

Witness Name: Andy Burnham

Statement No.:

Exhibits:

Dated:

## UK COVID 19 INQUIRY

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANDY BURNHAM

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I, Andy Burnham will say as follows: -

1. I am the Mayor of Greater Manchester, of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority ('GMCA') Tootal Buildings, 56 Oxford Street, Manchester M1 6EU and make this Witness Statement further to receipt of the Rule 9 letter from the Public Inquiry dated 13 January 2023 and to provide assistance to the Public Inquiry in relation to Module 2.
2. The facts and matters set out in this statement are within my own knowledge unless otherwise stated, and I believe them to be true. Where I refer to information supplied by others, the source of the information is identified; facts and matters derived from other sources are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.
3. I attach to my Witness Statement various exhibits to which I refer in the following paragraphs of my statement. References in square brackets below are to those exhibits.

#### **The Mayor of Greater Manchester's role, function and responsibilities**

4. I am currently the Mayor of Greater Manchester. I was elected on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2017 and took office on 8 May 2017. I was re-elected to the office on 6 May

2021. Prior to this, I was MP for Leigh from June 2001 to May 2017. During that time, I held several Government and opposition posts including Secretary and Shadow Secretary of State for Health, Shadow Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.
5. As Mayor of Greater Manchester, I have the following functions:
    - a. Chair and Member of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority;
    - b. Functions of a Police and Crime Commissioner;
    - c. Functions of a Fire and Rescue Authority;
    - d. Responsibility for the devolved transport budget, smart ticketing and franchised bus services, and
    - e. Control of £300m Housing Investment Fund.
  6. The office of the Mayor of Greater Manchester is not designated as a Category 1 responder for the purposes of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The role of Police and Crime Commissioner and responsibility for the Fire Service rest with the Mayor of Greater Manchester however these roles are also not designated as Category 1 responders under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004
  7. With respect to *emergency preparedness*, the office of the Mayor of Greater Manchester is not designated as a Category 1 responder for the purposes of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The role of Police and Crime Commissioner together with responsibility for the Fire Service rest with the Mayor of Greater Manchester however these roles are also not designated as Category 1 responders under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.
  8. Within Greater Manchester, the system-wide response to the Covid 19 pandemic was led through the emergency response structures anticipated under the UK's civil contingencies framework. A cross-sector, multi-agency Strategic Coordinating Group ('SCG') was established with membership drawn from organisations contributing to the emergency response. The role of the SCG was to enable strategic level officers and experts across different sectors to come

together to provide an integrated and coordinated response to Covid 19. A range of sector and function specific working groups were established to report into the SCG providing it with advice and recommendations on specific issues. These response structures were flexed throughout the pandemic as the impacts and service needs changed over time. Many organisations that were engaged in these response structures were statutorily independent of my role. In addition, organisations such as the police and fire service maintain operational independence in emergencies and therefore were operationally independent from me in their engagement in the SCG.

9. As Mayor of Greater Manchester and as described in the terms of reference for the Covid 19 Emergency Committee (see paragraph 10 below), my role in the pandemic was broadly as follows:
  - i. to be an advocate for the population of Greater Manchester ('GM'), its public sector agencies and the voluntary, community and business sectors.
  - ii. to ensure the effective co-ordination across the city-region of public service responses to the Covid 19 crisis, where there is a clear case for such intervention.
  - iii. to have a lead role disseminating and amplifying key messages to the population of Greater Manchester, its business community and to Government, exercising this role in collaboration with GM Council Leaders.
  - iv. to ensure those key public services for which I had a direct responsibility, but noting the caveats around operational independence, played a full part in the response to the Covid 19 crisis – public transport, Greater Manchester Police ('GMP') and Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service ('GMFRS') and, alongside the local authority leaders, the GMCA.
  - v. to articulate the needs and priorities of businesses in GM and also formulate specific asks of the private sector to contribute to the current challenge.

10. To assist in effective political leadership during the pandemic, together with the Leaders of Greater Manchester's 10 Councils, I established the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee. The terms of reference of the committee were:

- i. To receive briefings from the Local Resilience Forum ('LRF') / SCG on key issues relating to the to the Covid 19 crisis.
- ii. To be a point of escalation for system-wide issues requiring GM-wide co-ordination of the response to the Covid 19 crisis.
- iii. To provide the GM Mayor and the political leadership of Greater Manchester with a city-region perspective on the societal and economic impact of the Covid 19 crisis.
- iv. To provide oversight of the financial impact across Greater Manchester.
- v. To identify and oversee the implementation and co-ordination of agreed GM-wide responses to the critical issues identified by the LRF / SCG and other stakeholders (Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership ('GMHSCP'), GM, GMFRS, GMP, Voluntary sector, business representatives). Effective GM-wide responses must supplement, improve or enhance local arrangements or provide additional services of recognised value.
- vi. To enable the GM Mayor to advocate and represent the needs and requirements of GM at a national level with Government departments, bodies and agencies.
- vii. To enable the GM Mayor and GM leaders to provide consistent and effective communication and reassurance to the public of Greater Manchester in a timely manner.
- viii. To be the key body in GM to liaise with Government about the Covid 19 crisis.

11. In helping the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee to discharge its functions during the pandemic, the 10 Greater Manchester Council Leaders and I drew on the support of staff from across the GMCA and the Greater Manchester system. This included but was not limited to representatives from GMP, officers from the fire service, officers from Councils (for example, Directors of Public Health,

humanitarian assistance and social care, education, public health and bereavement specialists), colleagues from the NHS, officers within Transport for Greater Manchester, experts from Public Health England, specialists from the criminal justice system and representatives of the business community within Greater Manchester's Growth Hub. Within the GMCA, I mobilised support for the emergency response structures including data and research experts, resilience practitioners, governance specialists and programme management support amongst others. Of note, the Chief Executive of GMCA, Mr Eamonn Boylan, chaired the majority of SCG (see para 8. above) meetings.

12. As mentioned above, the Chief Executive of GMCA, Mr Eamonn Boylan, chaired the SCG and, in turn, supported the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee. With respect to those staff within the GMCA who assisted me and other Council Leaders within the committee they were as follows:

- Kevin Lee, Director, Mayor's Office
- Andrew Lightfoot, Deputy Chief Executive
- Liz Treacy, Monitoring Officer
- Julie Connor, Director, Governance and Scrutiny
- Steve Wilson, Treasurer
- Sarah Price, Chief Officer, GMHSCP
- Jane Pilkington, Director of Population Health, NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care
- Warren Heppolette, Chief Officer for Strategy and Integration, NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care
- Claire Norman, Director, Communications and Engagement
- Simon Nokes, Executive Director, Policy and Strategy
- Kathy Oldham, Chief Resilience Officer
- Julian Cox, Assistant Director, Research (Analysis)
- Thomas Whitney, Head of Policy Development
- (David Taylor, Executive Director, Waste)

13. The GMCA does not contain a public health function and drew on advice on this, and many other matters, from external experts, including the Greater Manchester

Health and Care Partnership. No GMCA staff were therefore members of UK public health or scientific bodies.

### **Overarching Reflections**

14. I thought it might help the Inquiry if I first set out my overarching reflections on the national response to the pandemic before providing detailed information to support those conclusions which answers the questions set out in the Rule 9 request.
15. My reflections are based around a number of key moments throughout the course of 2020 which built my sense that the wrong approach was being taken to the handling of the pandemic.
16. The first was in early March 2020 when, despite the growing need for freely available public information, an article from a Minister appeared behind a paywall. Having had experience of handling communications in the 2009 pandemic, including making mistakes, I decided to publish a thread on Twitter with suggestions as to how the Government could improve communications, including the establishment of a regular briefing headed by officials rather than politicians.
17. The second came shortly after at the first meeting of the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee when, to my great surprise, the lead Director of Public Health at the time, Kate Arden, reported a decision that had already been taken to stand down local testing teams. When the first testing station did open in Greater Manchester, it was at Manchester Airport – a location chosen without local consultation.
18. The third came in the second half of May 2020 with the announcement of conditional plans for easing the national lockdown. This came as a shock because there had been no consultation and, at the time, Greater Manchester had a case rate that was higher than the rest of the country given that the virus

had originally spread up the country from the south, creating a two-to-three-week lag.

