

Witness Name: Jane Runeckles

Statement No: 1

Exhibits: 32

Dated: 20 October 2023

UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY
WITNESS STATEMENT OF JANE RUNECKLES, WELSH GOVERNMENT

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 26 January 2023 referenced **M2B-WG-JR-01**.

I Jane Runeckles will say as follows;

1. May I begin by expressing my deepest condolences to those who lost friends, family members and colleagues during the pandemic.
2. I am the head of the Welsh Government's team of Special Advisers. I was appointed by the current First Minister, Mark Drakeford, when he came into this post in December 2018.
3. I first began working for the Welsh Civil Service in October 2003 when I was appointed as a Special Adviser by the then First Minister, Rhodri Morgan AM. At this time I provided direct support to the then Minister for the Environment, Planning and Countryside (Carwyn Jones AM) and the Business Minister (leader of the house equivalent). I remained as a Special Adviser until December 2009 when Rhodri Morgan AM stepped down as First Minister. During this time, I worked on the Government of Wales Act 2006, the legislation that set the framework for the successful 2011 referendum and the transference of the primary legislative powers that followed.
4. Between January 2010 and August 2015, I worked part-time for the Wales Trade Union Congress "Wales TUC" where I was responsible for their public service policy support and development.
5. In August 2015, I returned to the Welsh Government as a Special Adviser on secondment from the Wales TUC to support the then First Minister, Carwyn Jones AM, during the passage of the UK Government's legislation which became the Wales Act 2017.

6. I returned to the Welsh Government Special Adviser team as a direct employee of the Welsh Government Civil Service in November 2016, re-appointed by Carwyn Jones. I provided support to the First Minister on constitutional matters and covered the maternity leave of the health special adviser during 2017, supporting Vaughan Gething, Minister for Health and Social Services, during this time.
7. Prior to my appointment as a special adviser, I worked for the National Assembly Labour Party as their research officer (January 2000 – October 2003) where I worked closely with the Welsh Government special adviser team, including Mark Drakeford.
8. I am a qualified town planner, graduating with a MSc in town and country planning in 1998 from Cardiff University.
9. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been the senior special adviser to the First Minister, Mark Drakeford and I remain in that role, along with being head of the special adviser team in the Welsh Government.
10. As head of the special adviser team in the Welsh Government I currently have responsibility for 14 special advisers who cover all policy areas and provide support both to the First Minister (who appoints them) and to individual ministers in the Welsh Government. The numbers in the team have fluctuated during the period covered by the Inquiry between 11 and 14.
11. During March 2020, the structure of the team of special advisers was re-organized as detailed in an email dated 24 March, attached as exhibit **M2B-WG-JR-01/01-
INQ000222504**. I asked Clare Jenkins to co-ordinate the 'public services' team and Gareth Williams to do the same for the 'economy' team. We re-employed three experienced special advisers to assist with the Welsh Government response to Covid-19 and continuity of other Welsh Government business prior to 23 March 2020.
12. It is unusual in the Whitehall context for special advisers to stay in post for as long as I have been (working for three First Ministers for nearly twenty years). In the Welsh Government context, many of the team of special advisers have years of experience of working with the civil service and in Welsh public life. There are a number of members of the team who provide cross-ministerial support, such as communications and others who provide more specific portfolio cover.

13. We act as a bridge between civil servants, legal services, legal drafters and ministers, providing political advice to ministers and facilitating discussions between officials and external stakeholders to enable effective decision-making by ministers. Some members of the team are specialists in their field, others are generalists - there is no 'one size fits all' list of qualifications or experiences - but all of the team are dedicated to assisting ministers take the best decisions they can with the information available to them.
14. In the Covid-19 context, relationships developed over nearly twenty years of working in Welsh Government meant that we were able to work closely with senior civil servants, the head of legal services and first legislative counsel.
15. The role of senior special adviser is varied but I am responsible for building the team and on a day-to-day basis, ensuring that they are able to provide political advice, both to individual ministers and where necessary, to the First Minister. During the pandemic period, I provided advice to the First Minister on important issues of the day; ensured the ministerial team were engaged; advised on timing of papers coming to Cabinet; acted as first point of contact for officials when new issues arose; liaised with the legal team on legal or drafting challenges for legislation; liaised with CMO, head of NHS, health scientific advisers; senior officials in all areas; brought together relevant officials / external stakeholders when specific issues arose; problem-solved for ministers; helped with forward communications planning; helped prepare ministers for media appearances; ensured political briefings for Labour politicians; maintained relationships with other political parties; acted as a point of contact for local government leaders / TUs; linked with political advisers from other administrations – UK Government and Scottish Government; mayoral teams and the UK Labour Party.
16. Special advisers are employed as civil servants, but we are subject to our own code of conduct which I exhibit as **M2B-WG-JR-01/02-INQ000222866** alongside the Civil Service Code, except for those aspects which relate to the impartiality and objectivity of the Civil Service and of civil servants. Our contract includes a power of the Crown to dismiss us at will; our employment is completely tied to the term of office of the First Minister – should he stop being First Minister tomorrow then we are no longer employed by the Welsh Government. We do however have the same duties of confidentiality and loyal service to the Crown as ordinary civil servants and are required to exercise care in the use of information acquired in the course of our official duties and to protect information which is held in confidence. We are, as all civil servants are, subject to the Official Secrets Act 1989.

