

Module 2b (Wales) Week Three

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Vaughan Gething MS (Minister for Economy and former Cabinet Secretary/ Minister for Health and Social Services)

It was prohibited to make decisions through text or WhatsApp but it was never my understanding that it was prohibited to have a discussion. All the records about how we made choices are available. WhatsApp essentially became a substitute for conversations you have in a corridor.

Scientific advice originally came from SAGE to us via the CMO and then eventually Dr Rob Orford was able to attend. It would have been helpful if the Welsh Government were directly in the room. I don't think that would necessarily have changed the advice or the conclusions of SAGE, but it certainly would have meant that we'd have had a more direct insight into all the discussions. I think it would improve the way that not just advice is shared but the insight into the advice as well. Because there are times where the different devolved governments will have a slightly different insight into what that means for the way in which the health and care system and the economy is run.

For COBR meetings the papers were provided a few minutes beforehand and then the papers were then returned physically. It was a very, very strange way to do business. Also there are restrictions on the numbers of officials who could be there. Limiting devolved governments to two or three people in the room is unlikely to be helpful, because you then need to go and report to lots of other people afterwards.

I agree with the First Minister that the then Prime Minister should have chaired the early COBR meetings as that would have sent a signal that it was being taken seriously. They carry weight that other ministers in the Government just don't carry. The Prime Minister's attendance earlier on would have helped us to get to those decisions being made earlier. The person chairing COBR does have an impact on the decisions that are made but they were much better run when chaired by Matt Hancock or Dominic Raab. But having the Prime Minister chair the meeting and knowing that this is a choice that can and will bind the UK Government really does matter.

It is not right to say that Covid was not a priority for the Welsh Government until March. Things really changed in the second half of February. The position in Italy in particular had an impact on our understanding, that it was likely to happen and that we will have Covid in the UK and therefore in Wales.

I was familiar with the overarching points around pandemic preparedness, I'd gone through Operation Cygnus, and that was instructive around difficult trade-offs you might have to make in a pandemic. Because the planning hadn't been completed, if we had had an influenza pandemic, we would have found it difficult. Having a different pandemic meant that we went through the PPE that we had at a much faster rate and we found that some of the items weren't fit for purpose.

We had a highly efficient contact tracing system. The contact tracing system for a small-to-modest outbreak like TB was really efficient but actually the scale of what was required was not realised.

It was never shared with me that Matt Hancock was told by the CMO in Jan 2020 that there as a 50/50 chance the Wuhan quarantine would not work and therefore a risk of a global outbreak. I was surprised to read that in Matt Hancock's statement.

There is no prospect that I told Cabinet on 25 February that there were no imported cases into the UK. There had been multiple imported cases into the UK, and in fact I'd referred to them in my written statements. If that is in my witness statement then I plainly made an error.

It wasn't clear by then that containment was lost. It was the worry, but it wasn't certain. We still thought the plans and countermeasures we had in place would be enough.

Before lockdown we had assumed that the UK would be the primary decision-maker. On 20th March however we found out that public health legislation would be used. If we'd known that before 20th March we would probably have started work earlier on how to make use of those powers. There was a meeting where we looked at the possibility of a Welsh lockdown if we couldn't move as all four nations.

We didn't have modelling advice so the understanding of the likely impact of social distancing, we didn't have that capacity available to us at this point in the pandemic, that came much later. It's entirely right that we're directly engaged in this conversation. I think characterising it as simply leaving it to others is not an accurate reflection of what happened, but certainly it was led by the UK Government, undoubtedly.

There was real concern that the public would not go along with these sorts of extraordinary interventions because they were really significant intrusions to civil liberties. The initial behavioural science advice was more pessimistic about public response. In the end people were much more responsive when the time came.

For the economic firepower to support businesses to prevent harm to the economy you've got to have the UK Government acting. That isn't just the economy, it goes into everything else, because economic inequalities and health inequalities neatly overlay on top of each other. If the economy slows down, there's likely to be a bigger impact on your most vulnerable citizens compared to your most financially advantaged citizens.

