

OFFICIAL – SENSITIVE - CABINET

Cabinet will wish to note that these minutes, except those items in italics, will be published in week commencing 10 January 2022

**The Welsh Government
Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet
29 November 2021**

Present: Rt. Hon. Mark Drakeford MS
Rebecca Evans MS
Vaughan Gething MS
Jane Hutt MS
Julie James MS
Jeremy Miles MS
Eluned Morgan MS
Mick Antoniw MS

Dawn Bowden MS
Hannah Blythyn MS
Julie Morgan MS
Lynne Neagle MS
Lee Waters MS

Apologies: Lesley Griffiths MS

Officials: Andrew Goodall, Permanent Secretary
Des Clifford, Director General Office of the First Minister
Will Whiteley, Deputy Director Cabinet Division
Toby Mason, Strategic Communications
Jane Runeckles, Special Adviser
Madeleine Brindley, Special Adviser
Alex Bevan, Special Adviser
Daniel Butler, Special Adviser
Ian Butler, Special Adviser
Kate Edmunds, Special Adviser
Sara Faye, Special Adviser
Clare Jenkins, Special Adviser
Owen John, Special Adviser
Andrew Johnson, Special Adviser
Mitch Theaker, Special Adviser
Tom Woodward, Special Adviser
Christopher W Morgan, Head of Cabinet Secretariat (minutes)
Name Redacted, Cabinet Secretariat
Name Redacted, Cabinet Office
Tracey Burke, Director General, Education and Public Services
Reg Kilpatrick, Director General, COVID-19 Crisis Coordination
Judith Paget, Director General Health
Andrew Slade, Director General, Economy, Skills and Natural Resources
Helen Lentle, Director Legal Services
Frank Atherton, CMO
Rob Orford, Chief Scientific Adviser – Health
Andrew Sallows, Delivery Programme Director NHS

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Liz Lalley, Director Recovery

