

Witness Name: Christina McKelvie

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: [CMK]

Dated: 13 November 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CHRISTINA MCKELVIE

In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 request dated 16 June in connection with Module 2A, I, Christina McKelvie will say as follows: -

1. I am Christina McKelvie of Scottish Government, St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh, EH1 3DG. I am currently The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. I have been in this post since 29 March 2023.
2. I have prepared this statement myself by reference to records and material provided to me by the Scottish Government. I have also received assistance from the Scottish Government Covid Inquiry Information Governance Division.
3. Unless stated otherwise, the facts stated in this witness statement are within my own knowledge and are true. Where they are not within my own knowledge, they are derived from sources to which I refer and are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Background, Qualifications and Role

4. Prior to January 2020, I was the Scottish Government Minister for Older People and Equalities from June 2018. This role included our human rights work, our work to tackle and end domestic abuse including my co-chairing with a Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) colleague of our Equally Safe joint board. My responsibility included our Older People's strategy and our strategy to tackle Social Isolation and Loneliness. My older peoples work was entirely on rights and discrimination and at no point involved older peoples care, that was the responsibility of Ministers in Health. I held this post until the post-election reshuffle in May 2021, where I had a title change to Minister for

Equalities and Older People but mainly had the same responsibilities. My role was to liaise with key stakeholders and gather information for Deputy First Minister (DFM).

Initial Understanding

5. I became aware of Covid-19 like most people early in 2020 from news reports and our preparations in Scottish Government (SG). I didn't attend Cabinet Meetings. I became aware officially around the 12th of March from my Cabinet Secretary Shirley Anne Somerville. We agreed a course of action that involved speaking with all our key stakeholders. Meetings with key officials and then key stakeholders were arranged with Covid-19 support and the identification of specific needs of specific groups on the agenda. For instance immediate priorities for disabled people and organisations were different for the LGBTI community, women's sector and race equality sector.
6. During the next few months, I attended many meetings including Scottish Government Resilience Room (SGORR) meetings. In the weeks immediately before and after lockdown I met with many stakeholders particularly those in the equalities sectors. These meetings were an exchange of information on the expected impacts of Covid-19 restrictions on groups including those fleeing domestic abuse, disabled people and older people.
7. Ensuring a good exchange of information enabled us to react swiftly to issues impacting on these groups. Our food boxes ensured people had good nutritious staples and with support from the ethnic minority resilience network we were able to ensure that people also got culturally appropriate food and information in many languages too.
8. We also ensured that many equality organisations were funded to deliver tailored support to our vulnerable groups. For instance, we extended our Connecting Scotland programme to disabled and older people. This included a digital device, a support package and broadband package to prevent social isolation and loneliness. We also funded many organisations to go online to offer support and extended our older peoples helpline via Age Scotland.
9. In the months ahead I also chaired the Manufacturing Group, the Retail Subgroup, the Scottish Trade Union Congress network and the Expert Reference Group on Covid and Ethnicity. All of these groups were a way of receiving and disseminating information. A

list of all the dates of the first meetings of the groups I was on or chaired has been provided [CMK/002 - INQ000346063]

10. I also along with all Ministers sat on the Public Services Group chaired by the Deputy First Minister.
11. I had no decision-making responsibilities on any of these groups as information from these meetings was provided to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister who then took decisions.
12. On a few occasions I represented the Cabinet Secretary Aileen Campbell on the four nations food group too. I had no decision making responsibility, and representation was on the basis of gathering and sharing information.
13. All of my work was to build, sustain and promote excellent communications with the most vulnerable members of our nation and the organisations who worked with us to support them. Again, I had no decision making responsibilities.
14. It was apparent that this was a serious situation and the most vulnerable were most at risk, I believe we took that responsibility very seriously and the excellent relationships we had with stakeholders enabled us to react swiftly to the potentially dangerous situation developing around us.
15. One issue where our excellent communications with the women's sector became important was when lockdown came into force and we realised that the travel ban could prevent people fleeing domestic violence, with advice from organisations such as Scottish women's aid we took action to amend regulations to allow people fleeing such circumstances to travel to safety and receive the necessary support. This was all done through the normal parliamentary process and most of this was taken forward by Michael Russell MSP in his government role.
16. I believe the First Minister's (FM) daily broadcast supported people with clear information and ways to ensure support was given to them at the right time and in the right way.
17. I had little involvement with the UK Government apart from attending the four nations food group. The four nations food group was a forum convened by the UKG to ensure