11 March. I'm clear that Covid is here, and it's going to grow, without interventions, and it's going to grow to a size and shape quite quickly where the NHS can be overwhelmed with significant harm.

12 March COBR meeting – it was made clear that if nothing was done the NHS would be overwhelmed. The two suggested interventions are not modest at that point in time, because this hasn't happened before, there hasn't been a nationwide directive telling people they should stay at home if they have symptoms that look and feel a lot like a common cold.

There was an agreed position across the four nations on mass gatherings but that fell apart within a day or two because of the incoherence as the public saw it as talking about significant intervention in other parts of your life but you can still go out to a large gathering. That's what scientific advice was at the time, but you have to deal with the reality of how people react.

Hospital discharge

Of course there was a risk with anyone moving around in the community and the risk is there in care homes, which is why there had been advice around infection prevention and control. Infection prevention and control is a real issue for the care sector in any event because of the vulnerable population. It's why the flu season is such a challenge and there are supposed to be measures in place in every commissioned care home around infection prevention and control. We understood there are risks and then it's practically what you then do about them.

I do recall conversations in February about asymptomatic infection, not asymptomatic transmission.

29th April Wales changes its policy such that all patients being discharged from hospital to a care setting would be tested regardless of showing symptoms. I had asked the question, we got more advice and the policy changed. It's one of the areas where there wasn't the sharing of information you'd have expected between Department of Health and others. If the same information had been shared with us instead of being announced, then I think we could have been in a different position. I wish we had been able to move more speedily on not just changing our position but in making sure that we had the testing ability to implement a new policy effectively, not having the means is a really significant problem and we eventually did get there. You've got to deploy your testing in a way that deals with the resource you've got and the testing capacity at that point in time was needed for people with symptoms.

I can't say whether we would have gone ahead with our own lockdown if there had not been agreement at COBR for a UK lockdown. I can't tell you absolutely that we had decided that if we couldn't get agreement at COBR we would definitely be doing this ourselves. If there wasn't agreement at COBR we'd have had to say something about where we were. It's possible that we would have got agreement around the Cabinet table to implement something like a Welsh lockdown plan. It's also possible that we would have said we think we need to do this but we need to do it together.

By 23rd March the lockdown was necessary. To avoid it we would have needed to take decisions much much earlier. But we needed to take the public with us too and would have needed financial support. We would have needed to intervene before harm was visible to the public and that's really difficult because of the extent of the measures. I do not think there was a way to avoid the first lockdown, I really don't.

The timing of it could have been different potentially, and a few days could have saved more lives, but I honestly can't see that there would have been a way to have avoided that lockdown. I've not seen any persuasive and realistic argument.

If the proposal had been to lockdown a few days earlier, we would have agreed. That was my view at the time. In hindsight I would have gone a week earlier. That would have made a difference.

I learned of the change from Stay at Home to Stay Alert through the Sunday papers. We were a more porous border than Scotland and England - there's a lot more social and economic transfer across the border. We have settlements that straddled the border. It was part of the reason why we were so annoyed. When that significant change in messaging is made without an attempt to even have a conversation, it was a surprise to officials as well as ministers. It was a really significant departure. We did think about it, but the clear advice to us was this was the wrong time to remove the Stay At Home messaging. It wasn't wanting to be different for the sake of it.

For the re-opening of schools, we had to understand what the science was telling us. It was important that the teaching unions agreed to go back to work, and the leaders of local authorities have their own responsibilities as employers with governing bodies.

I don't agree with Rishi Sunak that we did not need to be consulted on EOTHO. You're essentially talking about the support you provide to businesses. Business support and economic development are plainly devolved. Also you're in an unfinished emergency so it would make more sense to have a conversation, discuss the evidence. It wasn't just a surprise to devolved governments, it was a surprise to fellow ministers in the UK Government and indeed public health experts advising the UK Government on these matters.

