

# Ministers Reflect Kirsty Williams



28 September 2021

# Biographical details

## Welsh assembly/Senedd history

1999–2021 member of the Welsh assembly/Senedd for Brecon and Radnorshire

## Government career

2016–21: minister for education

**Kirsty Williams was interviewed by Akash Paun and Alex Nice on 28 September 2021 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.**

Kirsty Williams reflects on her time as minister for education in the Welsh government, her experience of being a lone Liberal Democrat minister in a Labour administration, the reforms made to the education system during her tenure and the challenges raised by the coronavirus pandemic.

**Akash Paun (AP):** You became a minister in 2016 after an election that left you as the only remaining Liberal Democrat member of the Senedd. A Labour government was formed and then you were asked to join the cabinet. Can you talk us through how that came about?

**Kirsty Williams (KW):** So, as you alluded to, it was a devastating set of election results for the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the prospect of serving as a cabinet minister was certainly not one that was at the forefront of my mind. A Liberal Democrat staffer was asked by a Labour member of staff on the Friday following the elections whether I would be willing to take a call from the presumptive first minister over that weekend. And I agreed to speak to Carwyn Jones, which I did on the Sunday, although it was a very strange conversation. It was one of those conversations where you felt like saying to Mr Jones: “Well, I’m not quite sure why you’ve rung, you know. What’s this about?” It was a very strange conversation. But he did ask when I was going back to Cardiff Bay [the location of the Senedd], and I said I thought I would be in the Bay on Tuesday. He asked me to come and see him on Tuesday morning.

So I didn’t give it a second thought. Carwyn and I have been assembly members since the beginning, in 1999. We’re quite good friends, not close friends but we’ve always got on very well. And everybody was feeling very sorry for me, and I took it as part of, you know, people just trying to be nice, given what had just happened to the Welsh Liberal Democrats.

I went in to see him on the Tuesday morning and he immediately put to me the idea of serving as a cabinet member in his government. It was quite blunt really; there was no soft soaping it or anything like that. He just said: "I think you should do this next." So we talked about it, briefly. I said I would have to go away and think about what he had just said.

**AP: And just to clarify, was the proposal at this point specifically to take on the education portfolio?**

**KW:** No, it was to take on another role, actually, not the education role. I said I would go away and think about it and obviously I would need to discuss that with a few people and so we just left it that I would get back to him.

I did indeed discuss it with a few people, you know, the idea, and went out for lunch with a close friend, who has also previously been involved at quite a high level in politics, and discussed if I was to take that job, what would I do in that job, what kind of Liberal Democrat things would I want to do in that job. And immediately [there] sprung to my mind a significant policy difference between myself, of the Liberal Democrats, and what the Labour policy would be. So, I texted the first minister to say: "What about this particular policy?" And he texted me back, and he said: "Oh dear, you better come and see me." And I thought, oh God, I've been sacked before I've even accepted the job! I'm out before I'm even in. He said: "Are you still in the Bay? Can you come back and see me now?" So I said: "Yes, fine."

And clearly, for whatever reasons, he'd been having further discussions, and he said: "I've changed my mind." And I said: "That's fine, you know, it was a very kind offer..." etc etc. He said: "No, no, no, no, I haven't changed my mind about being in the government. I think you should do [the] education [portfolio]. You've given me such a hard time over the last five years, and you think I've been awful and the party's been awful. Let's see how good you can be then." And that's when I was offered education, which was an even more interesting proposition. That really then started the process rolling.

So, as you know, because the Liberal Democrats like Byzantine structures and ways of doing things, and they like to make it as difficult and as hard as possible, especially for people in positions of leadership, not to go off and do their own thing. So I then had to have a discussion with the chair of the Welsh Liberal Democrats for me to take up that role. Even though from Labour's perspective, they were not perceiving it or calling it a coalition. And that was deliberate by Carwyn Jones because he wanted to avoid going through the processes that he would have to go through; he wanted to avoid all of that. But there was just no way, I knew, there was no way that I could avoid – nor would I want to – going through the processes the Liberal Democrats had previously set up.

So we began the process. First of all, in normal circumstances, it would have been a vote of the [parliamentary] group. Well, the group didn't exist anymore – I was the group – so that's the first part. Then we had to have a vote of the executive committee of the Welsh Liberal Democrats. So we began discussions with the chairman of the Welsh Liberal Democrats at that time, Councillor Rodney Berman, about setting that process up. And then it was agreed that if the executive said yes, then we would have to have a special conference at which every single member of the Welsh Liberal Democrats had a vote as to whether I should accept the job or not.

