

Witness Name: Toby Rhys Mason

Statement No: 1 in M2B

Exhibits: 55

Dated: 2nd November 2023

UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF TOBY RHYS MASON, COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION, 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-CD-01**.

I, Toby Mason, will say as follows: -

Preface

1. This was an unprecedented period for us all, not just as members of the Welsh Government and civil servants but as individuals. We all lived through this experience professionally and personally and there were impacts and consequences for family, friends, and colleagues. So many people across Wales lost loved ones during the pandemic, and it was important to all of us that our communications as a Government properly recognised the depth of loss and the grief felt by the family and friends of those who lost their lives, as well as the hardships suffered during the lockdown periods.
2. It is important to me to acknowledge at the outset of this statement the sheer scale and circumstances of the pandemic, our response and the significant impact on Wales and the operation of the Communications function within the Welsh Government. Every communications discipline within the Government, be it press office, social media, digital, design, campaigns and others, worked together with the single objective of providing the people of Wales with the information they needed to keep themselves, their families and their communities safe. I am immensely proud and appreciative of the efforts of every communications professional within the Welsh Government during this period.

3. The process of writing this statement has given me the opportunity to pause and reflect on what was by far the most challenging time of my career, and those of my colleagues. I have tried to remember faithfully the information I had and the advice I gave.

Introduction

4. I was appointed as Head of Strategic Communications for the Welsh Government in January 2014. Prior to this I was News Organiser in the BBC Wales political unit based in the Senedd in Cardiff Bay. Through the pandemic I was line managed by (then) Director General, Office of the First Minister, Des Clifford. I am ultimately responsible for all aspects of the Welsh Government's external communications, and head of profession for communications.
5. I have a Postgraduate Diploma in Newspaper Journalism from Cardiff University and a Level 6 senior journalism qualification from the National Council for the Training of Journalists.
6. My statement is intended to provide an overview of the Welsh Government's communications operations, its structures, functions, governance and decision-making processes, with particular focus on the communication arrangements that were put in place to enable the organisation to support Ministers and respond to the pandemic.
7. I provided a detailed structure of the Communications Division and the strategic approach to communications within the Welsh Government in the statement provided by Andrew Goodall, Permanent Secretary referenced MB2-WG-01.
8. I have exhibited within this statement the key documents held by the communications division. Our principal role in the overall Covid response was to provide communications and handling advice to decision makers and to communicate those decisions as clearly as possible.

Key officials and Special Advisers with involvement in the response to Covid-19

9. I have set out below a non-exhaustive list of senior officials and special advisers who had particular involvement in the communications response to Covid-19. There were

of course other individuals who played invaluable roles in the response to the pandemic. At a Ministerial level, the then Deputy Minister for the Economy and Transport, Lee Waters had responsibility for strategic communications until May 2021, and this responsibility passed to the First Minister from that point onwards following the Senedd elections.

10. I had overall responsibility for the Welsh Government's communications, in my role I worked closely with (among many others):

- a. **Name Redacted**, Grade 6 Head of Communications for the Health and Social Services Group, responsible for public health communications and marketing and NHS Wales / DHSS communications co-ordination.
- b. **Name Redacted** Grade 6 Head of News, responsible for all press and media activities across the Welsh Government.
- c. Madeleine Brindley, Communications Special Adviser and other Ministerial Special Advisers on portfolios closely connected with pandemic handling including Jane Runeckles and Clare Jenkins.

11. To date, no members of the Communications Division have provided oral or written evidence to Senedd or UK Parliament committee in relation to the response to Covid-19.

Role of the Communication profession

12. From the outset of the pandemic, Ministers and senior officials within the Welsh Government recognised the importance of clear, consistent communications. The complexity of the Regulations in force meant that the people of Wales needed clear, understandable information and advice at all times, which would in turn lead to better understanding and compliance with the rules designed to limit the spread of the virus. Communications advice and guidance was provided as frequently as possible to inform policy and decision making by both Ministers and officials. This included advice on audiences, channels, the timing and handling of announcements, and stakeholder management.

13. Throughout the pandemic, we worked closely with the Public Health Wales communications team, given their responsibilities for public health information provision,

14. The Welsh Government's communications teams delivered and facilitated a vast amount of content throughout the pandemic, including more than two hundred press conferences, examples of the press conferences are exhibited at **WG/M2B/CD-01-01/INQ000227480**, **WG/M2B/CD-01-02/INQ000228028** and **WG/M2B/CD-01-03/INQ000227481**, thousands of media interviews, social media and campaign work. As well as the main health-focused campaigns, campaigns were also delivered via the communications teams in education, social justice and economy. We also carried out communications tailored to specific audiences, including minority ethnic communities, vulnerable individuals and others.
15. The role of the Communications directorate was to provide communications advice and guidance to Ministers and officials as part of their policy and decision-making process, and then communicate those decisions, alongside key public health advice, to the public and stakeholders through all available channels. These included work with the press and media, our own social media activities, paid for and organic campaign material, newsletters and others. Communications officials used focus groups, polling, media monitoring and social listening to provide insight for Ministers and senior officials on public sentiment throughout the pandemic. This insight was important in advising Cabinet on the likely level of public reaction to, and potential compliance with, various policy options. An overarching reflection was many people's desire for an approach to regulations which was as clear and simple as possible while still preventing the spread of the virus.
16. As Head of Strategic Communications, I attended Cabinet meetings and written advice was provided to Ministers via the formal Cabinet paper process for all significant decisions. Day to day communications advice was also provided to individual Ministers as part of the Ministerial Advice process. Significant programmes such as Test Trace and Protect (TTP), vaccination, support for individuals and businesses and other high-profile areas had bespoke communications plans and budgets, taking into account specific audiences and appropriate channels. By way of example, I exhibit as **WG/M2B/CD-01-04/INQ000198618** a TTP communication plan updated for March 2021 burst.
17. We took a decision that communications within specific pandemic related programmes, such as TTP would be undertaken using the overarching "Diogelu Cymru - Keep Wales Safe" brand in order to build on the trust and recognition of that campaign which was developed by the Welsh Government in May 2020 as a distinctively Welsh