Tom Smithson, Deputy Director COVID-19 Restart

Helen Lentle, Director Legal Services

Jason Thomas, Director Culture, Sport and Tourism

Name Redacted

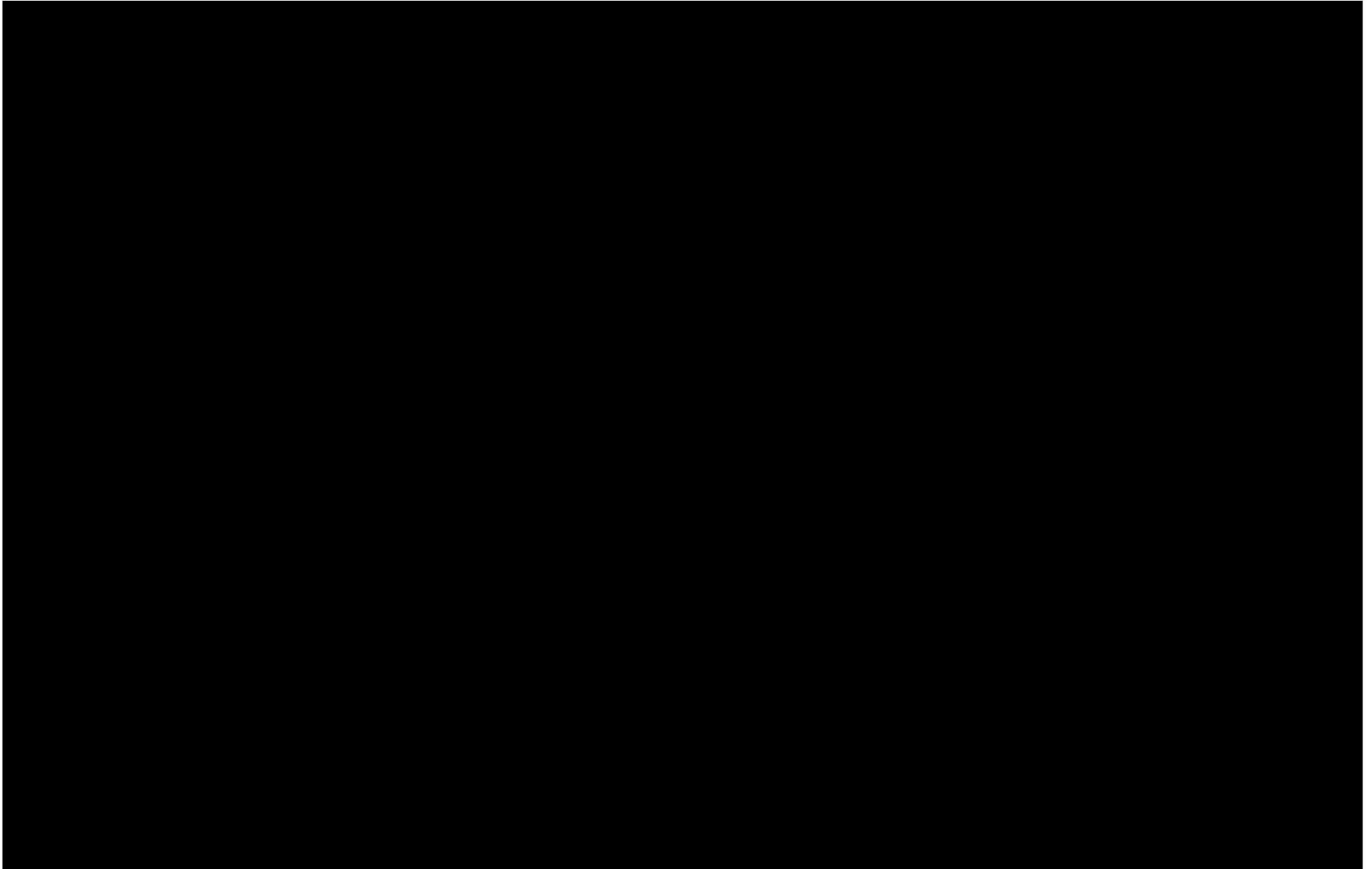
, Cabinet Office

Item 1: Minutes of previous meetings

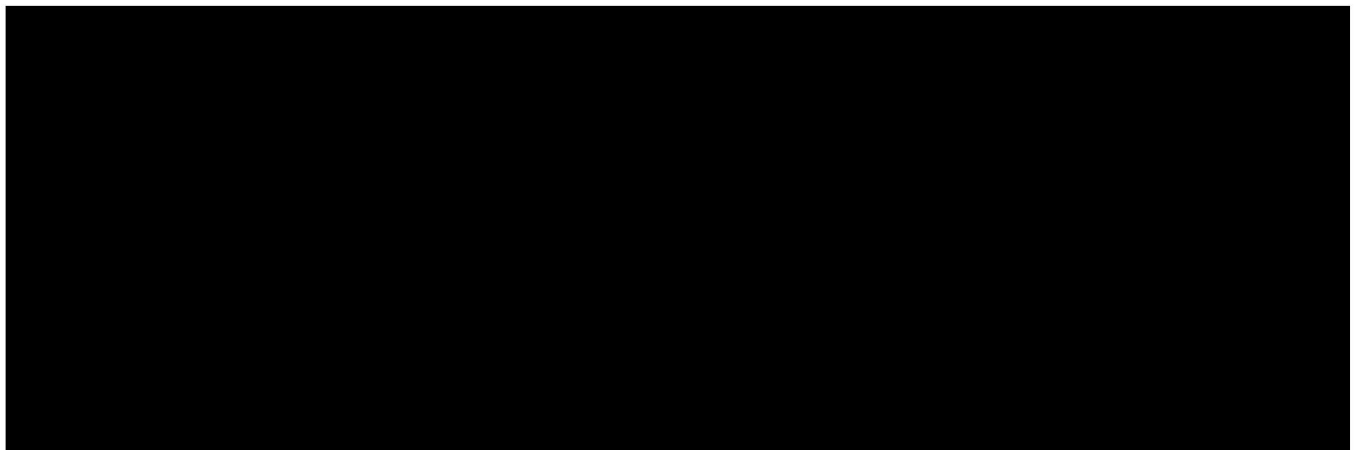
- 1.1 Cymeradwydd y Cabinet gofnodion y 22 Tachwedd / Cabinet approved the minutes of 22 November.

Item 2: Senedd Business

- 2.1 Cabinet considered the contents of the Plenary grid and noted the statement on a Healthier Wales, scheduled for Tuesday had been replaced by a Statement on COVID-19 to update Members on the new variant, Omicron. Voting time was scheduled for 7pm on Tuesday and around 6:35pm on Wednesday.



Item 4: First Minister's items



COVID-19 – the Omicron Variant

- 4.3 The First Minister invited officials from the Health Department to provide Cabinet with an update on the latest developments concerning the new variant of COVID-19, now known as Omicron.