**AP: This is the triple lock, isn't it, as you call it?**

**KW:** Yeah. The triple lock, absolutely. But parallel to the triple lock process being started, we also started discussions on our policy platform. Myself and a group of close advisers began to look at, first of all, what would we write down between me and the first minister as to what our priorities would be in the field of education. And also what other Liberal Democrat policy commitments and manifesto commitments in areas outside education could we also get them to agree to. So there was a twin-track approach. The kind of the rule-based side of it and the processes the party would require me to go through, but then we were also – myself and a small group of advisers – working on a policy programme both within education and wider policy initiatives we would want in return. It's quite cheeky, really, isn't it? Quite cheeky, really!

**AP: It's interesting to me that you were the only remaining Liberal Democrat, but you felt you had some leverage there to open negotiations beyond even the specific portfolio that you were going to take on. And the other part of my question is, to what extent was all of this an explicit *quid pro quo* for your backing of Carwyn Jones in the first minister vote, where there was a very close vote with Leanne Wood [leader of Plaid Cymru] as an alternative first minister candidate?**

**KW:** Yes, you're right. The title of this is 'Minister Reflects'. You know, on reflection, it was probably quite cheeky to think as the single Liberal Democrat, that you had any cards. But at the same time, we did have a lot of cards because politics is always a numbers game in the end, and we knew that that 30th vote would make a massive difference to the ability of the Labour Party to, first of all, remain in power, and secondly, to be able to carry out any programme of government. I mean it wasn't perfect, even with 30 [out of 60 assembly members], but 30 is a lot more comfortable than trying to do it with 29, where you need a deal on absolutely everything.

So that did give us some confidence that even with one [assembly member] we had quite a powerful hand and we would need to use that power to achieve things that we believed in. We were confident that we could do that and actually received no resistance. It's what they expected on the other side; they were not expecting anything less from me.

And I think it's important to remember that in the previous session, I had done a number of budget negotiations with the first minister, sometimes on our own, sometimes in conjunction with Plaid Cymru, to extract expenditure measures on things that we felt were important. So there was, first of all, an expectation that that's how the process would work. I don't think they expected me to simply to say: "Yeah, whatever, you know, we do not ask for anything."

But secondly, there was also a process of trust. I felt that I was dealing with somebody who, if he gave you his word, then that was trustworthy, and I'd like to think that he felt the same. So it was just a question then of focusing on what those priorities would be, and what we would want in return. So that was interesting. And it was implicit, although never spoken out loud, that obviously then I would vote for Carwyn Jones to be elected as the first minister.

Now, as it happened, the way of the timings of all of these things, the deal had not been signed off by the Liberal Democrats by the time there was that vote on the floor of the chamber. And, if I'm being very candid, I had been approached by Plaid Cymru as to whether I would support Leanne Wood to be first minister. Because Adam Price [Plaid Cymru assembly member] had already said that he could bring on board the Conservatives and what was then the UKIP [United Kingdom Independence Party] members to support that.

So an approach had been made, but for me there were two issues. We were negotiating and discussing things in good faith with the first minister and, as I said, I think trust is a really important part of how I do my politics. So it would have been, you know, I just think, completely unworthy of anybody if I had been negotiating on one hand and then double-dealing behind anybody's back. And secondly, the idea of putting – and I explained this to Leanne herself, I just said: "I just don't think it's a good look for you being elected and being held hostage by the Conservative Party, but even worse than that, [by] members of UKIP." And when [there is] a coalition, and when parties work together, for it to work, I strongly believe that you have to have some values in common. And I said: "How on earth are you going to sustain your position as the first minister when you're reliant on people that I know you have nothing in common with?"

**AP: So you didn't do a – if I'm allowed to call it that – do a Nick Clegg and open a second channel of negotiations to increase your leverage in the first?**

**KW:** The first minister would have seen right through it. I've done enough anti-Nick Clegg coalition-bashing in my time. He would have known, he would have known that it was rubbish.