19. The fourth was in June 2020 when, as we were struggling to manage a stubbornly high case rate across our 10 boroughs, our lead Director of Public Health reported that local Directors of Public Health were unable to access data relating to the identities of those testing positive. This was an issue because there was a clear sense amongst the local DPHs that the national contact tracing system, based on a call centre model, was not working. Greater Manchester had to force the Government to agree to provide data by pointing out that it was required to under the emergency legislation it had passed at the start of the pandemic (by making Covid 19 a notifiable disease).
20. The fifth was in late July 2020 when the Secretary of State for Health called me late in the afternoon to notify me that, within hours, the Government intended to announce introduction of the first local restrictions on household mixing in Greater Manchester (and parts of Lancashire and West Yorkshire) and was seeking our support. When the restrictions were announced by the Secretary of State late evening via a pre-recorded TV clip, it became clear that there was no supporting detail to answer the many questions that our residents had. It led to a chaotic evening and following morning with people left very confused.
21. The sixth was in September 2020 when the Government announced without any consultation that it was requiring all hospitality outlets in Bolton to close. A request for financial support for the businesses affected from Bolton Council and GMCA went unanswered.
22. The seventh was on the 7th of October 2020 when it was announced via a front-page headline in the Times newspaper that pubs across the North of England could be required to close. This signalled the start of the debate about what would become known as the Tier 3 restrictions and a series of difficult meetings between Greater Manchester and the Government about the financial support that would be provided. We were unable to agree with the Government's proposed approach and, ultimately, the restrictions were imposed.

23. One after another, these experiences revealed to me that the approach to the pandemic was overly top down and overly centralised. It completely failed to follow Recommendation 17 of the Hine Review for more “local flexibility” and “increased subsidiarity”. This was most clearly illustrated in the arrangements for contact tracing which led to an ineffective, outsourced national system being established which failed to support local areas. At all times, the national response was characterised by a lack of adequate consultation and poor communications. It frequently felt chaotic. Repeated requests were made that regional Mayors be invited to join COBR but, despite this, only the Mayor of London attended regularly and the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region on one occasion. This, I believe, led to a London-centricity in decision making and failed to consider equally the needs of all regions when national policy was being decided.
24. Given our inability to make structured contributions via COBR, we were forced to find other ways to open dialogue with Government in relation to important issues. Many of the issues we raised were never really addressed despite our efforts; there was a real failure to listen.
25. For example, in my view there was a critical need for a comprehensive self-isolation support system. The lack of income support and job protection for low paid residents remained in my view the ‘Achilles Heel’ of Britain’s pandemic response - there was a real need to develop a clear national policy on isolation support reflecting the natures of the modern economy. Throughout the pandemic, myself and others regularly raised the issue of the difficulty faced by people in insecure forms of employment in isolating (for example, my article in the Guardian newspaper on 2 August 2020 *AB/1 INQ000184689*). Also that month, I also joined forces with the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region and the TUC to launch ‘Time Out to Help Out’ – a national campaign to pay workers fairly if they were requested to self-isolate. When Baroness Harding confirmed in February 2021 that 20,000 people a day who should be isolating were not doing so, I spoke to the local press to raise the issue again. The failure to resolve this issue led to a high case rate in some of our poorer communities.

26. In addition, there was a lack of financial support for the recently self-employed and those on flexible contracts. There was a need to develop a fair national policy on economic and business support. I wrote to ministers to ask that they extend the Government's financial protection to these excluded groups and along with some other Metro Mayors and met with groups such as Excluded UK and Forgotten UK where the personal testimonies were heard from those directly affected. Martin Lewis (*Money Saving Expert*) attended one of the online events. Government Ministers were invited but did not attend. This was seen as gap in Government support affecting over three million individuals. I made public calls in support of Excluded UK and Forgotten Ltd at various times, including when major retailers returned their business rate relief to the Treasury, and ahead of the budget, but no action was taken by Government to address the issue. Whilst I appreciate that support systems had to be stood up quickly, there were significant gaps, and it is estimated that some three million people found themselves excluded. This had serious consequences for the management of the pandemic and the health of the people affected.

27. These experiences revealed to me that the approach to the pandemic was too inflexible and insufficiently consultative. The pandemic landed at a time when the devolved structures in England were new and just bedding in. However, I believe our early decision to work as one Greater Manchester system improved our response. Given that much of England is now covered by a Mayoral Combined Authority, it would make sense to give these bodies a formal co-ordinating role in the response to pandemics and civil emergencies, including attendance at COBR or other national committees.

### **Covid 19 Awareness**

28. I first became aware of Covid 19 through media reports about the situation in China and spreading across the globe.

29. My first real engagement with the pandemic in an official capacity was through our local Chinese community because of our sister city relationship with Wuhan (Manchester and Wuhan were officially twinned in 1986). The Chinese

Consulate-General asked us for support in relation to fundraising to buy Personal Protective Equipment ('PPE') to send to Wuhan and I met with him on 7 February at the offices of the GMCA. I then attended a media event in the China Town area of Manchester on 13 February. We convened a 'Coronavirus Joint Healthcare Roundtable' to discuss the GM response to the outbreak on 18 February 2020. This was our first formal meeting about Covid-19. Several local stakeholders were in attendance including the Assistant Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police, the Consul General Zheng Xiyuan, representatives from the Federation of Chinese Association of Manchester, senior offices from local universities, and the Head of Systems Resilience and Response at the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership. The agenda included the following items:

- a. GM preparedness;
- b. Supporting the Chinese community in GM;
- c. Providing assistance to Wuhan.

30. We convened the SCG (see paragraph 8 above) for the first time on 1 March 2020 in response to the notification of the first case of Covid 19 in Greater Manchester.
31. Around the same time, officers from the GMCA began to brief me in relation to the virus. These briefings focused on a number of emerging issues including, for example, protecting 'gig economy' workers from Covid 19, the early understanding of the position relating to vaccines, Government activity and updates on the work towards an antibody test.
32. We held an urgent meeting on 13 March 2020 at the offices of the GMCA to discuss supporting older adults in the GM area which was attended by a number of stakeholders.
33. By 18 March 2020, I had a growing sense of the severity of the situation and decided to appoint our most senior leader within the city region, Sir Richard

Leese, to the critically important position of GMCA Portfolio Lead for Health and Social Care.

34. The Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee was first convened on 18 March 2020.

35. In line with many other Strategic Coordinating Groups across the country, recognising the gravity of the situation faced by communities in GM, the SCG declared a major incident under the terms of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 on 20 March 2020.

### **Seriousness of the Threat**

36. I recall a change in my own perception of the seriousness of the threat presented by Covid 19 when the May elections were cancelled in early March 2020.

37. Government communications about the pandemic at that time were intermittent and haphazard in nature. As referred to above, on 14 March I came across an article by the Health Secretary in the Sunday Telegraph where he announced that anyone with symptoms had to isolate at home for seven days, but it was initially published behind a paywall, and this caused me particular concern. I didn't think that Government appreciated the seriousness of the situation or were making the necessary preparations. As a result, I made a statement on social media (Twitter) on March 15, 2020, which referenced and drew upon my experiences as Health Secretary at the time of the Swine Flu pandemic in 2009.

