



Cross Party Group for North Wales Grŵp Trawsbleidiol Gogledd Cymru

Note of the Meeting of the Cross-Party Group for North Wales in the Welsh Senedd Friday 13th November 2020

Present

Llyr Gruffydd MS (in the Chair), Mark Isherwood MS, Janet Finch Saunders MS (Part), Sian Gwenllian MS, Mandy Jones MS, Clare Eno (Office of Mandy Jones)
Hywel Williams MP, Rob Roberts MP, Simon Baynes MP, Mark Tami MP (Part).
Stephen Jones (WLGA) Secretary and Sponsor Representative, in attendance.
Gwenllian Roberts and Bryn Richards, Welsh Government
Katie Summerfield

Speakers:

Mark Polin Chair of the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB)
Gill Harris, Acting CEO of the BCUHB
Ed Sherriff, Welsh Government (EU Transition Team)
Tim Peppin, Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), Director of Regeneration and Sustainable Development

1. Chair's Welcome

The Chair opened the meeting.

2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting held on the 3rd July 2020

The Minutes of the previous meeting were agreed and there were no matters arising.

3. The Priorities of the BCUHB

Mark Polin, Chair of the BCUHB gave a short presentation:

The BCUHB coped well with the first wave of Covid 19 (relatively speaking). It was, though, a very difficult and challenging period.

The crisis brought people to together, which enabled good leadership, a renewal of clinical partnership and a strong sense of purpose.

There were challenges arising for staff from stress, absence, some deaths and long hours but overall staff were brave, committed, resolute and confident in their response.

Board Members and Senior Leaders worked hard and visited many hospitals and care settings to give support to front line staff.

The whole of the BCUHB workforce is feeling tired because of the extended pressures of Covid-19 and continuing day to day demand.

Partners came together really well and helped support the response of the BCUHB. They also confidently maintained their own services and responsibilities through the pandemic.

The opening of the field hospitals exemplifies great partnership working. The Deeside Field Hospital is receiving patients.

The emergency structures in Civil Contingencies Legislation worked well with good partnership working at the Strategic Co-ordination (SCG) and Recovery Co-ordination Groups (RCG).

The North Wales Regional Partnership Board has been working on a cross sector response to winter pressures, seeking to ensure that hospitals and social care services are ready for the winter plus Wave 2 of Covid-19.

Preparation for winter pressures is now the top priority of the BCUHB.

English Hospitals are not able to take patients from Wales as easily due to local pressures, including Covid-19 cases. English contracts for scheduled care have been heavily restricted in terms of activity. Therefore, BCUHB waiting lists for elective treatment are lengthening. Pressures on Emergency Departments (EDs) are going back to normal levels after an initial fall at the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ysbyty Glan Clwyd's ED is under most strain.

The Board plans to respond to the significant change in its capacity to treat elective patients following the closure of English hospitals to BCUHB patients. An outline case for two diagnostic and treatment centres has been submitted to Welsh Government, who are sympathetic to the proposal. The current estimated capital cost of these centres is in the region of £112m, which makes them a sizeable endeavour. These centres would however provide a sustainable solution for planned care for the region.

The monitoring of the pandemic has enabled a better understanding of demand and resources in the region by both the BCUHB and the government.

The goal of the two new diagnostic and treatment centres will be to recover waiting lists and increase capacity to deliver elective/scheduled surgery. They should also improve patient flow and reduce pressure on EDs.

BCUHB will in parallel determine a sustainable solution to improving ED waiting times and wider patient flow.

The Welsh Government has made available a financial support package that will offset £40m of BCUHB's deficit. In addition a further £42m is to be provided for each of the next three years to support transformation and service improvement.

The material effect of the deficit support monies is under consideration and plans being developed as to the use of the additional monies.

A priority for investment and improvement will be Mental Health.

The BCUHB is moving forward. The financial support package came from dialogue with the Welsh Government, which now has the confidence to further invest in the Board.

Business cases for investment in the Royal Alexandra Hospital (Rhyl) and Robotic Assisted Surgery in Ysbyty Gwynedd are about to be approved by the Board. The Robotic Assisted Surgery proposal signifies the commitment of the BCUHB to Ysbyty Gwynedd. Leading edge kit in decent facilities will aid recruitment of doctors and nurses.

The Board is in the process of redeveloping the Ablett Unit. Consultation on the proposed development has commenced along with an application for planning permission.

