

Witness Name: Carwyn
Jones-Evans
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits: 0
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Module 9 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry ('the Inquiry')
Request for Evidence pursuant to Rule 9 Inquiry Rules 2006
Reference: M9/R9R/CJE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF Carwyn Jones-Evans

I, Carwyn Jones-Evans, will say as follows: -

1. Roles and Relationships

1.1. My career in local government began in July of 2009 as an administrative assistant at Gwynedd Council. I spent 7 years at the Council working in the Economic Development department in various roles, culminating as a project/programme manager. In 2016, I worked for the North Wales Economic Ambition Board as their Regional Engagement Team manager – working regionally to co-ordinate investments of EU funding via the Welsh European Funding Office to align with regional priorities/need. In 2018, I moved on to the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) as Economic Policy Officer. In 2019, I was appointed as Team Manager: Growth & Major Developments at Ceredigion County Council. This was a new junior/middle management role with a small team (under 10) to develop and manage strategic economic development projects for the Authority.

1.2. I was in this role until December 2021, where I was then seconded to lead on the development of the Mid Wales Growth Deal also at Ceredigion County Council. From which point I solely focused on the Growth Deal, and was not involved in any Covid response work from that point.

- 1.3. My role in Ceredigion County Council was unaffected until the end of March 2020, where we then began to have early conversations around the economic impact of the pandemic/lockdown, as it evolved. In those early days, these conversations were largely between internal colleagues and teams. We received information via the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). These meetings became the principal conduit of information from Welsh Government to us as economic development officers.
- 1.4. As the pandemic evolved, and the nature of the business support arrangements became clear, some members of my team were re-tasked to assist with the front-line administration of the business support scheme that was put in place by the Welsh Government.
- 1.5. My role was to help advise my team, support internal responses and attend meetings organised by the WLGA to understand the Government's position and any funding that was being developed.
- 1.6. During that time, I was not in a position of authority in relation to any aspects of the funding, neither had I any direct involvement or visibility of the Authority's senior management discussions in relation to the pandemic response.
- 1.7. Prior to the pandemic and in the early stages of the pandemic (January - March 2020), the main structure in place between Economic Development officers and Ceredigion Council were direct engagements with various civil servants in the Economy Department of Welsh Government. We had direct links with business support colleagues, regional economy colleagues, regeneration and so on. Ad hoc, but established and strong after many years of working together.
- 1.8. We also had semi-regular engagement as a collective of Local Authorities and with Welsh Government via the Welsh Local Government Association (Economic Regeneration Officers Network), where various topics/funding were discussed with all 22 Local Authorities.
- 1.9. As the pandemic evolved and as we transitioned to online/remote working, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) largely led the conduit and flow of information to ourselves in Economic Development teams from the Welsh Government. This took form as online meetings that evolved from an existing platform of engagement (the Economic Regeneration Officers Network).

- 1.10. The meetings were effective from my perspective to create a forum where we could understand upcoming policy/funding responses from Welsh Government and discuss/raise any concerns from a practitioner's perspective.
- 1.11. I personally did not have any key relationships with individuals in the Welsh Government during that time in discussing the economic response to the pandemic. All feedback/discussions were undertaken in a "one to many" setting, via the Welsh Local Government Association's online meetings.
- 1.12. It is fair to note that in those joint virtual meetings between Local Government officers and civil servants of the Welsh Government – relationships did strengthen as the pandemic evolved through a spirit of team working and constructive dialogue to overcome any issues/challenges/barriers.
- 1.13. From my perspective, it was clear that we as Local Authorities were beholden to the Welsh Government's policy/funding decisions. Our role was presented quite clearly as delivery agents of the various business support schemes that were established. Feedback was presented at various meetings of where gaps/issues became apparent in support coverage, eligibility considerations and so forth.

