

Witness Name: Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

Statement No: Module 2C, Statement 1

Dated: 12 March 2024

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF Carál Ní Chuilín

I, Carál Ní Chuilín MLA, will say as follows:

My Role

1. I am currently a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I was appointed Principal Deputy Speaker on 6 February 2024.
2. I joined the Sinn Féin Council team in 2003. I have been a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly for Belfast North since 2007. I have served in the Northern Ireland Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure from 16 May 2011 until 15 of March 2016.
3. I participated in the Committee for Communities from January 2020 to June 2020. I was appointed as Minister for Communities on a temporary basis on 15 June 2020 until 15 December 2020 due to the ill-health of my colleague Deirdre Hargey.
4. As Minister in the Department of Communities from 15 June 2020 to December 2020 I had to step into Deirdre Hargey's role. I had only one day's notice that I was to serve as Minister. I was aware that the Department's overall aim was *'tackling disadvantage and building sustainable communities.'* My responsibilities included reviewing policy and legislative issues in areas such as Social Security and Welfare, Housing, Culture, Sports and Leisure, Arts, Historic and Cultural Affairs and Employment.

5. As Minister I had to ensure continuity of leadership within the Department and work with other Ministers to ensure continuation of the Department's aims whilst Deirdre Hargey was unavailable. As Minister for Communities, I focused my departmental priorities on inclusion and tackling disadvantage by helping those most in need.
6. The Inquiry will be aware that I sat on the Committee for Communities meetings on a weekly basis from January 2020 to June 2020, so I was aware of the work-being undertaken by Deirdre Hargey and the Department of Communities.
7. From 15 June to 15 December 2020, I was responsible for ensuring the continuity of essential services within the Department including social security payments and housing support. I was also responsible for engaging with the voluntary and community sector, community workers, councils, art groups, sporting bodies and organisations, faith-based organisations, grassroots groups, and cultural organisations at this time.
8. The Department of Communities was responsible for policy and legislative change in areas such as Social Security and Welfare, Housing and Culture, Sports and Leisure, Historic and Cultural Affairs and Employment. I had to ensure continuity in leadership, the continuation of social security payments and housing support during this period. As Minister I was responsible for engaging fully and co-operating with other Ministers, voluntary groups sporting organisations, sporting bodies and cultural organisations at this time to deliver help to those most in need.
9. During the relevant period the most senior civil servants I would have worked with were Tracy Meharg, Moira Doherty, Colum Boyle and Beverley Wall. Contact was mainly through the Department's Permanent Secretary and the Private Office. Between 15 June 2020 and 15 December 2020, the private secretaries for my office were Roisin Thompson and Louise Anderson.
10. At this time my special adviser was Ronan McGinley. His main role was to support me as Minister, to work with the Department and to provide political advice and assistance. My special adviser had to work collaboratively with civil servants to deliver my priorities as a Minister. Ronan McGinley was in post for the duration of the pandemic.

How the pandemic developed and the response

Impact of absence of power-sharing

11. I have been asked about the collapse of power-sharing in the North and long-term impact upon the response of the Executive to the pandemic. As the Inquiry will know I was not a Minister until 15 June 2020, therefore I cannot comment on the Executive's response prior to 15 June 2020. As an observer, I believe the absence of an Executive from January 2017 until January 2020 had a negative impact on the health and social care system, due to serious financial deficit caused by austerity and an absence of long-term planning.
12. I am aware that before the Executive collapsed plans were in place to fundamentally transform the Health Service in the North. I believe that if the implementation of Bengoa had occurred the health system would have been better placed to meet the needs of the population during the pandemic.
13. I have been referred to comments made by the then Health Minister at the Northern Ireland Assembly Health Committee on 5 November 2020 *'our health system has been underfunded and understaffed for the past 10 years. We cannot adapt or flex up...we do not have the staff or the ability to run the three health services.'* Official Report: Minutes of Evidence, Committee for Health meeting on Thursday 5 November 2020.
14. I agree with that statement, our health system has been significantly adversely impacted by austerity, and the North had, even prior to the pandemic, the worst waiting lists across these islands, because of understaffing and underfunding.
15. I have been referred to observations made by the former First Minister in her statement to Module 1 in which she states *"I was however conscious at times that the Senior Officials may have preferred meetings to be limited to officials only so that they could speak more freely...There is a balance to be struck between ensuring Ministers have as much information as possible, or that they feel they need, to make decisions for which they are accountable, and potentially hampering the operational work of officials"* [INQ000205274 paragraph 19].
16. That was not my experience, during my period in office as Minister. My experience of meetings and groups with senior officials and Ministers was positive. I felt that civil servants felt free to speak frankly and it was my perception that civil servants welcomed the involvement of Ministers and welcomed us taking a leadership role. I am not aware

of any meetings where officials were not able to speak freely or forthrightly about the situation.

Overarching view

17. I have been asked how I would characterise the Executive's Committee's approach to Wave 1 of the pandemic. The Inquiry will appreciate that I wasn't a Minister at the relevant time so any comment I make is from my perspective as an MLA. However, in my capacity as an MLA I was watching events unfold in China and then Italy, France and other parts of Europe it was my belief that it was only a matter of time before Covid reached the North.
18. I was in the early months concerned about the continuation of significant sporting events which involved large gatherings of people, such as Cheltenham in England and the Ireland- Italy rugby game in Dublin. I was concerned about the number of people from here who travel for these events. I believed that both the British and Irish Governments should have acted immediately to stop mass gatherings and limit travel.
19. I have been asked whether, after Wave 1 of the pandemic, steps were taken to analyse or consolidate learning from the response to Wave 1 and further, whether any analysis was done to assess the impact of the pandemic, or the restrictions imposed to mitigate the pandemic, on vulnerable groups.
20. I am now aware that a '*Lessons Learned*' document was prepared by Dr Andrew McCormick. This '*Lessons Learned*' document was prepared before I took up office, it examined issues around the civil contingency response and identified lessons to be learnt for the future. I don't however believe that it was a document I was aware of at the time.
21. Throughout my period as Minister for Communities I fully engaged with voluntary groups, charities, sporting organisations, sporting bodies and cultural organisations to ascertain the impact of the pandemic and the measures adopted on those most vulnerable in our communities. My Department engaged with the public on an ongoing basis, particularly with those who stood to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the restrictions. The outreach work carried out by my Department was one means whereby the Executive was kept informed about the impact of the pandemic and the measures implemented to address it.

