion around specific topics. Weekly meetings of the four nations' Health Ministers were also

useful forums for discussing issues specific to their portfolios. The level and quality of engagements with UKG Ministers across the board very much depended on the person occupying office. Examples across subject areas were provided of engagement on specific subject areas improving and deteriorating when UKG Ministers left/started roles.

50. Working to support Welsh Ministers, officials made considerable efforts to push UKG counterparts for strengthened political level engagement at the highest levels. In the circumstances, officials leading central co-ordination work in the WG maintained senior level dialogue with officials in the UKG's Cabinet Office - sometimes utilising pre-existing relationships which were positive and yielded positive results.

51. There were more open two-way communication channels at the political level with the other devolved governments which were very beneficial, especially at important decision points.

52. Alongside this political level and centrally-led activity, senior officials and advisers – including the Chief Medical Officer, Chief Nursing Officer, Chief Scientific Adviser for Health and the Chief Economist – used their existing long standing networks with counterparts across the UK to engage, often more frequently and intensively. A newly created four nations Senior Clinicians Group and having a WG official embedded in the JBC, as mentioned previously, added considerably to the effectiveness of engagement in respect of evidence and more broadly.

53. It is apparent that colleagues leading each element of the response invested considerable time engaging across the nations, recognising the importance of WG decisions significantly impacting on people's lives being informed by an awareness of developments and thinking across the UK. In some areas (e.g. business support), support was either delivered directly by the UKG for wage/income support or consequential funding was received and there was scope to act autonomously so engagement focused on ideas sharing and knowledge gathering. In other areas (e.g. education), there was widespread comparison and scrutiny of approaches which needed to be understood and explained. Then, at another level, in other areas (e.g. testing and international travel), there were strong interdependencies and considerable effort was needed to go beyond engagement to exert influence on developments. It was clear in these discussions that the UKG was mainly focused on information sharing around their proposals with an expectation of alignment, rather than co-production of approach. This hindered ability to tailor the response in Wales in some important areas.

54. During the initial months of the pandemic, people participated in a large volume of meetings with UKG officials which – especially for those working in areas with strong interdependencies – were convened in an ad hoc way and without it being clear to colleagues how UKG officials in attendance fitted into UKG departmental structures. In some key areas, a more structured approach to meetings and clearer governance arrangements did not emerge until the Spring of 2021.

55. A particular challenge throughout was the lack of notice, or no notice, given in respect of key UKG announcements – many of which (e.g. HMT decisions on wage/income support) had direct implications for Wales. Another challenge throughout was around daily data returns the UKG wished to receive based on an incorrect assumption that Wales' data would/could be generated and presented in a consistent format.

56. It emerges from these insights that engaging and communicating with the other UK nations has been valuable and often essential during the pandemic. The engagement has facilitated the mobilisation of required UKG resources and enabled knowledge sharing and expertise among the four nations.

57. It is clear that **good practice** has occurred by:

- Deploying strategies for sustaining engagement among governments taking into account the value of both informal relationships and robust governance structures. In doing so, recognition that these will vary according to subject matter, operational versus policy emphasis, and political considerations is important.

58. **Further development of our approach** to facilitate officials' efforts to sustain engagement and deliver benefits for all would be achieved by:

- Use the new post-IGR Review structures to pursue to the fullest extent possible joint ministerial decision making among the four nations' governments so that a more joined-up approach is achieved when managing a major crisis in response to which the levers of both the WG and UKG need to be deployed.

Engagement and communication with delivery partners in Wales

59. People recognised the importance of engaging and communicating with delivery partners in Wales and invested considerable amounts of time in activities to do so. There was a brief period at the outset where people have reflected that two-way communication between the WG and local authorities was not optimal, with some not linked sufficiently closely with Directors of Public Health, but this was addressed early with a step change in engagement activity being achieved overall.

60. In many areas, colleagues utilised existing relationships and intensified existing engagement structures while in other areas engagement needed to be framed very differently (e.g. higher education to develop arrangements with autonomous organisations) or developed from a low base (e.g. Border Force and the hospitality sector, where for the latter there were established relationships only for engaging on production and export issues).