If we'd been consulted, I'd have wanted to have a conversation with the economy minister and I'd have wanted to have a conversation with our public health experts as well. Their advice was not particularly different to the advice that Jonathan Van-Tam gave, that they would have said this is not a very good idea, it's likely to lead to a greater circulation and regrowth of the virus. If we had been consulted we would have been unlikely to say it was a good idea.

Once the UK Government have made a decision and they've announced it, there would have been no way back. There was no power for us to have stopped it in Wales.

The local lockdowns did fail but I think it was right to try. We didn't see the growth being capped. In hindsight, if we'd undertaken modelling then we'd have had a further basis to take action but we were still trying to have a conversation through official means around whether the UK were prepared to act which was a fruitless course.

Firebreak

Having more restrictions in place after the firebreak would have helped us. The ideal of course would have been if we agreed on UK-wide action because then you would have had a much greater prospect of resetting public engagement. Plainly it did not work to the extent we wanted it to, and so looking back it is one of the things I would do differently.

Eluned Morgan MS (Minister for Health and Social Services)

I started to understand how serious the threat was in March. On 11 March we were still suggesting the Rugby should go ahead a few days later. We probably should have been making earlier preparations. It was very late when we realised that the Welsh Government would have responsibility effectively for managing how we responded to the pandemic. I think there was an assumption that it would have come under civil contingencies.

In Wales lots of people get their information from the UK press, so for us to have initiated something prior to England would have been very difficult. If we had our time again, we would have gone into lockdown earlier. Perhaps a week earlier.

On 16 March there had already been a requirement for people to not undertake unnecessary travel but people were not adhering to that. We were still looking for our ability to enforce it. It's not just about making a statement, it's about our ability to make sure that people actually follow through on what we've asked them to do.

Before every meeting when we were discussing in the 21-day reviews, we were reminded by the First Minister of the limitations of the legal powers that we had, and one of those is that we should act proportionately, and so we were very aware of that. I think just in relation to being deliberately cautious, if the evidence wasn't as clear as we'd like, we would err on the side of caution. I don't think any of it was deliberate in terms of us comparing ourselves with others. We were trying to do what was right for Wales, and that cautious approach seemed to chime with the people of Wales. We were doing what was right for our nation. We were looking at the data, looking at the evidence, looking at the spread, looking at the ability of the NHS to cope, so those were the things that were determining our decision-making.

Waste water sampling having been used throughout the pandemic in Wales as one of the primary surveillance methods in relation to tracking the virus and that gave us insight into about 80% of the population of Wales. The real benefit of this is that it didn't depend on how much testing was happening within the communities. This was very much real time, but also gave us an insight into what kind of variants were circulating in Wales so we had early sight of when Omicron had hit. We could note where, across the whole of Wales, the virus was at its peak. So we knew when it was coming down and therefore we could relax restrictions with a bit more confidence. This is not a cheap way of monitoring, I think we'd spent about £5 million on it.

Firebreak

We were still trying to work out whether the local restrictions were effective. There were parts of Wales where actually the virus wasn't very strong at the time, so we had to work out at what point the firebreak should be instigated. We had to act proportionately. The local lockdowns clearly didn't work, which was why we needed to go into a firebreak. I was aware on 15th October that the science advice was that the measures in England were not enough and Patrick Vallance had said there should be a firebreak.

I think us going into a firebreak before England was quite a brave decision. We were still not sure whether the Welsh public would follow us. And obviously we were really concerned about the financial firepower of the Welsh Government to be able to sustain a lockdown for as long as was necessary. The scientists were suggesting that we should be doing it for three weeks and I think we didn't have the economic power to maintain a three-week firebreak. It was really disappointing that the UK Government was not forthcoming in terms of financial support, about two weeks later when they wanted to go into a firebreak they suddenly announced a very different approach. I think that was a very difficult time for us as a nation, because people felt like we were second class citizens. What was suitable for them was not suitable for us two weeks earlier, and I think that was a huge disappointment to us.