22. When I stepped into Deirdre Hargey's role on 15 June 2020. I was aware of the need for consistency and to continue Deirdre's engagement with the public. The Department had a number of outreach programmes, and I was aware of my responsibility as Minister to continue to supervise the Department's engagement with the public. Under my leadership, Beverly Walls Deputy Secretary of Strategic Policy and Professional Services continued to engage with the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Leadership Group. The Inquiry will be aware that my colleague Deirdre Hargey established the Emergency Planning Group (EPG) on the 9 March 2020 and the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Leadership Group (ELG) with the first meeting taking place on 20 March 2020. These groups in particular were communicating directly with the Department and this enabled me as a Minister to have constant communication and feedback from the community and voluntary sector.
23. This direct engagement with the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Leadership Group, and with local charities, sporting organisations, local sporting clubs and local businesses allowed the Department to keep itself informed, to analyse what worked well and what could be improved upon and importantly to learn about the impact of the pandemic and the impact of restrictions on those most vulnerable.

Decision-making after March 2020

24. I have been referred to comments made by the CMO at the Executive Committee meeting on 15 June 2020 where he is noted as saying he was "*extremely uncomfortable with move to less than 2m.*" The DAERA Minister, Edwin Poots appears to have said that the Executive was following science "*currently unproven, best guess*". The CSA disagreed – "*respectfully disagrees re science – always based on uncertainty...decisions shd be informed by science but need to take other considerations into a/c – economic*" [INQ000065730].
25. This was my first day stepping into my new role, as an MLA I was aware that the Executive's approach was that decisions in relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions should be informed by the expert medical and scientific advice. I shared that view. I was also aware, and understood, that the science could not be expected to be certain, but it operated as a guide to the Executive, as to the impact any decisions we made, would have on transmission rates.

26. I believe the catalyst for the increased rates of Covid-19 in the North in August 2020 was the relaxation of restrictions in July 2020. This is based on my understanding that there was usually a 2–3-week period for easements to impact upon transmission rates. [INQ000048485].
27. I have been asked whether there was resistance to, or non-compliance with protective measures [INQ000048485]. At this time the Executive received advice from the CMO / CSA on the issue of reopening of pubs. Both experts referenced '*relaxed attitudes of some people towards social distancing*'. There is reference in the Executive Committee minutes of 13 August 2020 by the Health Minister in the context of the relaxation of restrictions to '*complacency*' I agree it was more '*complacency*' and '*relaxed attitudes*' rather than resistance or non-compliance. In my experience most people followed the rules and understood why the restrictions were necessary.
28. On 20 August 2020 the "*Executive agreed...imposition of restrictions in response to high rates of transmission in local areas should not be adopted at this time but this option should be kept open*" **INQ000065453** The Health Minister is noted to have observed "*rather than regional lockdowns. Look at local area enforcement*". Thereafter in September 2020 localised restrictions were imposed and in November 2020, as reported to the Health Committee the *R* rate had increased.
29. I have considered whether what happened from August 2020 onwards demonstrates that restrictions were eased too quickly or without adequate planning. I do not believe so. It was not possible to exactly predict what would happen over the Summer, but as Ministers we were aware that once relaxations came in then transmission rates would rise, it was my perception on the ground, that most people remained cautious.
30. As Ministers we were aware of the impact of restrictions on people, not only their health and safety but also the impact of the restrictions on people's mental health and emotional well-being. At this time Ministers took the view that people needed some relief from restrictions, after much debate Ministers formed the view that it was better for the relaxation of restrictions to happen over the summer months because with the better weather there were more opportunities for people to be outside where transmission was less likely compared to indoors.
31. I have been asked why the civil contingencies structures were not reinstated immediately in August when transmission rates increased. Given my role in the

Department of Communities my role in relation to civil contingency structures was limited but it was felt that the existing structures were working well.

32. At the Executive Committee meeting on 1 October 2020, the First Minister “*advised that an appropriate point had been reached to consider and implement a reset of the Executive’s approach to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic. FM outlined Exec may wish to consider, including other issues, reference to the Framework for Decisions Making and inclusion of family impacts in the decision-making process*” [INQ000048491].
33. I understand that the rationale for a reset was because transmission rates were rising and there was a concern that we need to be prepared for the next phase of the virus, which would be combined with the predicted Winter flu spike and would significantly impact on the health system.
34. The reset took the form of ‘*a stocktake*’, that is, to get the Executive to work more collaboratively and collegiately to address issues such as trying to balance the health consequences of increased transmission rates with other factors, including the mental health and well-being consequences of further restrictions, and the economic impacts of further restrictions. I was in favour of a reset / stocktake.
35. When the ‘*reset*’ happened it was not dramatic in my opinion. I fully supported the ‘reset’ and felt it was appropriate. It was designed to ensure that in our thinking and approach moving forward, we were alive to issues, such as the impact of restrictions on family life, mental health and the economy while still ensuring that we took measures to protect public health.
36. During the Northern Ireland Health Committee meeting on 15 October 2020 there was a suggestion that modelling work had significantly underestimated the development of the pandemic in the North. I don’t have a specific recollection of this observation however all Ministers knew that modelling was not an exact science, Ministers knew we had to attach weight to the science and the data, but we also had to carefully consider other factors such as the impact on the public’s mental health and emotional wellbeing. Ministers had to take a holistic approach to planning. The handwritten notes of the Executive meeting of 15 October 2020 clearly illustrate the work I was doing in my Department at this time in terms of planning.