17. We are permitted, under the Special Advisers Code of Conduct, to convey to officials ministers' views, instructions and priorities, request officials to prepare and provide information and data, including internal analyses and papers; hold meetings with officials to discuss advice being put to ministers and review and comment on – but not suppress or supplant – advice being prepared for ministers by civil servants.
18. The code makes it clear that we must not ask civil servants to do anything which is inconsistent with their obligations under the Civil Service Code; authorise expenditure of public funds or have responsibility for any budgets; exercise any power in relation to the management of any part of the Civil Service or otherwise exercise any statutory or prerogative powers.
19. During the period covered by the Inquiry – January 2020 until May 2022 – save when I was away from the office which I address in paragraph 21 below, I attended almost every Cabinet meeting, ministerial call, meetings with the UK Government and other devolved governments in an observer capacity. I attended many internal Welsh Government meetings (both formal and regular, as well as informal and ad-hoc) that dealt with the impact upon the Welsh Government's response to Covid-19, a list of which is included as exhibit **M2B-WG-JR-01/03-INQ000227534**.
20. I provided no written briefings for any of these meetings. I may have contributed to paperwork being prepared for some of these on email but provided advice mainly verbally throughout the whole period.
21. For personal reasons, there was a period between the end of November 2020 and sometime into February / March 2021, when I was largely absent. I listened in to some of the Cabinet and other meetings but undertook very few (if any) meetings where I participated actively. I did keep in daily contact with my colleague, Clare Jenkins, throughout this whole period.
22. I developed relationships with a special adviser in No10, Luke Graham, early in the pandemic; the Secretary of State for Wales' special adviser, NR the First Minister of Scotland's chief special adviser – Liz Lloyd (replaced by Colin McAllister after the May 2021 elections); and with a number of other political advisers to mayors in England, particularly the Mayor of London's office. The frequency of discussions with political advisers from other parts of the United Kingdom varied and the discussions with the UK Government advisers became less and less frequent after the first couple of months. The

relationship with the Scottish Government special adviser has continued, albeit with far less frequent discussions, beyond the initial Covid-19 pandemic.

Initial understanding and response to Covid-19 (January 2020 – March 2020)

23. I live approximately 100 miles from Cardiff and during January and into February 2020 I was undertaking my usual routine of travelling to Cardiff on Sunday evening and returning on Thursday. I was on the periphery of the early discussions which were led by the Minister for Health and Social Services on the UK Coronavirus legislation, but would have been variously copied into submissions and updates. The correlation between the gradually developing seriousness of the situation in China and the implications for Wales' population and the activities of the Welsh Government were not clear. Discussions about international travel and post-travel quarantine were held, particularly travel by citizens residing in Wales and expected travel during the half term holiday in February 2020. COBR meetings became more frequent during February. I attended COBR with the First Minister when required.

24. There was significant flooding in Wales during February 2020 which preoccupied a lot of the First Minister's time (and by extension, mine) as well as other day-to-day aspects of government life, including the finalising of the 2020-2021 budget and Brexit preparation. From February half-term (week beginning 17 February), the direct threats to Wales posed by Covid-19 felt as though they had started to increase significantly. Prior to this time, I was keeping up-to-date with preparation work being undertaken in other parts of the Welsh Government, of meetings and briefings being attended by the Minister for Health & Social Services and of engagement by other members of the special adviser team, particularly Clare Jenkins, with issues surrounding the potential impact of Covid-19.

25. The First Minister attended his first COBR meeting on 18 February 2020 (previously attended by the Minister for Health and Social Services). The First Minister met with the Minister and Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services and the Ministers for Education, Housing and Local Government, Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs and the CMO for Wales on 26 February when they discussed that the risk assessment had got markedly worse and that ministers needed to take stock of preparedness for the weeks ahead. Following the announcement of our first confirmed case on 28 February 2020, the amount of time spent on other government business for both the First Minister and I began to recede. An emergency Cabinet meeting was held on 4 March 2020. The unpublished

minutes from that meeting detail the information that had been available to the First Minister and Minister for Health and Social Services earlier that week which included a reasonable worst-case scenario for Wales that resulted in 25,000 deaths. The receipt of this advice was very sobering. I exhibit the minutes of the cabinet meeting as **M2B-WG-JR-01/03a-INQ000048789**.

26. The weekend of 6-8 March was the last weekend I went home until 17 April 2020. It was evident that it was important for me to be in Cardiff full-time to properly discharge my work responsibilities. Although advice to 'work from home' was agreed across the four nations on 16 March 2020, the use of Skype and Teams for meetings had not become a regular feature of our working day. Instead, recognising the importance of the advice being received about 'space', the First Minister, Minister for Health and Social Services, their private offices, Clare Jenkins and I moved out of our regular office environment in Ty Hywel in Cardiff Bay and into Cathays Park after the last 'in person' Senedd session on 18 March 2020. Most civil servants, ministers and the rest of the special adviser team were working from home by this point and the Welsh Government offices in Cathays Park were largely empty. This ensured social distancing could be observed for the small number of people who continued to attend the office. For the two weeks leading up to 17 April, I isolated at my home in Cardiff to ensure that I had fourteen days of no contact with another person before I returned to Pembrokeshire to be with my family. I worked from home for the remainder of the specified period and only returned to Cardiff on a handful of occasions during this time.

27. From the Cabinet minutes it is evident that everything changed in the period between 25 February and 23 March 2020. I did not begin keeping my notebooks until 17 March 2020 so my recollections from this period are reliant upon official documents including Cabinet minutes and published papers. My notebooks which are as complete a record as I kept, are available to the Inquiry should they be necessary. They run from 17 March 2020 until the period I took leave at the end of November 2020.