- 4.4 The CMO reported that Omicron was first reported by South Africa to the World Health Organisation the previous week and was now rapidly becoming the most dominant variant in that country. Since then, the variant had been identified in mainland Europe, Scotland and England, and it was only a matter of time before cases would appear in Wales.
- 4.5 Evidence from South Africa suggested that Omicron had increased transmissibility when compared to the Delta variant with the potential to re-infect those who had been previously infected. It was not known at this stage whether Omicron would be more harmful.
- 4.6 The public health response would be to try and control entry of the new variant into the country and then slow its introduction into the population by using TTP and requiring those infected and close contacts to self-isolate. Generally, the population would be encouraged to maintain social distancing and wear face coverings while indoors. The JCVI was expected to recommend an acceleration of the vaccine programme across the UK later that afternoon.
- 4.7 In terms of the Delta variant, the situation was still improving with a significant reduction in infection rates in the over 60s being reported.
- 4.8 The Chief Scientific Adviser for Health advised Cabinet the South African infection rate had increased approximately tenfold, from 200-300 cases per day to around 2,000-3000 per day and cases in the population had increased from 1% to 30%. The initial projections on the spread of the variant had already been surpassed, suggesting that Omicron had the potential to escape the vaccines. Given the high natural immunity in South Africa from previous infections there should have been a better resistance to this strain.
- 4.9 *There was evidence of super spreading events in South Africa and the UK now had 200 probable cases, not all directly related to international travel, suggesting that community transmission had already commenced. There were ongoing discussions on whether there would be any impact on the under 5s.*
- 4.10 The Delivery Programme Director for the NHS indicated that those in hospital with COVID-19 continued to fall. Daily admissions had reduced from 45 to 30 and there were currently 634 people occupying beds. The situation was also improving with those in critical care, with now only 47 beds occupied by patients with coronavirus. However, these occupancy rates were still above the historic maximum.
- 4.11 *There was some concern, however, about staff absences, which stood around 7%. This amounted to around 2,000 people not in work due to health reasons.*

- 4.12 The First Minister informed Cabinet there had been a series of meetings over the weekend to consider the impact of the new variant. However, the UK Government had continued to take decisions without consulting the devolved nations. The First Minister, along with the First Minister of Scotland, had written to the Prime Minister seeking an urgent meeting of COBRA to discuss a co-ordinated four Nations approach to Omicron. They had also called for tighter travel restrictions and Treasury support should lockdown measures be required in Wales or Scotland.
- 4.13 *The aim now was for the Welsh and Scottish Governments to act in concert when responding to the new variant, which could include the re-introduction of restrictions.*
- 4.14 It was reported that plans had been drawn up over the weekend to enhance the vaccination programme with the aim of increasing the number of people receiving boosters from 128,000 to 300,000 a week. It would be extended to all adults and the gap between the second dose and the booster would be reduced from six to three months. In addition, those who were immune-suppressed would be offered a booster three months after their third primary dose and all 12-15 year olds were eligible for a second dose.
- 4.15 Ministers agreed it would be important to continue to encourage all those who had not been vaccinated to come forward, particularly those in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.
- 4.16 It was noted the UK had moved quickly over the weekend to add southern African countries linked to Omicron to the red list for international travel, requiring anyone returning to the UK from these nations to quarantine in a managed hotel for ten days.
- 4.17 *As a result of this decision, Scarlets Rugby had left South Africa in a chartered aircraft on Sunday for Dublin without making adequate provision to self-isolate in a designated quarantine hotel. They had subsequently travelled to Belfast and took occupancy in a hotel set aside by the Northern Ireland Executive. Welsh Ministers were now under pressure to secure accommodation for them in Wales and facilitate the return of Cardiff Rugby Club from South Africa.*
- 4.18 *Ministers agreed the rules should be applied consistently to all travellers and public funds should not be used to support the clubs. Current government policy was that there were no designated quarantine hotels in Wales, however if this were to change legislation would be required to facilitate such accommodation. Furthermore, it was unlikely that any hotel would be willing to change the purpose of their business in the run up to Christmas. However, there was a need to be mindful that the UK Government might decide to take over such a hotel for its own purposes, as it had done to accommodate asylum seekers.*
- 4.19 Cabinet considered the impact on the education sector and agreed that the use of face coverings should be strengthened in secondary schools, colleges and Universities for the rest of the winter term. All staff and learners would be required to wear such coverings while indoors when physical distancing could not be maintained.

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- 4.20 *In terms of other issues, it was suggested the UK Government should provide international leadership and act globally to combat the virus, particularly in the developing world. It was noted the Wales and Africa programme was already providing COVID-19 support to countries such as Namibia.*
- 4.21 Ministers agreed that more should be done to enforce the regulations and noted the case against Cinema and Co Ltd, which had refused to comply with the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) (No.5) Regulations, was being considered in Swansea Magistrate Court the following day.
- 4.22 It was agreed that Cabinet would need to reconvene on Thursday to consider developments in relation to the Omicron variant in advance of the next formal review, which was scheduled to take place the following week.

Sections 28, 35 & 36