brand to communicate the regulations in Wales. Further details of the Diogelu Cymru - Keep Wales Safe campaign is set out in Andrew Goodall's statement, WG-01. It also provided a single high-level 'look and feel' for the broad sweep of Welsh Government interventions during the pandemic. I provide further details about the Keep Wales Safe approach below.

18. I also attended ExCovid, Health Protection Advisory Group (HPAG) and other senior meetings within the government structure to advise officials and provide feedback from media monitoring, social listening and focus groups in order to inform recommendations to Ministers. I exhibit as **WG/M2B/CD-01-05/INQ000198450** minutes of the ExCovid meeting dated 18 August 2020 which rehearsed communications messaging around schools and local lockdowns. I also exhibit as **WG/M2B/CD-01-06/INQ000198572** the minutes of the ExCovid meeting on 15 September 2020 during which role of the communications team in local lockdown messaging was discussed.

Cabinet papers relating to the potential introduction or removal of NPIs, and other key programmes or initiatives contained advice to Ministers on communications and handling. This set out proposals for how announcements would be handled and were presented to Ministers for discussion and endorsement along with the rest of the paper. I exhibit as **WG/M2B/CD-01-07/INQ000048984** a paper entitled "Cabinet Paper on Phase 2 messaging and communications" dated 7 May 2020 and which was submitted to Cabinet, for Ministers to consider moving away from the core message of "stay home, save lives" initiative., The paper was considered at Cabinet on 7 May 2020, where it is recorded in the minutes of that meeting which are annexed as **WG/M2B/CD-01-08/INQ000022478** that the messaging would be amended to include "stay safe, stay local". Likewise, I exhibit as **WG/M2B/CD-01-09/INQ000057937** a note commissioned by the First Minister on "messaging complexity" that was discussed at Cabinet on the 28 October 2021. A further communications paper on the 21 day review was discussed at cabinet on 27 May 2020, exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-10/INQ000048986** refers. While communications came up as part of a discussion at cabinet, it was not always a regular agenda item. When communication updates were on the agenda, that update was usually given verbally, exhibits **WG/M2B/CD-01-11/INQ000048789**, **WG/M2B/CD-01-12/INQ000048799** and **WG/M2B/CD-01-13/INQ000048801** refer.

19. The First Minister and other Ministers were also briefed on longer-term campaign and marketing campaigns on a regular basis, for example, the evolving messaging around Diogelu Cymru - Keep Wales Safe. Approval was sought for new campaign bursts or changes of tone and content, for example during a period where regulations were being relaxed, to make sure that Ministers were content with the messages being given to the public.
20. Briefings were also prepared for the First Minister and other Ministers ahead of press conferences or interview rounds with likely areas of focus and lines to take, and the press team would also have preparatory sessions with them beforehand where time allowed.

Impact of NPIs on 'at risk' and other vulnerable groups in light of existing inequalities

21. Advice and evidence on the direct impact of NPIs on particular groups was principally a matter for colleagues in policy and science areas, and subsequent consideration by Cabinet on the balancing of relative harms. However, the 'at risk' and vulnerable groups, who may have been digitally excluded, were an important and distinct audience for our communications, which sought to reach groups such as these via the channels most accessible to them, including a number of nation-wide door-drop leaflets. For example, an all-Wales door drop leaflet with key public health advice for the winter was issued in Autumn 2021 to 1,468,400 households. The leaflet was also produced in 35 minority languages, Easy Read, Braille, large print and British Sign Language. I attach, by way of example, exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-14/INQ000198530** a copy of the leaflet that was distributed in Kurdish. I also exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-15/INQ000282288** an English version of the leaflet.
22. Our press conferences included a British Sign Language interpreter, and the accessibility of our communications work was a continual focus.
23. Given the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities that was emerging, particular effort was made to engage with these audiences. A specialist agency, Multicultural Marketing Consultancy (MMC) was subcontracted to support this work by the agency engaged to deliver the Keep Wales Safe Public Information Campaign, [Name Redacted] during: Dec 2020-Mar 2021; April 21–Sept 21; Dec 21-Mar 22. Regular engagement with internal and external stakeholder groups also helped to shape and share messaging. This resulted in a vast

range of activity being undertaken through the pandemic, through face-to-face engagement, media, trusted voices and organisations.

