# STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Coronavirus (COVID-19)** |
| **DATE** | **17 June 2020** |
| **BY** | **Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister** |

Since the beginning of the lockdown period I have made 10 oral statements to the Senedd on coronavirus.

This is the final statement in that series as next week will see the return of oral questions.

As usual I will focus on developments in portfolios not represented in other Ministerial statements today.

I will also set the scene for the important decisions which have to be taken as we conclude the mandatory three week review cycle of lockdown restrictions.

Last week was Carers week, as many members will know from their own constituencies. Together with the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, I joined an on-line discussion with carers about their experience of lockdown and to learn of the challenges it has brought. The additional £50,000 we were able to announce to support the work of Carers Wales will, I know, be put to very good use.

The world which coronavirus has created means that, in very many walks of life, new ways of working have to be developed. The Welsh Government continues to work with our social partners across the range of our responsibilities to assist in that process.

Over the last week alone, fresh guidance has been provided to child care providers, schools and colleges, student support, bereavement services, dental services, visitors to care homes, and on the use of medical masks in health and social care.

I can also report to Senedd Members that a further set of regulations have been made, amplifying the quarantine arrangements designed by the UK Government which came into force on Monday of last week.

The new regulations will ensure that international passengers on aircraft and ships receive important public health information relating to the Coronavirus, before arriving in Wales, including on the need to self-isolate for 14 days upon arrival.

Members will want to know our latest assessment of the state of coronavirus in Wales, as we come to make the latest decisions in our journey to ease lockdown.

The Minister for Health and Social Services will provide further details in his statement today, but summarising very briefly, the position continues to improve. The circulation of the virus continues to fall, with the number of patients in critical care beds, and the number of people dying from COVID-19 at their lowest since the end of March.

All of this has been achieved because of the enormous efforts of our communities to stick to the lockdown rules and to bring the pandemic in Wales under control. The headroom which has been created must be used carefully and systematically, to reopen our economy, to return to people the freedoms they have had temporarily to give up, and to do so in a way which continues to protect our health and social care services.

In Wales, that position is further reinforced by our Test Trace Protect system. This forms an essential part of our surveillance arrangements, allowing us to identify and respond to local outbreaks of coronavirus if new hotspots emerge. Other surveillance measures are also in place. 70,000 Welsh citizens regularly report through the King’s College COVID-19 app, with its Welsh partner, the SAIL Databank at Swansea University.

I am pleased that the Welsh Government will fund a programme of work to support the monitoring of COVID-19 levels in wastewater, led by Bangor University, in collaboration with Cardiff University, Public Health Wales and Dwr Cymru Welsh Water.

Wastewater monitoring offers the potential to provide early warning of increasing incidence of COVID-19, complementing our wider public health surveillance programmes, and building upon strengths that we have in Wales in environmental sciences, disease surveillance and pathogen genomics.

The Welsh expertise will make an important contribution to the proposed UK waste water monitoring project. It will strengthen important collaborative relationships that will serve us well for COVID-19 and potentially other communicable diseases in the future.

The Welsh Government continues to reject the advice of those who argue that the need to protect public health and the need to restart our economy are in competition with one another: that to protect health is to harm the economy. In fact, the only foundation for a healthy economy is a healthy society; health preservation and wealth creation are complementary, not contradictory, objectives.

The coronavirus experience teaches us that loud and clear, because we have seen just how directly economic disadvantage also produced an impact on health. ONS analysis published last Friday shows that rates of death involving COVID-19 were twice as high in the most deprived areas as in the least deprived areas. These more ‘hidden’ harms have been less obvious but no less real and substantial.

As we make decisions about the future, therefore our approach to recovery will take a broad view of public health, responding to the ways in which economic disadvantage reduces quality of life and the distribution of life chances.

That understanding underpins our decisions which have provided the most generous package of business support anywhere in the UK. Companies across Wales have benefited from Non-domestic Rates grants worth over £680 million.

The first phase of our Economic Resilience Fund provided over £200 million to eligible firms, and the second phase will open on 29 June.

Yesterday the Development Bank of Wales published record results demonstrating the crucial role it plays in the Welsh economy. The Bank’s loan facility, created to help deal with the impact of the virus, has allocated almost £100 million to more than 1,200 businesses, providing an essential lifeline that has safeguarded thousands of jobs.

Last week we launched the next phase of our Circular Economy fund, with an additional £6.5 million to support the green recovery.

And because other parts of government continue to work, even while we deal with the pandemic crisis, I am very pleased that, with the UK Government we have been able to confirm approval of the Pembroke Dock Marine project, a central part of the Swansea Bay City Deal.

The Project will provide an essential boost to our ambitions for the development of renewable energy from the sea. The Pembrokeshire Demonstration Zone will be the largest facility of its kind anywhere in the world, supporting existing firms, and attracting others to Wales. It, too, is firmly part of the green recovery to which we are committed.

I look forward to building on these steps to restart further our personal and our economic lives, doing so always in the knowledge that the greatest risk to either would be to do too much, too soon and so undermine the hard won successes I have been able to report today.

Given that questions to the First Minister will resume next week, and this is my last statement of this kind, I will emphasise again to Members that the Welsh Government remains focused on coronavirus. Over 80% of our staff are contributing to the response to the pandemic, including work on the TTP system, securing PPE, conducting the 21 day reviews, supporting vulnerable people, and preparing our public services to meet the many challenges created by the virus. Of our 5500 staff, 97% are currently working from home.

We remain in the grip of a public health emergency. This is the top priority for the public and must remain the top priority for the Welsh Government until we can be confident that the pandemic is safely behind us.And thatmay not be for many months to come.