37. I do not believe that Ministers were blindsided by transmission rates in Autumn 2020. I believe that the Executive always worked hard for the best possible outcome but also preparing for the worst-case scenario.
38. At the Executive Committee meeting on 8 October 2020, the CMO is reported to have said *"never more concerned as CMO than I am now. Short window of opportunity. Sooner rather than later – intervention now to avoid situation in 2/3 weeks"* [INQ000065756].
39. As a Minister I was extremely alarmed at the developments as of 8 October 2020, and I considered the position to be very grave. It was clear to me that the factors that contributed to the increase in transmission rates was society re-opening in August together with cases of non-compliance. I wanted immediate action by the Executive.
40. At the same Executive meeting Minister Poots said *"people are not listening to us....not going after where problem exists. Afraid to say where problem is"* [INQ000065756]. I have been asked about my understanding of these comments. I am aware that on 13 October 2020 DUP Minister Edwin Poots said the difference in transmission between nationalist and unionist areas was *"around six to one"* - *Coronavirus: Edwin Poots says he did not link virus with religion – BBC News 21 October 2020 & Coronavirus: Edwin Poots says some parties holding back lockdown easing – BBC News 9 June 2020*). I believe that the DAERA Minister was implying that there was a greater problem in Nationalist areas which in my opinion sectarianised the pandemic in a manner which was entirely unjustified. Ultimately, it is for Mr Poots to explain what he meant by this comment.
41. I do not believe that there was a fear of identifying locations by reference to transmission rates, at different times during the pandemic transmission rates fluctuated geographically and difference factors impacted on different communities at different times. The minutes of the meetings clearly show Ministers being specific about areas experiencing higher rates of transmission.
42. I consider that the decision taken on 16 October 2020 to implement the *'circuit breaker'* was the correct decision. I believe that this decision could have been taken earlier, for example on the 8 October 2020 when the Department of Health presented a paper to the Executive which showed a very worrying trend in relation to the increase in transmission.

43. The Inquiry will see that the paper from the Department of Health did not make any specific recommendations however as noted the CMO stated "*never more concerned as CMO than I am nowshort window of opportunity.....interventions now to avoid a worse situation in 2-3 weeks*" [INQ000065756]. As a Minister I was alarmed I believe that the decision to implement the '*circuit breaker*' was the correct decision but it should have been taken earlier.
44. The minutes of the Executive Committee meeting on 13 October 2020 record that the DAERA Minister commented that there was "*no science, just assumptions...want to see science- didn't get science. Sick of assumptions from experts*" [INQ000065753]. This criticism was not representative of the views held by me or other Ministers. During my time on the Executive, I thought the medical evidence was well presented by the CSA and CMO.

Executive Meeting of 9 November 2020

45. The proposal at the meeting of 9 November 2020 was that the existing restrictions would be extended for two weeks [INQ000116294]. I agreed with this proposal. The Inquiry will see from the minutes that this Executive meeting was very difficult. I have been asked to comment on why this proposal was so controversial. The controversy stemmed from DUP opposition to the two-week extension, and it appears to me that it is for the DUP Ministers to explain why an extension of two weeks was considered by them to be so controversial.
46. On 9 November 2020 the CMO clearly explained why the two-week extension to the restrictions was necessary to avoid excess deaths. It seemed to me, and to the majority of Ministers, that this was a relatively modest extension which could save lives. I believed that this was a sensible proposal considering the available evidence.
47. The Minister for Agriculture Mr Poots called for a cross-community vote which the Inquiry will note had not happened previously in the context of decision making around Covid restrictions. The Inquiry will be aware on the 10 November 2020 that all Ministers except the DUP Ministers voted in favour of the Departments of Health's proposal. Unfortunately, because the DUP Ministers voted against the measure did not pass.

48. At this meeting of 9 November 2020, I complained about flaws in the modelling. I was concerned because much of the modelling was English based, and I was worried that local information was not being considered.
49. I was constantly alive to the responsibility of Ministers to interrogate the data to make sure that the Executive had the best information available to make decisions. I was very aware of the impact of restrictions upon vulnerable groups in the North and those who would be disproportionately affected by them. I wanted Ministers to consider all options and thoroughly analyse all evidence before implementing further restrictions.
50. I was also responsible for paying benefits and ensuring those most impacted by the restrictions were protected and helped as much as possible. As Minister I wanted to prepare as much as possible. I wanted as much clarity as possible so that I could ensure the Department had the necessary funds to help those who needed it.
51. I have been asked what brought the 9 November executive meeting to breaking point. I believe this was caused by the opposition of DUP Ministers in the face of a very clear warning from the CMO about the health consequences of not extending the restrictions, and their going on to veto the majority view of the Executive.
52. A SitRep dated 17 November 2020 recorded that "*The Executive will do all it can to "protect" as much of the Christmas period as possible, However Prof Ian Young said mid-December could be the "big risk period" (BBC News) [INQ000065956].* The need to save lives, reduce the spread of the virus, protect the capacity of the health service and provide support for workers and their families were the Executive's priorities in the run-up to the Christmas period.
53. Enabling people to spend Christmas together was a factor that was considered by the Executive when taking a holistic approach to restrictions and careful considering all issues. Allowing people to spend Christmas together was not driving the response to the pandemic at that time.