**AP: So you go through that process and Carwyn Jones is elected as first minister. The deal you've struck is agreed by both sides and you are then appointed. What was it like**

**becoming a minister, walking into ministerial office for the first time? What did you do on that first day?**

**KW:** Well, it's terrifying. It's absolutely terrifying and there's no manual. There's no manual for doing that job. I arrived on the fifth floor, which is where the cabinet members are, with a Minnie Mouse mug, which my daughters had bought me as a consolation for the election going really badly, and my prize possession, which is a limited-edition original Barack Obama 'Hope' poster, a big one, under my arm. And that's how I arrived. And the person I wanted to be my special adviser was on his honeymoon in the USA, so I had to wait for him to come back off his honeymoon from the USA.

**AP: That was Dewi Knight?**

**KW:** No, that was Tom Woodward. Dewi Knight was due to be appointed as a specialist adviser and he was having to work his notice at the British Council. So I literally was on my own and it was very frightening. I was very fortunate. I had a very experienced, highly experienced private secretary who had PS'ed [served as private secretary] for education ministers going right back to Jane Hutt [minister for education, 2007–09]. So she had a lot of experience PS'ing for education ministers. And I had a very supportive director of the education section of the government, a guy called Owen Evans who is currently the chief executive of S4C and has actually just been appointed to become the new chief inspector of schools, Estyn. And he was great. Obviously, working within their bounds of the civil service code, because he's a civil servant, but he was very supportive.

Walking into the first cabinet meeting where, you know, you're the cuckoo in the nest. I've known those people around those tables for quite a long time and as one of them whispered to me: "You were really horrible to me, you know." I had not pulled any punches as the leader of the opposition party, so there were some people around that table who felt kind of a bit bruised about things that had happened in the past. So yeah, it was a very strange feeling to find yourself, first of all, in a completely new job and having to forge new relationships with people who, for the last five years, and especially during the election period, you've been telling the world have done a terrible job.

And then you're sitting alongside them around a cabinet table trying to create that sense of a government, a group of people, who have a vision about what they want to achieve over the next five years. Completely overwhelming. The then director of education came in, a guy called Steve Davies. He stepped down when I stepped down. And Steve was quite new to the civil service as well. It's the first time he'd worked inside the government. Highly experienced in the field of education but new to the civil service. And yeah, it's just overwhelming, the amount of information that the director and the deputy directors just bring to your table. They're just stacking things up on the table about everything that's in your in-tray that, you know, that has got nothing to do

with what you actually want to achieve. This is just all the day-to-day stuff, and the stuff that's been lying around which the other minister hasn't dealt with because the election is coming and would rather not deal with it. So yeah, it's a pretty overwhelming, frightening experience, and there's no manual, and there's no training or anything like that. Sink or swim.

**AP: So, as you've described, you get confronted with this huge workflow, a lot of which is just keeping the business of government moving. But at the same time, you had just negotiated with the first minister about some big things that you wanted to achieve. Could you talk us through your key priorities when you came in?**

**KW:** Certainly. We had a long list of things that we wanted to do in education and some of those things were more simple to achieve than others. But immediately what struck me was that in some areas there was an absolute desire by the civil servants to tell you that you were wrong and that was never going to happen. So immediately you're struck by [the question of] how do you pull the levers to make what you want to happen?

So, for instance, class sizes. One of the things we'd said we would do was cut class sizes and immediately we found some policy resistance from the civil service. So, cutting class sizes and trying to establish a way of doing that. Increasing the amount of money going into what was then called the 'Pupil Deprivation Grant', which is the Welsh equivalent of the Pupil Premium [for schools in England]. It became known as the Pupil Development Grant because we wanted to stop the focus on deprivation and a deficit model. We wanted to think about using that money to develop. So it became known as the Pupil Development Grant.

We also knew that we had big, substantial, potentially explosive issues with the publication of the Diamond Review [into higher education funding in Wales]. As you can imagine, as a Liberal Democrat, the prospect of substantial reform to student finance was absolutely explosive. And, in fact, the first minister had offered to carve that out of my list of responsibilities. He said that if I thought it was going to be too difficult to have a Liberal Democrat doing student finance that he would give it somebody else. But what's the point of being the education minister if you duck things? So that was on the list, implementing the Diamond Review, which we knew was going to be substantive in what it recommended. [There was also] a wholesale focus on educational improvement.

