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# **Briefing to Inform the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee 12 November 2025**

## **Covid- 19: Evidence Session with Public Health Wales**

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Submitted to the Public Accounts and Public Administration  
Committee

Public Health Wales  
November 2025

## **1. Introduction**

This briefing seeks to provide the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee with the following contextual information ahead of Public Health Wales attending the Committee on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2025:

- ❖ Our background and role in the public health system in Wales.
- ❖ Our role in emergency planning and resilience.
- ❖ Our role during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2. Public Health Wales and the Public Health System**

Public Health Wales is the National Public Health Organisation for Wales. Our purpose is working together for a healthier Wales. We help all people in Wales live longer, healthier lives. With our partners, we aim to increase healthy life expectancy, protect people against threats to health and to improve health and well-being and reduce inequalities for everyone in Wales, now and for future generations.

Together, our teams work to prevent disease, protect health, provide system leadership, specialist services and public health expertise. We are a primary source of public health information, research and innovation, and work in collaboration with our partners across all sectors including the NHS, local authorities, education, housing, policing, employers and the third sector to drive improvements in health and wellbeing.

We are working towards a Wales where people live longer, healthier lives and where all people in Wales have fair and equal access to the things that lead to good health and well-being. This is at the heart of our Long-Term Strategy which takes us to 2035.

### **2.1 The Role of Public Health Wales**

Public Health Wales was established in 2009, by the then Minister for Health and Social Services, following a review of public health functions of national health organisations and units in Wales, which was undertaken in 2006. We are an NHS Trust, established for the purpose specified in section 18(1) of the NHS (Wales) Act 2006 and have four statutory functions set out in Part 3 of our Establishment Order. These are to:

- ❖ provide and manage a range of public health, health protection, healthcare improvement, health advisory, child protection and microbiological laboratory services and services relating to the surveillance, prevention and control of communicable diseases
- ❖ develop and maintain arrangements for making information about matters related to the protection and improvement of health in Wales available to the public in Wales; to undertake and commission research into such matters and to contribute to the provision and development of training in such matters
- ❖ undertake the systematic collection, analysis and dissemination of information about the health of the people of Wales in particular including cancer incidence, mortality and survival, and prevalence of congenital anomalies
- ❖ provide, manage, monitor, evaluate and conduct research into screening of health conditions and screening of health-related matters.

The establishment of Public Health Wales brought together four distinct pre-existing entities which were:

- ❖ National Public Health Service for Wales (NPHS)
- ❖ Wales Centre for Health (WCfH)
- ❖ Welsh Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit (WCISU)
- ❖ Screening Services.

This meant that, for the first time, an independent NHS body was created in Wales with a clear and specific public health remit to provide professionally independent public health advice and services.

Public Health Wales protects and improves health and well-being and reduces health inequalities for the people of Wales. We also provide data and science-based leadership, specialist public health expertise, coordination and advice, and delivery of key public health services (e.g. population screening, microbiology and health protection).

Since our establishment in 2009, Public Health Wales has grown considerably and the organisation has taken on, and internally developed, additional and new functions focused on protecting the public and improving health and wellbeing in Wales. This has included developments in the areas of:

- ❖ policy, research and international collaboration which includes the establishment of a Behavioural Science Unit, an Adverse Childhood Experience Hub and a Health and Sustainability Hub. We were also designated as a World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre in Investment for Health and Well-being in 2018
- ❖ data, knowledge and research with the establishment of a directorate specifically focused on maximising the use of digital, data, research and evidence to improve public health which has recently been designated WHO Collaborating centre on Digital Health Equity
- ❖ our core public health services, particularly microbiology and health protection, along with adopting new diagnostic methods such as molecular diagnostics and whole genome sequencing, through our Pathogen Genomics Unit.

## **2.2 Public Health Wales' role in emergency planning and resilience**

The Emergency Preparedness Resilience and Response (EPRR) Team is responsible for public health emergency preparedness, resilience and response leadership at all levels across the organisation and in partnership with other organisations.

Emergency Planning in the UK is driven by the principle of subsidiarity, where decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level (individual, community, locality, or national) and co-ordination is at the highest necessary level.

The key roles and responsibilities of Public Health Wales specifically are set out in three documents:

- ❖ Public Health Wales Emergency Response Plan

- ❖ Public Health Wales' Emergency Response Handbook: A guide for Public Health Wales responders
- ❖ Incident Co-ordination Centre Concept of Operations.

In addition to the above, Public Health Wales supports the Welsh Government in developing *The Communicable Disease Outbreak Plan for Wales*, collaborating closely with health board Directors of Public Health, NHS emergency planning leads and Directors of Public Protection in local authorities in Wales. This plan is published in the name of all four bodies and is hosted on the Public Health Wales website.