The Board is now progressing several positive developments and investments. A coherent strategy is needed to “wrap around” the proposed investments. So, the BCUHB is now discussing the production of a coherent strategy that will map out plans for the future. This will seek to define clinical pathways and propose IT platforms and an estate to enable the chosen pathways.

The Board will need to address the configuration of service delivery on the three acute sites and elsewhere and what is to be delivered where. The BCUHB will need capital investment to deliver change and reconfigure the estate to support the clinical pathways it develops.

A priority for investment remains Wrexham-Maelor Hospital, which is dated and poorly configured to handle existing and new demands. A lot of investment is needed there.

The new CEO starts in January 2021. Jo Whitehead will look to learn Welsh and undertake an immersive Welsh learning course for senior leaders. The Chair and the incoming CEO are in regular contact.

The BCUHB is recruiting again for new directors of Finance, Mental Health and Medical. The recruitment market is tough with not many people prepared to move in the midst of a pandemic.

An encouraging development that will assist with recruitment is the positive response of the Welsh Government to a medical school in North Wales proposed by the BCUHB and Bangor University. The BCUHB and the University are working together closely and the WG is to establish a Task and Finish Group to examine the case.

The proposed Medical School would have significant socio-economic benefits as well as medical recruitment benefits for North Wales.

Gill Harris, Acting CEO of BCUHB gave a short presentation: -

The BCUHB has many challenges. In framing improvement, the BCUHB puts safety first: -

- Patients
- Staff
- Mental Health
- Prevention

Prevention has been an area of good performance with over 110,000 65+ people vaccinated against flu. The BCUHB is prepping for the roll out of Covid-19 vaccinations.

There are 121 Covid-19 cases in BCUHB Hospitals with 4 in ICUs. Therefore, the BCUHB can continue with planned care. It is assessing options for temporary (modular) facilities for diagnosis and treatment (including surgery).

Partnership working has been positive, especially with local authorities. The BCUHB is supporting care homes which are closed (to new residents) due to Covid-19.

The Deeside Field Hospital has been opened for Covid-19 cases. The majority of CV19 cases are in North East Wales.

There will be no movement of CV19 patients from East to West (or vice versa) in the region.

The Board is responding to Covid-19 and delivering its “ongoing” strategy and services.

There are 35 pathways into care via primary and secondary care. There will be a “Once for North Wales” programme which uses a digital platform to try and simplify care pathways.

The BCUHB is facing challenges across its Emergency Departments, with attendances rising. The Board is committed to maintaining the momentum of delivering planned care.

The challenge of meeting emergency demand and delivering planned care makes preparing for winter pressures a top priority.

The Strategic Funding from Welsh Government has helped enormously.

There is a lot of pressure on the workforce and many of them are moving around a lot to maintain services: -

- TTP
- Mass vaccination
- Covid-19

The easing of demand from Covid-19 has enabled a focus on scheduled care and the development of plans for diagnostic and treatment centres.

Clinicians are now working more positively, another significant benefit from the crisis.

Questions and Discussion

All of the contributions made by elected representatives praised the response of the Board and its workforce to the Covid-19 emergency. Everybody had worked hard and worked together as a team to serve the public in a time of crisis. Particular praise was lavished on front-line workers who had taken risks and worked so hard to care for their patients.

Senedd Members and Members of Parliament asked for their praise and thanks to be passed on to the BCUHB workforce

Rob Roberts MP asked:

- How many diagnostic and treatment centres will there be and where will they be located?
- How sustainable is the growing size of the remaining GP practices (1800 – 2000) as some GP surgeries terminate their contracts and close as independent businesses?
- What is the Board's approach to Community Hospitals?

Rob Robert MP reported that he had been told that the Board has a policy of no new Community Hospitals but in some areas, they are being refurbished and upgraded.

Response

The Royal Alexandra Hospital in Rhyl is a long-standing project where it is critical to deliver the business case.

Primary Care is a national challenge with the recruitment of GPs and retaining GP Practices is very difficult at the moment. The BCUHB is aware of the fragility of primary care and is seeking to develop a primary care academy which will: -

- Develop Innovative Ways of Working based on multi-disciplinary teams that work around fewer GPs e.g. advanced nurses etc.
- Train and recruit new GPs to practices in North Wales

The proposed treatment and diagnostic centres will help with recruitment and retention. They need to be in the right place, but their locations have not yet been finalised.