28. Throughout this period, there were an increasing number of meetings with the Cabinet, the Minister for Health and Social Services, the Chief Executive of the NHS, the CMO and others to discuss measures being taken specifically in the NHS in Wales but also preparedness in other sectors.

29. During the week beginning 9 March and leading up to the COBR meeting on 12 March, my conversations with officials across the breadth of the Welsh Government intensified and I attended the Welsh Government Covid-19 Preparedness Group meeting held in Cathays

Park for the first time on Friday 13 March. I was also involved in discussions held between the First Minister, the Llywydd (Speaker) and the opposition parties about the impact upon the Senedd and Senedd business as the number of confirmed cases in Wales was growing.

30. The Senedd continued to sit until the week beginning 23 March, although we had a number of ministers aged over 70 who were advised to stay at home on 16 March 2020. We put in place a 'cover' system for ministers in the event of any of them falling ill with the virus, to ensure that we had contingency measures in place to keep the business of government running smoothly (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/04-INQ000222502**).
31. Whilst I have no recollections of specific meetings about either the Stereophonics concerts on 14 and 15 March 2020, nor the Scotland vs Wales Six Nations rugby match on 13 March, I do have access to limited documentation detailed below and remember that there were discussions about both the appropriateness, or not, of the Welsh Government to intervene to stop either of them unilaterally.
32. On 11 March at 0830 I attended the Covid-19 Core Group meeting at which the issues around mass gatherings were discussed (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/05-INQ000215171**).
33. Later on that day, I was copied into email correspondence between Carys Evans, the First Minister's Private Secretary and Rob Orford, Chief Scientific Adviser for Health, in which clarification was sought as to how a ban on mass gatherings would interact with the other social distancing measures that were to be adopted and how a different approach to that taken in Ireland could be justified (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/06-INQ000222497**). I was also copied into an email sent by Carys Evans at 18.04 that set out that the First Minister had discussed the issue of mass gatherings with the First Minister of Scotland who was going to press the Prime Minister at COBR the following day on mass gatherings (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/07-INQ000216467**). The notes of the COBR meeting on 12 March show that the issue was discussed, but that the Prime Minister stated that the science did not support a ban on mass gatherings at that stage (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/08-INQ000056221**). That position changed at the COBR meeting on 16 March (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/09-INQ000056210**).
34. On 17 March 2020 I was copied into an email from Carys Evans informing the recipients that the First Minister had organised a meeting for 18 March to discuss how to mobilise volunteer support for vulnerable persons (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/10-INQ000222498**). This meeting was to bring together representatives from across the third

sector to discuss co-ordination and response to the pandemic. Jane Hutt AM, who was then Deputy Minister and Chief Whip followed this meeting with a follow up email detailing further points for consideration (exhibit **M2B-WG-JR-01/11-INQ000222500**). When the UK Government announced their online form for volunteers in England on 24 March 2020, we were repeatedly pressed to follow suit. We were reluctant to by-pass the existing structures in Wales and worked hard over the weeks from 18 March to assist in the co-ordination of support for people who were asked to shield. I sent an email to ministers on behalf of the First Minister on 30 March (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/12-INQ000222510**) which set out the arrangements that had been put in place with the third sector, Welsh Government and local authorities working together.

35. The growing public concern regarding Covid-19 meant that parents were beginning to remove their children from school. I was engaged in discussions with the Minister for Education about the closure of schools, her discussions with her UK counterpart and liaising with the First Minister, leading to the decision on 18 March 2020 that schools in Wales would close early for the Easter break on 20 March 2020. The First Minister attended a COBR meeting on 18 March 2020 where the closure of schools was discussed.
36. By the end of that week I had my first discussions with the Mayor of London and the then First Minister of Scotland's advisers ahead of the COBR meeting on 20 March 2020. These conversations related to the concerns of the Mayor of London over pressure on London's ability to cope with the exponential growth in Covid-19 cases and the real threat, as he saw it, to the capacity of hospitals in London to be able to cope with the vast number of patients presenting to them. The Mayor of London's team conveyed to me that he intended to push the UK Government to go further and faster to put in place measures to stop the spread of the virus in London at the COBR meeting on 20 March 2020: a position that the First Minister was happy to support.
37. The COBR discussion on 20 March 2020 discussed the use of the Public Health Act 1984. The First Minister signed two sets of regulations, made on 21 and 23 March 2020 to close some businesses (including pubs and restaurants) and footpaths in Wales. These were the first sets of regulations that I recall engaging on directly with the Head of Legal Services and First Legislative Counsel.
38. The potential for divergence between the four parts of the United Kingdom was referred to by the First Minister at COBR on 9 March 2020 and this possible divergence was already evident by the Scottish Government indication at COBR on 12 March 2020 that it intended to ban gatherings of more than 500 people.

