

Witness Name:

Statement No.:

Exhibits:

Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RIGHT HONOURABLE BARONESS ARLENE FOSTER OF AGHADRUMSEE DBE

I, Arlene Foster, otherwise Baroness Foster of Aghadrumsee, will say as follows: -

This statement is made in response to the Inquiry's request for additional information and comment in response to statements made by senior members of the United Kingdom Government with respect to the relationship between the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Responses to Question 1:

- a. I agree with Boris Johnson's assessment that divergences in the approach of the four nations was a "presentational problem" during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have referred at paragraph 173 of my witness statement to the "realpolitik" whereby political considerations were brought to bear in decision-making and the timing of announcements, whereby, for example, Nicola Sturgeon would brief the media ahead of an upcoming announcement by the Prime Minister. I imagine this led to UK Government being perhaps less open about its decision-making than it otherwise might have been, in a bid to stay in control of messaging. The "presentational problem" to which Boris Johnson refers is therefore one in which UK Government's authority was at risk of being undermined. However, as I have outlined in my witness statement, the fact that different devolved administrations had different approaches also caused presentational problems of a different kind in that the public at times were unclear about the jurisdictional application of restrictions announced. Hence the leaders of each devolved administration began conducting their own briefings to their constituents. See further paragraph 137 of my witness statement.
- b. The primary causes of the differences in response to the pandemic of the four nations and the UK Government were both political and practical. In terms of the political causes, I consider that, particularly at the outset of the pandemic, there was a degree of political posturing whereby the devolved administrations, most notably Scotland, wished to assert their authority and resist being dictated to by UK Government. As time went on and the devolved administrations were able to make more of their own decisions, the factors leading to divergence were more practical. These would include, for example, the fact that the virus progressed at different rates across the four nations with case numbers varying at different times; differing ICU capacity; and differing health and social care and education arrangements. However, the approaches across