38. In that regard, I had only been in post as Secretary of State for Health for a matter of days when the WHO declared the global pandemic. Whilst Swine Flu did not develop in the way that Covid 19 did, it gave me great cause for concern at the time. One of the reasons for this was that children with disabilities and pregnant women were identified as risk groups. The level of concern amongst certain groups was very high and as the situation developed over the summer of 2009 communications quickly became one of my biggest challenges. Two

incidents stood out for me – the first was an appearance on GMTV where the interviewer had first-hand experience of an adverse reaction to Tamiflu; I felt that all I could do was to reiterate the Chief Medical Officer's advice to take it preventatively. The second incident was when I was preparing to make a statement to the House of Commons. I had been provided with the mortality rates for a worst-case scenario and we gave careful thought to whether these figures ought to be provided to the House. We concluded that it was only right to share the figures in the interests of transparency; we thought that it may cause panic among the population if they felt that the Government was withholding information. The figures were met with audible responses of shock in the Commons; this response was reflected in the media coverage of my statement the following day.

39. We changed our approach as a result of these experiences; the Chief Medical Officer and I both agreed that the mixing of political communications and briefings with official Government statements was problematic so from that point onwards we increased the latter at the expense of the former. Liam Donaldson began to lead the media activity and on reflection, this was absolutely the right decision – it allowed me to direct my attention as Health Secretary towards the response to the outbreak rather than the media engagement including, for example, the proposals for a vaccine.
40. Considering my experiences in the swine flu outbreak, I felt that for Covid 19 the Government needed to move to a regular daily briefing fronted by experts, such as the Chief Medical Officer for example, rather than Ministers. Shortly after, the Government did institute the daily televised briefing but maintained a Ministerial presence. I believe it would have been better to keep the separation that we developed during the swine flu outbreak.

## **Relationship with Government**

### **Day to Day Experience**

41. In general, I would describe my working relationship with the UK Government during the pandemic as largely unstructured, sporadic in nature and intense

when particular issues arose. Throughout the pandemic, I was struck by how unclear and 'ad hoc' the arrangements were. I am aware that, at an official level, there were regular briefings for local authority chief executives and directors of public health but, at a political level, there was no clear structure.

42. We did have some structured regular contact which I have described in the 'Key Meetings' section below but I don't recall having a great deal of regular contact with other officers from Government. I did have some sporadic contact with the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Jenny Harries OBE, and Sir Patrick Vallance but that contact was minimal.

43. In terms of high-level interaction, as noted above, there were sporadic but very intense periods of contact with persons such as Matt Hancock when major developments occurred, for example, concerning the imposition of restrictions on household mixing. During those periods, contact would often take place via the telephone or over messaging apps.

44. Given our lack of representation at COBR, I spent a great deal of time writing to various Ministers and requesting conversations or meetings to raise awareness of regional issues and advocate on behalf of Greater Manchester.

45. For example, in March 2020 we raised the issue of PPE as an urgent issue for resolution with Ministers. Access to PPE was being reported as a significant challenge in Greater Manchester for NHS staff but also for GMP, carers and others working in front line services. The Growth Company and MIDAS<sup>1</sup> were leading a multi-agency group to identify national supply chains for local authorities, GMP and GMFRS – this was seeking to complement provision through the national stockpile not to replace it.

46. By way of further example, on 22 March 2020, the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government ("MHCLG") Robert

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Growth Company see: [The Growth Company | Economic Growth & Employment Support](#) For MIDAS see: <https://www.investinmanchester.com/midas/>

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Jenrick announced plans to shield those people identified as most clinically vulnerable, requiring them to stay at home for 12 weeks. The 1.5m people affected would receive a letter notifying them of website and phone line support and a network of hubs established to deliver supplies to the most vulnerable. In Greater Manchester, local authorities had to seek advice for individuals who may be putting themselves into a vulnerable position by self-isolating e.g., those at risk of domestic abuse. The concerns raised were about vulnerable people being required to self-isolate particularly if they were in a situation of potential domestic violence/abuse. How would they be able to flee/report such situations, especially if they were in the house with the abuser. There was no clear guidance from Government for those in this position.

47. In addition, Government communicated in March 2020 that all rough sleepers had to be housed by the week ending 29 March. At the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 25 March, we discussed that the legislation didn't go far enough and did not specifically address 'no evictions', with some landlords attempting to evict high risk residents, albeit that landlords required a court order to evict. We noted that residents were not always aware of their rights, and it was agreed that I would raise the issue of 'no evictions' at a national level as a priority to be addressed urgently.

48. On the 1 April 2020 I wrote to the Chancellor with a proposal to outline gaps in support for self-employed which had been announced on 26 March 2020 *AB/2 INQ000184690*. Whilst welcoming the steps that the Chancellor had taken to ensure that the scheme was fair and of benefit to many of the UK's self-employed businesses and individuals, I believed that the scheme left a significant gap for a specific group of the self-employed community who had set up their businesses since April 2019 and did not qualify for the scheme.

49. By way of further example, on April 15, the delivery of PPE arrived from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It was far less than requested, with approximately a day's supply of masks and aprons delivered. The Ministry advised that there was enough stock in the system and that there

were issues with logistics. I was aware of the intention to make representations to the MHCLG on the reduced delivery.

50. At the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 13 May 2020, we discussed recent information which suggested that additional responsibilities would fall on local authorities in response to local outbreaks, including local controls on buildings or communities. It was our understanding that Government was not inclined to re-impose national lockdowns in the event of isolated outbreaks or spikes. I had advised Government that local interventions needed to be premised on a track, trace and test infrastructure that has to be implemented, and that localities needed to manage and co-ordinate this rather than it being managed via national programmes. MHCLG officials accepted the points but there was no detail available at that point on timescales on infrastructure.
51. Following the Government's 'Everyone In' policy, Greater Manchester had been pursuing a homelessness response to Covid 19 that had exceeded usual statutory activity. However, in May 2020, MHCLG drew a line under the 'Everyone In' activity and asked local authorities to focus on step down and move on for those who had been accommodated as a result. At the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 13 May this change in direction was noted, as was the cessation of Government direction and funding going forward. The guidance around accommodation was to now accommodate in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. GM focused on providing stable housing with appropriate support for as many individuals as possible. It was agreed that I and the Portfolio Leader for Housing, Homelessness & Infrastructure would lobby Government on this national policy.
52. A letter was sent to Government on 26 August AB/3 INQ000184691 outlining the consensus that GM should be concentrating on powerful targeted measures and not agreeing to blanket restrictions that would damage the economy. It was considered that there was a need to strengthen targeted interventions in relation

to test trace and isolate and argue against blanket measures and local lockdowns.

53. At the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 29 September, we discussed the pilot which was aiming to look at the mechanism for rolling out locally supported contact tracing and taking on all cases the national team had been unable to find. Initially there had been a 48-hour gap in data and it had been requested that this be reduced to 24 hours. That was now the case in 9 out of 10 localities. It was agreed that the pilot would be used as mechanism to facilitate a more informed debate with Government with a view to rebuilding the system before winter. It was envisaged that the exercise would provide the required intelligence required. In that regard, we initiated a high level of contact with Test and Trace officials, including Baroness Dido Harding.

54. By way of a final example, at the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 2 March 2021, it was agreed that I would approach the Vaccination Minister with a request for a more controlled and flexible approach for the management of the vaccination programme within GM. Our sustainable delivery model was based on the following key design principles:

- a. Roll out at a pace and in priority order to protect as many lives as possible in the shortest time;
- b. Provide easy and safe access to vaccinations;
- c. Consider impacts and inequalities and ensure access was equitable;
- d. Take a locally led, GM supported and nationally enabled approach to vaccinations; and
- e. Provide quality, quantity, value for money and sustainability of delivery to be fit for the future.

In relation to d. above we felt that localities knew their communities best and were therefore better placed to determine their approach to delivering vaccines in their local area.

55. To conclude, throughout the pandemic, I was struck by how 'ad hoc' the arrangements were on a day-to-day level. As a result, we experienced considerable frustration in trying to advance issues that were of huge importance to us regionally.