24. By way of example, in Dec 2020, a pilot multilingual street team was established for face to face engagement in Cardiff between 18-21 Dec. Multicultural teams of six people visited community touchpoints in Cardiff, such as places of worship, barbers, local shops and community centres, chatting to people about measures to protect against the virus, including testing, face masks and the vaccine, and providing flyers and posters in multiple languages for display in the locations visited. Following the first two days of activity, Alert Level 4 restrictions were introduced and face to face activity was paused. In the 2 days the street team engaged around 1500 people. I attach an example of the poster that was distributed as **WG/M2B/CD-01-16/INQ000198533**.
25. In light of lockdown restrictions, Minority Ethnic engagement was replaced with an online engagement session, 'Ask the Expert'. This was virtual Q&A session on vaccination chaired by the then Minister for Health, Vaughan Gething with an expert panel answering questions and directly addressing concerns of the Ethnic Minority community and faith leaders who attended. The event was attended by over 140 individuals representing over 50 organisations. Insight gained from this session helped to inform the need for future communication content, such as the development of films from trusted voices to reassure people about vaccination and to address circulating misinformation.
26. We worked with community leaders and influential figures from many communities, producing content for our own channels but importantly for use by others to promote to our target audiences. Examples of this content included videos reassuring people about the vaccine (by Muslim Doctors Cymru), and quote cards for social media from high profile community figures such as Judge Ray Singh who was the Chair of the First Ministers Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Covid -19 advisory group and the Chairperson of the Chinese in Wales Association, Dr Ching-Yi Chen.
27. Partnerships were established with three community radio stations with strong reach into multicultural communities. The partnerships included live-reads/discussions from presenters and audio spots, based on a provided script about being a good friend by doing what we can to limit the spread of the virus.

28. In February and March 2022, the street teams were reinstated visiting Cardiff, Swansea and Newport over 21 days, as areas of Wales with particularly diverse populations which resulted in 14,676 interactions visiting similar community locations as the pilot in December 2020.
29. Regular updates on the engagement work were provided to the Wales Race Forum and the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Socio-Economic Group. Written updates were also submitted to the First Minister's Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Advisory Group an example of which is attached as **WG/M2B/CD-01-17/INQ000198581**.
30. Evaluation reports were produced by Multicultural Marketing Consultancy (MMC) and Golley Slater which I've exhibited at **WG/M2B/CD-01-18/INQ000282292**, **WG/M2B/CD-01-19/INQ000282291**, **WG/M2B/CD-01-20/INQ000282293**, and **WG/M2B/CD-01-21/INQ000282287**. These covered the period November 2020 – April 2022 and assessed the effectiveness of the measures above.

Engagement with UK and other devolved nations

31. A high-level chronology of Welsh Government / UK Government communications interaction, divided into three general phases is set out in the Welsh Government's corporate statement M2B-WG-01 at paragraphs 434 - 454.
32. Using the devolved Public Health Act 1984 as the underpinning legislation for NPIs meant there was always the potential for policy divergence between UK nations. This made liaison between communications teams in each of the four nations particularly important. This involved both formal and informal contacts on a regular basis. My main formal engagement with the UK Government was through a weekly Wednesday meeting with the head of the Cabinet Office Covid Hub and other senior staff, which was also attended by the heads of communications from the Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive.
33. The meetings were also attended by communication leads from UK Government's Territorial Offices, including the Wales Office, but this was largely for information as they did not have operational or policy responsibility within devolved areas. Ministers were never present at these meetings, although Ministerial views were frequently fed into discussions.

34. The meetings provided an opportunity to discuss communications developments in each of the four nations, identify areas of common interest, and also resolve as far as possible areas where policy, and therefore messaging, would diverge. Upcoming campaign material and content could be discussed on a trusted basis and scrutinised for any potential inconsistencies with the rules in place in any of the four nations. Cabinet Office colleagues were open and receptive to feedback and the emphasis was on seeking consensus where possible.
35. I do not recall any substantial changes to Welsh Government communications strategies as a result of these meetings or in changes to the UK Government communications strategies as a result of their impact on Wales. The Diogelu Cymru – Keep Wales Safe approach had been tested and carried a consistent tone throughout the pandemic, as did Welsh Ministers in their press conferences and interviews. It was a useful forum for the purposes of discussing perspectives on communications content, channels and campaigns in the four nations, and the public reaction to those. It also helped us provide advance notice to Welsh Ministers about developments in UK Government communications, given the likely knock on impact on Wales.
36. Where there were proposed pieces of content that ran contrary to policy in one of the four nations, it was recognised that this could be misleading for people in Wales and efforts were made to either amend the content or limit its distribution in Wales. Our normal practice was to have an initial discussion, and where necessary, check the content with policy officials within each administration. No minutes or notes of these meetings were held by Welsh Government. We would then come back with suggestions on how the content could be adapted or changed in order not to cut across the current rules in place in different parts of the UK.
37. For example, a single piece of content for 'out-of-home' advertising reflecting the 'Rule of 6' approach which was in place in England but not in Wales. A spreadsheet was circulated by the UK Government relating to communications activities they planned to carry out. We were then asked to input changes that would need to be made to take reflect the variations in rules across the 4 nations. Row 25 of the spreadsheet exhibited at **WG/M2B/CD-01-22/INQ000282302** records the variations in Wales and Scotland as follows;

“SCOTLAND: Yes but must account for household rule: 6 people from 2 households, the headline 'stick to six' would need to change 'stick to six

people from two households' WALES: Pubs - not until 22nd April earliest for outdoor hospitality and also line change to 'stick to groups of six from a maximum of two households.'