2. Funding for Local Authorities

- 2.1. I cannot recall being consulted or involved in decision making on the timing or amount of funding – in respect to the Business Support schemes. I was not in a role that involved any discussions on any wider Local Authority funding/support.
- 2.2. In respect to business support, I believe there was a genuine commitment by the Welsh Government to consult with practitioner colleagues in Local Government – via the online meetings organized and co-ordinated by the Welsh Government. However, as the pandemic evolved – Local Authority Officers also learnt that sometimes, the time just wasn't there for consultation in some cases either. Hence my comment in paragraph 2.3 below – where relationships improved as time evolved – both Local Authority Officer and Welsh Government Civil Servants gained a deeper understanding of each other's challenges and concerns – which led to a deeper mutual appreciation and better conversations.
- 2.3. In relation to the funding for Local Authorities to deliver the Business Support schemes – the communication was generally good to my memory. Using the Welsh Local Government Association as a conduit did help the communication

flow and kept it simplified and clear. There were occurrences to my memory, that notice was incredibly short. However, the reasons for these were it seemed that funding and policy responses for the economy were rolled out in response to swift moving decisions at a national level. For example, a further lockdown/firebreak was announced and then the policy response would be communicated afterwards.

- 2.4. In respect to guidance, I believe it was generally clear enough for the majority of cases that I personally saw coming forward for support. However, there were a minority of cases from memory, where the guidance did not quite cover certain types of businesses/circumstances or sectors where there may have been some ambiguity. In those cases, feedback was provided promptly via the Welsh Local Government Association or a Welsh Government mailbox/contact point for the fund, and we received either clarification or saw updates to guidance subsequently.
- 2.5. The degree as to which the guidance was flexibly was the source of much discussion in our regular meetings as Local Authority Officers with the Welsh Local Government Association and in the joint calls with Welsh Government. There was a narrative by Ministers in the public domain, that Local Authorities had discretion and ability to be flexible. But the guidance was clear on which businesses were eligible, and which weren't. For example, in the early stages of the pandemic, the support was geared towards businesses that paid business rates. It became apparent that a lot of businesses did not have rateable premises or were self-employed – and they were being missed from any kind of support. The reality was, that the guidance was sufficiently clear on what was eligible for support, and what wasn't. There may have been occasions that certain kinds of businesses were inadvertently left out, in these occasions, improvements or revisions were then made to guidance following discussions and feedback with Welsh Government/Welsh Local Government Association.
- 2.6. In the future, the development of guidance should be clearly linked to the policy intention. That is, are we supporting all businesses, or certain kinds of businesses. The reality on the ground is that there are as many circumstances as there are businesses. I think the approach that was followed was to start with the obvious (businesses with rateable premises – and thus a tangible

mechanism to identify legitimate businesses), then gradually filter and worked through to determine where additional support requirements were needed. Therefore, in the future, a conscious decision should be made earlier if the intent is to safeguard people's livelihoods (essentially a form of basic income) or should we be compensating for a financial loss due to forced closure. My view is that we should now clearly understand what kind of support is needed in the future, and how it should be organised and deployed.

- 2.7. In respect of financial monitoring and auditing, I did not have any direct experience or knowledge on the arrangements that may have been in place. My perspective was that the team placed the same standards on the grants they administered as they did with other Welsh Government grants/EU funding they managed prior to the pandemic. Requesting supporting evidence and ensuring thorough record keeping.
- 2.8. At the time, we had capable staff in local government that could administer grants (previously having operated regeneration/economic development schemes). We had close links to our business community and ability to co-ordinate feedback on where the schemes weren't working (e.g. not covering self-employed or inadvertently missing our certain sectors/business types). This was a fortunate benefit of local authorities across Wales still having retained capacity and capability in their local economic development/regeneration teams due to the continued activity of Welsh Government/European Funding at that time. This capacity is funded on a short-term basis across all Local Authorities and is subject to significant turnover at the end of each funding programme from Government (EU Funds, Levelling Up, UK Shared Prosperity Funds). A lot of the colleagues across Wales that were involved in pandemic response had been in place for a number of years prior and had the basic grant administration knowledge and skills to be able to accommodate and deliver the response required.
- 2.9. We are currently in a landscape where there is even less funding certainty for these kinds of teams across Local Government in Wales. If a future pandemic was to occur, we would be reliant on a highly variable picture of capacity and capability across Wales.

2.10. To mitigate and minimise this risk in the future, it is my opinion that serious consideration should be given to statutory funding of economic development in Welsh Local Authorities. This would mean a long-term funding programme with revenue funding to maintain and support capacity at a local level. We are currently in a landscape where Local Authorities must wait to find out if they will get any funding, how much funding, what it can support, think of schemes to bid in for, then determine if they have the resources to retain/recruit any staff. The issue with such a cycle of short-term and uncertain landscape – is it makes it impossible for Local Authorities to plan and retain capable people as part of any long-term resourcing strategy.

