

Beth Winter MP



February 2021 Report

It has been widely reported in recent weeks that Rhondda Cynon Taf has the third highest Covid deaths rate in the UK with [340.3 deaths per 100,000](#). This stark fact fills me with sadness and anger. I am so upset about all the lives that have been lost to this virus in our communities. But I am also angry because I believe that most of these deaths were avoidable. Decades of widening inequality, poverty and austerity are the root cause of this high death toll. I'm determined to challenge the gross inequalities that exist so that we don't end up with the poorest paying the greatest price every time. My experience to date working alongside CLP members, local people and agencies tells me that there is an appetite for doing things differently, and this fills me with hope. Watch my [speech here](#).

On a positive note, the Welsh Government vaccine programme is going well. Although there have been bumps in the road, rollout seems to have been tremendously successful, with over 860,000 having had their first dose of the vaccine here in Wales. If you are in the first 4 priority groups and haven't been contacted, you need to [contact Cwm Taf Morgannwg health board](#). I am worried though about the ability of poorer countries to [access vaccines](#). We are not safe from this virus until everyone is safe. I urge Boris Johnson to use our surplus to vaccinate those in poorer countries.

This month marked one year since [Storm Dennis](#) caused destruction to homes and businesses in Cynon Valley and across Wales. We have seen the Cynon burst its banks again this February. However, fortunately here in Cynon we have not seen devastation on the same scale as last year. It is clear that our climate is changing. We need to ensure we are resilient to future extreme weather events but we must also radically change the way we live in order to reduce emissions. I welcome Welsh Government's draft [transport strategy](#), which states that; "Our first priority is to reduce the number of car and private vehicle journeys". I am encouraged that Welsh Government understand the severity of the situation and are talking about modal shift to public transport and active travel.

I have recently been speaking with Welsh Government about free school meals (FSM). While the extension of meals during school holidays until Easter 2022 is welcome I believe that we can and should go much further. An estimated 70,000 children in poverty in Wales are not eligible for FSMs. Of the 4 nations of the UK, this is the highest proportion of children in poverty excluded from free school meals and this represents a clear failure of the eligibility criteria. No child should go hungry, and one child in poverty not accessing FSM is one too many. This is why I support the position of the Child Poverty Action Group and Bevan Foundation that Welsh Government should extend eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and with no recourse to public funds. See my statement [here](#).

In Cynon



The old tramway to Aberdare in the snow.
[Photo Credit: Beth Winter(!)]

This month saw online fashion retailers Boohoo buy out Burton as well as two other Arcadia Brands, however they did not take on the premises, meaning Burton will be the latest shop in Aberdare to close. There can be no hiding from the damage the Covid-19 pandemic has done to our high streets, however the high streets were struggling before Covid, and simply returning to normal will not be enough. This is a priority for my **Economy Advisory Group** who have been [surveying businesses](#) in Cynon Valley

on what they feel needs to change, and what my priorities for action should be.

The group also took evidence this month from [Helen Cunningham](#) of the **Bevan Foundation**. Helen is an expert on local economies and community regeneration and had a wide ranging discussion with the group, including how to make the most of the A465, support start-up businesses and develop anchor towns in the valleys.

My **Welfare Reform Advisory Group** is focused on the Universal Credit uplift. The Chancellor will deliver his spring budget statement on 3rd March. We have been discussing how to keep the pressure on him to not only keep the uplift, but also extend it to those on legacy benefits who have received no additional support since the start of the pandemic. Another focus for the group is how to make sure all those in Cynon who are eligible for Council Tax Reduction receive it, as the current take-up rates are worryingly low.

The **Devolution and Constitution Advisory Group** arranged for Jeremy Miles MS to come and speak to us, inviting all Cynon CLP members. Jeremy is currently launching legal action against the UK Government for the way it has been riding roughshod over the devolution settlement. The meeting was really positive and it was fascinating to hear Jeremy's perspective on devolution and the future of the UK. Diolch Jeremy!

I must also thank all those members who came along to my **virtual coffee morning** in the middle of the month. Spending time speaking with you all is always a tonic in these stressful times. I also held a welcome meeting with new members of the CLP which I thoroughly enjoyed. Your enthusiasm, knowledge, experience and ideas for projects as well as your commitment to get involved was inspiring. I look forward to working with you on some local initiatives and meeting you in person when it is safe to do so.

I met earlier this month with the headteacher of St Margaret's primary school. They are part of a Welsh Government pilot called [Big Bocs Bwyd](#) which is helping children develop an early understanding of healthy food choices while providing affordable priced food to families in the community. A really exciting initiative. Also exciting is the announcement that **Penywaun Primary** has become the first school in the UK to be named a 'School of Excellence' for mental wellbeing. Llongyfarchiadau to staff, students and all involved at Penywaun primary! Finally, we heard this month that the **Enviroparks** stack will be going to planning on March 4th. We must stop this development and I will continue to vocally oppose it. I intend to speak at the planning committee meeting to make my feelings clear.