38. This demonstrates the level of attention to detail needed in trying to align content to policy in each of the four nations. The spreadsheet, exhibited above, also indicates that the release of content was staggered between nations.
39. The 'Hands Face Space Air' campaign media plan from March 2021, further illustrates the complexity of trying to get message alignment based on changing rules in each of the four nations.
40. However, there were still areas such as press partnerships where there was inevitable "bleed across" to audiences in Wales from the UK Government purchasing space in UK newspapers, with no obvious means of resolving this.
41. It is important to note that there was also discussion of proposed UK Government campaigns which were appropriate to run in all four nations, for example the 2021 "Stop Covid Hanging Around" ventilation campaign. It was recognised that a UK-wide campaign would mean that communications campaigns run by the devolved nations could then focus on other protective behaviours.
42. The meetings were also a forum for professional and at times personal support, as we all faced similar pressures within our respective governments. The group was established early in the pandemic, around May-June 2020 and meetings continued on a weekly basis until campaign work linked to the restrictions in place in the four nations wound down in late Spring 2022. I do not recall precisely when the Covid Hub was disbanded by the Cabinet Office, but it would have been during this period. Once restrictions were removed and the main focus of the messaging became around public health rather than regulation, there was no longer a requirement for weekly senior-level co-ordination.
43. Discussions between civil service colleagues in the different UK nations were conducted in a respectful and constructive way even where there were policy disagreements between administrations.

44. It was often challenging for firm information to be shared in advance at points during the pandemic when decision-making was taking place quickly and with limited time before announcement and implementation, for example, the decision to introduce stay home legislation on 23 March 2020 which had minimal prior engagement on either official level or with Ministers.
45. In any similar situation in the future, I would strongly recommend that a similar formal group as referred to in paragraph 31 is established at a senior level between the four UK nations. As all the principal members of the group from each of the four nations were communications professionals and members of the Senior Civil Service, I feel it operated at the right strategic level. One of the key improvements from early 2021 was an apparent agreement from Number 10 that campaign and communications content could be shared on a trusted basis earlier in its development, rather than when it had been finalised and was ready to be deployed. This would have been beneficial from the start and meant that representatives of the devolved nations could have given an early steer on the likely views of our Ministers on the materials, as well as the extent to which there might be a conflict with rules or policy in force.
46. Although campaign and marketing materials were being developed and delivered at pace in each of the four nations, efforts were made to share these in advance of publication in order to give an awareness of what was being prepared, and whether they would cause confusion to the public if they were run across the UK. Advance sharing of this material improved from early 2021 onwards, which also reflected more structured engagement among governments, particularly at First Ministerial level with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.
47. The UK Cabinet Office had significantly larger resources and budgets for agencies and media buying than the three devolved nations, and therefore the impact of campaign material which did not reflect different rules was greater. The level of funding for the Welsh Government's communications strategies was determined by Welsh Ministers through the normal Ministerial Advice process through the pandemic. Most of the paid-for campaign work undertaken was via the Health and Social Services communications team under the Diogelu Cymru – Keep Wales Safe brand.
48. Prior to May 2020 there was no dedicated budget for communications and funding was provided on an ad hoc basis from policy/emergency budgets which totalled £422,000 between March 2020 and May 2020.

49. Between May 2020 and March 2023, a further £19.5 million was agreed via Ministerial Advice (MAs) for communications;

- a. MA-VG-1544-20 approved funding for an ongoing pan-Wales COVID-19 Public Information Campaign (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-23/INQ000221168**).
- b. MA-VG-2390-20 approved funding for COVID-19 funding for NHS stabilisation for 2020-21 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-24/INQ000281793**). This included the approval of a dedicated budget of up to £3 million to support the Keep Wales Safe public facing campaign from Sept 2020 – March 2021.
- c. MA-EM-2618-21 which provided additional Covid response funding for the HSS MEG for the second six months of 2021-22, (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-25/INQ000103980**). This included an attribution to the ongoing communications programmes which cover areas such as vaccination, TTP and making good choices in accessing healthcare.
- d. MA-EM-1326-22 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-26/INQ000282091**) approved funding for Help Us Help You and Keep Wales Safe Public Information campaigns 2022/2023.
- e. MA-VG-1227-21 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-27/INQ000145111**) which was for the allocation of £380 million NHS Covid funding. This MA approved the holding of £6 million to enable NHS related communications programmes to continue until 30 September 2022.

50. Other Ministerial Advice where funding for communications campaigns were agreed include:

- a. MA/JH/1247/20 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-28/INQ000235727**) approved funding to develop a violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) Coronavirus communications campaign under the 'Live Fear Free' banner.
- b. MA-JJ-1093-20 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-29/INQ000136771**) which approved funding to extend the youth homelessness communications campaign – to focus on COVID-19.
- c. MA/KS/1076/20 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-30/INQ000116765**) which **approved funding** to develop a campaign and associated creative assets to communicate the practical and financial support available to businesses in Wales from the Welsh Government in response to Covid-19.
- d. MA-KS-0290-21 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-31/INQ000177007**) which approved funding for Business Wales Marketing to develop and implement a

campaign and associated creative assets to communicate the business support services, available through Business Wales within the context of the pandemic and as the economy starting to re-open