The responsibilities of Public Health Wales in responding to a major incident or emergency occurring in, or affecting the NHS/health services in Wales, are set out in the NHS Wales Emergency Planning Core Guidance. Where the emergency affects the whole of Wales the *Pan Wales Response Plan* takes effect. In response to a major infectious disease emergency the generic arrangements are set out in the Wales Framework for Managing Major Infectious Disease Emergencies and specific details for pandemic influenza in the *Wales Health and Social Care Influenza Pandemic Preparedness and Response Guidance*. These documents are published by the Welsh Government but emergency planning leads from all sectors and agencies, input into the development of these documents.

### **2.2.1 Public Health Wales Emergency Response Plan**

When Public Health Wales was established in 2009, it inherited an Emergency Response Plan from the former National Public Health Service for Wales. Updated plans were published between 2011-2018. The emergency plan Public Health Wales had at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic had been approved by the Public Health Wales Board in September 2018 and has been regularly updated since.

The Public Health Wales Emergency Response Plan provides the overarching framework for managing emergencies involving the organisation and includes details of the command-and-control arrangements (key roles and responsibilities). It is an all-hazards plan written in the context of Public Health Wales as a category 1 responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Public Health Wales determines its organisational response level to any given incident in accordance with this plan.

The plan is supported by a suite of documents including the: Emergency Response Handbook, Emergency Response Telephone Directory, Terms of Reference for Gold and Silver Response Groups and Silver Group Concept of Operations. In line with best practice, Public Health Wales aims to review its Emergency Response Plan at least yearly.

The Public Health Wales Emergency Response Plan contains specific reference to the organisation's role to give special consideration to those who are made 'vulnerable' as a result of the emergency or who are less able to help themselves in the circumstances of an emergency. For planning purposes, the plan references the Cabinet Office Guidance 'Chapter 5 (Emergency Planning) Revision to Emergency Preparedness' which states that there are broadly three categories that need to be considered:

- ❖ those who, for whatever reason, have mobility difficulties including people with physical disabilities or a medical condition or otherwise may have physical challenges to their mobility, for example, pregnant women
- ❖ those with mental health or learning difficulties
- ❖ others who are dependant, such as children.

### **2.2.2 Local Resilience Forums (LRFs)**

Emergency Planning is a 'multi-agency team effort' involving collaboration with all partners in the Local Resilience Fora's (LRFs) who work to develop plans, train and exercise to improve preparedness. Public Health Wales has representation on all four LRFs in Wales, led by Consultants in Communicable Disease Control, Consultants in Health Protection and the Emergency Planning Team who provide representation to each Local Resilience Forum (LRF) in Wales.

Public Health Wales also engages with all relevant Local Resilience Forum sub-groups in the development of products such as the community risk register and assessment of risks detailed within the National Security Risk Assessment, and plans to mitigate the impacts of risks identified.

Public Health Wales also participates and supports the following groups:

- ❖ Emergency Planning Advisory Group
- ❖ Wales Risk Group
- ❖ Wales Resilience Forum
- ❖ Wales Resilience Partnership
- ❖ Wales Learning and Development Group
- ❖ NHS Emergency Planning Advisory Group
- ❖ NHS Mass Casualty Group
- ❖ NHS Wales Training and Exercise Group
- ❖ The Joint Emergency Services Group
- ❖ Four Nations Health Protection Oversight Group

In considering key areas of pandemic planning, preparedness and response, Public Health Wales also has exclusive competency in the provision of Welsh epidemiology and surveillance data to the Welsh Government, all partners and the public and also in the running of the Pathogen Genomics services e.g. in support of response to Variants and Mutations of Concern.

### **2.2.3 Emergency Exercises**

Public Health Wales undertakes exercises based on emerging hazards and threats, and in accordance with the lessons management systems, the national risk assessment and local risk registers across Wales. This is done independently, as part of the Local Resilience Fora across Wales, and also with the NHS Wales Training and Exercise Group.

Public Health Wales is a Category 1 responder as defined by the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) and therefore plays a key role in relation to the preparation for, and response to, any emergency and major incident. Public Health Wales's role across the civil contingencies risk architecture in Wales is to ensure that public health perspectives are embedded in risk assessments. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004

requires us to meet a range of civil protection duties as set out by the Act:

- ❖ assessment of risk to inform planning
- ❖ developing a Public Health Wales Emergency Response Plan
- ❖ putting in place business continuity management arrangements for Public Health Wales
- ❖ putting in place arrangements to make information available to the public about civil protection matters and maintaining arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency
- ❖ sharing information and co-operating with other local responders to enhance co-ordination.

Further information on our role within these structures is also set out in the Public Health Wales Emergency Response Plan referred to above.

Other Category 1 responders include: Police services, British Transport Police, Fire Services, Ambulance Services, Local Authorities, UKHSA, NRW and the seven health boards.

As a Category 1 responder in Wales, Public Health Wales' approach to civil contingency risk assessment and forecasting is discharged by being a core member of the Wales Risk Group and contributing to the assessment of risks detailed within the National Security Risk Assessment. The Emergency Planning and Business Continuity Team provides representation at the Wales Risk Group.