So yeah, there were lots of things to do. And the thing that, looking back on, I wish I'd have known [was] how long it takes things to change. You know, the processes are just really, really, really slow. And I think if I'd have known how difficult that was, I would have cut down the list, I would have had a smaller list, because there are genuine constraints. People think that there's millions of civil servants sitting around not doing very much. But actually [there are] physical constraints on people to do the work, especially in the legal department, because anything that required legislation, either

primary or secondary legislation, just trying to fight within the government for the legal resources to do that work, was pretty challenging. I quickly discovered that they had not been joking when they said there was no money. So [there were] really challenging financial constraints and the sheer worry of hanging onto what you've got, let alone trying to persuade the finance minister to give you more to do new stuff, trying to identify how you can finance the new stuff that you want to do. It was really very, very challenging and I think, on reflection, as I said, I would have cut down the number of things I was trying to do and I would have done that earlier. I mean, we had to make some quite difficult choices, but I would have started that process earlier if I'd have known how long things take to happen and, you know, just how difficult it is. And trying to learn, you know, how to pull a lever to actually effect real change.

And then the [challenge] is understanding and having to do the hard work of making the case for change to key stakeholders. Because, in the end, you can lay down some kind of directive or issue or statement but actually for the people out there, the partners out there on the ground, they can make that happen or they can choose not to make it happen. So winning the hearts and minds of key stakeholders to work with them to effect the changes you wanted to make was really worthwhile but incredibly time consuming.

**AP: And which were the most challenging stakeholder relationships and how did you go about improving those?**

**KW:** So I think the most challenging were local authorities, local councils. Really challenging. When you think about the way in which education is structured in Wales, I don't employ teachers, I don't run schools. We still have a very, very orthodox and simple structure. There are no free schools here; there are no academies here. All of our schools that are in the public sector are run by local education authorities. They are the employers; they are the people who are responsible for organising education within their local areas. The legal duty for education lies with them. Therefore, even though we have structures around them, they were always quick to remind me [that] when it came to it, the statutory, the legal duty for providing education lay with them, and lay with them alone. Not with me, not with our education improvement services, not with individual governing bodies or individual leaders, school leaders. They [local education authorities] were the people that had the statutory responsibility.

**AP: Right. And were there specific elements of your agenda that they were resisting, or was it more them just trying to make the point that in the end it's their responsibility?**

**KW:** Well, one of the things that I had to learn, actually, was that I inherited a system where superstructures for school improvement had been set up above local authority level, what are called 'school improvement regions' that covered a number of local authority areas. And they were set up in slightly different ways in different parts of Wales. In effect, it was about the local authorities pooling their resources together and



rather than trying to run a school improvement service 22 times across Wales, you had a number of regions to do that. But the tension sometimes between that regional approach and then individual local education authorities wanting to do their own thing, or duplicating their own thing, left individual head teachers saying: “Okay, whose hoops am I jumping through? Am I jumping through my local education authority’s hoops, am I jumping through my regional school improvement hoop? Is it you, is it your hoop I’m jumping through?” So trying to create that kind of clarity for individual school leaders and governing bodies, that was really challenging. Relations with local authorities were challenging. And, you know, they would deny it, but I sometimes wonder whether they were more acute because I was a Liberal Democrat.

**AP: I actually wanted to go on to some of the party-political aspects of this. To what extent was it a challenge, because you were the sole Liberal Democrat in the cabinet, to get cabinet buy-in for what you were trying to achieve? You’d agreed it with the first minister upon your appointment, but how did you find that process of reaching agreement when you needed it within cabinet?**

**KW:** I never encountered any difficulties within the cabinet system at all. And obviously, you know, the real test, I think, of these kinds of arrangements is not the stuff that you write down. Because the fact that you’ve been able to write it down means it’s not going to cause either side a great deal of difficulty. It’s not the stuff that you’ve written down that you’ve got to worry about, it’s the stuff that you haven’t been able to write down. And there’s a reason why you haven’t written down – either because you know you can’t agree to write it down, or two, you haven’t even thought of it yet. The Lord knows, I wouldn’t have signed up for it maybe if I’d had known in 2016 that Covid was coming. I might have made a very different decision. It’s the unforeseen things, isn’t it, that you’ve really got to worry about in these arrangements.

**AP: We’re definitely going to come onto Covid as a separate issue in a minute. But prior to Covid, your experience was that you felt there was a collegiate government and backing for the things you needed backing for?**

**KW:** Yeah, very much so. And I’ve got no complaints in that regard. I always felt very supported by the first minister, either Carwyn Jones or subsequently Mark Drakeford. And I actually never encountered difficulties in the cabinet convincing cabinet colleagues either to do the things that we’d written down that we were going to do, or dealing with things that came up in between. I never felt that that was a problem.

