

First Minister gives evidence.

[Prof Brian Edwards.](#)

Mark Drakeford, First Minister of Wales, spends a full day giving evidence. He is a former Professor of Social Policy with years of experience of government in Wales.

He believes in distributed leadership and cabinet government.

He accepts responsibility for his government's actions, but it was down to individual ministers to take operational decisions like the reopening of schools, having first informed colleagues and obtained their broad support.

Ministers shared next door offices, so this was not difficult.

Until the pandemic there had been regular meetings of UK ministers where the First Ministers and the Prime Minister could meet and discuss policy.

There were none during the pandemic. Cobra was the highest level of ministerial contact.

Drakeford found it extraordinary that Johnson took the view that this was "optically" wrong [giving the impression that such meetings were involving a group of equals].

Drakeford claims to have had good relationships with his colleagues in the devolved governments.

The truth, I think, is that the First Minister of Scotland could not be trusted by English colleagues to preserve the confidential nature of such discussions. She did not seek a UK consensus.

Using a football analogy, he explained that Michael Gove who acted as the link between Whitehall and the devolved governments, was a skilful lead minister but acted like a centre forward without a team behind him and with a manager who was largely absent.

Our witness had little time for the Secretary of State for Wales who in his view spent more time scrutinising the work of the Welsh government than representing their views to the UK cabinet.

It was clear that in any future pandemic the respective powers of Whitehall and the devolved governments

needed to be much clearer. He had always supported a UK family of nations and never been motivated to be different for the sake of being different.

Our witness and Lady Hallett get into a semantic discussion about "some risk of rain" and "a risk of serious rain" when discussing the early warning signals of a pandemic.

Whilst Wales did not have many sophisticated modelling resources it did have excellent international sources to tap into.

He tried not to use the phrase "follow the science" instead using "decisions informed by the science".

He had argued at Cobra for a ban on mass gatherings on clear messaging grounds rather than expert evidence grounds but had been frustrated by Boris who explained that "Dom said no."

It must have been a relief when Welsh Ruby took their own decision to cancel international matches.

The reason the residents of care homes had such a poor outcome in the early days of the pandemic was, in his view,

more to do with transmission by staff than transfers from hospital.

He had not wanted schools to close before Easter but local decisions to close made the need for order essential and led to a national decision to close.

The shift in public messaging from “Stay at Home” to “Stay Alert” had not been supported by Wales.

There was considerable resentment that Boris had not made this clear when making the announcement and gave the impression that it applied to the whole of the UK.

He had used WhatsApp on very rare occasions. It was the policy that was wrong not the practice.

There had been many arguments about a second lockdown and the financial consequences if Wales took a different stance to England without the support of the UK Treasury.

There was no way the Treasury would give devolved nations more support than they gave England!

The decisions about rules at Christmas had been very difficult with a divided cabinet.

In the end he had supported the health minister “*A smaller Christmas was a safer Christmas*”.

The policies regarding international travel, taken largely in London, had been chaotic and shambolic.

Consistency and predictability had been missing.

When challenged about those who made the pandemic rules thinking that they did not apply to them, he responded vigorously.

‘Not in Wales’, he said. He quoted some government trust figures. 70% in Wales compared with 40% in England.

If Mr Drakeford had to draw a single lesson from the pandemic experience? He stressed the need for a predictable, orderly government. Making decisions with authoritative but challengeable professional advice. The four governments needed to work together better.

Counsel for core participants are direct in their challenges.

You will not admit that your government did anything wrong! I came to explain not justify was his reply.

An honest and thoughtful witness with very little political posturing.