61. The achievements made by people in this area with strong support from Ministers are exemplary. Pre-existing relationships have been strengthened, new relationships have been formed and much has been learnt about operational delivery. At times, officials have engaged with people running businesses who

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have been profoundly affected by the effects of the pandemic, and who have sometimes directed anger and shared mental health challenges which officials needed to respond to without prior training and experience.

62. In some areas, join up was even closer. A noteworthy example of this is the way in which colleagues involved people in the NHS Delivery Unit to the extent that they were working together as closely as was possible without iShare access being shared. Close working with stakeholders was also prevalent in respect of the NHS and academia who were involved in the preparation of expert advice as members of TAC and TAG. Further, colleagues delivering the vaccination programme worked alongside NHS colleagues in an operational Group and involved third sector organisations representing vulnerable groups in a Stakeholder Board to advise on how to reach certain groups whose views were not being received via other routes.

63. Communications colleagues led a Warning and Informing Network which proved to be a very effective forum for keeping key stakeholders up to date with developments. Also, the Shadow Social Partnership Council was re-purposed to enable Ministers to engage directly with the Commissioners, trade unions, employers and representatives of business. This was very successful as a structure for enabling stakeholders to input ideas on proposals ahead of key decisions wherever possible. However, it was sometimes challenging to secure the engagement desired when the Cabinet was meeting very frequently and final decisions were being taken close to announcement points.

64. Many policy colleagues now have much stronger experience of collaborating with stakeholders to co-produce solutions and advocate continuing these practices beyond the pandemic. People recognise that achievements made were possible because of the strength of relationships built with stakeholders based on openness, honesty, respect and trust formed through regular dialogue. Some policy colleagues were especially grateful to the CMO and DCMO for agreeing to speak to stakeholders directly which helped build confidence in messaging and understanding.

65. It is clear from experience in this area that it would be **good practice** to:

   • Continue the transparent, trusting and co-productive ways in which we have been able to engage with partners and stakeholders, and provide an authorising environment for this at both Ministerial and official levels.

66. Within this very positive set of achievements, some people have queried whether an attempt to develop bespoke and sometimes voluminous sets of guidance was the most administratively efficient and clearest way of communicating expectations. Therefore, there is potential for **further development of our approach** by:

   • Reviewing our approach to guidance, including consideration of whether there would in future be scope for greater standardisation and lower volume.

<u>Virtual working</u>

67. It is clear that colleagues would not have been able to engage with the other UK nations' governments nor external stakeholders in Wales in such a frequent, broad and timely way without having been able to work virtually. Many people acknowledged the timeliness of the WG's investment in ICT resources which enabled staff to mount the response they did so quickly and without in-person engagement which would have presented significant personal health risks during the pandemic.

68. It is obvious that virtual working has saved travel time and enabled meetings to be convened with ease (including outside of normal working hours), without needing to agree locations and secure physical spaces. Apart from this, people have reflected that access to more meetings with the UK nations' other governments has been possible for more people as a result of these practical barriers being removed. It has also enabled stakeholders across Wales to engage in the same way regardless of geographical location which created a level of join-up across Wales not previously experienced.

69. In addition to the effects on external engagement, virtual working has resulted in everyone in the WG having an opportunity to participate in the organisation's functioning in a way which many colleagues - especially those based outside of Cardiff - felt had not been possible before the pandemic. This was aided by the WG-wide engagement events, and various communication and engagement activities delivered at group and team levels.

70. It has also resulted in many people believing that their productivity levels have increased due to a reduction in travel time and increased ability to undertake multiple tasks simultaneously. It also increased flexibility for many colleagues who needed to balance work and non-work life, especially during periods when caring responsibilities increased.

71. The drawbacks of virtual working in respect of external engagement activities which emerged are small in number. Some people contemplated whether they might have developed even stronger relationships and/or gained from conversations in the margins of meetings, especially where relationships had not been built pre-pandemic, and thought virtual meetings created scope for larger numbers of attendees who might not have used their time most effectively by being present. Moreover, WG policies prevented some colleagues engaging using certain platforms (e.g. Zoom) and some made the tangential point that WG ICT security polices prevented them from accessing / receiving data from certain external sources electronically.