**AP: You mentioned the change of first minister that took place in 2018. What impact did that have on you, your role and your place within the government?**

**KW:** Well, I was very fortunate. Once again, I had done previously quite a lot of work with Mark Drakeford when he’d been the health minister. And so we had a good working relationship. He was very kind, and he came to see me right at the beginning of

his leadership challenge to say: “If I’m successful, will you stay?” So he had made it very clear from the beginning that it was his intention to ask me to stay on. And actually, we took that opportunity to review whether there were any kind of minor amendments to what I’d agreed with the old first minister that we needed to reflect the things that had happened. And in fact, my portfolio increased when he became the first minister; there were extra things that were added in. So it wasn’t an issue, we just agreed that we would publicly recommit ourselves to the programme that had been previously agreed.

**AP: Were there ways in which you were able to, or you tried to, maintain your distance from Labour and from what the other bits of government were trying to achieve? That was obviously the big lesson that the Liberal Democrats at Westminster learnt, that it was potentially politically dangerous to become too closely tied to everything the Conservatives were doing. So were there ways in which you kind of carved out areas where you didn’t actually fully back the government line, or were you bound by quite tight collective responsibility?**

**KW:** When it came to matters that were devolved, I absolutely abided by the principle of collective responsibility. If there were issues that were non-devolved, then both the old first minister, Carwyn Jones, and Mark Drakeford were very clear that they understood that sometimes I would do something different or certainly vote maybe on an amendment in a debate differently. And primarily that came down to votes around Brexit and the Brexit process. Because obviously the Liberal Democrats had a slightly different approach around Brexit than the Labour Party, so it was agreed from the very beginning that if there were non-devolved matters, [where] there was a difference of opinion between our two political parties, I would have the freedom to be able to vote to express myself in a way that was reflective of the Liberal Democrat policy.

But when it came to things that were obviously devolved, then that would obviously be a matter of collective responsibility. I have a mug somewhere where a certain vote on Brexit was turned into a bit of a meme by the Conservatives, saying: “There’s one rule for Labour and there’s one rule for Kirsty.” And I wore that as a bit of a badge of honour really. It kind of backfired. They were trying to make a point but it failed to make the point I think they were making, because I was allowed to do something different on Brexit than the Labour backbenchers.

**AP: So how did Brexit impact on you in your job? The answer may be ‘not very much’ because education is not something that’s shaped much by decisions at an EU level. But what were the impacts on what you were doing, what your focus was on?**

**KW:** Obviously, the whole Brexit debate had a massive impact on the government. And you’re quite right, in many areas the issues are not particularly pertinent to education, although there are some areas that are really, really important to my portfolio, for instance: participation in the Erasmus programme [for international student exchanges], the Horizon programme [an EU funding programme for research], the

impact on research and development in the university sector, visas and the whole kind of atmosphere that potentially Brexit creates in terms of international students, European students and faculty. So, from a policy perspective, there were definitely things that we were concerned about and were impacting upon us.

But the other most significant impact was the opportunity cost. I just talked about a lack of legal resource. Well, Brexit took up a huge amount of legal resource. That was work that the lawyers had to do, otherwise we would have been in all sorts of difficulties. When the first minister and the cabinet are sitting there looking at the regulations that need to be done – and as a result of Brexit there's stuff that *has* to be done – and I'm asking for some legal resource because actually I want to perhaps change the law to require teachers in the private sector to register with the Education Workforce Council, which we need to do, you know, actually in the end we had to drop those plans. We had to drop some plans about home education regulation, because we simply did not have enough legal resource. I had to prioritise within education, and education was having to come further down the list because lawyers had to deal with some of the Brexit steps.

So there's the obvious policy implications, but actually the bigger impact was on the time and effort and the opportunity cost for the government, where civil servants, lawyers and ministers were taken away to deal with the consequences of that, rather than getting on with the agenda that we wanted to get on.

**Alex Nice (AN):** The discussion on Brexit leads on well to the next set of questions we wanted to ask you, which was about relationships outside Wales with the UK government and other devolved administrations. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, how regularly did you work with your counterparts in the UK government and what was that experience like?

**KW:** Okay. Interesting, because they [UK ministers] kept changing. That's one of the challenges – just when you get your foot in the door and establish some kind of relationship, then they would change. I think I lost count of how many higher education ministers I dealt with. So, when you're trying to make the case to stay in the Erasmus programme and you're travelling to London quite often to make the case for Erasmus and Horizon, you just keep getting a different higher education minister that you're dealing with all the time. So that's challenging.