39. The Cabinet minutes from 23 March 2020 (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/13-INQ000022471**) note that officials were working on plans for a lockdown in Wales to enable the Welsh Government to mirror any decision by UK Ministers or move separately. I do not recall that we were actively considering taking action outside the four nations process but we were becoming concerned that the UK Government were reluctant to move towards full lockdown – the approach that by this point was being adopted by many other European countries to address the rapid spread of the virus. We had anticipated a COBR meeting taking place on Sunday 22 March and this was cancelled by UK Government. Wales' infection rates were behind other parts of the UK, particularly London. This was difficult to quantify in the early weeks because of the limited amounts of testing that was being undertaken but we were aware and had better data on the number of hospitalisations in Wales due to Covid-19. The COBR meeting on 23 March resulted in a four nations agreement to enter a full lockdown across the United Kingdom.
40. The First Minister relied on the advice from the Chief Scientific Adviser for Health (who had been attending SAGE regularly) and the CMO who was attending four nation CMO meetings. The control of the COBR meetings and the production of papers for it rest exclusively in the hands of the UK Government. The First Minister did not see COBR papers until very close to the time of the meetings and it was often unclear what the agenda would be until just before the start of those meetings.
41. On 25 March I was involved in an email chain in relation to the establishment of COBR sub-groups called Ministerial Implementation Groups. I was involved in identifying the relevant members of each MIG on behalf of the Welsh Government (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/14-INQ000222507**).
42. Over the week between 16 and 23 March, the First Minister established the 'Star Chamber' as the process for considering the reprioritising of the Welsh Government budget and how to allocate the consequential from the UK Government budget to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. I had a standing invitation to these meetings as an observer. I attended many, but not all, of them over the subsequent months. An email sent to me by Gareth Williams on 24 March in relation to identifying the level of savings required by each directorate identifies the type of involvement that special advisers had in that process (exhibited as an example as **M2B-WG-JR-01/15-INQ000222506**).
43. A Covid-19 Core Group was established, attended by ministers, officials and the Welsh Local Government Association. I listened to these almost without exception. By September

2020, these meetings were re-formatted to ensure regular briefings were held for the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of Plaid Cymru. It was normal for the First Minister to be in the chair and they were attended almost always by Reg Kilpatrick, the Chief Executive of the NHS, CMO and Chief Scientific Adviser. Other individuals were invited to update, including the Leader of the WLGA, representatives of the third sector and the police.

44. During early March, I created a 'warning and informing' list for political contacts, including members of the Senedd Labour Group, members of the Welsh Parliamentary Labour Party, the Leader of the Labour Party's office, some Labour local authority leaders and some key trade union figures. My team and I spent a considerable amount of time keeping colleagues up to date with a fast-moving picture over many months. The sheer volume of requests for information from many different parties outside the Government led to the establishment of a dedicated email address for elected representatives queries (staffed by additional support in the First Minister's office), regular online meetings mostly chaired by the First Minister and Minister for Health and Social Services, daily update emails provided by Madeleine Brindley from the special adviser team and frequent phone calls. The weekly meetings of the Senedd Labour Group were sometimes held more than once a week and the First Minister, Minister for Health and Social Services and other ministers met with smaller groups of the Senedd group on a regular basis throughout the specified period. Additional and more regular meetings were also held with the Welsh Parliamentary Labour Party. 99 times out of 100, I would attend these meetings when the First Minister was present, to observe and ensure that any actions were followed up.
45. Formal engagement structures of the Welsh Government, such as the Shadow Social Partnership Council, were slightly adjusted and the frequency increased to ensure that our partners were fully engaged in decision making through the specified period. I would normally attend these meetings in an observer capacity.

Role in relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs)

46. After the decision taken at the COBR meeting on 23 March 2020, concerns focused on how best to communicate with the public and other more significant elements such as ongoing support for those people who were being advised to shield; support for vulnerable children; potential harm from domestic abuse; provision of PPE; impact on people from different ethnic backgrounds; continuing provision of public transport; the financial implications of

businesses being closed (although the UK Government's decision to introduce furlough the week before had removed a considerable amount of this pressure); how best to engage the third sector, etc. These discussions were a regular feature of daily life throughout the next two years.

47. Apart from the time period noted in paragraph 21 above, I played an active role in engaging with our Chief Scientific Adviser, CMO, Chief Executive of the NHS, Permanent Secretary and other senior officials and legal staff to better understand the information, data, analysis and advice on decisions concerning the imposition of, easing of, or exceptions to all of the following NPIs:

a. The national lockdowns, including the firebreak;

Discussions leading up to the introduction of the firebreak (which ran from 23 October to 9 November 2020) were particularly intense. We had introduced local measures throughout September but by the middle of October it was becoming clear that they were not containing the spread of the virus at that time. The Chief Scientific Advisers, CMO, Chief Executive of the NHS, Director General, Clare Jenkins and I met to discuss the emerging evidence and whether there was a need to shift back to a national intervention. A significant number of other meetings then took place including with the First Minister and Minister for Health and Social Services.

The tensions that had emerged between the Welsh Government and the UK Government (explored further in the section below on divergence) were very much evident in the run up to this period and I noted a discussion with Luke Graham on 31 October where I asked if there would be a COBR meeting and noted 'how many times do we have to ask?' There had been two COBR meetings during this period - on 22 September and 12 October 2020 – and it is minuted that the First Minister asked on 12 October for a separate discussion on circuit breakers. The First Minister followed up this conversation with a letter dated 13 October 2023 **M2B-WG-JR-01/16-INQ000198495 refers**. There was a COBR meeting on 2 November 2020 following a PM press conference on 31 October.

b. Local and regional restrictions;

I was involved in discussions leading up to the introduction of local authority specific restrictions and during the period they were in place throughout the autumn of 2020. Meetings took place with officials including the CMO and Chief Scientific Advisers, legal services, Office of Legislative Counsel, policy officials and local authority leaders

themselves who were fully engaged with the emerging evidence and identification of practical considerations. On behalf of the First Minister, I engaged directly with a number of local authority leaders during this period.

