

Witness Name: Gregor Irwin
Statement No.: 4
Exhibits: GI4
Dated: 06 December 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY
MODULE 2A

WITNESS STATEMENT OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL ECONOMY

This statement is one of a suite provided for Module 2A of the UK Covid Inquiry and these should be considered collectively. In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 notice dated 27 September 2023 served on the Scottish Government, in connection with Module 2A, the Director General Economy will say as follows, in relation to advisory groups: -

Introduction

1. This statement covers the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery and the Economic Partnership and Strategic Planning Group which fall under the remit of DG Economy.

Advisory Group on Economic Recovery

2. The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, Fiona Hyslop MSP, announced to the Scottish Parliament on 21 April 2020 that the Government intended to establish an independent Advisory Group on Economic Recovery.
3. This was because the Scottish Government recognised the Covid-19 pandemic was both a health emergency and an economic emergency, with short term economic impact likely to have long lasting effects. This was an advisory group and as such, the papers have been provided, though the minutes will follow shortly.

4. The Cabinet Secretary said the Scottish Government was committed to ensuring the economy could recover quickly, and to a future economy which supported wellbeing and was resilient to economic, environmental and health contingencies.
5. This Group was asked to provide urgent advice on the private sector and business aspects of the economic response to the Covid-19 crisis.
6. The remit of the Advisory Group was:
 - to advise on the economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, including measures to support different sectoral and regional challenges the economy would face in recovery; and
 - how business practice would change as a result of Covid-19, including opportunities to operate differently and how Government policy could help the transition towards a greener, net zero and wellbeing economy.
7. The proposals from this Advisory Group complemented expert advice from other sources across Government.
8. The Group's membership provided a range of expertise and insights across several key disciplines related to the economy and recovery. Group members were:
 - Chair - Benny Higgins, former Chief Executive of Tesco Bank, following senior roles in Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) and Halifax / Bank of Scotland (HBOS). At that time also Special Advisor to the First Minister on the Scottish National Investment Bank and Member of the Infrastructure Commission for Scotland
 - Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Glasgow
 - Dame Sue Bruce, a non-executive director with Scottish and Southern Energy, the Electoral Commissioner with responsibility for Scotland and a former Chief Executive of The City of Edinburgh Council
 - Grahame Smith, former General Secretary of the Scottish Trade Union Congress with experience on a number of boards / bodies in the field of economic development and skills
 - Professor Anna Vignoles, Professor of Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge
 - Professor Dieter Helm, Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Economics at New College, Oxford

- Professor John Kay, visiting Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics
 - Dame Julia Unwin, former Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
9. The Group also took into consideration Government ambition and work across the key areas to feed into the strategic economic thinking and policy relating to green economy, net zero and the wellbeing economy. More information on the economic recovery actions taken by the Scottish Government are outlined in the Module 2A Communities statement provided on 23 June 2023.
 10. Mechanisms were established to ensure the Group gained valuable insights and considered Government policy priorities, including the transition to net-zero emissions. Through these mechanisms, the Group received over 375 individual submissions from organisations and individuals across Scotland setting out their views on Scotland's economic recovery which shaped the Advisory Group's recommendations. The Chair of Scottish Enterprise, Lord Smith, was a key part of this process gathering the views on the business aspects of the economic response.
 11. The Advisory Group's report *Towards a Robust Wellbeing Economy for Scotland* was published on 22 June 2020. The Scottish Government's response to the report entitled *Economic Recovery Implementation Plan* was published on 5 August 2020.
 12. Benny Higgins provided evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee in his capacity as chair of the Advisory Group on 08 September 2020. His contribution was on the topic of green recovery.
 13. The Advisory Group on Economic Recovery was one of several bodies created in response to the pandemic. Another group with an interest in the economy, on a non-advisory basis, was the Economic Partnership and Strategic Planning Group.
 14. The meeting minutes for the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery are provided:
[GI4/001 – INQ000362629]

The Economic Partnership and Strategic Planning Group

15. The Economic Partnership and Strategic Planning Group was focussed on economic recovery during the pandemic. The Group brought together various public sector

stakeholders to share updates across the economic landscape. The Group was established in early April 2020 and ceased in September 2020. This was not an advisory group and as such, the papers have not been provided.

16. The Scottish Government used existing relationships; internal and with enterprise bodies and local government to ensure a representative membership.
17. The Group did not provide specific policy advice nor input directly to decision making – the main focus was to ensure stakeholders were up to date with the latest developments. The Group had no role in providing advice to Cabinet, Scottish Government Resilience Room (SGoRR) or the Four Harms Group.
18. Meetings were held virtually with minutes recorded and cleared by the Group Chair. Minutes of the meetings were not published. The Group did not seek to meet with the Minister directly.
19. Overall the Group brought relevant people together with topics discussed at the meetings including the Scottish Government’s response to the Economic Recovery Implementation Plan, local government challenges and opportunities in the local and regional economy, and support to business.
20. The Group was not subject to scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament or its Committees. There was no lessons learned exercise undertaken for this Group.

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:

PD

Dated: 06 December 2023