More generally, on policy areas, with the Department for Education, not so much really on school stuff, because it's mostly devolved. There would be occasional discussions around teachers' pay and how you would pay for teachers' pay. During my time in office, teachers' pay and conditions were devolved. That's one of the things we said we would do, we would devolve teachers' pay and conditions. But it's one of those funny quirks of devolution. Technically they do sit with us, and you can make your own decisions. But politically, you know, how do you defend a decision if your pay review body has said to teachers they can have 1% in Wales, and England suddenly says you

can have 5%? So it's one of those issues where it's devolved but you always have to keep an eye out for what's happening elsewhere and also how they finance it. So obviously the decisions they make on how they're going to finance teachers' pay impact on us because if the Treasury is going to give them money to implement their pay rise, we get a slice of that money, [but] if the Department for Education is told [by the Treasury]: "You're on your own and you've got to pay for it yourself," then there's no money for us in Wales. So apart from teachers' pay, really, we didn't have many policy discussions with the Department for Education on other areas. So it was courtesy, really, that sometimes you saw each other at events if there was a conference.

I had a closer working relationship with John Swinney [then Scottish cabinet secretary for education and skills] in Scotland. Partly because both Scotland and Wales were part of what's called the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory, which is a group of progressive education systems across the world that have an annual conference and Scotland and Wales are a part of that. So yeah I had a much closer working relationship with John Swinney about discussing areas of mutual concern or bouncing back and forth ideas about how they were dealing with things. Obviously, they'd been through a period of curriculum reform so learning the lessons from their curriculum reform was important to us as part of our curriculum reform process. But I didn't really have a relationship with Northern Ireland until Covid when the four of us spent a great deal of time discussing things, myself, John Swinney, Peter [Weir, minister for education in Northern Ireland] and poor old Gavin [Williamson, UK secretary of state for education].

**AN: Let's go on to the coronavirus pandemic. Could you talk us through those weeks leading up to the decision to close schools in March 2020? When did you have a sense of the gravity of the crisis and what was it like being in government at that time?**

**KW:** It was truly terrifying at the beginning because there were so many unknowns and there was so much uncertainty as to what the best thing to do was. We've seen outbreaks of Covid-type illnesses in Asia before. And, of course, it's awful, absolutely awful, but we've never been affected. And initially I think there was a feeling that it was a repeat of one of those circumstances. Clearly, when we saw what was happening in Italy, you know, then there was real concern. And in the cabinet – I don't know the date, I should have gone to look at the dates – in the cabinet one morning the first minister said: "This afternoon I want Kirsty, Julie James, minister for local government, Vaughan Gething [then minister for health and social services], in my office, with the chief medical officer, and we're going to get a briefing on this situation in Asia." And I was, I'm ashamed to say, a little bit blasé going into that meeting, and I was absolutely terrified coming out of that meeting with the chief medical officer.

Then we began then to think about what on earth we were going to do. At that stage, you know, there was still a desire to try and keep things business as usual, but it was clear to me that we were not in that position at all. Schools were beginning to fall over; parents were pulling their children out of school because they were terrified. I mean if

we look back to the experience of the influenza pandemic, at the end of the First World War, what we do know is that children and young people were very badly affected. Now we know that, thank God, children and young people are not so severely affected by Covid. But people were pulling children out of school, teachers weren't going into school because, quite rightly, they were terrified. So, we made the decision [to close schools] and communicated the decision to Scotland and to England on the morning of 18 March [2020] and I made the announcement just prior to oral questions that afternoon, publicly. By the end of that afternoon we were able, across all four nations, to come to an agreement that we would announce the cancellation of examinations. Because as soon as we said on the floor of the chamber, or just before I went out onto the floor of the chamber, that we were closing schools, the next question was: "Well, what are you going to do about exams?" But we hadn't been able to get that agreement by the one o'clock deadline when you have to go down, really [to the chamber]. That came later that afternoon.

**AN: How did you find the level of co-operation with the UK government and the other devolved administrations in the early stages of the pandemic? The sense from the outside was that there was good information sharing and alignment of policy. Was that your experience?**

**KW:** I wouldn't describe it as good information sharing. I wouldn't describe it as that. In some ways, I think, information sharing got a little bit better as things went on, but no, it wasn't great. It was sometimes really difficult to understand what England were going to do. Scotland were much more open about where they were, what they were doing. England, it was much, much more difficult, on an official level anyway, [for] my officials trying to get information from DfE [Department for Education] officials about what would be happening and how it would work. You know, when I spoke to Gavin Williamson, he was always very candid and very open, and he would tell you what he knew.