### **Working with Government Bodies**

56. As noted above, we had a high level of contact with Test and Trace officials, including with Baroness Dido Harding, as we pursued our proposals to introduce locally led test and trace arrangements in Greater Manchester. We felt that what was needed was a locally led response wherever possible, particularly on testing and contact tracing. In my view, this responsibility should be given to local health services with a requirement to develop a local plan to mobilise a testing and tracing service, in partnership with other local bodies, in the event of an epidemic or pandemic.

57. Looking back at August 2020, I was repeatedly calling for the Government to improve the contact tracing system; its tracing rate in Greater Manchester was nowhere near good enough. We wanted to take on contact tracing locally; we knew we could be more effective than the national call centre system. Greater Manchester's team had demonstrated a 98% success rate while the national call centres only appeared to be reaching approximately 50% of contacts. This issue was of real, material importance to the region at the time – it was critical to tackling the virus. We had a high case rate and were constantly being subjected to local restrictions which we just couldn't get out of. The ineffectiveness of the national inflexible system was hampering our ability to respond to the pandemic – it just didn't work for us.

58. A telephone meeting was held on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> August with Baroness Harding, which included GM Leaders. The purpose was to discuss how Greater Manchester could operate localised test and trace arrangements through the local authorities supported by Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service ("GMFRS"). GMFRS could provide a call centre operation with a local '0161'

number in addition to teams undertaking doorstep calls based on the national data. A full paper presentation of the proposed locally supported test and trace solution is attached *AB/4 INQ000184692*. With regards to proposals for localised track and contact tracing, it is important to note that our ability to enhance local tracing would be partly subject to our ability to persuade Government to transfer data to us more quickly (within 48 hours) and to provide adequate support.

59. During the pandemic, the Government created new structures and escalation routes which, at times, made it challenging for the local tier to interface effectively with Government. This is reflected in discussions at the Greater Manchester Covid 19 Emergency Committee on 19 August 2020 where committee members confirmed that MHCLG, representing Government, were attending each SCG meeting. However, in order to support the committee's efforts to establish early discussions between Greater Manchester and Government ahead of escalations in nationally imposed measures, further details of the Government response structures and escalation processes were to be sought from Dr Carolyn Wilkins, Contain Divisional Director, NHS Test and Trace, who also retained her role as the Chief Executive of Oldham Council in Greater Manchester.
60. We had a visit from the Cabinet Office in the week commencing 17 August 2020. They acknowledged that Greater Manchester was an exemplar of best practice in a whole range of activities.
61. Our discussions with Baroness Harding continued through September 2020 – the Baroness had been encouraging of the submission of a GM proposition for locally enhanced test, trace and self-isolation arrangements. The next phase of the work had been to develop the detail and co-design with the national team for delivery. The more immediate 'ask' of Government was for resources whilst the detail of the proposition was being developed.
62. On a general note, we felt that it was important to start from a position of no return to tiers. It was agreed that the tier system had not worked and had created an incentive for people to travel (one example being Christmas 2020 when the

Liverpool City region was not under the same restrictions as Greater Manchester - people were travelling to bars and restaurants across the boundary as a result). A national approach to unlocking would be easier for the public to understand rather than going back to a regional approach. We held live conversations with officials rather than politicians at ministerial levels. There was still the potential to return to a regional approach, but we didn't have any clarity regarding the ministerial position.

### Key Meetings

63. The first regular meetings we had with Government started in March 2020, with Baroness Vere. In that regard I met virtually with Baroness Vere alone on 11 and 30 of March, 29 April and 22 May 2020. During these calls we discussed public transport funding given the shortfall in passengers. There were 3 further virtual meetings with Baroness Vere on 3 April 2020, 6 July 2021 and 30 July 2020, which were also attended by the regional Metro Mayors to discuss a number of matters including transport priorities and the need for continued Covid 19 funding for buses and trams.
64. Structured contact was also set up by the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment who held bi-weekly meetings with the 9 Metro Mayors during the period 23 December 2020 and 31 March 2021. These meetings were about the vaccine roll-out; they enabled the Metro Mayors to comment on any issues with the roll-out and distribution and was seen as an effective meeting with the Minister responding constructively.
65. Additional separate briefings with the Minister on Vaccines started in February 21 and continued to be delivered every 3 weeks approximately until 20 July 2021.

66. In addition to the above, I had other various meetings with Ministers throughout 2020 and 2021. A list of these meetings is attached at *AB/5 INQ000184693*. I have provided some examples below.
67. The M9 group of Metro Mayors and the leader of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority met with the Prime Minister on 1 May 2020. The agenda was provided by the Prime Minister's office and featured the following items:
- a. Situation update
  - b. Mayors' immediate role in the response
  - c. Re-opening public spaces and economic recovery
  - d. Planning for the medium -term recovery
  - e. Wrap up
68. In advance of the above meeting, the Metro Mayors submitted a paper entitled 'Delivering Recovery in Our Regions' *AB/6 INQ000202008* to the Prime Minister's office. This paper set out what we considered to be the key steps that would help frame and enable recovery to the communities we represented in our regional economies.
69. Other key meetings included that of the Chief Constable of GMP with the Prime Minister, Home Secretary and Matt Hancock on 2 September for a 'round table' discussion of the opportunities for the enforcement of Covid 19 measures to increase compliance. I did not attend this meeting; its occurrence was verbally reported to the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Emergency Committee.
70. The Metro Mayors (including myself) met with Matt Hancock on 5 October. We focussed on raising five specific issues:
- a. The role of the Metro Mayors in the Covid Response: we wanted to see a clearer role for Mayors in informing decision making, communication and engagement since March has been limited – a regular meeting would help improve our ability to work with Government;

- b. Local lockdown measures: the tiered approach being developed was helpful – the current position at that time was too complex and we must take steps to support people to comply. A crucial element of these plans must be clarity on how and when places move back out of these measures;
- c. Financial support: the impact of Covid was obviously not only on health. Lockdown could only work if financial support was in place for those we were asking to close businesses or limit activity. The regular meeting with Government Andy Street suggested should include HMT as well as your department;
- d. Supporting recovery: our immediate focus was of course stabilising the current position. But we also needed to think about recovery – financial support was needed for sectors – such as aerospace - that would play a vital role in renewing the places we represented;
- e. Next steps – we wanted to work together. We needed those open lines of communication to plan effectively, implement changes together and support our places through these challenging times. We welcomed as urgent next steps a regular meeting between the Metro Mayors and ministers and for the treasury to also be around the table.

71. At the above meeting, we advised that there were concerns about the proposed Tier system, with restrictions and no identifiable support. Support was most likely to be available from a national 'circuit break' rather than the North standing alone. We were advised that the Tier system would be published that week as a set of proposals with a view to becoming operational the following week. We expressed our concerns regarding the thresholds within the Tier system, in the absence of no information available about movement within the system.

72. Michael Gove chaired a regular four nations coordinating group – he invited me to attend on Wednesday 23 June 2021 to discuss the disagreement with the First Minister of Scotland over the travel ban introduced in the summer of 2021 (all non-essential travel to Salford and Manchester had been banned from 21 June but there had been no consultation or even advance notice from the Scottish

Government to Greater Manchester or the local authorities affected). On 21 June (see *AB/7 INQ000184694*) I sent a letter to all MSPs and posted the same on Twitter where I expressed concerns about the restrictions imposed and the way they had been announced.

73. I was not invited to attend any of the meetings of the Civil Contingencies Committee (COBR) which were held during the pandemic. I struggled to understand why the regions outside London had no representation on this forum. Despite regular requests for other Mayors to have the same opportunity, these was not granted. For example, in May 2020, I wrote an article which was published in the Guardian newspaper where I highlighted what I considered to be the Government's 'London-centric mode' and called for regional Mayors to sit on COBR. I referred to a telephone meeting with the Prime Minister which had taken place two weeks earlier where we had highlighted the need for the regions to be empowered to lead recovery within a national framework and to be properly involved in 'what comes next'. However, we had no real notice of the measures that were introduced at that time (the replacement of 'stay at home' messaging with 'stay alert') and this highlighted what I considered to be a recurrent problem throughout the crisis. The Mayor of London was on COBR and rightly so but there was no place for any Mayors from the north, or indeed the rest of England. I felt that Government had reverted to the default London-centric mode in the crisis, and this was often reflected in the way that measures were introduced/removed.