Advice was received in September regarding the need for a firebreak. It didn't happen until mid-October. The delay can be explained by the need for further scientific advice. One of the considerations was about the half term holiday and whether that would help or hinder the spread of the virus, so that was the area that we wanted more advice on. In retrospect, we probably should have gone a week earlier and should have been for longer, but there were reasons why that wasn't the case.

Rebecca Evans MS (Minister for Finance and Local Government)

I'm in charge of the Welsh Treasury. I don't think the UK Government recognises that we are responsible to the Senedd, that we have an incredible amount of scrutiny from the Welsh media, we have the Welsh public very interested in the choices that we make, and I think that in treating us like another UK Government department, it doesn't necessarily recognise the unique context that we have here in Wales and the fact that we are a government, we're not just another department.

The Star Chamber was established by the First Minister on 23 March 2020. That was to oversee and coordinate the Welsh Government's overall fiscal response to the crisis.

4th June I wrote to the Chancellor about the intention to revive the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme so furlough or the self-employed support scheme in the event of a second peak or of the need for local lockdowns so obviously we were thinking about that as early as June 4th. We didn't receive a response to the letter.

We weren't involved in the setting up of the furlough schemes or the self-employed support schemes, those are very much UK Government functions. Benefits and welfare are reserved functions, so we wouldn't expect to be deeply involved in the detail of that, but nonetheless you would expect to have at least some kind of discussion about what might be helpful for the response in Wales. But discussions

really were about the UK Government telling us through the finance quadrilateral meetings what their intentions were rather than exploring with us the shape of those schemes.

We did not know about EOTHO beforehand. I saw that Rishi Sunak said in evidence to the Inquiry that Wales didn't ask to opt out. I thought that was a curious thing to say, because there's no mechanism within the devolution settlement for us to opt in or out of UK Government programmes and decisions.

We asked for the new scheme to be brought forward because it was more generous than the Job Retention Scheme. We also didn't want businesses to have to apply twice for the same person plus some of the worst affected sectors had staff who weren't eligible for the scheme.

Financial support for workers to self-isolate was a concern. The self-isolation support payment scheme was introduced in October 2020. I would have liked to have brought that in sooner. There were huge financial pressures at the time.

Jeremy Miles MS (Minister for Education and Welsh Language)

Formerly General Counsel then Brexit Minister

I was not asked for legal advice on the school closures. I would have preferred for there to have been legal advice taken in relation to that. There had been a Cabinet a couple of days before where it didn't feel like that decision was imminent, but the position changed very rapidly. I certainly think it would have been preferable for there to have been legal advice even though there wasn't a formal exercise of a legal power. The Welsh Government has no power to change school dates – that is a matter for the local authority.

Powers under the Public Health Act can be used to keep an individual or group of people in isolation, if necessary or proportionate to reduce the risk of infection. But the advice was these powers could not be applied to all citizens and therefore could not be used to lock down the whole of Wales. The advice went on to say that powers under the Coronavirus Bill could be used to restrict the movement of people if they're potentially infectious and could also be used to restrict gatherings. The advice was that the powers in the Civil Contingencies Act are not devolved, they're reserved to UK Government ministers and therefore are not available to Welsh ministers. The assumption at this point was that the civil contingencies legislation would be the relevant legislation effectively. We had used powers on the Monday ahead of the UK Government to close caravan parks and footpaths.

Legal services' advice was clear that the economy at this stage was very much a secondary concern to public health considerations.

In the 21-day review there was a high-level analysis of the impact of restrictions on groups with protected characteristics, but it was not a comprehensive equality impact assessment. That was because of the pressure on resources. I raised the lack of Equality Impact Assessments with Cabinet. Carrying out impact assessments is a statutory duty and any failure to do so leaves ministers vulnerable in an event of a challenge. As decisions are taken to ease restrictions and those decisions become more nuanced (as

opposed to binary) the need for careful consideration of the equalities impact of proposals becomes even more significant.

If this were to happen again I would want to see impact assessments in equality, children and socioeconomics.