**AN: And how did your role, and the role of your department, change in response to the pandemic?**

**KW:** In those initial weeks and months, absolutely everything just stopped because [we were] just trying to find a way of dealing with the here and now. So there was the decision to close the schools. So then [the question was]: "Right, fine, so what do you replace that with? What do you do instead if the schools close?" We were looking at how you could support children to carry on learning in a remote fashion and what did we need to do to make that happen. And all of a sudden, what you know instinctively is very much brought to the fore, that for some children school is so much more than just a place where you go to learn. The free school meals issue – how were we going to feed children? How were we going to keep children safe when we know for some children school is an important part of their safeguarding. They are seen five days a week. If adults are concerned about their welfare, they're seen. All of a sudden, these children

were not going to be seen anymore. How could we satisfy ourselves that those children were safe and were being appropriately looked after?

Then we had the whole debacle about exams. What the hell were we going to do about the qualifications for those children? So you're doing that for schools. We were also trying to do that for FE [further education] colleges and trying to provide support and guidance for the HE [higher education] sector. All of those issues are writ large for all of those sectors. So initially, all the other stuff had to go on the back burner. As we kind of got ourselves sorted, when we figured how we were going to make sure the kids carried on [getting meals] – they got money instead of the free school meals – once we'd set up that system, once we'd set up the distance-learning system, you were able to create a bit more space to look at the other issues. But we had to prioritise those. And obviously for us the priority was the curriculum and being able to make progress on the curriculum and assessment bill. But yeah, everything else kind of had to go out of the window because everybody was working really hard to sustain education through this crisis.

**AN: There are some key moments [when] the Welsh government has taken a different approach to the UK government in England on health decisions and on education. Was it difficult to implement, but also to explain this divergence to the public?**

**KW:** Those decisions weren't difficult ones for the cabinet to make. At the forefront of our minds always was: "What do we need to do here that is best for Wales? What are we being advised by our advisers is best for Wales?" Obviously, taking into consideration things that SAGE [the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] and other people were doing. But making those decisions and being aware that we were different did not preclude us from making those decisions. Except, of course, you do have to think about how you're going to communicate those decisions when you know it's going to be different. So no, that wasn't difficult. It just created presentation difficulties, communication difficulties. But I think the vast majority of Welsh people – and we had lots of focus group work and stuff that was going on throughout the pandemic to test these things – resoundingly people in Wales wanted that cautious approach. So sometimes the approach in Wales was regarded as much more cautious than perhaps approaches across the border. And I think the election result kind of like proves a point, doesn't it? There's that perceived cautiousness that the Welsh government took in doing things, actually, [that] was one that was supported by the Welsh public.

**AN:** You referred earlier to the capacity constraints that you encountered and that these became acute during Brexit, and then I imagine during the Covid crisis. Looking back, are there any changes that need to be made in the way the civil service operates? Are there reforms or additional powers that you would like to see for the Welsh government to be more effective, and particularly in your role?

**KW:** Yeah. It's really challenging. I think there's definitely capacity issues that need to be looked at. But creating more jobs for civil servants, or the Welsh government [being] seen to spend more money on itself, is never an easy thing to justify in a political sense. But I do think we need to look at whether the civil service is right for the power the Welsh ministers now have. And certainly, as a result of Brexit, there were departments that were crying out for even more civil servants. And I found myself in a very unenviable position, asked by the first minister to sit in judgment on another minister's application for more people. Because, he was like: "You and another minister sift through these requests and really interrogate whether these requests are absolutely necessary." And I think there are different ways in which we can do things. That process taught me [to ask of] a request for a certain person, do we really need that person or actually can we work with one of our universities, who I know have got real expertise in that area, and can we come to an arrangement where we can work with that university to tap into their expertise, rather than trying to find an individual that sits in Cathays Park [the location of the Welsh government].

So, I think different ways of working would be interesting to look at as well. This was beginning to happen before I left: looking at secondment and the different types of people that can at least have a period within Welsh government, in the civil service and actually sending some of our civil servants out of Cathays Park, out there into the real world. I think greater movement across that membrane would be really, really useful.

I think what Covid also taught us is that we have got skills in Wales which we can rely on. Obviously SAGE was really important to us, but one of the most important tools that we had was this amazing gang of academics in Swansea University that were doing amazing modelling work, absolutely amazing modelling work. Having some of that capacity was also really helpful.

