

Widow of Vernon Hough, manager who committed suicide due to impact of COVID-19 deaths at their Welsh care home, demands inquiry

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Louise Hough managed the 40-bed Gwastad Hall Nursing Home near Wrexham, Wales, alongside her husband Vernon. She has called for an inquiry into the Labour Party-led devolved government's handling of the pandemic.

Vernon, 61, shot himself outside the local Police Divisional HQ on May 21, 2020, just a mile from his care home, as a direct consequence of the traumatic experiences of seeing elderly residents die from Covid-19.

Gwastad Hall was opened in 1987 after the Hough family converted the old hall on the 11-acre site in Cefyn-y-Bedd into a nursing home. In early March 2020, when the rapid spread and deadly consequences of the pandemic were becoming ever clearer and with sections of workers in Europe and the US walking off the job in a series of protests and strikes, staff shut the Gwastad Hall Nursing Home without waiting for an official government response.

In the opening months of the pandemic, hospitals nationwide, under instruction from the Conservative government, were discharging patients into care homes to free up an already inadequate number of beds due to years of austerity measures. Many of those elderly patients were infected with COVID and spread the disease to many others before dying themselves, unable to receive even the most basic treatment.

When the Houghs refused to accept elderly patients without a negative Covid test, the local health board allegedly threatened to report them to Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) for "bed-blocking".

As in countless instances across the world, due to the

failure of the authorities to provide even basic personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers, care home staff had to desperately improvise to protect themselves and vulnerable elderly residents. Louise told *WalesOnline*, "I was having to buy stuff on Amazon. We were wearing painters' gowns, those all-in-one paper things.

"People in the village here were making us theatre gowns out of duvet covers and face masks because I couldn't get them from anywhere."

The virus swept through the home and claimed many victims. Louise begged her local health board to provide the home with some oxygen as many residents drew their last desperate breaths. "Imagine a fish pulled out of water. That is how they were gasping for air. I had no oxygen here. I was begging the health board for oxygen just to give them some relief. There is still no oxygen in any care home, who decided this I don't know."

Louise said that within 36 hours many of the residents had died due to a lack of oxygen, and some were not able to see their families.

Having known many of the 40 residents for years and being devoted to them, their deterioration and his increasing helplessness in the face of a raging pandemic had a particularly shattering effect on Vernon.

A week prior to her husband's death, when many residents had already died, Louise explained, "We had 15 staff off sick and everyone was in rooms isolating. We had to take four patients each so we could get through feeding them all.

"He [Vernon] was still doing the maintenance and

was going round supermarkets trying to find toilet roll. He was going from one to another queuing up because the supply chain was ridiculous and we couldn't get anything.

"It was really wearing him down and he was losing weight. I said, 'listen you have got to take a step back from the care home'. We live next door. I told him to stay at home for at least a week, stay away from the place and do not turn the telly on.

"I said we would go on holiday at the end of June and get away from all this and the next day he went to feed his patients. One of the ladies wasn't very well and he came back, got his shotgun and shot himself."

Louise is angry that there will be no specific inquiry into what happened in Wales. "The public do not know the appalling stuff that happened in care homes as well as in hospitals I imagine. People in care homes are written off. Absolutely written off. I do hold the Welsh government accountable.

"People say that we didn't know what was coming but we had seen what had happened in Italy. We knew this was coming, why did they not get prepared for this?"

Louise singled out for condemnation the Labour government's failure to test people if they were not symptomatic. "When asked about why they were not testing asymptomatic staff and patients the Welsh Government didn't say it was because they haven't got enough tests, they said they had the tests but would use them elsewhere.

"I wrote down what [Welsh First Minister] Mark Drakeford said. When he was confronted about whether the decisions were due to a lack of resources, he said there have always been more tests available than are being used. If they are available why not use them? But he said that residents and staff had to be symptomatic to be tested. He was killing people."

An official UK government inquiry will only be launched by Spring 2022. The Labour administration in Wales is relying on what will inevitably prove to be a whitewash to conceal its own crimes, with a spokeswoman arguing, "A UK-wide inquiry will have the capacity and force to oversee the interconnected nature of the decisions that have been made across the four nations [England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland] and the best way for the experiences of people in Wales to be properly understood."

Vernon Hough was one victim among many of the savage policy of herd immunity pursued by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government, with the active collusion of the Labour Party and the trade unions throughout the UK. More than 20,000 care home residents, vulnerable, elderly, disabled and often chronically ill, lost their lives directly to COVID-19 in the first wave of the pandemic last year, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). As of early February 2021, this figure had shot up to 42,000, including 37,895 deaths in England and Wales, 3,189 deaths in Scotland and more than 1,000 in Northern Ireland.

The true number of deaths in care settings is far higher. Researchers at the University of Manchester found that COVID-19 deaths were "hugely underestimated" in the first wave, when 10,000 fatalities went unrecorded in England alone, due to the tardy introduction of mass testing.

ONS data compiled in February revealed that were 20,664 deaths in care homes in England and Wales during the second wave of the pandemic from March to September 2020—an increase from the 21,677 in the first wave from September to April 2021.

Elderly residents continue to die. A report published last month by the Welsh Government and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) found that "From 1 March 2020 to 28 July 2021 CIW has been notified of 1,928 care home resident deaths [in Wales] with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. This makes up 18.9% of all reported deaths."

In the week up to August 13, Office for National Statistics figures revealed that 57 care home residents across England and Wales had died—up from 50 the previous week.

On September 10, Wales First Minister Drakeford said there were around 520 cases per 100,000 people in Wales, with hospital admissions rising. The last time rates were this high was during the peak of the second wave last winter.



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