Behavioural science

54. The Executive Committee meeting on 19 November 2020 considered the Executive Paper E (20) 267 (c) Modelling the course of the Covid epidemic and the impact of different interventions and recommendations " *As much as we agree that we must be*

informed by the science, that science and the modelling can only support our decision-making – there is no one definitive and specific response or guide to the challenges we face”. The recommendation in the paper was as follows “it is recommended that the Executive considers the information above and concludes on the appropriate response” [INQ000048498]

55. As appears, in a letter sent to the Health Minister, Conor Murphy criticised the lack of a clear recommendation in the paper from the Health Minister and CMO/CSA. Given that as Ministers we wished to be guided by the science, I agree that a clear recommendation as to what measures would address rising transmission rates was what ought to have occurred, while recognising that the ultimate decision was a political one for Ministers. I believe that the failure to make a recommendation could have been a product of the difficult meeting on the 9 November 2020.
56. In the meeting of 19 November 2020, the Infrastructure Minister is reported to have said *“presented with medical / scientific advice 5 weeks ago. We chose not to act”*. The First Minister is recorded as responding *“had advice 5 weeks ago, made different decision. We had hoped R would fall, stay down during restrictions”* to which the CSA is noted to have added *“thought R would reduce further, stay down longer”*. The Justice Minister is said to have observed *“agreed 4 weeks, schools 2 weeks – clear advice from CSA, we took different decisions”* INQ000065739.
57. I genuinely believe there should have been an early intervention made in October. I believe that early intervention was necessary to save lives. The priority at that time should have been to keep transmission rates low and to keep the pressure off the health service, therefore action should have been taken in October. While aware of the economic and social difficulties around lockdown I believe decisions should have been taken sooner by the Executive to achieve a better outcome at that time.
58. At this time as Communities Minister, I had to make difficult decisions to try and protect lives. I was worried about significant sporting events taking place while people were fighting for their lives in Hospital. On Friday 16 October 2020 before the Coleraine and Ballymena United game I made the difficult decision that spectators should not be allowed to attend games. I made this decision to try to curb the spread of the virus and save lives.

59. I sent a letter on the 16 October 2020 to sporting bodies advising that it was "*necessary to stop spectators from attending sporting events following new coronavirus restrictions*". The Inquiry will be aware that later that night the First Minister Arlene Foster tweeted that fans are "*not banned*". The First Minister wrote "*the regulations do not ban spectators in the grounds of elite sports*". DUP Ministers Carla Lockhart and Sammy Wilson backed the First Minister's position. The gates were open, and fans unfortunately were allowed in. All I wanted to do, at that time, was to minimise the spread of the virus and save lives. I was extremely worried about people travelling, walking into the game, and walking around risking infection, whilst people in ICU were fighting for their lives. I believed that these measures would go some way towards preventing a further increase in numbers. Prior to making the decision to issue the letter on the 16 October 2020 I had spoken to the CMO and sought his advice. The CMO was fully supportive of my decision. I also secured written advice from the CMO on this issue.
60. I have been asked about the Executive's decisions over the period 3 December – 21 December. I was not in office from 16 December 2020, and I can therefore only assist the Inquiry about why we made the decisions we did on 3 December. On 3 December 2020 the Executive discussed the restrictions that would be put in place when the Regulations expired on 10 December 2020. The minutes of the meeting record that the Executive agreed the proposals "*as set out at Annex A to Executive Memorandum E (20) 277 (c) – Restrictions from 11 December 2020 and as amended following discussion*" [INQ000048501].
61. I have been asked to explain the Executive Committee's rationale for this approach. The Christmas period was very difficult because of the backdrop of the cross-community vote when the DUP blocked the restrictions proposed by the Health Minister. The veto by the DUP Ministers had resulted in lesser restrictions being in place and I believe that this probably contributed to a spike in transmission rates.
62. In December we were advised by the CSA that there was a new variant B117 which put more people at risk, therefore the Executive had a responsibility to consider the updated information and conduct a careful balancing exercise. At this time Ministers were also aware of the need to take on board people's mental health and well-being and the desire to see loved ones at Christmas, it was a very difficult decision.

63. I have been referred to the Witness statement from Holly Clark, Deputy Director of the Constitution and Rights Group NIO to Module 2 C states: "*As Christmas 2020 approached, the UK Government proposed a joint approach towards restrictions during this period with all Devolved Administrations. A joint statement to be issued by all UK jurisdictions regarding restrictions was then proposed on 16 December 2020Instead, the NIE adopted a different course regarding NPIs over the Christmas period*" INQ000148325. The Inquiry will be aware that I was no longer in office, 15 December 2020 was my last day in this role.
64. It was necessary for our Executive to react to the situation in the North. The different approach was a direct consequence of the unique situation here in the North. I believe it was right for the North to adopt its own approach in relation to Christmas. At this stage of the pandemic, people were aware that the Executive was framing its own response to the pandemic, where appropriate.
65. I have been asked about the Executive Covid Taskforce (ECT). I had no direct involvement with the ECT. However, I understand that it was established in December 2020 to respond to the evolving nature of the pandemic and to report directly to the Executive. The ECT monitored the ongoing work within Departments and reported to the Executive on the development and implementation of the overall strategy. I am aware that initially some Ministers raised concerns and questions about the ECT, for example the Health Minister was concerned about possible duplication of work. Concerns were raised by the Economy Minister that it would add an extra administrative burden, however I believe that the Ministers were reassured that it would report to the executive and could bring a more co-ordinated strategic approach to the work of the Executive.

Part 2: Overarching and thematic issues

Retirement of Sir David Sterling

66. I have been asked about the retirement of Sir David Sterling, who was acting Head of the Civil Service, and the delay in recruiting his replacement, Ms Jenny Pyper. Sir David Sterling retired at the end of August 2020, it was not my impression that Sir David's retirement had an adverse impact on the Executive's response to the pandemic.

67. I was not involved in, nor did I have any knowledge of, the recruitment process, I understand that the recruitment of the Head of the Civil Service was a civil service rather than an Executive exercise.