In terms of powers, well, I don't think there was anything in the powers bit that was difficult for us during the Covid crisis. But what the future of the union looks like, and what future powers Wales should have, that's another interview altogether!

**AP:** After you left office, you've talked about having suffered from online abuse and sexism during your time as a minister. To what extent did that affect you in how you were able to carry out your job? Did that play a part in your decision to step down in May 2021?

**KW:** Certainly. So it's probably the least pleasant aspect of my job. It's a very high-pressure job, you're making very, very difficult decisions and, like that line from the film *Argo*, often you're looking at the least worst of the really bad alternatives, especially during Covid. Civil servants would never be able to present you with an option that's great, it was just the least worst of the awfulness that we were facing.

The abuse is the worst part. I'm willing to work hard, I don't mind the long hours, it is my responsibility to make those decisions and it is also my responsibility to deal with the consequences of those decisions and to be held accountable for them. And I am more than willing to do any of those things. I'm not so naïve to think that everybody will agree with everything that I do. But I do believe that there is a way that you can disagree agreeably, and you do not need to be subjected to some of the things that I and colleagues are subjected to in trying to do that very, very difficult job – especially by people who do not have the courage of their convictions and their vileness to put their own name to it and to be held accountable in the way that you were held accountable for your decisions. So yeah, it's the least pleasant aspect of my job.

It got particularly bad during Covid, particularly difficult and bad. And, yeah, it absolutely played a part in my decision to leave frontline politics. Absolutely. Partly because – and I've spoken about this – I could not protect my family to an extent that gave me confidence. I had all my children after I was elected as a politician, they've grown up with it and they're pretty tough characters and tough cookies as well. But you know, when your children are subjected to abuse – my daughter was in her final year of school, I had to make a formal complaint to my daughter's school about a way in which a member of staff spoke to my daughter in front of her peers about my decision. When your elderly mother-in-law, you know, is abused. When your husband, who was born and brought up here and, you know, is a pillar of the community, people that he's been in school with and he's lived all his life with. When you can't protect your family from that, you just think: "I don't want to live like this anymore." You also become, despite your best efforts, sometimes it turns you into not a very nice person. It begins to affect how you view the world and how you conduct yourself. And you think: "I don't want to be that person, this is turning me into a person I don't want to be, and I don't want my children or my family to be subjected to this anymore." It's not the only reason, there's lots and lots of very good reasons, but yeah, definitely a part of it.



**AP:** Our final question is, what is the single thing that you're proudest of having achieved from your time as a minister?

**KW:** Oh, my goodness me. That's like asking me to choose between my children! I can't do that!

I'm really proud that, despite all the challenges we faced, we were able to create the National Mission for Education Reform. It is the largest piece of education reform in post-war Britain, that has seen us leave no aspect of the education system untouched, with the curriculum at the centre of it. We have changed our curriculum. We have changed the way we in which we do initial teacher training. We have changed the way in which we provide post-qualification training and support for teachers. Changing the accountability system. And to have that peer-reviewed by the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], which said we had shifted the system from being completely weary and done to, to actually creating a sense of readiness for change and readiness for reform and a coherent vision around that – I'm very proud of that.

We managed to introduce the, I believe, most progressive system of student finance anywhere in the United Kingdom and we did that without anybody burning an effigy of me on the steps of the National Assembly, which I know Nick Clegg is very jealous of. We oversaw the first ever set of PISA scores [standardised international school student tests] that saw improvement in all three domains and has got Wales back into the mainstream. Don't get me wrong, it's a million miles away from [where it should be], there's lots more to do, but to get back in that mainstream and to give some confidence back to the sector. The first set of A-level results that I had to sit through, you know, we were at the bottom of the pile. Prior to Covid, we had the best percentage of A-star/A grades anywhere in the United Kingdom. We've got a flagship 'more able and talented' programme in the Seren Network. We've got more of our kids going to Oxford and Cambridge than we've had for generations. And just before I left, back to Brexit, we managed to give £64 million to Cardiff University, which is the host organisation which is going to set up a Welsh version of Erasmus. Even in the face of Covid.

And then during Covid, it didn't take a footballer to tell us that we needed to feed our children. We knew. We knew we needed to feed our children and we knew we needed to get devices and an online learning platform out to children, and I'm really proud of how we dealt with that as a government.

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