c. Working from home;

My recollection is that the initial advice to work from home was issued following a COBR meeting during the middle of March. We put 'work from home where possible' into regulations on 26 March. This stayed in place until 28 January 2022. The focus of most of the discussions I was involved in with ministers, officials and stakeholders was upon those people who were unable to work from home and ensuring suitable protections were in place for them in the workplace, for example shopworkers, those operating public transport, teachers and healthcare professionals. The shift to home working has had a long-lasting impact, particularly in the public sector in Wales and specifically in the Welsh Government. The First Minister has been keen to harness the benefits of working from home as one of the positive outcomes from the changes that had to be made as a result of the pandemic.

d. Reduction of person-to-person contact / social distancing;

One of the unique parts of the health protection regulations in Wales was the 2m social distancing. The First Minister concluded very early on that in order to protect citizens the 2m would be placed into the regulations that were made on 26 March 2020. In order to provide protection for employees who were unable to work from home, the regulations were strengthened on 4 April 2020 through changes to the reasonable measures that had to be taken by businesses. I worked with the drafting lawyers to understand how this would work and liaised with them and the First Minister and Minister for Health and Social Services ahead of decision-making meetings on them. Exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/17-INQ000222509** is an email example of this kind of discussion. I was also involved in discussions about the appropriate guidance for employers, employees and the public. It remained an important feature of our regulations until 17 July 2021. The UK Government undertook a review of 2m social distancing during June 2020. Exhibits **M2B-WG-JR-01/18-INQ000222517**, **M2B-WG-JR-01/19-INQ000222514**, **M2B-WG-JR-01/20-INQ000222515** and **M2B-WG-JR-01/21-INQ000222516** are an email thread between Luke Graham and I where I seek to understand the basis for a pending UK Government decision to change 2m social distancing. Email thread as exhibited in **M2B-WG-JR-01/22-INQ000228020** including Rob Orford, demonstrates that the Welsh Government were unable through any channels to see any paperwork to underpin their review. A call with the Chancellor of

the Duchy of Lancaster took place with the First Minister of Scotland, the First Minister of Wales and the First Minister / Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland on 23 June 2020, a couple of hours before their announcement (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/23-INQ000216523**). As far as I recall, no information was shared with us prior to this discussion.

e. Self-isolation requirements;

The length of time required for self-isolation was changed a number of times during the pandemic. The emerging evidence about the transmission of the virus was explained to ministers at meetings that I attended. I did not undertake any specific role other than attending meetings. I do recall that there was at least one occasion when the UK Government decided to shorten the period for self-isolation to 7 days and that the Welsh Government, with advice from the CMO for Wales, chose not to do the same at that time. There were ongoing discussions about the implications of self-isolation periods for workplaces, including healthcare settings and other public services.

f. The closure of schools and education settings;

I have explained above the limited nature of my role in relation to the initial closure of schools on 20 March. When the first decision was taken, it was unclear how long the period of closure would be for. As it became evident that schools would remain closed, the impact upon vulnerable children (such as those in receipt of free school meals, those placed in difficult situations at home, those with SEN and those who did not have access to appropriate support and equipment) was closely monitored. At varying points during the specified period, the levels of transmission of the virus and changing evidence about the risks of contracting and spreading the virus meant that schools were reopened for periods and then closed again. The level of my involvement differed throughout the pandemic but I recall facilitating discussions between officials, local authority leaders and support staff, trade union representatives to ensure they had an opportunity to discuss emerging evidence with the Chief Scientific Advisers and to ensure that ministers had feedback to inform future decisions. I also attended a number of meetings with the Minister for Education and the exam bodies during the summer of 2020 to ensure that the First Minister was able to be briefed quickly on the difficult issues surrounding GCSE and A-level examinations.

g. The use of face-coverings;

I was involved in and organised a number of conversations about the use of face coverings over a number of months. The note I wrote for my colleague Clare Jenkins

during her period of absence in August 2020 (outlined further in paragraph 51 below) details one meeting I attended with the First Minister, CMO and Chief Scientific Adviser. During the weekend of 6-7 June 2020, Clare Jenkins and I organised a number of discussions following the publication of updated technical advice from the WHO.

h. The use of border controls.

Decisions around international border controls were driven by the UK Government. We did not have people returning from overseas directly to Wales as ordinarily people would enter via an airport in England. The only international airport in Wales, Cardiff International Airport, handled its last scheduled passenger flight on 30 March 2020 and re-opened to passengers in July 2020. The meetings with the UK Government on border issues were led by the Minister for Health and Social Services. I sometimes met with officials when changes to border regulations were anticipated in order to facilitate the timely briefing of the First Minister where necessary. On 7 November 2020 I also participated in the process that led to the making of regulations, working into the night, to respond to the urgent situation in Denmark created by the transmission of Covid-19 from mink to humans.

48. As described in paragraphs 13 to 18 above, I acted as a bridge between officials and ministers, including the First Minister. I wrote two independent documents for the First Minister during May and June 2020. Both are on non-pharmaceutical interventions. These are included as **M2B-WG-JR-01/24-INQ000222864** and **M2B-WG-JR-01/25-INQ000222865**. The first is dated 4 May 2020 and the context for this note is described further below in paragraph 57. The second note is dated 9 June 2020 and relates to the approach to further relaxations of non-pharmaceutical interventions at that time. By this point we had, in Wales, established a 'regular, reliable rhythm' – something that the First Minister had publicly spoken about the importance of. His commitment to this 'regular, reliable rhythm' and the 21-day review process proved extremely important in maintaining public confidence in the measures that the Welsh Government undertook to try and protect the population of Wales. It also provided structure to the meetings with external stakeholders on a three-weekly pattern, allowing local government leaders, opposition party leaders and the Shadow Social Partnership Council an opportunity to engage with future decision-making and understand the rationale behind it.