72. A few more potential drawbacks of virtual working were highlighted around interactions with and impacts on colleagues within the WG. While it was felt that the organisation and many teams within it have made considerable efforts to support colleagues for whom virtual working caused, or had the potential to cause, difficulties the main issues highlighted were:

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- Feeling of being 'always on' and working excessive hours which was most acute during intense periods of activity.
- Line managers less able to pick up on signs of stress than in a physical office environment.
- Fewer opportunities for networking with colleagues.
- More challenging to induct and integrate new starters.

73. Based on these insights, **good practice** has been achieved through:

- Capturing the benefits of virtual and hybrid working for engagement and inclusion, whilst being aware of the challenges of managing people remotely.

74. **Further development of our approach** is expected to be delivered by:

- Continuing work within the WG to enhance the organisation's fitness for the future post pandemic with the establishment of sustainable working practices.

Overview of lessons and conclusions

75. A summary of the lessons learnt for good practice and areas for further development of our approach is as follows:

Theme	Good practice	Further development of our approach
Structures utilised	• Recognise that the pandemic response required central co-ordination and could not be managed through civil contingency arrangements and/or health officials only. • Where possible, enable people to be fully dedicated to working on the pandemic.	• Designing resourcing arrangements which can direct the right people, in sufficient numbers, to the right places at the right time – while fully considering safeguarding and wellbeing, and enabling staff to take breaks. • Ensuring that our approach to emergency response can support a sustained, nationwide effort which galvanises the whole organisation at the right time.
Capacity to deliver, including impacts on less urgent work	• Colleagues acting individually to demonstrate flexibility	• Determine what governance should be used to ensure

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	and willingness to adjust priorities.	Ministers and senior officials are sufficiently sighted on reprioritisation decisions and longer term risks/impacts, recognising that priorities are likely to change as a situation moves from immediate crisis to sustained emergency and beyond.
Input of expertise, and arrangements for assessing impacts and adjusting	• Identifying sources of expert advice and operational expertise, and building relationships to enable those to be utilised. • Enabling policy makers and analysts to work closely together to provide well-evidenced and rounded advice to Ministers - including facilitating access to external expertise and Wales-level, rather than UK-level, data gathered and used as soon as possible in an emergency scenario.	• Fine turning of administrative practices to choreograph outputs alongside key decision making cycles and clarify senior official sign-off and accountability. • Ensuring that technical and scientific advice is presented as part of rounded policy advice. • Embedding consideration of wider harms beyond health during a pandemic from the outset and seeking appropriate input from across affected policy areas to ensure decisions are robust and can be implemented successfully.
Management of policy issues arising not linked to a WG team pre-pandemic	• Prioritising work to engage with stakeholders to inform policy developments specific to stakeholder groups.	• Establish mechanisms for allocating responsibility and resources for new work areas which are not initially perceived as falling within the remit of established teams.

Internal communication channels	• Standing up lines of communication as quickly as possible so that decisions can be communicated as widely, swiftly and frequently as needed, and so that there is clarity about how and why decisions are being made.	• Proportionate uplift in Cabinet Secretariat resources to administer rapid communication around Cabinet meetings when they are needed more frequently and/or at shorter notice.
Alignment with Ministers' individual and collective preferences	• Ensuring Ministers are supported to engage in decision-making, recognising the important role played by Special Advisers, and using insights from this exercise to articulate what helps Ministers engage with officials in a crisis and vice versa.	None
Engagement and communication with the UKG and other devolved governments	• Deploying strategies for sustaining engagement among governments taking into account the value of both informal relationships and robust governance structures. In doing so, recognition that these will vary according to subject matter, operational versus policy emphasis, and political considerations is important.	• Use the new post-IGR Review structures to pursue to the fullest extent possible joint ministerial decision making among the four nations' governments so that a more joined-up approach is achieved when managing a major crisis in response to which the levers of both the WG and UKG need to be deployed.
Engagement and communication with delivery partners in Wales	• Continue the transparent, trusting and co-productive ways in which we have been able to engage with partners and stakeholders, and provide an authorising environment for this at	• Reviewing our approach to guidance, including consideration of whether there would in future be scope for greater standardisation and lower volume.

	both Ministerial and official levels.	
Virtual working	• Capturing the benefits of virtual and hybrid working for engagement and inclusion, whilst being aware of the challenges of managing people remotely.	• Continuing work within the WG to enhance the organisation's fitness for the future post pandemic with the establishment of sustainable working practices.