Simon Baynes MP reported that he is: -

- Concerned about GP practices in Wrexham, where closures are making remaining practices larger and more difficult to run
- Pleased to see investment and positive progress in addressing the challenges faced by the Health Board.

Mark Polin and Gill Harris committed to “off-line” conversations with the MPs regarding their concerns with primary care.

Mandy Jones MS observed that after 5 years in special measures it is still not clear how BCUHB will exit them. She then asked how the BCUHB will deal with winter pressures and the backlog in planned care.

Gill Harris gave a commitment to brief Mandy Jones in a one to one meeting.

There was a short recap on how the proposed diagnostic and treatment centres will enable more planned care by increasing operating theatre capacity.

North Wales no longer has access to operating theatre space in English Hospitals and does not have much private sector capacity either so building additional capacity (through diagnostic and treatment centres) is the only way forward

Mark Polin added that the BCUHB will not accept growing waiting lists for elective surgery/planned care.

The withdrawal of service by English Hospitals had brought government officials into the debate on how to reduce waiting lists which had been higher than average for the BCUHB (in Wales) before Covid 19. This led to government officials gaining a better understanding of the challenges facing the BCUHB and the agreement to invest in diagnostic and treatment facilities.

The situation now is that BCUHB has a workable solution to the challenges of planned care. It is now critical that the region stands together to help deliver the capital from Welsh Government to implement the solution. This is important as there is competition for capital resources throughout the Health system.

On special measures, improving performance on planned care will help that. However, the best advice for this meeting is special measures ought to be released for the several areas where improvements have been made and BCUHB performance is similar to (or better than) the Welsh average.

The special measures label is affecting recruitment and has an impact on partnership relationships as well.

It is appropriate to keep special measures on BCUHB in place for mental health. For all other areas it is now the opinion of the Board that special measures could be lifted.

Mandy Jones reported that some people will refuse vaccinations. Will there be sanctions on such people?

Gill Harris responded on mass vaccination: The Welsh Government will develop a set of priorities which the BCUHB will deliver on. It is likely that the elderly and those with medical conditions will be the first to be offered Vaccinations (for CV19).

Hywel Williams reported on his discussions with Bangor University where jobs are being lost. He is concerned about the impact of these job losses on Welsh medium provision which could affect nursing and social work courses. He also expressed concern about the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of young people.

Mark Polin and Gill Harris gave assurances that the BCUHB is committed to bi-lingual provision and that the Board is working with Bangor University to ensure that existing provision and future provision by the Medical School will be available in the medium of Welsh. The BCUHB requires a good supply of bi-lingual medical staff for services in North Wales.

The BCUHB is aiming to increase bi-lingual provision and has a strategic, long-term commitment to Welsh Language Standards.

The BCUHB is focussing a lot of effort on improving Mental Health Services for all age groups. The priority is to make available early intervention services.

The BCUHB is conscious of the impact of Covid-19 and is reviewing its mental health strategy and how Mental Health services are delivered. The CHC is supporting the review of the Mental Health Strategy and is holding engagement events for that purpose.

Janet Finch Saunders MS raised concern about dental services. Two dental practices have closed in her constituency and it is a big issue locally, which she is raising with the Government.

Mark Polin undertook to provide a brief on dental services provided to Darren Millar MS to Janet Finch Saunders MS.

The problem is caused by BUPA scaling down its presence in dentistry. The BCUHB is looking at how to redistribute the patient lists and how to bring in new dentists.

Janet Finch Saunders MS commented that the regulation of dentistry through Covid-19 in Wales had been poor and harmful to maintaining services.

Clare Eno asked what the incidence of mortality from flu is (compared to CV-19).

Gill Harris committed to producing the figures. Flu figures are kept separately from CV-19 and vaccination against flu is a priority for BCUHB.

Mark Isherwood reported that: -

- He had spoken to a clinician who spoke about Covid-19 patient numbers rising but demand for critical care declining.
- Constituents are writing to him, complaining that Covid-19 is taking too much capacity and that the pandemic crisis is exaggerated.
- While Deeside's Field Hospital has opened Mark is receiving e-mails that usage is low
- Members of the Senedd are being approached by many special interest lobbies complaining that CV-19 has caused loss of life by disrupting work on cancer, epilepsy, lung illnesses and heart disease etc. Charities representing these groups along with specialist clinicians and their professional bodies are concerned about the access of their "client group" to NHS services during the pandemic.