Mark Drakeford MS (First Minister of Wales)

I accept responsibility myself, for all the decisions that we made. The decisions that were made in the Cabinet are signed off by me and in that sense I am responsible.

The Prime Minister Boris Johnson chose not to meet with the First Ministers of the devolved nations because he thought that would give a false impression that the UK was a federal state. I wrote very regularly to the Prime Minister asking for a predictable series of meetings between the heads of the four nations. The Prime Minister had turned those requests down. I could have understood it if that was on practical grounds as these were very busy times. It had never occurred to me until I read the evidence that he had turned down the requests as a matter of policy. That did seem to me to be an extraordinary decision.

I believe it did have an impact on the Welsh Government's response to the pandemic. It would have been optically important for people in Wales and in other parts of the United Kingdom to see the heads of their nations coming together at a moment of such national peril. I think regularity of meetings improves trust, and in a pandemic, when things are moving so quickly and sometimes with such difficult moments, trust is a very special commodity.

The production of papers to be used at COBR meetings rests exclusively with the UK Government, in practice this meant you did not see papers until shortly before the meetings took place. It would undoubtedly be the case that when I arrived at a meeting, and I would be the only Welsh voice often at that table, other UK ministers would already have had a discussion and would already have had access to the information that I might have seen often less than 20 minutes before the meeting began. In that sense you are at a disadvantage because you are trying to grapple very quickly with information that others have had longer to absorb and to think about.

I was aware of anxieties in the UK Government of leaks. I had sat in many meetings where confidential information had been shared in relation to Brexit and the UK Government could not have pointed to a single example of a leak from the Scottish or Welsh Government. So whilst I understand the anxieties, I do not think there was an evidential basis for them.

I took part in COBR debates which were genuine debates and where a variety of views were canvassed, but I also definitely took part in COBR meetings where the decision had already been made in advance of the meeting.

SAGE

Initially we were fortunate that our Chief Scientific Adviser for Health, Rob Orford, was well connected to people who were on SAGE, so we had a direct line into the SAGE discussions. As that month moved on, I did come to be more anxious that we had somebody in the room while those discussions were taking place, rather than having a good read-out of the discussions. Later on I did become anxious about our ability to put questions directly to SAGE that were pertinent to Wales. In the early days SAGE was less concerned with domestic impacts than in collecting the information on what was happening elsewhere in the globe. At that stage I did not see that there was a particularly Welsh angle or contribution. In the beginning, I didn't have concerns, but they did grow a little as the weeks went by.

There was no reliable protocol which made it clear that SAGE in fact worked for all four nations and not just for England. We had to ask COBR to make SAGE advice available to the Welsh Government, and we could not ask SAGE to carry out any bespoke research without prior agreement from COBR.

I did not attend the first 3 COBR meetings (the first one was 18 Feb.) I do not agree that means the Welsh Government was not taking it seriously. At that point the approach to the pandemic is still very health dominated and being dealt with by the Health Ministers. I think a health minister going to a COBR chaired by the health minister of the UK Government to talk about health matters is not unreasonable.

I had not anticipated that the UK Government would use the health protection legislation as the basis for responding to the pandemic. Once that course of action had been determined it placed an onus on the devolved governments to pass corresponding legislation and that had unintended consequences of this decision for divergence. I don't think it was apparent to UK ministers at the time, but by placing that responsibility at the nation level, that meant that there would now be decisions being made by others over which they had no direct control.

My belief right up until 20 March is that the essential decisions would remain in the hands of the UK Government and that devolved governments would be implementers of those decisions.

I had no motivation of any sort to make decisions for the sake of being different, and I think my effort through the whole pandemic is to try and find better ways of coming together to make informed decisions, and I don't think the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State could offer you a single specific instance to justify the assertion that the Welsh Government made decisions just to be different.

Vaughan Gething starts issuing weekly statements on Covid-19 to the Senedd on 24 January. He starts issuing daily updates to ministerial colleagues on 28 January. So before February begins, we are already alert to and engaged in making sure we are as well informed as we can be of what's happening elsewhere. But at that point it is happening elsewhere. There's not a single case in Wales, nothing you can point to that is directly affecting the Welsh population.