that those most in need received nutritious food in food boxes distributed through the resilience network and local authorities.

Initial Strategy and Decision Making

18. In all Scottish Government meetings leading up to lockdown I felt all necessary actions were being taken to support and protect people. I do believe that lockdown should have been implemented sooner but I was aware that this was a UK Government decision as the Scottish Government don't have powers or resources to fund a furlough scheme. I had no discussions at any point about 'herd immunity'. I had no role in UK SG alignment I also had no decision making responsibilities. I thought the daily briefings from the FM worked well and so did our policy of cash first payments to families in receipt of free school meals. I also thought funding grass roots organisations to support people locally worked extremely well. Much of the comment and information was passed directly up-line to public health officials and Covid-19 officials. I did not provide advice only information to enable decision makers to make informed decisions.

Role in relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions

19. In relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions my role was to share information in relation to all of our equalities stakeholders, again those meetings were not decision making bodies. Issues raised by Scottish Trade Union Congress stakeholders about challenges for staff working from home were passed up to Deputy First Minister.

20. I was heartened to see the level of public compliance with all restrictions placed on them, they were not only compliant but they were the backbone of many local communities and provided food and prescriptions pick-ups for the more vulnerable members of their own communities.

Divergence

21. I am not aware of when and if divergence from UK Government policy happened, one point I do remember was a Scottish Government decision to provide cash first to families receiving free school meals, this was judged to be a more dignified way to support Scottish families. This was a different approach to the UKG who did not take the same view as SG did to providing families with a cash first intervention.

Role in relation to medical and scientific expertise, data and modelling

22. I had no role in the scientific or medical policy work. I had no role in data and modelling, expert officials in SG did that and presented us with trends etc at the Public Services meetings convened by the DFM.

Role in Covid-19 public health communications

23. I had no role in public health messaging this was for health colleagues and the First Minister's daily broadcast briefing.

Role in public health and coronavirus legislation and regulations

24. I had no role other than voting on legislation and regulations when they came to the chamber.

Key challenges and lessons learned

25. On key challenges and lessons learned I think we are still working through this. The only area I can think of that I was involved with was the Expert Reference Group on Covid and Ethnicity (ERG). Terms of reference and membership are provided: [CMK/003 - INQ000182818]. A number of recommendations were made at the end of its work and these are published in two reports, provided: [CMK/004 – INQ000182802] and [CMK/005 – INQ000182803]. As Minister for Equalities and Older People, I provided an initial government response to the ERG recommendations on 3 November 2020, provided: [CMK/006 – INQ000182804]. The ERG minutes and recommendations will give a clear understanding of the key challenges with language and culture and our efforts to rectify these where we could. This included ensuring public health messaging was targeted at key audiences through written, social media, print media and using the daily broadcast briefings by the FM. This work was all taken forward by our communications team.

26. In September 2021, I took some time off to complete my treatment regime for breast cancer. At that point all of the groups I chaired were taken over by other colleagues. When I returned in February 2022 this work had come to an end or was progressed by other Ministers apart from the next steps in the recommendations from the ERG.

Informal communications

27. I located archived text messages between myself, my private office team and colleagues, these relate to discussions about covid and covid response. I have provided transcripts of all of these messages including two documents (correspondence from NHS Lanarkshire and a briefing note following meeting with DFDS) both documents relate to constituency casework and not Scottish Government work. WhatsApp

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.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: 13 November 2023