76. In conclusion, it is clear that colleagues made enormous efforts to deliver an effective response to the pandemic. The WG Civil Service's capability has been enhanced as a result, with many good practices established. Considering the areas identified for further development of our approach surfaced during this exercise has the potential to enable us to utilise limited resources even more effectively in the future and further strengthen our ability to respond to a crisis requiring a sustained cross-government response.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Objective	Policy	Technical / Advisory	Perm Sec and DGs
Objective 2 To explore the effectiveness and efficiency of structures and/or processes linked to the development and implementation of protection measures, and surface ideas for where alternatives might have been beneficial	Question 1 How were structures, processes and people arranged in your area to respond to the pandemic? For example how was work distributed and were additional or dedicated teams put in place? • How well did the arrangements work in terms of helping your area respond effectively to the pandemic? • Were the arrangements you've described what you had in place at the start of the pandemic, or did they change? If they changed, why was that? • To what extent were new governance arrangements or processes needed to support these arrangements? • Looking back, how would you	Question 1 How were structures, processes and people arranged in your area to respond to the pandemic? For example how was work distributed and were additional or dedicated teams put in place? • How well did the arrangements work in terms of helping your area respond effectively to the pandemic? • Were the arrangements you've described what you had in place at the start of the pandemic, or did they change? If they changed, why was that? • To what extent were new governance arrangements or processes needed to support the new structures?	Question 1 What did our organisational response to the pandemic look like from your perspective? • Did you make or see changes to the structures and, if yes, why were the changes made? • How were existing governance arrangements adapted and new ones created? • How effective were the arrangements?

	have structured things differently?	• Looking back, how would you have structured things differently?	
	Question 2 What evidence and expertise did you draw on to inform your approach? • What types of decisions were informed by what types of evidence? • How did this work when decisions needed to be made rapidly?	Question 2 What type of evidence or expertise did you provide and what sources did you draw on yourself? • To what extent did your input influence decision-making? • What types of decisions were most and least influenced by evidence and expertise? • How did this work when decisions needed to be made rapidly?	Question 2 How was evidence or expertise used to inform the strategic/organisational response? • What happened when decisions needed to be made quickly? • How was evidence used in Group-level decision-making?
	Question 3 How did Ministers influence the Covid response in your area? • How did Ministers engage?	Question 3 How did you see Ministers engaging in the Covid response? • How did Ministers' actions influence activities?	Question 3 How did Ministers influence the organisation's arrangements for and strategic response to the pandemic? • What impact did this have?
Objective 3 To consider the extent to which work to manage the pandemic was balanced with other work successfully	Question 4 How did your work area prioritise between business as usual and Covid-related work?	Question 4 How did your work area prioritise between business as usual and Covid-related work?	Question 4 Was a strategic steer or strategic advice given, and were expectations set, around how areas should prioritise their

	• What decisions were made to inform the way your area prioritised work? • What challenges were encountered? • How were these challenges overcome? • Did the approach provide scope for new policy areas, which were not within the remit of any team pre-pandemic, to be absorbed? • How has non-covid work been impacted?	• What decisions were to inform the way your area prioritised work? • What challenges were encountered? • How were these challenges overcome? • How has non-covid work been impacted?	work alongside Covid responsibilities? • What happened in practice? • How were challenges overcome? • Did the approach provide scope for new policy areas, which were not within the remit of any team pre-pandemic, to be absorbed?
Objective 4 To review the effectiveness and efficiency of engagement and communications flows with the UK Government and other devolved governments, particularly at key points	Question 5 How did you communicate and engage with the UK Government and its agencies, and the other devolved governments over the pandemic? • To what extent did you rely on more formal meetings compared with more informal relationships with individuals or teams? • To what extent did these	Question 5 How did you communicate and engage with the UK Government and its agencies, and the other devolved governments over the pandemic? • To what extent did you rely on more formal meetings compared with more informal relationships with individuals or teams? • To what extent did these	Question 5 How did you and people around you engage with the UK Government and its agencies, and the other devolved governments at a strategic level over the pandemic? • Do you feel these activities enabled you to know what you needed to know? • How do you think virtual working helped or hindered? • What could have made