- e. MA/KS/1576/20 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-32/INQ000350771**) which approved funding for Business Wales marketing between June 2020-March 2021 to develop and implement a campaign and associated creative assets to communicate the practical support available to businesses in Wales from the Welsh Government, responding to the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak through to the recovery period and beyond.
- f. MA/DET/0691/21 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-33/INQ00035076**) which approved funding for the business plan for Tourism and Marketing for 2021/22; and proposals for capital and revenue expenditure to support the recovery phase for the tourism and hospitality sector, including £5.330m for comms and marketing campaigns.
- g. MA/KW/1354/20 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-34/INQ000350769**) which approved funding to support communications with parents/carers/workforce in relation to the operations of schools and Covid 19 during Spring /Summer 2021.
- h. MA/KW/2048/20 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-35/INQ000350812**) which approved £250,000 to deliver communication campaigns to raise awareness of the student finance support in academic years 2020/21 and 2021/22. The campaign was halted when the pandemic started and £26,934.81 from this budget was re-allocated to support a campaign (working with DFE and Scottish Government, and the HE Covid Working Group in Wales) to ensure students and parents were aware to the rules when leaving university to travel home from Christmas.
- i. MA/KS/2596/20 (exhibited as **WG/M2B/CD-01-36/INQ176999**) to approve funding of £1m, to support the marketing and communications activities required to tackle the rise in unemployment through various engagement strategies.

51. Paid-for communications work was extremely important and was complemented by owned media on Welsh Government channels and via partners, media work from Ministers and others, and the regular televised press conferences.

52. During times when the situation was changing rapidly informal, bilateral official-level discussions between the communications leads in each of the four nations also took place ahead of several inter-governmental Ministerial meetings in order to provide

briefing and identify points of contention and potential mitigations, for example proposing amendments to communication creatives in order to remove inconsistencies with current rules in one of the four nations.

53. There were occasions during the pandemic where communications and campaign materials from the UK Government were published in Wales against the wishes of Welsh Ministers. For example, when the 'Stay Alert' messaging was introduced in England in May 2020, the UK Government's media buying strategy was UK-wide. The First Ministers of Wales and Scotland formally objected to this (given the key message and legal injunction in those nations remained 'Stay Home'). It is my recollection that both the First Minister and the First Minister of Scotland expressed opposition to the 'Stay Alert' messaging at the COBR meeting on the afternoon of 10 May 2020, and said campaign material featuring this should not be run by the UK Government in either Scotland or Wales. Sky News reported this on the evening of the same day. I do not have access to any specific inter-governmental correspondence on this.

54. I recall being contacted by phone by the UK Government's Executive Director of Communications on 5 May where we discussed the possible shift away from the 'Stay Home' policy and what might follow in terms of messaging from the UK Government. A detailed readout from me to colleagues and associated considerations are exhibited at **WG/M2B/CD-01-37/INQ000281683**.

55. As the readout sets out, we discussed potential changes in UK Government messaging, but it appeared that no settled decisions had yet been taken at that point. We weren't given advance notice of the 'Stay Alert' campaign prior to its introduction in England. My recollection is that the first we were aware of "Stay Alert" was in the Sunday Telegraph on the morning of Sunday 10 May – which was the day of the COBR meeting itself. It was at this meeting where the First Ministers made their views clear. The "Stay Alert" campaign then commenced in England on 11th May 2020.

56. In light of this, the Cabinet Office made efforts at very short notice to restrict the media buying to England only, but this gave an early indication of the complexity of delivering different messages to different parts of the UK.

57. The four nations Directors of Communications group was established in order to try and facilitate advance sharing of messaging and content and avoid the situation that arose around “Stay Alert”. Although it took a while for this to become routine, as set out elsewhere in the statement, it was a useful and regular forum for these discussions.

58. The “Stay Alert” campaign was subsequently criticised by a number of academics and behavioural science experts, for example King’s College London who noted in a published article on 20 May 2020, exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-38/ INQ000282299** refers, that:

“The new “stay alert” message, by contrast, was met with criticism from the scientific community. The level of scientific input into the change in messaging has also been questioned. Furthermore, the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all rejected the new message, meaning there is no longer consensus in the advice that is being provided.”

59. The Cabinet Office had purchased high profile ‘cover wraps’ for several UK newspapers to promote the new messaging. Very few of these had Welsh-specific editions so there was no practical means of differentiating between the different messages in different nations, and therefore Welsh readers of these papers were not receiving messaging appropriate to the rules in place here. During the pandemic, as now, the relative weakness of the Welsh written press meant that much of the Welsh population received their news via UK-wide newspapers produced in London rather than ones originating in Wales.

60. Our focus groups sometimes reported confusion about their understanding of the rules in place in Wales as compared with England. For example, a focus group report commissioned by the Welsh Government from Britain Thinks dated 21 May 2020 highlighted that participant voiced regret and concern that the UK is no longer taking a joined-up approach to managing the pandemic across all four nations (see para 2. page 2. of Exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-39/INQ000282289** for full details) and that all participants voiced a strong preference for a joined-up, UK-wide response. It was felt that taking different approaches has caused confusion and risks leading to an increase in the spread of the virus. (see para 2. page 3. of the above exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-39/INQ000282289**, for full details).