49. I was fully engaged with the officials responsible for the 21-day review process at all stages from April until the final relaxation of all restrictions in May 2022, except during my period of leave when Clare Jenkins performed this role.

50. Concern about potential wider health, social and economic impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions was a constant preoccupation. I was involved directly in meetings regarding the equality impact considerations relating to advice to be given to ministers for them to take decisions. The purpose of those conversations was for me to be able to reassure ministers that the advice they were receiving took those considerations into account. I believe that the Welsh Government were aware of the disproportionate impact of the virus on persons with protected characteristics including those from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic background and that this was taken into account in decision making.
51. Attached as exhibit **M2B-WG-JR-01/26-INQ000222863** is a contemporaneous note that I wrote to my colleague Clare Jenkins while she took some leave from 10 to 14 August 2020. It is the only note of this kind I wrote during the period covered by the Inquiry. It is clear from this note the volume of different issues that were being considered on a daily basis. The note particularly details discussions around face coverings, exams and the preparations for 'local lockdowns'.

Divergence

52. I scribbled a note as early as 22 March that a 'reliable rhythm' for COBR meetings was necessary, an email from Carys Evans following a meeting with the First Minister and MHSS confirms action for me to raise this with No10 via Luke Graham, (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/27-INQ000222503**). It was made public on 27 March that the Prime Minister had tested positive for Covid-19 and 10 days later on 6 April he was admitted into hospital where he stayed for the following six days. During this period, on the 1 April, the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland spoke to reflect on the fact that we were halfway through the 21-day period since the full lockdown had been introduced and, as yet, there was no sign of a COBR meeting. Luke Graham and I spoke on 7 April and discussed the UK Government's 'Easter review'. A call between the First Minister and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster took place on 8 April but no firm commitment to a COBR was given. The First Minister made it clear that he would prefer a four nations approach but that it was clear that Wales would not be ready to lift restrictions at the end of the first 21-day period. A calling notice for a COBR meeting was issued at 18:49 on 8th April 2020 (exhibit **M2B-WG-JR-01/28-INQ000083777**).

53. There were two COBR meetings on 9 and 16 April 2020. I have no contemporaneous notes of these meetings nor any notes of conversations between the First Minister and any minister from the UK Government from 8 April to 1 May. I do have notes of a phone call between the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the Mayor of London on 1 May where they discussed a letter the First Minister of Wales intended to write to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to ask for a meeting the following Monday in order to get a sense of whether the UK Government were intending on announcing easements to the restrictions the following Thursday. The three of them all, instinctively, preferred a UK wide position but reflected that they were not prepared to take decisions to ease restrictions without evidence having been shared by the UK Government to support any such decision.
54. It was becoming clear towards the end of April that divergence from the UK Government decision-making might be necessary. A number of things had happened that had put pressure on the relationship, including the opening of a test centre in Cardiff City football stadium by the UK Government without any consultation with the Welsh Government (which created significant difficulties with data) (exhibit **M2B-WG-JR-01/29-INQ000216485**). It was also becoming clearer through informal channels that the UK Government were moving towards wanting to relax the regulations and the evidence available to the Welsh Ministers didn't show any significant improvement from the end of March in Wales.
55. I had a conversation with Luke Graham on 26 April 2020 where I re-emphasised the First Minister's desire to demonstrate that the four nations were working together and his belief that the four nations approach was the right one.
56. On 1 May, the First Minister spoke to the Secretary of State for Wales and reflected that regular weekly contact in the three-week cycle would have kept each other in touch and would have maximised the chance of coming to a joint conclusion on what to do at the end of the second three weekly cycle. The 21-day review cycles were emerging as significant and continued to be a regular feature of the Welsh regulations for the following two years. The First Minister reiterated his commitment to a four nations approach to responding to the pandemic.
57. The note I wrote for the First Minister on 4 May 2020 (as described above in paragraph 48) demonstrates that we had had some intelligence about scenarios that the UK Government were considering for easing restrictions in England but that we had also, through necessity, undertaken significant work of our own on what a 'Welsh solutions to Welsh circumstances'

approach would look like. The First Minister was trying to stay aligned with the UK Government but the lack of formal engagement with them was making it increasingly likely that we would begin to ease restrictions on a different timescale.