The fact that there was no discussion at Cabinet until 25 February should not be read at all as there being no discussion between Cabinet colleagues, because there was a great deal of discussion between Cabinet colleagues. At that point there is nothing for the Cabinet to decide, we're being kept well informed, we are discussing matters between ourselves, and then there comes a point when it becomes clear that the Cabinet is likely to be involved in cross-portfolio decision-making. At that point it becomes an item on the Cabinet agenda and very quickly it comes to dominate the work of the Cabinet.

The question for me there is: at what point does the Cabinet shift from being kept informed to needing to make decisions that would be necessary in Wales? That point does not come for us until the second half of February. The signal to me that we needed to move into that territory was the moment when Chief Medical Officers advised that the risk level to the United Kingdom and to Wales has moved from low to moderate.

During January and February there was some limited and preliminary evidence regarding asymptomatic spread but the Welsh Government concluded that there was insufficient evidence upon which to base operational decisions. I wish we had known more at that time about the scale at which asymptomatic spread would happen.

Should we have taken a more precautionary approach? Knowing what we know now, the answer to that would be definitely. Did the evidence at the time amount to sufficient evidence to take even that more precautionary approach, well, that was addressed by our clinical advisers on as late as 28 April they are telling us it doesn't.

For what we actually faced, we were not as well prepared as we needed to be. For what we thought we would face, our planned response did have a lot of robust elements in it.

COBR on 12 March – we were advised that cancellation of mass gatherings could reduce infection related deaths by 2% whereas self-isolation of those with symptoms would have a greater impact, likely to reduce deaths by 11%. I argued at this COBR meeting for us to agree that mass gatherings should not go ahead. This was a proper discussion in which the Prime Minister did go around the room and ask for the views of everyone who wanted to contribute.

I was arguing for a four-nation agreement that mass gatherings would not go ahead, not on clinical grounds, because all the clinical advice I have is that that's not a supported course of action, but I am arguing for it on the grounds of messaging. It seemed to me we're trying to convey to people how serious the position is and we're asking them to do already some extraordinary things. To say that it's alright to go to a mass gathering seemed to me to contradict that.

Discharge of patients from hospital to care homes

Hospitals were about to become the epicentre, the most dangerous place to be so to keep vulnerable people in hospital when they are medically fit to be discharged did not have merit. You are discharging people back to their home which in some instances was a care home. But it is still their home and there are protections that can be put in place to manage the disease. That was the line of reasoning at the time.

If testing had been brought in earlier that would have meant tests were not available for other purposes due to the limited resources. There weren't enough tests to do all the things we would have liked to have done with them, and we were creating a priority order.

Of course there are instances where coronavirus is seeded into care homes by people being discharged from hospital, but the primary reason why coronavirus ends up in a care home is because of people who worked there carrying it in from the community.

The Welsh Government does not have decision making capabilities to close schools. On 17 March I said the position of the Welsh Government was that we did not want schools to close before Easter. By that afternoon we were already getting reports of schools closing in many parts of Wales, either as staff fall ill and cannot be in the classroom or as parents withdraw their children of their own volition. We were also getting powerful pleas from the Welsh Local Government Association, teachers' unions for the Welsh Government to bring some order and certainty to what was already happening.

Lockdown should have happened and should have happened earlier, not that it would have been avoided but the timing of it would have been altered.

7 May UK wanted to change from Stay at Home to Stay Alert. This was one of the bleaker moments during the conduct of intergovernmental affairs. We were not asked, we were told. I simply was not prepared to agree to such a major change of policy on the basis of the information that I had in front of me at that meeting. I was very unconvinced by 'Stay Alert.' I've no idea what 'stay alert' is asking me to do. My advice to Welsh Citizens to stay at home – they know what I'm asking them to do. If I'm asking them to 'stay alert' they have no idea what it is they're expected to do in response to that.