61. The issue of accuracy of messaging in the four nations was raised at Ministerial, official and communications levels throughout the pandemic, including COBR, Four Nations Ministerial calls with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, as well as the various officials' co-ordination groups.
62. We continued to press for UK Ministers and UK Government communications content to be more specific as to when the measures under discussion related to England only in devolved areas, in particular their press conferences which were televised across the UK, and the Prime Minister's broadcasts to the nation.
63. In my view, the effectiveness of this was mixed. There remained press conferences on fully devolved areas that made no distinction between policy in England and Wales. For example, the then UK Education Secretary gave a Downing Street press conference on 16 May 2020 which I exhibit at **WG/M2B/CD-01-40/INQ000282296** in which his opening statement did not mention "England" or "Wales" at any point. Neither did the then UK Health Secretary's statement on 4 May 2020 which I exhibit at **WG/M2B/CD-01-41/INQ000282295** which referred only to "Britain".
64. In parallel with our efforts to influence the UK Government's presentation, we used our own press conferences, which were televised on BBC Wales throughout the pandemic, to communicate directly with people in Wales about the rules in place here. We worked closely with the Welsh and particularly UK media to build their understanding of devolution, particularly as it applied to the different rules in place in Wales and England.
65. Our social media channels were also important in reaching people in Wales directly in order to highlight that decisions on handling the pandemic in Wales were being made by Welsh Ministers. Examples of messages with substantial reach can be found in exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-42/INQ000282297**.
66. Future confusion could be avoided by a more rigorous approach at every level to distinguishing between actions and measures being taken in each of the four nations of the UK, and in particular the UK Government being clear in all its public messaging as to when it is speaking in a purely English context.
67. At the same time, there were occasions where co-ordination between UK Government and Welsh Government communications activities worked well, for example, we agreed in late 2021 that the UK Government should run their "Stop Covid Hanging

Around” campaign in Wales. Its primary focus on ventilation then allowed Keep Wales Safe to focus on other behaviours such as social distancing and self-isolation.

Wales specific issues

68. Given that the majority of the decisions taken in relation to the management of the pandemic and the operational response were devolved and taken by Welsh Ministers, the communications profession played a key role in public health messaging to the people of Wales throughout the pandemic.
69. The differing rules specific to Wales were a significant challenge to communicate, however, as set out at paragraph 15 and in paras 438 to 448 of the corporate statement M2B/WG/01, the communications profession developed the single overarching brand ‘Diogelu Cymru - Keep Wales Safe’.
70. In 2020 the Ipsos Mori survey was used to gain insight into public awareness, attitudes and behaviours. A Wales specific boost to the questions was organised by colleagues in Knowledge and Analytical Services who shared relevant insights and information on a regular basis. An example of these reports can be found in exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-43/INQ000281775**. A full schedule of surveys, focus groups and social listening reports that were carried out in 2020 is listed in exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-44/INQ000350770** and all reports have been shared with the public Inquiry.
71. Cabinet Office colleagues also shared the results of their home nations polling activity from mid-April 2020 until June.
72. We started using social listening activity in June 2020. The first report focussed on BAME communities and vulnerable groups, looking at social media conversation and sentiment between 18-22 June around the Test Trace Protect activity. Social media listening became embedded in the Keep Wales Safe campaign from Nov 2020 onwards when we appointed a dedicated digital agency. The reports initially produced monthly to look at key conversation topics online, sentiment and emotional response to campaign messaging. We also carried out daily social listening and produced reports. An example of the social listening reports can be found in exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-45/INQ000282290**.

73. We undertook extensive focus group testing in all parts of Wales, and there was universal approval for Diogelu Cymru - Keep Wales Safe as an overarching message both to explain our approach but also to help people understand their role in avoiding behaviours which could spread the virus and risk a second peak.
74. We were already using the Diogelu Cymru - Keep Wales Safe message alongside Stay Home, Save Lives, which meant that shifting to this as a primary message was done organically and over time (as opposed to the overnight move by the UK Government from Stay Home to Stay Alert).
75. We took a decision to phase our approach to the campaign, allowing it to flex to reflect the severity of the public health situation. For example, in December 2021, we launched a new “Disrupt” phase, which took on a much more urgent tone than the previous “Together” campaign. This was in response to increasing concern about rising Covid-19 rates, particularly the new Omicron variant. A statement was issued by the Minister for Health Eluned Morgan on the 6 December 2021 setting out the “disrupt the transmission phase which had launched that day and which I attach as **WG/M2B/CD-01-46/INQ000198583**.
76. As with the other phases of Diogelu Cymru – Keep Wales Safe, the creatives for the “Disrupt” campaign reinforced key behaviours and framed them around a new concept of “disrupt the transmission”, namely wearing face masks, vaccination and self-isolation/testing. The campaign utilised the following channels - ITV Wales, S4C, ITV on demand, Channel 4 on Demand, Sky regional and Sky on Demand, radio, including digital radio and Spotify, out of home: digital poster sites in shopping centres and bus stops, press advertising, social media advertising such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube, digital advertising, and PR and engagement, working with influencers and partners to deliver messages via authentic voices.
77. Throughout the pandemic, BBC Wales ran Public Information Films (PIFs) of our campaign creatives between programmes in Wales, which, along with the televised press conferences, reached very large audiences. We worked closely with BBC Wales at both an editorial and corporate level to make sure that the relevant communications and content were within their guidelines, including around the May 2021 Senedd election period.