In that context what is BCUHB doing to communicate the seriousness of wave 2 of Covid 19?

Mark Polin and Gill Harris responded that they recognised there are challenges in communicating effectively with the many and varied communities (general, local/geographic, sectoral, professional, charity and service user groups). They invited suggestions to help them enable more effective communications with the community and service user groups.

Gill Harris reported that the BCUHB: -

- Sought to use front line staff to report key messages to patients.
- Is aware of the impact of Covid-19 on day to day services (Unscheduled and Scheduled Care)

Llyr Gruffydd concluded the discussion by asking Gill Harris and Mark Polin to: -

- Pass on the thanks of elected representatives to staff for their hard work during the pandemic.
- Let Members of the Senedd and Members of Parliament know what support the BCUHB needed to make the case for investment both individually and collectively.

4. Brexit Briefing

Ed Sherriff (Welsh Government EU Transition Team) and Tim Peppin (Director of Regeneration and Sustainable Development with the WLGA) presented on the potential impacts of Brexit on the economy of North Wales

Ed Sherriff reported that the Brexit negotiations over a trade deal are reaching a critical stage. The Welsh Government's priorities for a trade deal are substantially different from those of the UK Government, where the Welsh Government is very keen to secure a deal that avoids tariffs. The WG priorities are: -

- Secure a trade deal that enables a close trading relationship based on tariff free trade in goods
- Retaining protections for worker's rights and the environment – effectively agreeing to maintain a level playing field between the UK and the EU Single Market (aligning state EU aid rules).
- Remaining in EU programmes such as Erasmus, Horizon and wider co-operation in areas such as Policing and Security

There is no agreed collective position in the UK between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The UKG informs. It is not involving the devolved administrations in the Brexit Trade Deal process. This is concerning as some issues on which the UKG is negotiating on are devolved.

The areas remaining unresolved include: -

- The single market level playing field
- Fishing Quotas and access to waters

The EU is holding the wider trading relationship hostage to seek access to UK fisheries.

There is a lot of uncertainty.

Frictionless trade is critical to the Aerospace and Automotive industries in the UK (which are very important to Wales).

Both tariffs and regulations for goods and services could lead to very challenging trading conditions for Wales based manufacturing industries, like Aerospace and Automotive sectors.

Services and finance contracts are increasingly important to manufacturing firms. Services and finance linked to manufactured goods are likely to be outside any trade deal.

The Welsh Government is concerned about the preparedness of businesses given the “last-minute” nature of the deal and the potential for “no-deal”.

Risk assessment work and mitigation has been undertaken by WG on food and medicine supplies.

Covid-19 has provided good experience about food distribution, which has been helpful to Brexit planning.

The WG believes that the readiness for a new trading relationship on the part of Welsh Businesses is low. WG is therefore anticipating a busy time for business support services once the UK and the EU have determined their relationship as firms seek advice and support for maintaining their trading relationships.

The WG is supporting the process for registering EU nationals present in Wales with a view to encouraging them to stay and continue contributing to the Welsh economy.

There are still outstanding operational issues regarding Holyhead Port (Customs Checks and Immigration/Border Control processes)

The Northern Ireland protocol is a concern for the Welsh Government as it may lead to a greater flow of goods between Eire and the UK through Belfast/Liverpool at the expense of the Dublin/Holyhead route, thereby costing jobs in Holyhead.

Wales benefits from £700m of EU structural funding per annum. This flows through WEFO and is distributed to many partners, including local authorities. It has financed much support for business as well as infrastructure investment.

The replacement process for structural funds remains unclear with no detail available on the proposed Shared Prosperity Fund.

EU programmes, HORIZON and ERASMUS have been of considerable benefit for Wales and the government would like to retain membership of those schemes.

The Welsh Government’s “End of Transition Action Plan” will be published shortly.
[END OF TRANSITION ACTION PLAN 2020 \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/end-of-transition-action-plan-2020)

Tim Peppin, WLGA gave a short presentation:

The WLGA has run an EU Transition Support Programme within local government underpinned by research by Grant Thornton. This has attracted WG Funding.