74. I also issued a joint statement in early June 2020 with the Liverpool City Region which asked the Government to widen the membership of COBR after we received reports that the virus may be spreading in the North-West. In the statement we reiterated that there was no representation for any region outside of London on COBR. Our statement asserted that this could not carry on - if we were going to have decisions being taken that affected the regions, surely the voice of the English regions should have been represented there.

75. Without a place on COBR, we had to find other ways to try to initiate dialogue with Government on what we considered to be critical issues. Having chaired a

national weekly briefing during swine flu in my role as Health Secretary, working through Government offices and strategic health authorities, I was conscious of just how much the machinery of Government had changed between the two pandemics. Given that much of England is now covered by a Mayoral Combined Authority, it would make sense to give these bodies a formal co-ordinating role in both preparedness and response to pandemics and civil emergencies, including attendance at COBR or other national committees.

### **Communications – informal and formal**

76. In my experience, Ministers actively encouraged informal and private communications about significant decisions, and often initiated them. As a result, I had this sort of contact with several Ministers including, for example, the Health Secretary Matt Hancock, Robert Jenrick (Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) and Grant Schnapps (Secretary of State for Transport).

77. That being said, I was not part of any informal WhatsApp Groups, but I did use informal methods of communication to lobby, argue and make representations for Greater Manchester in relation to issues we considered to be important, for example securing access to Covid 19 infection related data and the merits of localised test and trace arrangements.

### **Messaging**

#### **Comments on success or otherwise of public health messaging**

78. On occasion, I was asked to write to Ministers to ask for greater clarity in relation to their public health messaging. For example, on 1 April 2020 *AB/8 INQ000184695* I wrote to Government regarding its guidance for businesses; many of our businesses were pulling together and doing everything that they could to support our communities through the crisis but a minority were failing to adhere to the Public Health England and Government guidance on social

distancing – in that regard, the Cabinet Office guidance for businesses stated that guidelines needed to be followed '*where possible*'.

79. The emphasis of the situation had changed following the Prime Minister's statement on Sunday 10 May 2020. In that statement, the Prime Minister introduced the concept of 'five tests' that must be satisfied before the country could move forward in its response to the pandemic, and five 'alert levels'. The Prime Minister confirmed that the country would not be moving out of lockdown that week but rather the Government was taking steps to modify its measures and he also set out a proposed route out of lock-down. Discussions had been held with the M9 Metro Mayors Group, with shared concerns regarding the handling of the announcement, with no advance notice to Mayors and with London colleagues reporting that they were not aware of the strength of the 'return to work' message. The suddenness of the announcement did not provide us with the ability to plan.

80. The often-confused messaging from Government hampered the ability of police and councils to manage events which were organised, but which were contrary to what was understood to be official guidance. We experienced a number of parties and raves across Greater Manchester, as did other parts of the country, which were difficult to manage and undermined public confidence in the official advice and messaging from Government.

### **Conflicting Messaging from Government - Impact**

81. I can recall several occasions when messages from Government appeared to be conflicting.

82. For example, at a meeting of the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee on 18 March 2020 it was flagged that the Government's messaging around schools and social separation was in conflict. It was also noted that further clarity was needed from Government around the distribution of funds for businesses. Local

Authorities and the GMCA would be required to revisit their budgets in light of the ongoing situation, and it was agreed that I would elevate the issues on behalf of the region.

83. At its meeting on 20 May 2020 the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee commented that the MHCLG statement in response to press coverage regarding 'Everyone In' was misleading, which suggested that people would not need to leave hotel accommodation and that funding had not been withdrawn.
  
84. There were further such incidences as we continued through 2020. For example, in August, in terms of Eid, the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee noted that work had been undertaken with local faith leaders and responsible measures had been introduced around calls to prayer and controlled crowds and gatherings for the Eid Festival. Notwithstanding that, there was going to be some impact resulting from social interactions during Eid, which was now coming through the system. There was still some confusion around Government messaging.
  
85. Further, it was noted at the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 22 September 2020 that the Department for Education (DfE) had advised schools to direct any queries to the new national call centre rather than local public health teams. The unhelpful national guidance still directed contacts to the call centre, however, GM were asking schools to go through their local PH teams. Schools did not want to rely on Government sources to advise them and were not prepared to accept this. Leaders agreed this should be raised with DfE. A single data system was required. There was also a need to open a stronger dialogue with the DfE with regards to Covid 19 and early years settings. It was agreed at the committee meeting that a letter would be sent to the DfE expressing the Leaders' concerns around the promoted use of the National Call Centre rather than Local Health Protection Teams for schools and the requirement for a single data system.

86. It was reported at the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 25 May 2021 that the DfE was not supportive of GM's position regarding face coverings in schools. GM held the counter view that local discretion and extra local measures were acceptable where it was needed. It was considered that individual circumstances meant it was not always possible to follow a strict national position and it made sense to be cautious.
87. At its meeting on 8 June 2021 the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee discussed in detail the pending Government announcement relating to travel advice for Lancashire and Greater Manchester. It was agreed that this would likely cause a communications challenge. The media had already reported the restrictions as a 'travel ban' but it was categorically not that; Government had referred to it as 'travel advice'.
88. In terms of Government announcements on 5 July 2021, it was felt that the package did not work particularly well for Greater Manchester. There was a need to communicate to residents the different risks this posed. The Government announced that competent authorities could continue to require face coverings on transport. The Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee agreed that this was difficult given the national message and was a recipe for some confusion and tension as we approached the 19 July 2021. I recall that the national messaging was that face coverings on public transport were no longer mandatory but by allowing different competent authorities to do different things there was the high risk of confusion and also of challenge. For example, we wanted to maintain face covering requirements because our case rates continued to be higher than elsewhere, but people locally could challenge any insistence given the national messaging. These were very hard messages to counter.

## **Communications**

### **With Government Ministers on lockdowns, local restrictions, working from home and social distancing**

89. On 14<sup>th</sup> May 2021 Government issued advice against travelling to and from Bolton, other than for essential reasons, due to the rise in cases of the Covid -19 variant B.1.617.2. This advice was subsequently amended to make it clearer that the guidance was not imposing local restrictions. This change in the guidance had been picked up by the media and caused widespread confusion.<sup>2</sup> PHE had since confirmed there was no change to restrictions in Bolton. The Greater Manchester authorities had been taken by surprise and were unaware of any changes; the guidance had been published without any government announcement. My position was that this was a major communications error which had a major effect on people's lives.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Prior discussion and consultation**

90. Most significantly, we were not consulted in relation to the UK lockdowns. As noted above, we did get some early indications of the proposed move to 'Stay Alert', but this was not contact of a consultative nature; it was apparent that the public engagement materials had already been prepared and disseminated so there was clearly no scope for meaningful discussion as to the merits of this decision.

91. Regarding the second UK lockdown on November 5, 2020, less than 2 weeks later the Government announced full furlough provision for everyone. London moved to Tier 2 on 17 October 2020 and was provided with Tier 2 funding as a result. This struck us as very unfair, given that Greater Manchester had recently been denied the Tier 3 funding it had requested and had been in Tier 2 restrictions since July without any financial support being offered. We were not consulted in relation to the second UK lockdown – I received a call from Robert Jenrick who simply informed me about the measure.