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	activities enable you to exert influence and gain knowledge? • How did virtual working help or hinder? • What could have made communication and engagement better and/or more efficient?	activities enable you to exert influence and gain knowledge? • How did virtual working help or hinder? • What could have made communication and engagement better and/or more efficient?	communication and engagement better for you?
Objective 5 To outline how the WG's relationship with key delivery partners has changed and what might be done to embed changes where desirable	Question 6 How did your area of the Welsh Government adapt the way it engaged and worked with key delivery partners in Wales? • To what extent did you achieve the level of engagement needed? • What were the challenges and benefits? Looking back, what would you have done differently? • In what ways did virtual working help or hinder? • Which innovations would you continue to use to engage with partners beyond the emergency	Question 6 How did your area of the Welsh Government adapt the way it engaged and worked with key delivery partners in Wales? • To what extent did you achieve the level of engagement needed? • What were the challenges and benefits? Looking back, what would you have done differently? • In what ways did virtual working help or hinder? • Which innovations would you continue to use to engage with partners beyond the emergency	Question 6 How did you see staff adapting the way they engaged and worked with key delivery partners in Wales? • To what extent do you think we achieved the level of engagement needed? • What were the challenges and benefits? Looking back, what would you have done differently? • In what ways did virtual working help or hinder? • Which innovations would you continue to use to engage with partners beyond the emergency phase of the pandemic

	phase of the pandemic?	phase of the pandemic	
Objective 1 To capture what worked well internally and how activity evolved with experience	Question 7 With the focus of this exercise in mind, when you look back at how you managed the response within your area of the Welsh Government - in addition to what we've discussed so far - what worked really well? • What made the approach successful? • Was it what you started out doing and, if not, why did you change? • Were there any aspects which didn't work so well?	Question 7 With the focus of this exercise in mind, when you look back at how you managed the response within your area of the Welsh Government - in addition to what we've discussed so far - what worked really well? • What made the approach successful? • Was it what you started out doing and, if not, why did you change? • Were there any aspects which didn't work so well?	Question 7 With the focus of this exercise in mind, when you look back at how the response was managed - in addition to what we've discussed so far - what worked really well across the Welsh Government civil service? • How about within your Group?? • What made the approach successful? • Was it what happened at the start and, if not, why did it change? • Were there any aspects which didn't work so well?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

External Delivery	Central Co-ordination / Analysis
Question 1 – Response to the pandemic How were people organised in your area to respond to the pandemic? For example, were staff in your area solely focused on Covid work or did people need to deal with other priorities as well? • What worked particularly well? • Were the arrangements you've described what you had in place at the start of the pandemic, or did they change? If they changed, why was that? • Looking back, could things have worked better if organised differently?	Question 1 – Organisation of people How were people organised in your area to respond to the pandemic? For example, were you and they dedicated to covid work or did people need to deal with other priorities as well? • What worked particularly well? • Were the arrangements you've described what you had in place at the start of the pandemic, or did they change? If they changed, why was that? • Looking back, could things have worked better if organised differently?
Question 2 – Use of Evidence What evidence and expertise did you and your colleagues draw on to inform the approach? • How did you access the evidence and from where? • How did you use the evidence? • How did this work when decisions needed to be made rapidly? Did your approach to drawing on/using evidence have to change as a result? • What could have helped to improve the approach taken to using evidence?	Question 2 – Use of Evidence What evidence and expertise did you and your colleagues provide or draw on to inform the approach? • How did you access the evidence and from where? • How did you use the evidence? • How did this work when decisions needed to be made rapidly? Did your approach to drawing on/using evidence have to change as a result? • What could have helped to improve the approach taken to providing and using evidence? • How did you access the evidence and from where? Did your approach to drawing on/using evidence have to change as a result?
Question 3 – Engagement with others (Wales) How did your area of the Welsh Government adapt the way it engaged and worked with key delivery partners in Wales in response to the pandemic?	Question 3 – Policy Priorities How were previously low priority Welsh Government policy issues (e.g. vaccine certification, social distancing and ventilation) managed during the pandemic?