Each Local Authority has undertaken a risk assessment and produced contingency plans aimed at a “no-deal” scenario. A co-ordinator in each local authority has been appointed to work through a Brexit toolkit prepared by Grant Thornton for risks/opportunities relating to:

- The Councils organisation/governance
- The delivery of Council Services
- The Council’s Community Leadership Role (wider economic and social impacts)

These co-ordinators also took on a role co-ordinating a corporate response to Covid-19. Key considerations have been the impact on the: -

- Workforce
- Prices of medicines/medical supplies
- Economy (Covid plus Brexit)

Grant Thornton also undertook an economic impact assessment. The report will be published soon but the headlines are: -

- Wales is the most exposed region in the UK to trade with the EU
- The value of EU trade with Wales is £4bn
- Aerospace and Automotive are particularly interlinked with the EU as exporters
- North East Wales (Flintshire and Wrexham) are very exposed with a quarter of the workforce there reliant on manufacturing. A “No Trade Deal” scenario could reduce exports by 19% and a “slim” trade deal by 6% at a potential cost of 27,000 and 8000 job losses, respectively.

Agriculture is a significant part of the local economies in areas of Wales which, with a “no trade deal” outcome, will be vulnerable to high tariffs on exports. This will not only hit the farming community but also the supply chain to agriculture (seeds, equipment, fertilisers, animal markets/auctioneers etc.).

Qualitative research with businesses suggests a general lack of preparedness because of: -

- A wait and see strategy derived from uncertainty and previous experience of frequent changes in approach at government level.
- Domestic businesses taking a view that it will not affect them if they do not export to the EU. In practice this is the wrong approach because prices, suppliers and regulations for the business could be affected at the end of the transition period.

There will be a response from businesses when they are faced with new arrangements starting from 1st January and what these mean (arising from the trading relationship and other new business requirements that emerge early next year). Governments need to work with businesses to prepare them or what is ahead.

Covid -19 will have an impact as well. It has weakened demand for most businesses and put more pressure on resources, detracting from preparation for the ending of the transition period.

Depending on the deal (or no-deal) reached by the EU and the UK Government, there could be economic dislocation and turbulence. Ongoing uncertainty and the impact of Covid-19 will add additional stress to the economic impact from Brexit.

Discussion

Clare Eno reported that Welsh waters have been overfished with EU based fleets doing much of the damage to fisheries in Welsh and UK waters. Using Brexit to reduce overfishing would be good for Wales and the UK.

Hywel Williams MP reported that his “big” issues were: -

- Agriculture
- Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF)
- Holyhead Port

Much food for Northern Ireland (supermarkets) travels via Holyhead.

The location of the customs post has not been determined with concern locally that trucks will have to travel to Warrington. There are still concerns as to whether there will be enough space for “stacking” trucks.

On agriculture, is the money at current levels of subsidy guaranteed (by UKG) or not?

How will the SPF be distributed? Will it be by competitive bidding, the Barnett Formula or as now plus inflation?

Ed Sherriff responded that Fisheries is subject to a big difference of opinion about quotas and access for the EU fleets between the EU and the UKG.

There is a need to compromise and over time there will be a gradual winding down of overseas access to UK Fisheries.

On SPF, the Internal Market Bill indicates that the UKG will be using the structural funds differently when they introduce the SPF. However, there is no clarity on how the SPF will work or be distributed.

Welsh Government will be looking for £700m per annum to replace the funding Wales would reasonably expect to receive.

Traffic Management at Holyhead Port should be okay. Customs checks will initially be at Warrington January – July 2021. It is hoped that there will be a long-term solution that is closer to the Port itself.

Tim Peppin reported that the WG Regional Investment Framework assumes devolution of (former EU) structural funds to Wales

Llyr Gruffydd MS reported that there needs to be sufficient veterinary capacity at the border for animal checks.

Rob Roberts MP and Mandy Jones MS reported that Brexit is happening. All that had been heard during the presentations was negative about Brexit. There must be some positives from Brexit. What positives are there?

Tim Peppin reported that there could be some inward investment into Wales to service the UK Market.

Ed Sherriff reported that 3rd country trade deals could yield some benefits. The devolved administrations are involved in the UKG's work to secure new trade deals.

The Welsh Government is working hard to market wales to the world. The WG also sees the UK market as very important for the future.

5. Any Other Business

It was agreed to hold a special meeting to hear about the progress of the North Wales Growth Deal which is scheduled to be signed off on the 17th December 2020.

Cynghorydd Dyfrig Siencyn, Chair of the NWRLB and Alwen Williams (NWEAB Programme Director) will be invited to attend the meeting to present on the final growth deal package.