

Shadow Social Partnership Council meeting notes

The following provides excerpts from meetings of the Shadow Social Partnership Council (SSPC). Original paragraph numbers have been maintained under the relevant agenda item headings.

Shadow Social Partnership Council (SSPC) Meeting – 9 December 2021

Agenda Item 2 – Covid19 Update - For Discussion

(Para 16) The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) confirmed that cases of the new Omicron variant in Wales, whilst small, were transmitting at a significant rate. He explained that current trajectories estimated that Omicron would be the dominant variant in Wales by approximately the 17 December raising concerns for the resilience of the NHS.

Agenda Item 3 – Covid19 - 21 Day Review Cycle – Update – For Information

(Para 19) The First Minister explained that knowledge of the Omicron variant was developing at pace as was the booster campaign to address the challenge. It was confirmed that by the end of the day one million people would have received their booster jab in Wales. The First Minister confirmed the impact of the new variant would be severe, raising significant challenges for the operation of public services and businesses as staff inevitably fall ill. Consequently, changes to COVID restrictions after next week might need to be more drastic to stem transmission. The First Minister emphasised the importance of developing a four nation approach to successfully stem the progress of the Omicron variant.

Shadow Social Partnership Council (SSPC) Extraordinary Meeting – 16 December 2021

Agenda Item 1 - Covid19 - Review Cycle – Update – For Information

(Para 2) The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) highlighted concerns over the pace of transmission of the Omicron variant which had been doubling every two days in other parts of the UK, generating significant uncertainty as the new-year approached.

(Para 3) The Minister for Health and Social Services reiterated the challenges presented by the Omicron variant due to the speed of transmission and the importance of preparing for its impact. Though figures for the new variant were currently low in Wales the situation was likely to worsen significantly over the next couple of weeks. The Minister emphasised that it was still unknown whether Omicron was more severe than previous variants, a situation that continued to be monitored.

(Para 4) The Minister confirmed rates of transmission were expected to peak at the end of January and into February, meaning the Welsh Government would need to act soon in order to continue protecting the NHS. The Minister explained that the NHS was already operating at full capacity and that even a small number of Omicron patients requiring hospitalisation would pose a significant challenge to the system. This, at a time when staff sickness levels were also anticipated to increase.

(Para 6) The Minister encouraged all employers to prioritise the release of their staff for vaccination, stressing the importance of the booster jab for keeping people safe from Omicron. However, the Minister confirmed the booster programme on its own would not be enough to protect the public from the new variant and that Cabinet would be meeting later to discuss what further measures might be needed. Key to this would be determining the right balance between guidance and more formal regulations.

(Para 7) The Minister explained that the next review announcement was scheduled for Christmas Eve. As a result the announcement scheduled for the 17 December would instead indicate Welsh Government intentions following the festive period. The Minister stressed that due to the Omicron variant more protective measures would be likely moving into the new-year.

Shadow Social Partnership Council (SSPC) Meeting – 22 December 2021

Agenda Item 1 – Covid19 Update - For Discussion

(Para 2) [Welsh Government Official] explained that Wales had seen a significant increase in the transmission of the Omicron variant. There had been an extra 713 cases reported across Wales and Omicron now accounted for approximately 60-70% of all Covid19 cases in most health board areas. Increased hospitalisation rates were not currently being recorded in Wales but this was likely to change. [Welsh Government Official] also noted the potential impact of Omicron on the health care workforce.

(Para 3) The Minister for Health and Social Services reiterated concerns over the anticipated level of hospitalisation due to the increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant and explained that the NHS is already operating at full capacity. The Minister also outlined the likely impact to health services if as many as 30% of staff were infected and unable to work.

Agenda Item 2 – Covid19 - 21 Day Review Cycle – Update – For Information

(Para 4) The Minister for Health and Social Services confirmed that due to the severity of the current situation additional measures would be introduced by the Welsh Government; she stressed the importance of acting early. The measures that would be introduced by the Welsh Government were then outlined.

(Para 6) Large gatherings would be prohibited but outdoor events would be allowed for fifty people in regulated settings (and thirty indoors). These figures would not include staff, carers, children or performers.

(Para 7) Adult entertainment venues and ice skating rinks would be able to continue operating but no more than 30 spectators would be allowed at indoor events and fifty at outdoor venues.

Shadow Social Partnership Council (SSPC) Meeting – 13 January 2022

(Para 2) The CMO explained that transmission figures were moving in a positive direction throughout Wales but stressed that community transmission remained at a steady but high level. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) data had recorded 5.6% of the Welsh population (1 in 20) as being positive with the Omicron variant. The CMO explained that this figure had remained relatively stable suggesting that community transmission had already peaked but he advised caution, citing the higher levels of transmission being witnessed in other parts of the UK.

(Para 3) The CMO confirmed hospitalisation rates continued to rise but not at the same rate witnessed following the festive period; ICU levels remained high but stable.

(Para 4) The Minister for Health and Social Services reiterated the positive picture that had been provided by the CMO whilst stressing the need for continuing caution. The Minister then outlined the changes that would be announced to Covid19 restrictions the next day by the First Minister. From Friday 21 January, the cap on the number of people attending outdoor activities would be removed entirely as would the 2 metre social distancing rule at these venues. Outdoor hospitality would be allowed without restriction from this time but the measures for indoor hospitality would remain.

(Para 9) The Minister for Health and Social Services reiterated the positive trends that had been outlined which seemed to suggest the peak of the Omicron variant had already arrived and that the restrictions that had been implemented were effective.

(Para 11) The Counsel General and Minister for the Constitution emphasised the purpose of this meeting had been to provide early notice to members of the Welsh Government's current thinking regarding Covid19 measures. He reiterated that all the proposals that had been outlined were based on transmission remaining on a downward trend and thanked the SSPC for their advice.