Scientific and medical advice to Ministers

68. I have been referred to the finding that there were “difficulties and tensions” which arose around the reporting of daily death figures [INQ0000001196] “*The Rapid, Focused External Review of Public Health Agency*”.
69. I am aware that there were issues with the gathering of data specific to the North. “*The Rapid, Focused External review of Public Health Agency*” [INQ000001196] found that there were “difficulties and tensions’ around the reporting of daily death figures. From my perspective I understood that there were issues with the production of reliable data, because of the lack of an effective test and trace model. Clearly from the Executive’s perspective, we wanted reliable figures on daily deaths, and the notes clearly indicate that this was an issue. It was extremely important for Ministers to have access to reliable data as soon as practicable and it is clearly not satisfactory that this was not the case.
70. Ministers needed reliable data to make sure we could implement measures such as lockdown in a timely manner. Ultimately, I was also aware that the modelling of data was not an exact science, it acted as a guide to assist the Executive in its decision-making. I wanted reliable data to allow me to calculate the payments which my Department would be responsible for. Reliable data would allow me to anticipate the number of covid related payment the Department would receive and to ensure we had the necessary funding.
71. While I was aware that there were issues about the reliability and availability of data, specific to the North to inform modelling given the absence of an effective test and trace strategy, it was nonetheless my perception that modelling was still a useful tool, and it was used by the Executive to assist in making decisions as to how to respond to the pandemic at different stages.
72. In terms of the ability of the Public Health Agency to play a significant role in the response to the pandemic, I think Ministers with greater knowledge of the Public Health Agency, would be better placed to answer that question.

73. I have been asked to provide an overview as to how scientific and expert advice was provided to Ministers as part of the decision-making process of the Executive Committee and about specific issues with the gathering of data in the North.
74. My approach in relation to decision making was to be guided by the advice being given by the CMO and CSA, as they had the medical and scientific expertise to assist us in our decision-making. The advice from CMO and CSA came in the form of written reports and oral briefings and this advice was provided directly to the Executive Committee.
75. As mentioned above, as a Minister I was also able to call the CMO and ask his opinion, which I did in October 2020 in relation to whether it was advisable for spectators to attend matches. Prior to issuing the letter on Friday 16 October 2020 and before making the difficult decision that spectators should not be allowed to attend games, I asked the CMO for his opinion and if this would help curb the spread of the virus and save lives. The CMO believed that these measures would help get the numbers down.
76. While my approach, and the general approach of the Executive, was to follow the science, Ministers did engage critically with the advice given and did explore issues with the experts.
77. I was aware that the CMO and CSA attended SAGE meetings, however I had no direct knowledge about the workings of SAGE but that I knew that our medical and scientific experts had access to the expertise at SAGE meetings.
78. While I was not in attendance at a presentation made by the CSA to Ministers about modelling, as I was not in post at the relevant time, like all Ministers I did benefit from the consistent advice being given to us at Executive meetings and I believe that I understood how it could assist in our decision-making as an Executive.
79. I have been asked about a statement made by Holly Clarke to Module 2C where she refers to concerns about SAGE publishing individual SAGE-calculated R numbers for the devolved administrations, as well as a UK-wide figure. *"In May 2020, SAGE advised against publishing individual SAGE-calculated R number in respect of the 4 nations, due to lower levels of confidence in R numbers for smaller geographical areas. It appears that this advice was not followed, and Devolved Administrations were*

notified that, going forward, Cabinet Office would publish figures calculated by SAGE in respect of all 4 nations, alongside the UK-wide figure. This caused concern amongst the Devolved Administrations about possible discrepancies between the SAGE/Cabinet Office figures and those published by them...following this it was agreed that each administration would continue to publish the R number in respect of their nation, but that publication would also note the estimate which had been calculated, but not published by SAGE..." [INQ000148325].

80. I found the R number to be a useful tool which assisted the Executive in its decision-making. I was aware that there were some concerns about the reliability of the R number in the North, however in I believe that the R number gave us a sense of whether the measures we were taking were working, if transmission rates were rising, we clearly needed to consider what further steps might be taken, if transmission rates were falling that suggested that measures were effective.
81. I was always very concerned about the data and the need to ensure Ministers had the best possible evidence. The Inquiry is aware that I raised concerns about modelling at the Executive meeting on 12 November 2020. I believed as Ministers it was important that we asked questions and explored issues with the experts to provide us with a sound basis for decision-making.
82. I am aware that two R numbers were published, the UK-wide number and the R number for the North, I can see that this may have caused confusion however, I believe that was appropriately addressed by information provided by the Department of Health to the media.
83. At the Executive Committee meeting on the 9 July 2020 the Health Minister advised that the use of the R number was being suspended and the Department was looking to use a wider set of figures. As will be appreciated this decision was taken by the Minister for Health, a relatively short time after my appointment. My understanding is that this decision was taken because transmission had reduced to such a level that it was no longer useful, however the Minister will be better placed than I am to answer this question.
84. I have been asked to explain the work of the Strategic Intelligence Group (SIG) and how the work of SIG was fed through to Ministers. I have no direct involvement with SIG.

85. As a Minister, I understood, the importance of behavioural science and management as part of the Executive's response to the pandemic. I understood the importance of getting accurate information out to the public and engaging directly with people and groups.
86. The late arrival of briefing papers or proposals before meetings of the Executive Committee was a consistent problem during my term of office. I believe this was mainly because we were moving at a faster than normal pace and with pressure to make decisions in response to evolving situations. The delay did result in a delay in the start-time of meetings on occasion and also resulted in meetings taking longer than might otherwise have been the case.
87. I have been asked about the reliability of the scientific advice which Ministers received and if it was received in a sufficiently timely manner. As mentioned above, prior to meetings there was always a lot of activity around papers and advice. Obviously, it would have been preferable to have received the scientific and expert advice earlier to allow Ministers a greater opportunity to consider the content, that said I believe everyone was working to the best of their ability under extreme pressure.
88. I believe that the scientific advice could have been clearer, as on occasion the advice was being presented without a recommendation, which I did not consider helpful.
89. I have been asked about whether the Executive had sufficient access to medical and scientific available to United Kingdom Government. I am aware that the CMO and CSA had access to the medical advice and scientific data and expertise available to and used by the United Kingdom Government. I am not aware of any concerns accessing this information.
90. I have been asked whether core decision makers, including Ministers had a sufficiently "*scientific mindset*" to grasp the scientific, medical, and mathematical concepts in order to understand the advice that we were being given. Speaking for myself, I felt that I understood the advice that we were being given, we had the opportunity to ask questions about the scientific information being provided to fully interpret the advice. I also understood that it was our role to make decisions, informed by the scientific advice.

