



THE WELSH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION--

**MODULE 7 OF
THE COVID – 19 INQUIRY**

TEST, TRACE AND ISOLATE

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OPENING STATEMENT FOR WLGA

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Introduction

This is the Opening Statement for the Welsh Local Government

I represent the interests of the Local Government Association and the Welsh Local Government Association in this Inquiry.

The two Associations – the LGA and the WLGA - work very closely together and welcome the opportunity to contribute as Core Participants in this Module. Together they represent the collected voice of local government, with 100% of the Welsh, and over 99% of the English, principal local authorities as members of their respective associations.

They both applied to become Core Participants in this Module, because, across both Wales and England, officers of local authorities played a major role in the process of defeating the pandemic through the process of testing, then tracing, and afterward isolating and protecting those who were, or were thought to be likely to be, vectors of the virus.

This work was of the very first importance in stopping the spread of the disease and protecting the population, including those who were clinically or socially vulnerable.

The need for a review of the strategy followed in Wales for test trace and isolation during the pandemic

The WLGA welcomes this Module also because there has been no national review in Wales of the steps taken to develop the national program for testing and tracing and then protecting those who had to be isolated to bring the virus under control.

Moreover, there were many significant features of the approach in Wales and England to testing tracing and isolation during the pandemic.

As the statements of the two Chief Executives Joanna Killian (for the LGA) and Chris Llewelyn (for the WLGA) show, the two nations did not follow the same path.

This Module provides an opportunity for the Inquiry to note those differences and to contrast the different approaches.

Outline

One key difference is that Wales has a national public health body Public Health Wales.

The statement of Mr Llewelyn explains the statutory framework concerning public health and the key role played in Wales by Public Health Wales and the Health Boards who have the direct responsibility for public health services in their localities.

While in normal times the role of the Welsh Local Authorities is complementary to that of these two bodies, during the pandemic they played a key operational role in ensuring logistics were effective, in enforcing restrictions and in supporting the most vulnerable under a national framework.

The most significant way that this occurred was through the Welsh Government's Test, Trace and Protect Strategy.

It was the tracing and protection parts of this strategy with which Welsh Local Authorities were most fully engaged.

Mr Llewelyn's statement explains in detail how this strategy was delivered in Wales and how local authorities were part of the iterative process.

While this engagement between the Welsh Government and the WLGA and the local authorities was very important it is also a fact that there had been no such plan before the pandemic occurred.

Mr Llewelyn explains how important this deficit was and how it meant that the strategy had to be developed by the Welsh Government at great speed.

That there was no such prior plan is very regrettable and a key learning point from this Module should be the need to make plans now for a future pandemic event when national testing and tracing and protection of individuals will be a key part of any plan to overcome such a crisis.

In making this point the WLGA does recognise the very good work that was done in developing the TTP strategy and the good level of communication between government, the WLGA and the local authorities.

This enabled local authorities to build their capacity at speed and to make a major contribution to the national effort.

They undertook a central role in the delivery of the strategy in their localities, working closely with Public Health Wales and their respective local health boards to establish the system at speed, and at a scale far exceeding existing contract tracing arrangements for localised outbreaks of a much smaller scale and duration.

Above all else it was the knowledge and versatility of the local government workforce that provided the flexibility to respond as needed to the waves of the pandemic at short notice as and when the need arose.

The evidence submitted on behalf of the WLGA explains how-

- Local expertise in managing and operating large scale contact centres enabled quick and successful establishment of tracing arrangements across Wales;
- Local authority officers were able to provide specialist advice, working with colleagues from PHW and the local health boards to
 - ensure consistency of advice and
 - advise on outbreak management.
- Local authorities were able then to

- give priority to the safety and protection of the most vulnerable people in communities;
- and
- provide a trusted source of advice and communication within and across local communities.

Removing past constraints to enable an even fuller contribution from Welsh Local Authorities

However as explained in this evidence there was a significant constraint on the work that local authorities could do.

While Local authorities enforced TTP procedures wherever they could, they had no enforcement powers when it comes to the behaviours of individuals who choose not to isolate when so directed. Their powers were limited to issuing directions and closure notices to businesses who were operating illegally under the prevailing restrictions, and to referring complaints to the police in the case of illegal gatherings, and individuals failing to isolate.

The Inquiry is asked to note that Local Authorities could have been more effective if they had the legal powers to issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FNPs) on individuals and to invite a review of the legislation to consider the benefits of granting such powers.

Recommendations

Overall, the WLGA makes the following 10 recommendations for the future and invites the Inquiry to note and adopt them.

There should be -

- Co-produced and resourced national contingency strategies and plans should be in place for TTP services for the eventuality of a future pandemic. These strategies and plans should be co-owned by Welsh Government, Public Health Wales, NHS Wales and the local health boards and local government, and should draw on the combined experience of the response to Covid-19;
- National and regional LRF level scenario-testing at regular intervals to test, report, review and adjust those strategies and plans;
- Planning concerning reserve capacity, public sector workforce redeployment plans, and logistical support/call-on contracts to stand-up a TTP service notice at short notice as part of the above planning.
- A core reserve workforce should be maintained on stand-by through the maintenance of a register, and regular retraining, at national/regional levels. This should be a pan-public sector resource;
- Consideration by PHW for stand-by arrangements for national capacity for (1) inbound travellers and (2) peaks in demand, known as 'surge', when local TTP services will be at a point of over-commitment;
- TTP operational systems maintained in a state of readiness, to include:
 - standard operating procedures and guidance;
 - role descriptions for contact tracers and advisors, and other roles;
 - training modules;
 - telephony and digital contact forms;
 - and
 - a national CRM system;

- A review of the adequacy and effectiveness of data capture and data sharing protocols for information on vulnerable people who will need to be protected and supported in a pandemic situation ;
- A register of sites for use as mass or local testing centres. This should be supported by logistical plans for their operationalisation;
- A permanently assigned lead in both Welsh Government and Public Health Wales for the oversight of the arrangements set out in the recommendations above;
- A review of the adequacy of the total capacity of the local government public protection workforce across Wales should be kept, supported by a dynamic and resourced workforce development plan for this professional sector.

Conclusion

Overall, there can be no doubt that the Welsh local authorities should be proud of the work they undertook in relation to testing, tracing and protection during the pandemic. The commitment of officers to work co-operatively and over very long hours to find relevant and imaginative solutions to the critical tasks of tracing and protection was of the utmost importance and a significant factor in bringing the disease under control in Wales.

The WLGA is glad it was able to help co-ordinate this response and to support its members and the Welsh Government in such important steps.

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