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<sup>2</sup> For example see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/25/ministers-back-down-over-limiting-travel-to-english-covid-hotspots> INQ000217373

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-57246973> INQ000217369

92. In relation to Greater Manchester's move into Tier 4 on 31 December 2020, we questioned why the Government were protecting retail but not hospitality.
93. The move to Tier 3 for Greater Manchester (and much of the North) in October 2020 was the only one with substantial engagement involving 2 weeks of meetings and intense disagreement with Ministers, which was widely covered in the media. Our engagement with Government on this issue began on or around 7<sup>th</sup> October. We spoke with health Ministers initially, who began to describe the proposed Tier 3 restrictions for our region. We raised the issue of proper financial support for the businesses and people who would be affected by the measures, but health Ministers considered this issue to be outside their remit. We also wanted to understand the evidence in support of regional lockdowns. In that regard, I can recall (at a meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> October with Jonathan Van-Tam and Edwards Argar) Jonathan Van -Tam saying that only a total lockdown would bring the spread of the virus under control but they couldn't say whether a regional one would work. They acknowledged that this approach would result in 'collateral impact' by effectively closing everything but schools and without a full package of financial support.
94. We also engaged with others such as Ed Lister and Kate Josephs and had a number of calls with the No. 10 Downing Street (with the Greater Manchester Leaders present) to hear the medical advice from the Deputy Chief Medical Officer.
95. The more we engaged, the more the experts seemed to be saying that whilst only a total lockdown would work, they couldn't be sure of the efficacy of a regional lockdown. We were therefore in a position where severe restrictions were being proposed without any assurances as to the level of financial support being offered, at a time when the Government's own health experts couldn't even confirm that the restrictions would be effective. In the media, the focus was often on issues of money, but the debate was not just about financial support – it encompassed fundamental questions about fairness, the impact on our communities and whether the regional Tier 3 measures would even work.

96. I made several public calls upon the Government during this period. For example, in a press conference on 15<sup>th</sup> October, I made it clear that Greater Manchester was fighting for fairness and would stand firm against government plans to move it into the highest level of Covid-19 measures. In our view, Ministers were asking us to gamble our resident's jobs, homes, businesses, and a large chunk of our economy on a strategy that their own experts were telling them might not work.<sup>4</sup> By way of further example, in a BBC interview on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2020 I called upon the Government to come together to agree a package of support that helped people through a punishing lockdown.<sup>5</sup>

97. Our fundamental position was that we couldn't accept a 'deal' that would lead to increased levels of hardship and homelessness in our region. We had originally requested £90m to protect incomes for people forced out of work but that sum reduced to £75 million and eventually to the bare minimum of £65 million as a way to prevent a winter of real hardship and homelessness in the region. Robert Jenrick had walked away from the talks at 2pm on 20<sup>th</sup> October after refusing to increase the Government's offer of £60 million. We held a televised press conference on 20<sup>th</sup> in the centre of Manchester, during which I was alerted to the message that the Health Secretary had advised a group of MPs that Greater Manchester was only to receive £22 million and was going into regional lockdown that week.<sup>6</sup>

98. In addition, there was very little discussion and very little account by the UK Government of the impact of the decisions to impose local restrictions in Greater Manchester on different sectors of the population, in particular those with protected characteristics. I recall that we repeatedly made these points, highlighting the impact of measures on the lowest paid members of our communities for example.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54557823>

INQ000217367

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-54589480>

INQ000217368

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2020/oct/20/brutal-andy-burnham-reacts-to-news-of-governments-tier-3-package-live-on-tv-video>

INQ000217364

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/20/greater-manchester-burnham-condemns-ministers-as-tier-3-coronavirus-talks-collapse>

INQ000217371

99. For example, regarding the decision in relation to lockdown in Greater Manchester in July 2020 I recall that Matt Hancock called at approximately 4.30 pm to tell us about the move, it was announced at 6pm but we didn't get the detail until after midnight.<sup>7</sup> We didn't oppose these local restrictions at the time but the communication from Government was extremely poor/insensitive in timing given impact on communities that celebrated Eid.

100. In November 2020, the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee voiced its general disappointment regarding Government's engagement with Leaders, with conversations being held at DPH level and MP briefings, rather than at Leaders level on the mass testing proposals for GM. It was also acknowledged that NHS announcements were often without advance notice despite regional and local conversations being undertaken.

101. By way of final example, at the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 22 June 2021 I confirmed the latest position with regards to recently issued advice by the Scottish Government and the imposed travel ban between Manchester and Salford and Scotland (see para 72 above). There had been no consultation in respect of the ban and GMP had no ability to enforce regulations. The enforced ban had an impact on GM residents.

### **Representations to Government**

102. There were numerous instances when the UK Government did not follow our recommendations or advice.

103. As noted above, I recall feeling shocked when it was confirmed at the first meeting of the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee that there had been an instruction to stand down local testing facilities in order to centralise them; it was just a feeling of bewilderment. The Government had barely been in office when the pandemic began; in my opinion they wanted to control the management of,

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<sup>7</sup> See [This Is The Sheer Chaos Unleashed By Last-Minute Local Lockdowns | HuffPost UK News](https://www.huffpost.com/uk/news/this-is-the-sheer-chaos-unleashed-by-last-minute-local-lockdowns) ([huffingtonpost.co.uk](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk)) INQ000217375

and response, to the pandemic in a 'top down' way due to political inexperience. When the first testing station did open in Greater Manchester, it was at Manchester Airport – a location chosen without local consultation.

104. Of most significance in my view was the decision to lift the national lockdown restrictions in the second half of May 2020 despite our representations that this was too early for Greater Manchester. Our Director of Communications in GMCA informed me that Government was lifting the first lockdown and I recall saying that this was too early. This came as a shock because there had been no consultation and, at the time, Greater Manchester had a case rate that was higher than the rest of the country given that the virus had originally spread up the country from the south, creating a two-to-three-week lag. I recall making the case that it was too early as our case rate in Greater Manchester was still high; this was done via Government officials but also through our weekly press briefings, and interviews for national and local media organisations which were often the only or most effective way to get our messages to Government as well as the public. For example, I expressed my concerns in an interview for Sky on 7 May 2020<sup>8</sup> and again in an interview for BBC Radio 4's Today programme which was picked up by local and national media on 30 May 2020<sup>9</sup>.

105. As referred to previously, in June 2020 as we were struggling to manage a stubbornly high case rate across our 10 boroughs, our lead Director of Public Health reported that local Directors of Public Health were unable to access data relating to the identities of those testing positive. This was an issue because there was a clear sense amongst the local DPHs that the national contact tracing system, based on a call centre model, was not working. Greater Manchester had to force the Government to agree to provide data by pointing out that it was required to under the emergency legislation it had passed at the start of the pandemic (by making Covid 19 a notifiable disease).

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<sup>8</sup> <https://news.sky.com/video/coronavirus-greater-manchesters-mayor-on-ppe-and-lockdown-easing-11984558> INQ000217366

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/greater-manchester-mayor-andy-burnham-18335264> INQ000217370  
<https://inews.co.uk/news/coronavirus-in-the-uk-andy-burnham-warns-against-premature-easing-lockdown-restrictions-432568> INQ000217365

106. This was followed by local restrictions in July and vigorous lobbying on our part over that Summer. Tier 3 requirements started to emerge in the Autumn; our core argument throughout this period remained that the national lockdown had been lifted too early for Greater Manchester and subsequently, the region was then 'trapped' for want of a better word. These were restrictions that applied in and were more severe than other parts of the country. This impacted on businesses and workers such as taxi drivers, bar staff etc. Hence the need for Greater Manchester to have a higher level of Government financial support than other parts of the country as we have been under restrictions for longer. This was the unanimous view of all ten leaders in Greater Manchester, including the Conservative Leader of Bolton Council, and myself.

107. In addition to the above, there were many other occasions when the Government did not follow our advice and recommendations. For example, in the Summer of 2020 we asked for restrictions to be lifted in particular boroughs without success (there were lower case rates in some of our boroughs such as Wigan and Stockport, but they remained under the same restrictions as parts of Greater Manchester which had higher rates).