Relationship with the United Kingdom

91. I have been asked to comment on the suggestion that the North by virtue of its dependence upon the United Kingdom as a source of expertise and guidance was aligned with it, particularly at the outset of the pandemic.
92. I was not a Minister at the outset of the pandemic therefore I am not able to comment on the relationship between the government in the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government in London at this time.
93. I have been asked whether the UK Government adequately involved Ministers from the Executive or senior civil servants in decision-making that impacted the North. I believe that the Ministers with direct engagement were the First and deputy First Minister and the Minister for Health, and it appears to me that they are best placed to answer this question, as I was not involved in these discussions.
94. I have been referred to the deputy First Minister's statement to Module 1 of this Inquiry, in which it was stated that *"actions by the British government, at times hindered our ability to reach consensus"* [INQ000183409]. I agree that if there was a misalignment between the actions of the British Government and the actions of the Irish Government, this could create difficulties in achieving consensus within the Executive.
95. On the 10 March 2020 the Minister for Finance spoke about the *"overly bureaucratic"* North / South Ministerial Council during an Executive Committee meeting [INQ000065695]. I agree that the North/South Ministerial Council was very formalised. However, meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council if adapted could have facilitated the engagement necessary to react to developments in the pandemic.

Relationship with Republic of Ireland

96. I have been referred to the Independent SAGE Report dated 12 May 2020 which stated that: *"One of the main criticisms of the response by the UK government so far has been the highly centralised approach that it has taken, in some cases excluding the governments of the devolved administrations from key decisions. The elected administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have the powers to determine their own policies in many aspects of the response to the coronavirus pandemic. While*

the general position has been to adhere to the decisions made in Whitehall, each administration has the opportunity to determine the distinctive measures needed to safeguard the well-being of the population for which it is responsible. The pattern of infection with the virus appears to vary markedly across the UK and the devolved administrations should take the opportunity, where possible, to engage fully in the introduction of our strongly recommended approach of case finding, testing, tracing, and isolation. This should be a cornerstone of their approach. Northern Ireland is a particular case, having a land border with the Republic of Ireland. We urge the Northern Ireland Assembly Executive to seek to harmonise their policies with those of the Republic of Ireland in keeping with the commendable Memorandum of Understanding that has been agreed between the two jurisdictions in relation to the coronavirus crisis."

97. The North had an 'island advantage' which could have been maximised if we aligned more closely with the South. I believed aligning the approach in the North with that of the South was a logical course of action. I note that Ministers were raising this issue of the North having an 'Island Advantage', this was an issue that was being considered by the Executive.
98. It was clear at the outset of the pandemic, people in the North started to look to other countries including the Republic of Ireland, to see what protective measures were being implementing and started to make their own arrangements ahead of the Executive.
99. The Inquiry will be aware that the island of Ireland is treated as one epidemiological unit for animal health purposes, this basically means that the North-South cooperation on agriculture effectively enables the island of Ireland to be treated in policy and operational terms as a single epidemiological unit for the purpose of animal health and welfare.
100. My view was and remains that there was an epidemiological justification for harmonisation with the Republic of Ireland for the purpose of Covid-19. Thus, treating the island as one single epidemiological unit would have been helpful as it would have prevented differences in approaches around the timing of restrictions and issues relating to travel.
101. I have been referred to the MoU between the Departments of Health North and South. I have been referred to The Independent SAGE Report which refers to the

memorandum, "*Covid-19 Response – Public Health Cooperation on an All-Ireland Basis Between: The Department of Health, Ireland (and its Agencies); and the Department of Health, Northern Ireland (and its Agencies)*" (the All Ireland MoU). I had knowledge of the All Ireland MoU during my time as Minister however this was put in place before my time in office and not during my time in office therefore, I cannot assist the Inquiry any further in relation to this.

102. I have been asked whether the structures that exist between the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive could have been developed to achieve a greater degree of co-operation or co-ordination. I believe structures could have been put in place to achieve a greater degree of co-operation and co-ordination for example adapting the structures of the NSMC.
103. I have been referred to a comment made by the deputy First Minister at a Quad meeting on 13 October 2020 "*cooperation was key and NI and Ireland could review the MoU to see if there were any areas for closer working*" [INQ000091398]. I understand that the deputy First Minister wanted to make the argument for all-island / two island approach to the pandemic and to see if there were any areas for working more closely together. I do not know if the suggested review took place. I believe co-operation and co-ordination would have been to the benefit of the response in both jurisdictions, particularly given the extent of cross-border travel that exists on the island.
104. I have been asked about whether the Executive or any key decision-makers commissioned any research aimed at understanding the impact of Covid-19 specifically along the border areas. While, during the pandemic some Ministers, including myself, wanted closer attention to be given to the border counties because of the number of people who cross the border every day for work and school, I am unaware of any specific research on this topic having been commissioned.
105. I have been asked to comment on views expressed in the document entitled "*Obstacles to Public Health that even pandemics cannot Overcome: The Politics of Covid-19 on the Island of Ireland*" [INQ000137387]. The study suggested that there was "*evidence of significant public health policy alignment brought about through ongoing dialogue and cooperation between the health administrations in each jurisdiction over the course of the first wave of the pandemic.*"