Similarly, and consistent with its duty to share information to enhance coordination, Public Health Wales's duties and responsibilities as a Category 1 Responder under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA), as stated in the Public Health Wales Emergency Response Plan (Version 2.0), are also shared with Local Resilience Forums and individual partners to inform multi-agency emergency response plans

In discharging the organisation's duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, Public Health Wales has a longstanding role in developing and communicating public health messaging relating to emergencies, including communicable disease.

### **3. Public Health Wales - Role During the Pandemic**

From January 2020, Public Health Wales mounted an unprecedented response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was part of a Welsh system-wide effort to respond effectively to the challenges faced as the pandemic progressed.

During this time, we prioritised the need to deliver an effective health protection and microbiology response (which included significant upscaling of our microbiology services for the purpose of testing and genome sequencing), while utilising our expertise in relation to behavioural insights and change, evidence and research, prevention and national/international horizon scanning. This supported policy development, advice, guidance and resources, in tackling both the communicable disease elements of the pandemic and the broader direct and indirect population health harms.

Public Health Wales played a key role in supporting the public, the Welsh Government and partners including the NHS, social care, local authorities, education, businesses and the third sector during our response to COVID-19. We provided system leadership across a number of key areas through the provision of specialist and expert public health advice, information, intelligence and support, and which included (but was not limited to):

- ❖ providing public health advice to the Welsh Government to support the development of policy (for example, the Public Health Protection Response Plan and Advice Notes)
- ❖ developing and disseminating surveillance and intelligence for the public and to the wider system (for example, COVID-19 Surveillance Reports, which included weekly/daily summaries and school-based reports)
- ❖ delivering key public health functions and services (for example, health protection including outbreak response and management, and microbiology services including COVID-19 genome sequencing)
- ❖ undertaking research, evaluation and international evidence analysis to inform policy and support Wales's ongoing response to the communicable disease nature of COVID-19 and also the broader direct and indirect harms resulting from the pandemic (for example, National Public Engagement Surveys, international horizon scanning reports and a range of health impact assessments)
- ❖ establishing a National Contact Centre and an Enclosed Settings Cell which had a specific focus on care homes and other high-risk settings
- ❖ supporting the COVID-19 vaccination programme through the provision of specialist advice and 'Once for Wales' functions to assist health boards in the delivery of vaccination services.

Externally, we held, or participated in, a range of different meetings with stakeholders and others to provide information, engage, work together, support and guide the NHS and other partners. Examples of meetings that we participated in and provided specialist public health information and advice to include (but are not limited to):

- ❖ Public Health Strategic Coordinating Support Group – PHSCSG
- ❖ Local Authority Chief Executive Briefings
- ❖ Health and Social Services Group (WG) Coronavirus Planning and Response Group
- ❖ Directors of Public Health and Directors of Public Protection Briefings
- ❖ Public Health Wales / Chief Medical Officer for Wales meetings
- ❖ Public Health Wales/ Health Board Meetings
- ❖ UK COVID-19 IPC Cell
- ❖ Public Health England Incident Management Team
- ❖ Local Resilience Forums (LRFs)

During the pandemic, the requests for advice to the Welsh Government increased significantly. Advice was primarily requested by Welsh Government officials including, but not limited to, the Chief Medical Officer for Wales and the Chief Scientific Adviser for Health. Advice was provided in a variety of forms including formal Advice Notes, formal reports, for example, the Public Health

Protection Response Plan which formed the basis for Welsh Governments Test Trace Protect Strategy, contributions from staff during meetings between Public Health Wales and the Welsh Government and/or Ministers, and in meetings with the Welsh Government and other stakeholders.

In addition to the above, subject matter experts from Public Health Wales were invited to join the Welsh Government Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and its sub-groups, and other groups such as the COVID-19 Intelligence Cell and COVID-19 Intelligence Group. We also engaged with our counterparts in the other nations throughout the pandemic.

In relation to public communications, Public Health Wales' marketing and communication activity was coordinated with the Welsh Government, and we used advertising campaigns, social media, joint press conferences with the Welsh Government and stakeholder communications to convey public health messages.

During the pandemic, we also submitted several business cases to the Welsh Government in order to significantly expand relevant capacity including:

- ❖ May 2020: expansion of microbiology testing infrastructure at Imperial Park 5, Newport
- ❖ August 2020: enhancement of laboratory resilience to manage COVID-19 demand in the longer term.
- ❖ November 2020: expansion of the Public Health Wales Health Protection workforce
- ❖ April 2021: expansion for scaling up sustainable and resilient whole genome sequencing for COVID-19.

Public Health Wales had no role in the following during the pandemic:

- ❖ advising the Welsh Government on the national lockdown implemented in March 2020
- ❖ the drafting of the Coronavirus Act 2020 or any secondary legislation
- ❖ the determination of the national alert level set by either the UK or the Welsh Government
- ❖ the procurement of goods and services for the NHS in Wales, other than those required for its own use
- ❖ presenting regular complex modelling data and modelling to ministers
- ❖ advising on the measures to restrict the movement of individuals between England and Wales.