108. We also opposed the 10pm curfew after GMP provided a verbal briefing to Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee advising that it was likely to cause more issues for them to deal with.

109. We engaged in some very specific lobbying about restrictions for the hospitality sector in Bolton because the base rate was very high, and hospitality had been closed down, but no additional financial support had been forthcoming to support these businesses.

110. As already referred to above, we wanted to manage Test and Trace locally – in the second half of 2020 we knew that the call centre approach wasn't working (calls were never answered, we looked at the abandonment rate etc.). We started to pull together proposals for a local contract tracing approach in the

context of high case rates and constant local restrictions. We developed a local pilot that worked but we were ignored. It was very frustrating.

111. In a small number of cases, our representations led to changes or variations in the UK Government's approach to NPIs. For example, in the Summer of 2020 our representations regarding the local restrictions in Wigan resulted in their being lifted for that district (Government was tracking and making decisions in relation to the general infection rates in Merseyside and Lancashire at the time which were higher than Wigan at the time).
112. In addition, the debate around recognising that Tier 2 restrictions had brought extra costs to Greater Manchester was finally conceded by the Government and a commitment was made to backdate support. GM was informed that this would be worth around £7 - £11m.
113. On 15 December 2020 the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee heard that an options appraisal had been undertaken to look at options to manage the impact of Covid 19 on educational settings. Discussions were being held with Government to influence the changing of national policy, whereby only children who were tested as positive themselves were isolated in primary schools (the French model). Positive conversations with DfE and Dept Health had been held and work was ongoing.
114. Following conversations with Covid Cabinet Office, it was stressed there would be no negotiation around which tier GM would be placed in but there was an openness to work on defining what the level and nature of the restrictions might look like. It had been made clear that the restrictions in Tiers 2 and 3 would not be the same than those prior to the national lockdown. It was yet to be determined what the restrictions would entail.
115. The Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee on 24 November 2020 noted that Local Authorities had been led to believe that significant military support would be made available to carry out mass testing, but this was simply

not the case. No support had been offered with the vast number of students that now needed testing. This was queried with Civil Servants.

## **GM position**

### **Medical/scientific advice/evidence sought by GM to inform dialogue with Government and our proposals**

116. From the outset, the Greater Manchester Covid 19 Committee used many of the core principles of effective emergency response. From its first meeting, and at every meeting subsequently, the committee's deliberations were based on a presentation and shared awareness of the current situation (situation reporting). Over time a dashboard of statistics was developed which was presented by a selection of relevant experts at each meeting. This focus on available scientific and medical data, together with the corresponding analysis on the Greater Manchester perspective was of help to the committee, myself and Greater Manchester's Council Leaders in understanding the pandemic, the position concerning PPE, economic impacts, mortality rates etc.
117. I was clear throughout the pandemic that data needed expert analysis and interpretation in order that both my views and those of the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee were informed by an appropriate evidence base. At each committee meeting I had access to one or more of Greater Manchester's Directors of Public Health. Representatives of Public Health England attended the majority of the committee meetings, especially from October 2020 onwards. The committee meetings also benefitted from updates from Greater Manchester's Health & Social Care Partnership, together with representatives from the Clinical Commissioning Groups.
118. We made sure we had access to a feed of data that gave local Leaders a high quality of material to better understand and inform what I was asking for in terms of Greater Manchester and to ensure our positions were always supported

by a robust evidence base. I was consistently of the view that the UK Government did not have us in mind when they were formulating national policy, so I drew heavily on the Dashboard and the advice that flowed from its data to advocate for Greater Manchester's context specific needs. We experienced some resistance from UK Government regarding access to data, for example, the R number and so we obtained it and published it ourselves. My advocacy was strongly rooted in robust evidence and data rather than conjecture.

119. The importance we ascribed to good data was reflected in the establishment as part of our emergency response structures of a Data and Intelligence Cell, chaired by one of Greater Manchester's local authority Chief Executives and a Contain Cell designed to discuss and interpret the data, again chaired by one of the local authority Chief Executives, both supported by our pre-existing Directors of Public Health Network.

120. In addition to ensuring that my advocacy for Greater Manchester was rooted in sound data, we were also very transparent around data. We recognised its value and importance not only to decision-makers but also to residents in informing their choices and in influencing their behaviour. I therefore published locally relevant statistics at my weekly press conferences.

121. We were clear that we needed our own briefing arrangements so that we could share data with residents and local stakeholders; these briefings were attended by some members of the national media as well in time. The briefings provided an important forum for the dissemination of information and featured a number of key figures including for example Kate Ardern (Lead Director of Public Health for the GMCA at that time and until 1 July 2022) and representatives from GMP.

122. We always tried to make sure that we followed Government guidance and messaging; we always observed the requirements of national guidance and went out of way to stress the need for local compliance in our communications.

123. We gave a great deal of thought to how we communicated with residents and stakeholders in Greater Manchester. A dedicated Greater Manchester-level communications and engagement resource was allocated to Covid 19 from the earliest days of the pandemic in March 2020, working closely alongside our 10 directors of public health and communications teams in our 10 districts and from key Greater Manchester partners. This focused on amplifying the Government's guidance and messaging, stressing above all the need for local compliance, in particular in response to emerging data and insight on where, when and by whom non-compliance was more common. Through updates issued at least weekly throughout an 18-month period, this ensured regularly updated national messaging and content was shared with – and used by – 70 organisations across Greater Manchester. We also had weekly press conferences which I led with the appropriate officials and Leaders.

124. However, our communications and engagement strategy in September 2020 recognised the complexity of rules and the changing local, regional and national nature of these, often with little warning, which made the messaging very challenging.

125. Blanket national messaging was often not tailored to target audiences, nor did it use trusted channels and advocates to ensure they had maximum impact. There was widespread apathy, some hostility and scepticism and growing disinformation.

126. The broad national messaging also did little to reflect the structural and social complexities of life in our city region – with people's housing, financial, employment, education and family situations more often meaning that non-compliance was less of a choice and more of a necessity.

127. A key part of our strategy at this stage was therefore to build on the national messaging with an increased focus on insight, equalities and engagement to ensure our activity could have most impact. Alongside national content we would add supporting approaches tailored and targeted to better

reach, enable and support specific audiences – to supplement, rather than duplicate or compete with what was issued nationally

128. The Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee met every Wednesday at 11am with a press briefing at 2pm. This sequencing was deliberate and important; I wanted the work of the committee to be transparent and communicated quickly and consistently to residents and stakeholders in a regular and open manner.

129. In the Summer of 2020 Professor Kate Ardern led a campaign to call on the UK Government to allow access to certain real time, patient-identifiable data that the Government received rather than the limited, anonymised data we were getting at that time. I made a number of press statements in support whereby I explained that the Government did not appear to be adhering to legislation that it drew up just four months ago, by failing to inform us about the identity of individuals testing positive in our area. I called on Ministers to provide a key list of information to local public health directors who were tasked with monitoring and managing local incidences of the virus. Rather than receiving anonymised weekly patient data, I called upon the Government to provide us with all the information they had. Emergency legislation (the Health Protection (Notification) (Amendment) Regulations 2020) made Covid 19 a 'notifiable disease' which meant that identifiable details of each recorded case should have been passed to local public health directors so that they could monitor the spread of the virus. Prior to this, we weren't being provided with the detail we needed; we wanted to set up our own contact tracing provision, but the Test and Trace team tried to assert ownership of data to which we were legally entitled.

