# **Covid bereaved accuse former Welsh health minister of incompetence**

Families say Vaughan Gething’s ‘arrogance is astonishing’ after he reveals loss of WhatsApp messages

Bereaved families who lost loved ones to Covid have accused the former Welsh health minister of incompetence and arrogance after he revealed that all his WhatsApp messages from the time had been lost.

Vaughan Gething, [who is standing to be the next Welsh first minister](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/14/labour-vaughan-gething-aims-to-become-first-black-welsh-leader-interview), said the messages had been a way of “blowing off steam” rather than being used to make government decisions but said he was embarrassed they had vanished.

Appearing at the Welsh leg of the UK Covid inquiry in Cardiff, Gething denied that the fact the Labour government’s cabinet [did not formally discuss Covid](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/27/welsh-government-slow-to-debate-covid-threat-inquiry-told) until a month after the administration was warned of the risk showed it had been too slow.

He also defended his government for taking almost two weeks longer than the Westminster government to begin Covid testing patients being sent from hospital into care homes, claiming [Wales](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/wales) did not have the capacity to do this.

Speaking outside [the hearing](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/covid-inquiry), Anna-Louise Marsh-Rees, who leads Covid-19 Bereaved Families Cymru, said: “He makes [the former UK health minister] Matt Hancock look like a strategic planning pandemic genius. He wasn’t prepared. He didn’t react. It was all just so casual. Thousands of people died in Wales because of these decisions. There was no sense of urgency. He was meant to be in charge of protecting our loved ones and he just didn’t. His arrogance is astonishing.”

Marsh-Rees said the revelation that all Gething’s WhatsApp messages had gone was “flabbergasting”. “If it wasn’t so tragic it would be like something out of The Thick Of It,” she said.

Another member of the group, Sam Smith-Higgins, was so angry that she walked out of the hearing, describing the Welsh government’s response to Covid as “chaotic”.

She said: “This is a socialist government but they are acting like a dictatorship. They don’t want to learn from this. The complacency that we’ve heard today from a man who could be first minister next week. We cannot allow the Welsh government to point to Westminster and say they were terrible. They were terrible but we made huge mistakes in Wales.”

Gething blamed a “security rebuild” of his Senedd mobile phone for the deletion of his WhatsApp messages.

He said: “It is a matter of real embarrassment, because if I’d been able to recover those messages then we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” Gething said the messages had been used in place of “conversations you have in the corridor” and not for decision-making. He characterised discussions as “largely blowing off steam and being supportive”.

The Welsh cabinet had its first formal discussion about Covid on 25 February 2020, a month after Wales’s chief medical officer, Frank Atherton, told the first minister, Mark Drakeford, there was a significant risk of the disease arriving in Wales. Even then, it was only in “any other business” on the agenda.

Gething said fellow ministers were aware he was making weekly statements about Covid and attending UK government Cobra meetings.

Asked why the Welsh government did not order patients to be tested for Covid before moving from hospitals to care homes until 13 days after England, he seemed to criticise the UK government, saying: “There wasn’t the sharing of information you’d have expected between the department of health and others … I certainly do wish we’d been able to move more speedily.” He also said he did not think Wales had the testing capacity to do it.

Gething was asked why the government had been prepared to allow 70,000 people to gather in Cardiff for a [Wales v Scotland rugby game on 14 March 2020](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/mar/13/wales-v-scotland-six-nations-match-called-off-coronavirus-rugby-union). The match was eventually cancelled by the Welsh Rugby Union but not until 20,000 Scottish rugby fans had arrived in the Welsh capital. He said: “In hindsight I think we’d do that differently … of the awkward choices we made that is definitely one that jars.”