I made it very clear that if the Prime Minister decides to go ahead in that way, then he must be very clear that this is a decision he is making for England, and that in Wales we will continue with the mantra that we have very successfully persuaded people to stay with, in those first six weeks. The Prime Minister gives assurances in the COBR meeting that he will do his very best to make sure that he does that. He then heads to the press conference and he provides a script in front of the cameras in which the only time he refers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is when he says early in the press conference "as Prime Minister of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland".

This is not a slip of the tongue, this is not somebody forgetting to mention, this is a deliberate attempt to imply to people that what the Prime Minister is about to say means them when he full well knew that it didn't.

3 announcements by UK

- 4 June mandatory face coverings on public transport;
- 5 June face masks in NHS facilities; and
- 10 June bubbles for single person household.

Those announcements were made with minimal or no prior communication. Those announcements will again have been made with very little reference to the fact that they were announcements for England and not for Wales. Had we been involved in the decision-making we might have agreed with them and if so, we would have had the opportunity to put things in place like arranging for face masks to be placed at NHS facilities. Intensely practical implications that we might have been able to navigate if we had been given the opportunity.

The Chief Medical Officer of Wales advised us very regularly not to put the weight of the Welsh Government behind the wearing of masks. There were only two examples in the whole of the pandemic where the views of ministers and the views of the Chief Medical Officer differed and this is the most

important one of them. If we had decided to go against the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, his advice that would be publicly available, everybody would see the Chief Medical Officer has advised this but we had done something different. I could not pick and choose what advice I followed and ignore other bits. There was always a very long list of groups asking for exceptions to be made for them and my strongest defence was always that we had clear advice.

EOTH0

Had we been asked about it at the time we would have asked some probing questions and would have wanted to see the evidence for it.

Use of local lockdowns

Things got worse much more quickly in September than we had anticipated, and very soon we find that there are some local areas where there is a significant upswing in the virus. By the time we get halfway through October, though, we have got local lockdowns over almost half or more of Wales, and every week we're having to add more local areas to it. In other words, it just hasn't worked.

Circuit Breaker

The advice seems to be pretty clear, certainly from SAGE on 21 September and then reinforced by TAC and TAG that immediate steps such as a circuit-breaker are needed and that they would be most effective if introduced early.

The Welsh Government took the advice very seriously. I raised it at COBR meetings. The Prime Minister told me he wasn't prepared to introduce a national lockdown. I asked for a special meeting of COBR to consider the circuit-breaker advice, I was supported in that by the First Minister of Scotland, but that meeting never took place. It's not just that the UK Government is not convinced or is neutral about it, they are positively determined not to do what they're advised to do and positively going to oppose Welsh efforts to do what we thought we needed to do. Both Sir Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance were in that meeting. They both repeatedly said to the Prime Minister "your plan for Tier 3 lockdowns will not bring the R rate below 1", and it's rare for advice to be given as bluntly as that and to be repeated during a meeting in that way.

Job Support Scheme

I raised the job support scheme with Rishi Sunak on 22 September and he told me it could not be brought forwards for Wales. He said it can't be done practically. Of course, he was able to do it practically as soon as England asked him to do it. I have since seen in evidence there was a debate amongst the Treasury about how they should respond to my request and they say there is a policy of the UK Government not to support the devolved administrations going further than the UK Government on NPIs. So it is the policy position of the UK Government that devolved administrations are never to be offered more help than has already been offered to England.

Christmas Lockdown

This was the most difficult period of decision-making in the whole of the pandemic for the Welsh Government. The health minister was in receipt of direct advice from the Director General of the NHS about the risk to the health service and from the Chief Medical Officer about the continuing rise in infections in Wales. I am concerned about the other harms that would occur if we were to bring forward a lockdown to the pre-Christmas mass period instead.

The Cabinet is evenly divided between whether to bring forward the restrictions or to stick with our original plan. Although I had approached it from a different starting point than the health minister, of course I sum up at the end of the meeting in favour of his position, not mine.