78. By winter 2021, the Diogelu Cymru - Keep Wales Safe campaign reached over 91% of adults in Wales, and the Ipsos-MORI survey found that 83% continue to report feeling well informed about what behaviours could help reduce the spread of the virus.

Data modelling / behavioural management

79. The communications profession, as with Ministers and policy officials, received data modelling from the Technical Advisory Cell within the Welsh Government. No separate data modelling relating to the pandemic was commissioned from within communications teams as it was important to have a single, scientifically and statistically assured set of data for all parts of the pandemic response to work from. A subgroup of the Technical Advisory Group was established which had a focus on communication and behavioural insight. More information about the Technical Advisory Group and its subgroups can be found in M2B/TAG/01. The first meeting of the Technical Advisory Group subgroup, Risk Communications and Behavioural Insight (RCBI) was held on 22 July 2020, a record of the first meeting is recorded in the attached minutes as **WG/M2B/CD-01-47/INQ000198435** and the remaining records have been provided to the inquiry. The group ran from July 2020 and remains ongoing. From the early meetings, the Health and Social Services Communications team was involved in the RCBI group, attending as active members, representing the Welsh Government communications Covid-19 response. Although I was not a member of the RCBI, we were represented on this sub-group by the communications lead for the Keep Wales Safe campaign, so that learning and insight from the group could be taken on board as quickly as possible in our planning and delivery. I am comfortable that this was the most appropriate and effective level of representation for the communications profession on the sub-group.

80. The Health and Social Services communications leads were actively delivering the communication response whilst also being members of the group. The early establishment of these relationships allowed for regular discussions and easy access to advice on proposed messaging and communications approaches.

81. As far as possible, recommendations from the RCBI were built into our communication approach. Challenges including the pace of work, and the speed and regularity of changes due to the development of the pandemic, meant recommendations, co-production or testing was not always possible, but the close working relationship between the communications division and the subgroup served to avoid any

messaging issuing to the public that was counter to behavioural insight. The Communications Division did not commission advice directly from the RCBI.

82. The KWS campaign team did work very closely with members of the RCBI and often sought advice both during and outside of official meetings, sharing ideas and strategies as well as practical support. This happened in a fluid way, often via virtual meetings or email.
83. An area where the campaign team worked closely with the RCBI and took on board their advice was in the development of content for the website. The RCBI advised on the need for content to help people make informed decisions about behaviours relating to Covid transmission. This supported the change in emphasis from 'Can I' to 'Should I' as recommended in: *'Behavioural Insights to Support a post fire break Wales'* which can be seen in exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-48/INQ000281903**. Individual members of RCBI provided direct feedback to help shape the content that appeared on the Keep Wales Safe landing page which was signposted by the full range of advertising and PR activity.
84. An occasion when the situation moved rapidly resulting in RCBI advice not being used was in November 2020. TAG published a paper on behavioural insights to support a post firebreak on 9 Nov 2020 as seen in the above exhibit (**WG/M2B/CD-01-48/INQ000281903**). As this paper was being drafted, discussions with RCBI members and early drafts led to the development of a KWS campaign phase 'Together'. This was developed at pace between end of Oct 2020 and was due to be launched in January following the Christmas campaign activity. However, this campaign was withdrawn due to lockdown measures being re-introduced between Christmas 2020 and Spring 2021. The campaign was quickly redeveloped to focus on Stay Home messaging that ran in Jan 2021.
85. Communication representation at RCBI meetings also enabled recommendations to be fed directly into communication planning and briefing of contracted agencies for each stage of campaign development. Tight timescales meant it was not always feasible to wait for formal recommendations, but the ability to participate in discussions and understand key issues, misconceptions, audience insights, academic theories and expertise enabled the team to quickly feed into 'live' campaign development and delivery.

86. It was also helpful to support discussions and recommendations that changing behaviour cannot always be achieved through communications alone, and other interventions are needed. This advice was also reflected in RCBI papers.

Dealing with Disinformation and Misinformation

87. Dealing with disinformation misinformation is set out in the corporate statement referenced M2B/WG/01.

88. Great care was taken in our external communications to be as clear and accurate as possible. While there were no instances of significant incorrect information being provided to the public there were times when we had to get information out on social media as quickly as possible, and in doing so, interpret what was regulation and what was guidance which resulted in the post shown in exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-49/INQ000282298** being issued in error and withdrawn. This was the only occasion when we had to withdraw incorrect information that was provided to the public.

89. Additionally, there were occasions where the sheer volume of documents and content in relation to guidance for different sectors of the economy meant that there were times when regulations had moved on, but there was a lag in updating or removing guidance. This resulted in the potential for incorrect or outdated information being seen by the public. An example of this was when the Welsh Government COVID-19 funeral guidance needed updating in November 2020. A decision was made to remove the funeral guidance and replace it with a holding message stating that the guidance was 'being updated'. This ensured that inaccurate guidance was not available on the site. The holding message was added on 16 November 2020 and the new guidance was published on GOV.WALES on 7 December 2020. The same process was used on other occasions when there was going to be a lag in updating guidance. Our use of core scripts and early sharing of material with trusted partners such as the police and local authorities minimised the risk of confused or contradictory messages, despite the complexity of the regulations in place during parts of the pandemic. We relied heavily on GOV.WALES as a single trusted platform, which received almost 25 million visits during 2020 and well over 20 million visits in 2021.