130. We had a GM communications cell with in-command structures and there was specific attention paid to the advice, data and intelligence which also had CEX oversight. A member of the Public Health England northwest communications team joined our GM communications cell from its formation in March 2020; this was supplemented by a counterpart from the Government Communications Service from November 2020. The Cell met once, twice and three times a week throughout the course of the pandemic. This allowed two-way

communications between the national and GM bodies in terms of communications activity. Alongside, the communications and engagement lead presented at weekly meetings with Greater Manchester's Directors of Public Health and test and trace leads, all of which were also attended by PHE or Government representatives. And the Director of Communications attended all SCG and Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meetings, ensuring a regular flow of consistent information across GM. During times of challenge – such as the local introductions of tiered restrictions and enhanced testing provision – additional meetings were held with national Government communications colleagues. A weekly national briefing was also set up by Cabinet Office at which the latest materials and messaging, which were accessible via an online platform, were shared with colleagues from across the country. Where appropriate we did feedback on the messaging, as did others. However, the ability to influence the national messaging via these routes was limited.

131. The following detailed information about our communications strategy has been provided to me by Claire Norman (Director of Communications and Strategy at the GMCA). Our communications and engagement strategy running from March 2020 to March 2022 had three strands: frequent and detailed population insight; equalities and engagement, and behaviour focussed communications and campaigns. We reviewed our approaches, activity, outcomes, key learnings and legacies in April 2022.

132. The resident insight secured through the first strand of our communications strategy informed the second – a deep focus on equalities and engagement. Across our city region, we secured £4.5m from the national MHCLG Community Champions fund – including £180k for Greater Manchester-level activities – to supplement our own significant investment in communications and engagement to keep residents safe and well during the main pandemic and subsequent 'living safely with Covid 19' phase.

133. With this, GMCA developed a series of whole-population campaign approaches, focused on both direct instructions (including advice on restrictions, testing and social isolation requirements) and support for extended impacts (such

as mental wellbeing, finances and practical help during disruptions to daily life). These responded to our insight and epidemiological data, ensuring both consistency of messaging across districts and audiences and cost efficiencies through a city region-wide approach. The value was extended further by making our content freely available to other areas of the country via the Cabinet Office's local communications network.

134. Alongside, we led evidence-based, targeted engagement activities informed by what worked in individual local areas both here and nationally which we developed through a collaboration with PHE's behavioural sciences and insight unit. We grant funded our city region's centre for voluntary organisation to create a grant scheme for the VCSE and faith partners to empower them, as trusted voices, to engage directly with people experiencing disproportionate impacts of the pandemic and not reached by mainstream channels. This included organisations working with ethnic minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, blind, visually impaired and deaf residents, people experiencing mental health impacts, over 65s and their carers, LGBTQ+ and female sex workers, including those who did not speak English. These non-geographically specific audiences were targeted at a Greater Manchester-level to best complement the extensive district- and neighbourhood-level community engagement led by individual councils.
135. Our communications and engagement approaches drew heavily on a behavioural theory, focusing on supporting residents' capabilities, opportunities and motivations for stopping the spread of the virus as a supplement to the more directly instructional national communications content. For example, a targeted programme reached Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents with community radio, talks and printed resource packs on key issues including self-isolation, shielding and travel, as well as financial, educational and wellbeing support.
136. It was agreed at the Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting on 19 August 2020 that a package of evidence to be presented to Government demonstrating that the Oldham position is improving with transmission rates moving in the right direction and that Wigan should be out with the GM arrangement, given the low numbers in transmission.

137. Oldham and GMCA colleagues had a call with Department of Health and Social Care, but there was no recognition of the unique position in Greater Manchester and strategic relationships, support and mutual aid that Greater Manchester provides.

### **Coronavirus legislation**

#### **Input regarding the legislation and regulations – where we recommended a different approach**

138. I didn't have any role or any involvement in providing advice to the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Office, the Office of the Prime Minister, Cabinet, or related Cabinet Committees on the public health and coronavirus legislation and regulations that were proposed and enacted, including the Coronavirus Act 2020.
139. However, we worked hard to advocate for those who were excluded from the furlough provisions – company directors, newly self-employed etc. – loopholes in economic support schemes and regs – we were successful in securing entitlement for those who were self-employed with 12 months of accounts, other categories of worker that we advocated for remained excluded.
140. Further, during the first lockdown I recall enormous concern around workplaces and potentially unsafe practices with regards to social distancing. The cabinet Office guidance for businesses required workplaces to maintain distances only 'where possible' and we felt that this sent out a conflicting message when compared with national guidance. I recall that we were inundated in April 2020 with concerns about the conflicting messages regarding social distancing in the workplace. We did try to influence Government to remove the reference to 'where possible' in the legislation without success (for example, the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region and I sent a joint letter to the Secretaries of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Health and Social Care on 1 April AB/8 INQ000184695 calling for them to tighten the guidance to ensure

that all businesses were operating in a way that ensured they were keeping their workers safe and healthy).

141. We had well established, strong links with our local police force, either at Chief Constable or Deputy Chief Constable level. GMP were represented at a very senior level at every Greater Manchester Covid-19 Committee meeting and their updates were a standing item. We were experiencing large groups of people meeting up outside at certain locations in the region and therefore the restrictions about indoor distancing did not seem to apply, making it extremely difficult for the police and others to enforce. I don't recall having much engagement with the Crown Prosecution Service. Our close working relationship with police colleagues was helpful as we tried to find the right balance in our arguments for Greater Manchester – for example in relation to the 10pm curfew proposals, which GMP advised were not sensible. We saw early evidence that it was counter-productive and called for its termination.

142. Some thoughts on suggested improvements which could have been made to improve public compliance have been provided to me by Claire Norman (Director of Communications and Engagement, GMCA) and are set out below:

- i. Based on evidence and an explicit and communicated understanding that non-compliance was often not about a personal choice or lack of awareness but about structural inequalities, the level of support available for people to be able to comply needed to be in place. Our experience was that enforcement alone was not the solution to the issue and the Greater Manchester '4E's' approach (namely engage, explain, encourage, enforce) was the only way through;
- ii. Collaboration with Local Resilience Forums on appropriate measures, which took account of local data and insight would have been more effective. The approach adopted during the pandemic was to impose measures from national to local levels and to introduce them with little or no warning. Especially in the early stages, there appeared to be little respect for the local and regional institutions and their ability to respond.

For example, from a process perspective the national announcements came first, followed by a way for the supporting guidance and legislation which caused implementation delays and inconsistencies in practice.

- iii. One recommendation would be that in future, the guidance and legislation be prepared before making the public announcement. The delay of several days between an announcement being made and the publication of the regulations or guidance created a period of limbo of not knowing the exact measures or enforcement arrangements which, in turn, caused confusion. In general, compliance was greater at the start of the pandemic, when the message was clear and concise and everyone understood the need, than in later periods when guidance / legislation seemed contradictory.
- iv. Compliance could have been improved by empowering trusted voices in communities to provide messaging, recognising the local context. There was an assumption that everyone watches daily press conferences from Downing Street and trusts those who are presenting them, whilst research into effective communication repeatedly demonstrates the importance of trusted spokespeople with relevance to different communities.

143. My reflections on Greater Manchester's experience of Covid 19 suggest that there should be a recognised role for Combined Authorities in the leadership, setting of strategy and implementation of measures in both pandemics and other national-scale emergencies. During Covid 19 the Greater Manchester Combined Authority offered a regional convening and coordinating role through which we sought to offer an effective route for dialogue between national Government and local Council Leaders. As evidenced throughout this statement, national recognition of the role that Combined Authorities could undertake in shaping national approaches and in designing locally effective interventions, could have added significant value to the response to Covid 19. The UK's framework for

responding to civil emergencies enshrines the principle of subsidiarity, which arguably was not followed in national handling of the Covid 19 response, and the role of Combined Authorities in future emergencies should also be recognised, considered and reflected in national doctrine and protocols. This should not be restricted to pandemics but also consider other emergencies that may have a national footprint and in which the ability of Combined Authorities to understand and respond to the local context could be leveraged to make a considerable difference.

**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:

Dated: 29 / 6 / 2023