106. I was not a Minister during the first wave of the pandemic however my observation was that, at the initial stages, the two jurisdictions were not aligned. The Irish Government imposed significant restrictions on 11 March 2020. I am aware that the deputy First Minister was advocating for equivalent restrictions in terms of the closure of schools, but this did not happen. The restrictions which were imposed, were imposed by the Executive following an announcement by the British Prime Minister on 23 March 2020.
107. I do recall the cancellation of St Patrick's Day Parades in Dublin and also in Belfast in March 2020.
108. When I was a Minister, I recall restrictions being implemented on social distancing measures and the mandatory wearing of face coverings roughly around the same time, albeit these measures were also being implemented globally.
109. It was my perception that there was scope for considerably more co-operation between the health administrations North and South than was a reality during the pandemic and this is an area in which I consider that there is considerable room for improvement in the future. I also agree with Deirdre Heenan that structures should exist to facilitate cross-border comparisons and shared learning, and would welcome structures being in place in the future.
110. In a record of a Quad meeting with the Republic of Ireland dated 9 June 2020, it is suggested that there were issues about the timing of Republic of Ireland announcements and the ability of the Northern Ireland Ministers to respond (and, it would appear, possible constraints upon the Republic of Ireland to communicate decisions to Northern Ireland in advance of the Irish Cabinet) [INQ000091381].
111. While this predates my time as Minister, it is clear that there were issues as to the Republic of Ireland timing of its announcements, in that no advance notice was given. This was a source of pressure particularly for those in border communities because of the reality of many people travelling across the border each day for work and school. Also, many people in the North were looking at other countries particularly the Republic of Ireland to see what steps were being implemented to address the risks.
112. I have been asked whether there was a reluctance on the part of the Republic of Ireland to share information or to cooperate with the North for political reasons, because Sinn

Féin was in Government in the North and an opposition party in the South. I have no reason to believe that this was the case.

113. I have been asked about other barriers to cooperation. As the Inquiry will be aware, the political parties which form part of the Executive hold differing positions on the constitutional status of the North, and in my opinion some Unionist Ministers were more comfortable aligning with the approach in Britain.
114. I am unaware of whether any work has been done to examine whether greater harmonisation or co-operation with the Republic of Ireland might have produced better outcomes in the North. I am also unaware of whether there have been any direct comparisons between outcomes North and South, although I am aware of recent reports which suggest that the South had relatively positive outcomes compared to the United Kingdom, which would in my view suggest that alignment with the South might have produced better outcomes than alignment with the government in London.
115. I was not a Minister at the outset of the Pandemic however it appeared to me as an MLA that the Irish Government responded much quicker and more decisively to Covid-19 particularly in the early decision to close schools. The United Kingdom Government appeared slow to respond, the reality therefore was that alignment with the United Kingdom Government led to our being slow to lockdown at the start of the pandemic.

Legislation and regulations: their proportionality and enforcement

116. I have been asked why criminal sanctions were considered necessary to enforce the Regulations put in place in the North. I was not a Minister when the regulations were put in place. However, as an MLA I understood at the time widespread compliance of the Regulations was necessary to ensure lockdown was effective. I fully understood that Ministers wanted to encourage compliance however some form of enforcement for non-compliance was necessary. I am unaware of whether any alternatives to criminal sanction were considered.
117. On 20 August 2020 the first Minister, Health Minister and CMO are recorded as expressing their views that the North had not been enforcing the Covid Regulations and that the fines in place were too small [INQ000065790]. The Executive increased fines at this meeting on 20 August 2020. I do not believe that there were any issues

with the criminal enforcement of Covid Regulations in the North. I am not aware of any reluctance or a sensitivity around criminal enforcement of the Regulations.

118. The minutes of the Executive Meeting on 10 September 2020 note that "*a working group on compliance and enforcement of the regulations [will] be established*" [INQ000048488]. I am not aware why this was not established prior to September 2020.
119. As a Minister I was aware that most people on the ground recognised the need for the Restrictions and knew that compliance would save lives. In my opinion most people did their very best to follow the rules. As a Minister I knew that the best way to achieve compliance was through positive engagement with the public and effective communication, for example explaining why the Regulations were necessary to save lives, and persuasion. I do not consider that there were any particular issues or sensitivities around the criminal enforcement of Regulations in the North.

Scrutiny by the Assembly

120. I have been asked about the level of scrutiny of the actions and decisions of Ministers by the Northern Ireland Assembly. I believe, given the need for urgent action there was an appropriate level of scrutiny by the NI Assembly and as an MLA I was aware that the Regulations were subject to reviews and scrutiny.
121. MLAs had the ability to scrutinise Covid Legislation, although there were changes in that the scrutiny was carried out in a much more compressed timeframe. As an MLA I attended weekly meetings / scrutiny Committees and had an opportunity to discuss issues. At the height of the pandemic the Executive was meeting three times a week. A lot of non-Covid related work was suspended because officials were extremely busy drafting Covid Regulations.
122. As a Minister I was called into the Assembly to answer questions through Ministerial Question Time and gave both written and oral statements.

Funding the response to the pandemic

123. I have been referred to the First Minister's statement to Module 1 '*my overall impression is that, within Northern Ireland there was no difficulty with funding the*

Executive response to the pandemic...I consider that, overall, funding was made available when required' [INQ000205274] and also to what the deputy First Minister said to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Covid-19 Response where she stated that "You asked about resource and about whether the Health Department had enough money. Money is not an issue".

124. I was an MLA when we initially locked down and I cannot gainsay what was said by the First and deputy First Minister about the early stages of the pandemic. During my tenure as a Minister, I did not encounter any difficulties with funding. If I identified that funding was required for a particular area, then I would raise this in writing in report form and then in person and at no stage did any other Minister object.
125. I have been referred to Baroness Foster's statement to Module 1 which states "*In the very early stages of the pandemic, in or around March 2020, the reliance on UK government to bring forward the economic package to support lockdowns including the closure of schools and businesses was one factor that limited Northern Ireland in making decisions about the imposition of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions before the UK government*" [INQ000205274] I cannot comment on what informed the Executive's decision-making at the outset of the pandemic. I can advise that when I sought funding during my terms as Minister, all of my requests for funding were approved.