3. Business Grant Schemes

3.1. All communication, according to my memory, was via Microsoft Teams meetings organised by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). I recall Welsh Government officials attending meetings to update on the latest situation and discuss the latest funding/policy response.

3.2. I believe there was as much consultation as was physically possible given the time constraints and limitations of any such process. There was a genuine intention to engage and discuss with Local Authorities, however, it is my opinion that we were largely consulted too late, at the point of delivery. Our input therefore was restricted to real-time feedback in a limited time window before launch and then feedback of issues/problems as they became apparent during rollout.

3.3. However, it would be unrealistic to involve all 22 Local Authorities sooner in any future process, but it would be sensible to engage with and involve WLGA at a very early point in any future pandemic. So that they form part of the thinking, rather than be delegated to a co-ordinator role. I did not have any insight into how the WLGA were involved or not, but my impression was that there would appear to be scope to bring in WLGA sooner than what was the case. The principle of a tri-partite relationship between the UK/Welsh Governments and the LGA/WLGA is one that merits further strengthening.

3.4. From memory, I believe the early support arrangements were established from our Non-Domestic Rates lists as an Authority. We therefore had this knowledge

and information as to who was eligible for support according to the guidance. Our teams then put multi-level checks in place to ensure that support was being provided only to those eligible. This tiered structure of approval – reduced the risk of human error/individual decision making within the process.

- 3.5. I was not in a position at the time that had an understanding of funding adequacy for local authorities to perform their role – I cannot recall if we had any capacity funding or not. However, I would comment that providing capacity funding, particularly at short notice – does not give the ability for Local Authorities to recruit capable staff, if they aren't already there within the organisational structure already.
- 3.6. I only had visibility of the business support schemes at the time. My personal view is that in hindsight, yes, the schemes were fragmented and too complex overall. However, they were devised in a short space of time and as gaps emerged, new schemes or revisions made. In the future, we should be learning and have a template ready to go on what support is needed for businesses in the case of any future pandemic.
- 3.7. During the pandemic, we learned by doing. In the future, we should be able to learn by having done.
- 3.8. I wasn't in a role that had an overview/understanding of all the grants and their impacts across the Local Authority, therefore unable to form a judgement on any potential inequality. I was aware that early support had gaps in the types of businesses that could be supported, or thresholds for levels of support.
- 3.9. What I saw was Government providing support in waves, as the pandemic progressed. The lockdown triggered a response to compensate businesses that had physical premises and had to close down. Then the support evolved to support businesses that didn't have premises, the self-employed (up to £50k) etc.
- 3.10. Both the UK Government and Welsh Government were responsible for the policy which we ultimately implemented, and they should be conducting that review of who was supported/who wasn't.

- 3.11. As I have commented previously, who is supported and who wasn't supported was a result of a conscious policy decision by either the UK or Welsh Government.
- 3.12. In designing the response differently, the key question is understanding the policy objective. Who do we need to support, and why? What started as a business support measure to compensate/minimise the impact of the lockdowns on businesses that had premises – then evolved into a complex and multi-level system of support.
- 3.13. From my perspective, and the role I was in at the time – support was provided to those eligible.
- 3.14. The question as to whether the support was adequately targeted at those in need of support is not something I can answer – as I did not perform any detailed analysis or was involved in any discussion as to the intention/design of the schemes.
- 3.15. In respect of businesses returning grants, I was not in a role that had any awareness of these measures, if they existed. My concern was administering the grant to those eligible. Whether the grant was needed or not, was not a consideration in the guidance or criteria from Government.
- 3.16. From my perspective, the funding went out to those eligible for the support. Whether the support achieved their aims or not, or were value for money, is a question to both UK and Welsh Government as they designed the policy and provided the funding.
- 3.17. By learning the lessons of the last pandemic, support schemes can be designed in advance to respond to certain scenarios.

4. Inequalities

- 4.1. My role was to support the rollout of the support schemes that the Government put in place to support the economic response. I did not personally undertake any review of the equality of impact of the schemes.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: **Personal Data** _____

Dated: 20/10/25_____