58. Over these days, it became clearer that SAGE were considering the implications of options / scenarios for easing lockdown restrictions (for England only) that they had been asked to undertake by the UK Cabinet Office. A call between the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and the First and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland took place on 5 May 2020 where all of the devolved First Ministers stated their commitment to working on a four nations basis. Concerns about the sharing of data from SAGE were expressed by the FM Scotland and Wales and the FM Wales asked for formal sight of SAGE papers.
59. There was a four nations phone call with the Prime Minister on 7 May 2020 after a UK Government Cabinet meeting. The Prime Minister explained that the Cabinet had reviewed the existing measures in England and that they would stay in force for the time being. He outlined that they hoped to set out a roadmap, that he hoped it would be able to be supported by the devolved administrations but that he hoped to give more detail in a COBR meeting on Sunday 10 May 2020. It was at this COBR meeting that the UK Government formally shared their intention to change their message from 'Stay at Home' to 'Stay Alert' - something Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland made clear they could not support.
60. There was a further call between Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the First Ministers on 8 May 2020 to discuss the roadmap (although from memory we still had received no detail of the proposals from the UK Government civil service). The First Minister of Wales clarified to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that he intended to make an announcement on next steps in Wales that day with measures not coming into force until the following Monday (11 May). This was the point at which Wales and the UK Government began to diverge in pace and messaging. There was a COBR meeting on 10 May 2020, where they did agree four recommendations including UK-wide engagement in the Biosecurity Centre and a UK wide approach to borders. There is record from this meeting of agreement that there would be different implementation of NPIs across the four nations.
61. I have a note of a discussion between the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland, First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, and the Mayor of London on 17 May 2020 to compare notes but no further record of a conversation with the UK Government at First Minister level until a bilateral call between the First Minister and the Chancellor of the

Duchy of Lancaster on 25 May 2020 and a call with the Prime Minister on 28 May by which time there is recognition that the four nations are following their own, albeit marginally, different paths. The PM fully appreciated the different ways in which the devolved administrations were responding and said that he would communicate that loud and clear to allow plenty of space for where R is different across the United Kingdom.

At about this time and in response to the way in which it had become apparent that SAGE was providing advice based upon questions to it from the UK Government, the First Minister wrote to Sir Patrick Vallance as Chair of SAGE outlining the desire of the Welsh Government to actively engage more directly in the work they were undertaking, rather than through the UK Government (exhibited as **M2B-WG-JR-01/30-INQ000216615** and the modelling questionnaire as **M2B-WG-JR-01/31-INQ000216616**).

62. Discussions with the UK Government moved towards conversations about issues such as how the Joint Biosecurity Centre was going to work and how genuinely 'joint' it was.
63. The First Ministers of Scotland and Wales held a telephone call on 17 June 2020 to discuss the next steps within the nations they were responsible for and this was followed on 19 June by a call with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the UK Minister for Health and the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with the First Ministers and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. Engagement between the four nations continued but there was no structure to the calls and no discernible outcome.
64. I have notes (of varying quality) of calls between the First Minister of Wales and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (and varyingly, FM Scotland and FM / DFM Northern Ireland) on 23 June, 7 July, 17 July, 5 August, 7 September, 9 September, 19 September, 5 October, 31 October, 11 November and 21 November 2020. There are also notes of calls between the First Minister of Wales and the First Minister of Scotland on 20 July, 7 September, 19 October, 21 November and 23 November. There is also a note of four nations call with the Prime Minister on 31 July 2020 and a phone call with the Prime Minister and the First Minister on 21 September 2020. COBR meetings that I make reference to in my notes took place on 22 September, 12 October and 2 November 2020.
65. There were attempts by all devolved governments in a call on 21 November 2020 to return to joint four nations action – with my notes showing that a joint press conference was discussed. This was in the period following the Wales 'firebreak' which was in place from 23 October to 9 November and prior to the introduction of new Covid-19 restrictions which came into force on 4 December 2020 in Wales.

66. I cannot be one hundred percent certain that these were the only calls that took place between the First Minister and a representative from the UK Government Cabinet during the period from the end of June through to the end of November 2020. However, even if I have missed making a note of a conversation happening, it is apparent from the dates given above that the 'regular, reliable rhythm' the First Minister had sought from early April was not forthcoming. From memory, a more reliable pattern of weekly Wednesday evening discussions with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster did begin after Christmas, early in 2021. After the elections in May 2021, there was a more formalised 'Summit' with the Prime Minister on 3 June where, from memory, he committed to re-setting the inter-governmental arrangements. I have a more detailed record of the First Minister's contribution when he made it clear that he believed that the fissures in the United Kingdom were growing rather than contracting. He went on to explain that the machinery of the United Kingdom which was meant to sustain the four nations coming together – the Joint Ministerial Committee - had not met once since Mrs Theresa May ceased being Prime Minister, pointing out that the Joint Ministerial Committee had played no part at all in the emergency (Covid-19 pandemic) that all four nations of the UK had faced together. The First Minister welcomed the weekly calls with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, both the fact that they had been regular and reliable but also the spirit in which they were conducted, but went on to explain that they were not a substitute for a more codified set of arrangements.

67. Overall, divergence between the decisions taken by Welsh Ministers and the UK Government (and other parts of the United Kingdom) was necessary for Welsh Ministers to properly discharge their functions. Welsh Ministers have a responsibility to discharge those functions on the basis of the advice that they receive.

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

68. I undertook no role in providing medical and scientific expertise, data and modelling. We were fortunate that the CMO and Chief Scientific Advisers were extremely good at explaining and disseminating the information they had available to them in an accessible way to non-scientists. As far as I am aware, once the first lockdown had been announced, I was copied in to all medical and scientific advice that was provided on paper to the First Minister and the Minister for Health and Social Services and met with the CMO and Chief Scientific Advisers very regularly (including Clare Jenkins and Reg Kilpatrick and others at

various times) to discuss the latest information. The key part of my role was to listen and when things needed to be escalated to ministers, consider how quickly and whether this was needed outside the formal meeting structures that were in place at the request of the First Minister and the Minister for Health and Social Services. I do not recall any occasion when any of the three of them (CMO, Chief Scientific Advisers) felt an issue needed to be discussed urgently, that this was not arranged at very short notice.