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• Did the level of engagement you had with delivery partners prior to the pandemic change? • What were the challenges and benefits? • In what ways did virtual working help or hinder?	• What challenges were encountered? • How were these challenges overcome? • Did arrangements for dealing with these situations improve over time?

Left column:

<u>Question 4 – Reflections on response</u>
With the focus of this exercise in mind, when you look back at how the response was managed within your area of the Welsh Government - in addition to what we've discussed so far - what worked really well?
• What made the approach successful?
• What would you say is the key learning you took away from the way the response was managed within your area?
• Was it what you started out doing and, if not, why did you change?

Reserve questions:

<u>Question 5 – Engagement with others (other agencies)</u>
How did you communicate and engage with the UK Government and its agencies, and the other devolved governments over the pandemic?
• To what extent were more formal meetings relied on, compared with more informal relationships with individuals or teams?
• To what extent did these activities make it possible to exert influence and gain knowledge?
• What could have made communication and engagement better and/or more efficient?

<u>Question 6 – Ministerial influence</u>
How did you see Ministers influencing the Covid response in your area?
• Were you able to gain a clear understanding of Minister's expectations?

Right column:

<u>Question 5 - Engagement with UK Government</u>
How did you communicate and engage with the UK Government and its agencies, and the other devolved governments over the pandemic?
• To what extent were more formal meetings relied on, compared with more informal relationships with individuals or teams?
• To what extent did these activities make it possible to exert influence and gain knowledge?
• What could have made communication and engagement better and/or more efficient?

• What could have made things better?	• What could have made things better?

LESSONS LEARNT EXERCISES UNDERTAKEN BY WG GROUPS

Subject	Exercise focus
Culture, Sport and Tourism	Lessons learnt with external stakeholders: May 2022
Data	External document from OSR- Health care covid lessons learned reports: October 2021
Data	External document from OSR - Improving health and social care statistics: lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic: October 2021
Economic policy	Lessons learnt with external stakeholders: May 2022
Education – further and higher	Lessons learnt with external stakeholders: May 2022
Evidence	Consideration of what evidence or information might be required to support the Welsh Government response for the coming winter 20/21: Sept 2020
Evidence	Consideration of future policy needs from scientific perspective for transition to a more complex, less technical – business as usual for COVID-19: Mar 2021
Evidence	Consideration of what evidence or information might be required to support the Welsh Government response for the coming winter 21/22: Oct 2021
Evidence	TAG wash-up report: 06/05/2022
HSS Group	A Review of the Health & Social Services Group Response Structure to COVID-19: Jan 2020-Sept 2020
HSS Group	A second review of the Health & Social Services Group Response Structure to COVID-19: Oct 2020-Oct 2021
HSS Group	Stakeholder views on engagement and ways of working: April 2022
International travel	Review of inter-governmental working, governance and cross WG working, working with stakeholders, evidence use and team practices: Jun 2022
NHS delivery	COVID-19 treatment pathway and essential services: Mar 2020-Jun 2022
NHS delivery	Nosocomial transmission and IPC: Mar 2020-June 2022
Shielding	Internal review of arrangements: Mar 2020-Jun 2021
Social care	Safeguarding Adults: Aug 2020
Social care	Care Homes: Aug 2020
Social care	Children and Young People: Aug 2020
Social care	Children Safeguarding: Aug 2020
Social care	Guidance: Aug 2020
Social care	Loneliness and Isolation: Aug 2020
Social care	Older People and Carers: Aug 2020

Social care	Regulatory Easements: Aug 2020
Social care	Workforce: Aug 2020
Test. Trace and Protect	Internal lessons learnt: Jan 2020-Mar 2022
Test, Trace and Protect	Internal identification of lessons: May 2022
Testing	Internal identification of lessons: May 2022
Vaccination Programme	Lessons learnt log: Oct 2021