In the Bubble

The High Court has ruled that **Matt Hancock broke the law** by failing to publish multibillion-pound Covid-19 government contracts. In my [January update](#) I spoke about the disgraceful way associates of Tory MPs have been getting PPE contracts throughout this pandemic. The newspapers call it cronyism. I think if it were another country they would call it by a different name. Matt Hancock must resign. However, that mustn't be the end of it. There must be an inquiry into UK Government handling of Covid contracts and we must invest in our public services and challenge the culture of privatisation and outsourcing which opens the door to this 'cronyism'.

This month I spoke at the [launch](#) of the **Justice for Christopher Kapessa campaign**. It was inspiring and emotional to listen to Christopher's mother Alina speak about the loss of her son. You can watch the session back here. I subsequently [tabled an EDM](#) in parliament which expresses solidarity with the family and raises concerns about the police investigation and CPS decision not to pursue a prosecution. The EDM has so far been signed by over 20 MPs, including Jeremy Corbyn, Diane Abbott and John McDonnell.

Food Insecurity is a priority for me and in February I coordinated a meeting with Welsh Government Deputy Minister Hannah Blythyn about the **Right to Food**, along with my colleagues Ian Byrne and Geraint Davies. Ian has been doing an incredible job on this, pushing the right to food UK-wide. The situation in Wales is complicated as many food-related powers are devolved to Wales, but the right to food must be underpinned by UK-wide legislation and the welfare system, which remains reserved to UK Government. I had a positive conversation this month as well with the **Labour Campaign for Human Rights** about their campaign for social rights such as food, housing, healthcare, work, and social security to be enshrined in UK law.

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In recent months, RCT has joined other councils across the UK in requesting to be the host of a **Universal Basic Income** pilot and I was delighted that the CLP backed my motion on this at the last All Member Meeting. This month at Welsh Questions, I [asked](#) whether the Government would be willing to pay for such a pilot. I was met with the usual non-answer. I will continue to push the matter and will meet with Clive Lewis MP and Compass this month on UBI, as well as attending a meeting of the UBI Cross party group of which I am co-chair.

If we are to build a future with massively reduced number of journeys by car, we urgently need to improve the public transport infrastructure in the Valley. At Welsh Affairs this month, I asked a number of experts about how that could be funded. Watch the session [here](#).

The **DVLA** in Swansea has been [in the news](#) this month as it became clear that the Department for Transport was forcing over 2,000 staff members come into work every day, despite having the biggest outbreak of Covid in an office workplace within the UK. PCS members at the DVLA are currently balloting for strike action. They have my full support and solidarity. There was a **victory for workers** this month as the supreme court decided that Uber drivers were workers, not self-employed contractors. This is a very significant decision that will secure national minimum wage and paid holiday for Uber drivers.



Matt Hancock must resign.

Rob's Review



Rob Hope
Senior
Caseworker

Casework continues in a steady flow into the office. You can see a word cloud below of the sort of things people have been emailing Beth about since my last update.

In addition to my day to day casework activities, I am very involved with Beth's Welfare Reform Advisory Group. The group is focused at the Chancellor's budget next week and I am working on how best to apply pressure on UK Government to ensure that they not only keep the Universal Credit uplift, but also extend it to those on legacy benefits who have been without additional support since the start of the pandemic.

Finally, I have attended a number of Cwm Taf Morgannwg Health Board meeting recently on Beth's behalf. The fall in Covid infections has been really encouraging but I am extremely concerned about the lasting effects of [Long-Covid](#) on the population. I've been reassured by positive commitments from the health board about re-designing services to support people with long-Covid but more must be done to ensure the condition is given the attention and research funding it needs.

As ever, get in touch if you have any questions.

Rob Hope
Robert.hope@parliament.uk

Beth is in the process of hiring a second caseworker on a part-time basis and this has led to a new job title for me! As Beth's Senior Caseworker, my role will change slightly as I will be responsible for supervising not only the second caseworker, but also our volunteers.

I am currently in the process of compiling a volunteer strategy which will enable us to involve local people in the work that we are doing and reach out in the most effective way we can to our communities. I have experience in this area having supervised volunteers in my previous role at Citizen's Advice. It is really important that the roles are well structured, and are designed in consultation with volunteers to make the most of their skills and experience. Please let me know if you would be interested in volunteering, I would really value your input in designing the roles.



01685 243166

beth.winter.mp@parliament.uk

@BethWinterMP

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