69. As the pandemic continued, amongst other information, the availability of the modelling from Swansea University, the behavioural modelling and the waste-water evidence were co-ordinated by the CMO and Chief Scientific Advisers and provided to ministers to underpin the difficult decisions that were needed. Alongside the real-time evidence from testing data, the First Minister was always very clear with the public and to the Senedd during his press conferences and interviews that he was only able to take decisions based upon the evidence that he had available to him at the time he had to take those decisions.

Role in Covid-19 public health communications

70. I was engaged in the Welsh Government Covid-19 public health communications at a very high level. I had frequent (daily but sometimes more) contact with Toby Mason, his team and Madeleine Brindley, the communications special adviser. They proved to be a very competent and highly skilled communications team who oversaw all aspects of our internal and external communications, from scripts for the First Minister and other minister's press conferences, through to regular public updates, the question-and-answer documents for the Welsh Government website and our social media content. Regular focus groups, polling and social media monitoring were available to the Cabinet. The team commanded very high confidence from ministers. I had no contact with journalists throughout this period.

71. As a result of the enormous efforts by the communications team and the clear and detailed statements from the First Minister and other ministers, our engagement with the Welsh public commanded significant trust in the face of alleged breaches of rules and standards by politicians elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We took our responsibilities seriously and there were a very limited number of people in the office from the middle of March 2020. Once I had left Cardiff by the end of April 2020, I returned infrequently (possibly two or three times) including once in October 2020 to undertake a very minor change to ministerial responsibilities, until after the Senedd elections in May 2021. There was never a question

of anyone breaking the rules (one minor incident when the Welsh Conservatives tried to deflect attention from criticism they were under and claim that the Minister for Health and Social Services shouldn't have eaten a bag of chips with his son) and I had no reason to speak to anyone in my team about any breach of the rules.

72. I believe that the public confidence in the Welsh Government response reflects the respect we have for those who suffered loss, the significance of the decisions that had been taken over the liberties of the Welsh population and the responsibilities that we had to uphold them.

Role in public health and Covid-19 legislation and regulations

73. As explored further above in paragraphs 13 to 18, I had a central role in facilitating advice and briefings to the First Minister, other ministers, Welsh Government committees, groups and forums on non-pharmaceutical interventions and, in turn, the legislation and regulations underpinning them. This was the case from the weekend of 20-22 March 2020 throughout the specified period (aside from my period of leave). I did not write any of these, nor communicate them directly. I did, however, meet and discuss aspects of the regulations regularly with the Head of Legal Services, First Legislative Counsel and members of their teams. The purpose of these discussions was always to convey the views of ministers or for the lawyers to ask questions for clarification of policy.

74. I was regularly engaged in discussions, mostly in general meetings such as the Health Protection Advisory Group but occasionally directly, about the proportionality of the regulations and about the proportionality of the use of criminal sanctions, the level and enforcement of them.

Key challenges and lessons learned

75. I have provided no oral nor written evidence to the Senedd or any Senedd Committee.

76. I did participate in one internal Welsh Government 'lessons learned' exercise.

77. The special adviser team worked to the best of its abilities throughout a period of unprecedented demands. Information sharing was already part of our daily lives, but the pandemic brought this into sharp focus. Our role as facilitators, both within government

and external to it, enabled us to play our part in a much wider team effort to assist ministers to take the best decisions they could with the information available to them and to do our best to communicate them effectively. I believe that if there is any lesson to be learnt for the special adviser team in the Welsh Government, it is that bringing people together reduces obstacles, aids understanding and enables consensus.

Documents

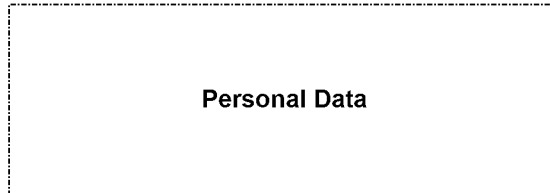
78. I have carried out a search for emails with [Luke Graham] and [NR] and the key emails are provided with this statement.
79. I do not use WhatsApp or imessages on my work telephone. I do use What's App and imessage on my personal phone. From a time prior to the pandemic, the settings on imessage have been set to delete messages every thirty days. Since 7 day disappearing messages was made available on WhatsApp, the majority of the groups I am part of have used this facility. I do have some WhatsApp messages from the specified period relating to the groups outlined in the three paragraphs below. These will be made available to the Inquiry to determine their relevance to decision-making during the pandemic.
80. I am the admin on a What's App group including all ministers in the Welsh Government which also includes my colleagues Clare Jenkins and Madeleine Brindley. The membership of this group was updated after the elections in May 2021 to reflect the changes in the ministerial team. The group was not used as part of any formal decision-making process or to discuss policy development. Such formal decisions were made via the ministerial advice process and Cabinet.
81. I am also the admin on a similar group for the Special Adviser team.
82. I was part of a What's App group with the Head of Legal Services, First Legislative Counsel, and two others for the duration of the specified period. Again, this group was not used as part of any formal decision-making process.
83. I have provided all of the contemporaneous notebooks that I have from the specified period (17 March 2020 until 29 November 2020 are the most detailed). I have also provided copies of two private notes that I wrote to the First Minister and one contemporaneous note that I wrote to my colleague Clare Jenkins, all of which are explored further in this witness statement above.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated within this witness statement are true.

Full name: Jane S Runeckles

Position or office held: Special Adviser



Signed:

Date: 20 October 2023