

Witness Name: Seamus McAleavey

Statement No.: **M1/NICVA/01**

Exhibits:

Dated: April 19, 2023

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF SEAMUS McALEAVEY**

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I, Seamus McAleavey, will say as follows: -

1. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, known as NICVA, was established in 1938 as the Northern Ireland Council for Social Services as an umbrella, support body for charities and voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland. NICVA has sister councils in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. We have over thirteen hundred member organisations and we offer a wide range of practical services, products and support to them, to help them do what they do best - find innovative solutions for social challenges. NICVA also represents the interests of charities, to government and others in society.
2. There are over six thousand active charities, voluntary and community groups in Northern Ireland. They are all legally separate entities governed by their own constitutions. There has not been a noticeable reduction in the number of organisations due to the COVID pandemic though some organisations have ceased their activities.
3. Voluntary and community organisations are effective vehicles for responding to emergencies when the need arises. They can be 'spontaneous responders' who simply act, often in a sustained way, to help their community. Within these organisations are many hidden assets, both human and material. For example, a local voluntary sports group, a football club, will have diverse memberships with a common interest in football. In an emergency, they might provide critical support

to vulnerable people in their community by drawing on the skills and assets in their club. Most importantly they have a pre-existing structure, are often hierarchly organized and they know each other and are used to collaborating for a common objective. During early 2020 we saw hundreds of organisations pivot from their normal activity into a community support response delivering food, groceries and medicines to people shielding at home. They organized telephone contact services to check on the elderly. They also provided volunteers to support the large-scale vaccination centres. The key lesson is that the organizational structures were the important thing that delivered action. The primary activity of the group didn't really matter. Also, the personal skills of the members and their access to commercial vehicles were invaluable.

4. In response to the pandemic NICVA worked closely with government in Northern Ireland to help coordinate the input of voluntary and community organisations, primarily with the Department for Communities – DfC. The DfC Minister established an Emergencies Leadership Group drawn from Government and voluntary and community organisations to coordinate activities. NICVA and DfC officials put together the ELG and acted as joint secretariat. NICVA also took the lead role in communications to the wider voluntary and community sector. An email contact list of 6000 people was organized from our existing database and COVID 19 updates regularly sent out. Weekly ENews bulletins also went out and the NICVA websites [www.nicva.org](http://www.nicva.org) and [www.communityni.org](http://www.communityni.org) became the information hubs for over 300 groups offering support all across northern Ireland. NICVA organized online vents for infection control with the public health agency, department of health and other government agencies. There was a spirit of collaboration.
5. Prior to the pandemic NICVA had not been involved with government on planning for any type of pandemic. NICVA did engage with DfC officials on the potential role of voluntary and community groups in terms of emergency responses as part of governments civil contingencies plans but centring on localised emergencies like major flooding. The local government lead on emergency planning was also involved. We explored how best to prepare organisations, if possible, for emergencies that might happen. This is when I coined the phrase 'spontaneous

responders'. As the vast majority of voluntary and community organisations have no locus in emergency planning, they are difficult to engage in the subject. As I referred to earlier local football clubs did a lot of emergency relief work during the pandemic but their primary purpose is sport. Pre-pandemic it's not really something they will realistically engage with. We concluded that what would be important was to have up-to-date databases of organisations, contacts and locations to organize with them in the event of an emergency. We also recognized that these community leaders have a history of self-activating and respond to demands in their environment. We saw this during COVID in early 2020 lots of groups acted autonomously, quickly and 'without permission' to help people in need. Coordination followed later.

6. Prior to the pandemic our engagement with the government on emergency planning consisted of a series of meetings to discuss how voluntary and community organisations might help in an emergency. The engagement was not extensive. We were never involved in the development of the 2011 UK Influenza Pandemic Preparedness strategy in any way. Indeed, I don't think we were even aware of it.
7. In terms of emergency planning, I don't think Northern Ireland was prepared for anything like the scale of COVID 19. It felt like our planning was for localized emergencies not something that affected the whole of Northern Ireland – the UK and was worldwide. In a localized emergency there is always the feeling that additional help can come from outside – the non-affected areas. With the pandemic that wasn't the case, there were no non-affected areas. On the other hand, resilience was high in the Northern Ireland community, there was a 'wartime spirit'. Collaboration between government, public sector bodies and voluntary and community organisations soared. Decisions were taken quickly and there was increased trust in working relationships. Thought had been given to those most vulnerable in the community and acted upon.
8. In terms of what could have been done better, with hindsight, more could have been done on preparing contact databases and keeping them as up to date as possible – the who's who of local community leaders and activists. These are the hidden assets within clubs and organisations, they are businesspeople, public

servants, teachers, builders and they have access to privately held equipment which they will use for public benefit in an emergency. The size and scale of the pandemic meant that much of this materialized anyway but maybe it could be better planned for.

9. A wider lesson from the pandemic response is that, in an increasingly interconnected world, we should expect and plan for global events to impact locally, be they pandemics, conflicts, shocks to energy prices, or climate change impacts. To do this we will need better understanding of the likely local impacts of global events and local capacity to respond.

### **Statement of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

**Personal Data**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

19/04/23

**Dated:** \_\_\_\_\_