90. We received a small number of media queries relating to claims of Ministerial breaches of regulations. Lines of response were issued via the press office, informed by internal legal advice. I have attached, as exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-50/**

INQ000282294 a schedule of the media requests received, and the responses provided by the press office to these requests.

Evaluating the effectiveness of communication

91. Our approach to evaluating the effectiveness of Welsh Government communications is set out in the corporate statement M2B -WG-01.
92. We kept the reach and targeting of our public health messaging under constant review during the pandemic, adjusting channels and media buying to reflect this. Our media buying and channel selection was advised by our media buying agency in order to reach as many people in Wales as possible, as well as segmentation for particular audiences or groups as I have set out above.
93. Our focus group work and polling enabled us to assess the extent to which our messages and communications were resonating with the public, the channels by which people were accessing those messages, and the likely reaction to potential future restrictions in different circumstances.
94. The focus groups were established in April 2020 and were funded from repurposed allocated funding. I attach as exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-51/INQ000145500** a Ministerial advice paper which relates to the establishment of focus group activities.
95. There were periods when responses from focus groups were less positive. These were often at times when rules had been introduced which some members of the public felt were counter-intuitive or internally incoherent, with complex messaging needed to explain them. The ban on the sale of non-essential items in supermarkets as part of the regulations imposed during the firebreak period attracted high profile media attention and negative public comment in focus groups and through social listening. This was fed back to both Ministers and official-level groups such as ExCovid in order to inform future policy-making approaches.
96. However, it should be noted that shifts in public sentiment were not necessarily linked to the severity of restrictions or messaging. Many participants in focus groups welcomed what they perceived as a more cautious approach in Wales, and this was reflected in our messaging, which appealed more to people and communities to keep themselves safe, rather than celebrating freedoms as rules were eased.

97. Communications was firmly embedded in the policy and decision-making process within the Welsh Government during the pandemic. As part of key groups such as ExCovid, HPAG and others within the overall government structures, and providing advice to Cabinet, communications professionals had an ongoing awareness of the direction of policy-making and were able to provide the latest communications advice to the Covid-19 21 Day Review team as they weighed up various options around policy and regulations.

98. One of the main challenges during the pandemic was the pace of decision-making and implementation that was required. In normal circumstances, it would be best practice to take a short period after a decision was made in order for a full communications and handling plan to be worked up. In reality, there were many occasions where decisions needed to be made and then communicated in a matter of hours.

99. Members of my team adapted their processes to reflect this and became accustomed to turning around communications material and briefings to very short timescales. For example, pre-pandemic, it would be standard practice for major government decisions to have detailed written communications and handling plans, worked up over days if not weeks. During the pandemic, this was condensed into much shorter timescales, and the fact that virtually all government communications channels were focused on the pandemic meant that we were able to use these very rapidly to deliver our communications activities. Early engagement with policy colleagues meant that we could undertake contingency planning for a variety of potential options which could then be delivered rapidly once final decisions were made. During the imposition of Local Health Protection Areas in autumn 2020, we prepared material in advance which could be adapted very rapidly for specific areas, in order to support communications teams in local authorities and other partners, which was greatly appreciated.

Lessons Learned

100. The Communications profession had undertaken a wide-ranging programme of professional improvement and development during 2019, including greater focus and expertise around digital and social media, resourcing and greater co-ordination between teams across Government. Exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-52/INQ000282303** provides an overview of the programme in Spring 2019, including work already in train. Exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-53/INQ000282304** is an update paper for Ministers in January

2020 which provides an assessment of progress. The most important element of the changes implemented by January 2020 was the new Digital Centre of Excellence, whose role was to improve our use of digital channels and content produced by the Welsh Government. A new more unified approach to communications planning had also been implemented and an Annual Communications Plan was in preparation to run from April 2020 onwards. This work was paused as all communications work was focused on the pandemic. While there was not a single communications budget across Government, once the pandemic struck, communications and marketing activity for all departments pivoted to promoting public health and Keep Wales Safe messages to their relevant sectors. Exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-54/INQ000282301** is a stocktake of the progress of the work in June 2020, illustrating how the pandemic accelerated the development of social media use, with live events with Ministers and improved social listening activities, reporting into the wider organisation.

101. Communicating during the pandemic required even greater co-ordination of messaging, more intensive media handling, and more accessible digital content than at any time since the start of devolution. The 2019 improvements meant that the communications profession was well placed to deliver this, as well as learning rapid lessons from the public response to the NPIs, test and trace, and vaccination programmes for example.

102. In 2021, the senior communications team, which included the departmental heads of communication and leads for each communications discipline, came together for a more formal rapid lessons learned exercise to discuss what positive elements and ways of working should be retained by the profession into the future. It was agreed that the closer working and co-ordination between departments had been extremely positive and recommended that we should continue the approach of all communications disciplines working to a common purpose and plan. However, while the ability to turn round communications activity and content in a very short time was recognised, we did not recommend that this should remain routine outside pandemic conditions, and robust forward planning and strategy remained an important component of effective communications. Exhibit **WG/M2B/CD-01-55/INQ000282300** sets out an overview of the discussions, particularly looking at the positive and negative reflections on the pandemic ways of working within communications and suggestions for future improvement.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed:

Personal Data

Date:

November 2nd 2023