Controlling Northern Ireland's borders

126. I have been asked about issues around our ability to control our borders and if more could or should have been done to control movement into the North. The Executive has the power to control its borders and to impose restrictions on people travelling from the Common Travel Area or from abroad on public health grounds. The executive did have the power to impose restrictions on incoming travel in response to the pandemic, any such measures would require consensus within the Executive Committee.
127. At the Executive Committee meeting on 23 July 2020 the deputy First Minister advised that she and the First Minister had agreed to request an urgent dedicated British Irish Council meeting to resolve issues relating to the Common Travel Area [INQ000048482]. I believe that the British-Irish Council was not convened to address Ministers concerns around travel. I do not believe that the UK Government sufficiently consulted with Northern Ireland Ministers in relation to issues of border control into the North and / or travel restrictions.

128. As a general proposition I believe that more could and should have been done by the UK Government and the Irish Government to co-operate in relation to border issues and to control movement onto the island of Ireland at times during the pandemic, when transmission rates in other parts of the Common Travel Area or in other jurisdictions were higher.
129. In advance of the Executive Committee meeting of 30 July 2020 the Health Minister circulated a paper E (20) 182 (c) Border Regulations: Methodology for Characterising Countries as Green / Amber / Red in terms of Covid-19 Risk [INQ000065639]. I believe this methodology was clear and comprehensive.

Care homes

130. I am aware that this Inquiry will be conducting a discrete Module in relation to care homes and I welcome that fact. From my perspective, it is vitally important that the Inquiry fully address all the issues and difficulties which arose in relation to care homes. Both as an MLA, and as a Minister, I was acutely aware of the concerns being raised from family members about their loved ones in care homes and the concerns about the need to protect those vulnerable residents. When I was out on the ground interacting with people and working with community groups, I was aware of the pain and anxiety families were experiencing because of the situation in our care homes and it was an issue which was raised regularly. I recognise that the Inquiry will fully investigate the issues which arose over the course of the pandemic about the protection of care home residents and about the difficulties for families and residents being denied contact with each other.
131. On this issue, I have been referred to notes of Executive Committee meetings over the period April - May 2020. While these notes clearly reflect the fact that the issue of care homes and issues around access to PPE were clearly issues Ministers identified as important, I was not a Minister at this time and I cannot assist the Inquiry about the extent to which Ministers were involved in monitoring the transmission or impact of Covid-19 within care home at this time.
132. The responsibility for care homes lay with the Department of Health, which meant that other Executive Ministers would not have been briefed directly on operational decision making, but as indicated it was an issue which was being raised with MLAs and

Ministers and we were all aware of the importance of testing within care homes, and of the importance of ensuring access to PPE.

133. I am aware that the Department of Health and Department of Finance worked together to secure access to PPE and that included securing access to PPE for care homes, this in my opinion was another example of Ministers working collaboratively together to help those most vulnerable.

Inequalities

134. I have been referred to the CMO's statement to Module 1 of this Inquiry which states *"While the Department of Health was able to provide scientific and public health advice to inform Executive decisions in relation to NPIs, my observation was that Ministers initially felt less informed of the wider societal and economic consequences of NPIs [INQ000203352].*
135. As Minister for Communities from June to December 2020, I was aware of the work already started by the Department of Communities under the leadership of my colleague Deirdre Hargey to help those most vulnerable in our communities. I could clearly see that Deirdre Hargey and the Department implemented a swift and decisive response through hard work, dedication and co-operation with other Ministers and Officials.
136. From my perspective, I could see that work had already begun in the Department to address the wider societal and economic consequences of NPIs. It was clear that the Department was actively engaging with the voluntary and community sectors, local council, sporting bodies, faith-based organisations and many grassroots groups and community workers to put in place real and practical solutions for those most in need. I continued this engagement as I realised the importance of getting information from those on the ground about the impact of NPIs particularly the societal and economic consequences of NPIs and providing help.
137. I also understood how vitally important it was to make funding available for those most in need. At this time the budget for Discretionary Support was increased; the fuel support scheme was established; increased funding for homeless services was secured; £430,000 was obtained in the form of covid support for sign language organisations; free school meal direct payments to families was set up; food distribution

plans put in place, regulations to amend the Affordable Warmth Scheme to lift the income threshold so more vulnerable household could access it were put in place; a freeze on Housing Executive rents; agreement reached with social housing providers so that there would be no evictions during the pandemic, and emergency legislation to stop evictions in the private rented sector.

138. Taking over as Minister, I was aware that the pandemic, and the measures imposed to reduce transmission, would impact adversely on the most vulnerable in our society. I was aware of the wider societal and economic consequences of non-pharmaceutical interventions on those most vulnerable, and alive to the need to keep the impact of such measures under constant review.
139. As Minister from June to December 2020 I wanted to ensure the continuation of the work already underway within the Department and to do as much as possible to protect those most vulnerable in our society.
140. On 3 July 2020 I requested an appearance before the Ad Hoc Committee on the Covid-19 Response to outline the work I was doing to assist those most vulnerable in our communities. I appeared before the Committee on 9 July 2020.
141. In the June monitoring round, my Department received Covid-19 allocations of £88.8 million, comprising £66.1 million that was previously agreed by the Executive and £22.7 million. At that early stage it was obvious to me that the Department's allocation would be spent in full. I was acutely aware that the Department's financial and staff resources should be used to respond to the immediate needs of vulnerable people as a priority.
142. The reality of the pandemic and the need to make decisions at speed meant that the normal procedures under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), where public authorities are required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain categories of persons, did not operate as normal. The process was suspended as the priority had to be the protection of public health. However, as an Executive we were aware of the impact of our decisions on people's lives and livelihoods. Thus, as an Executive, we sought to mitigate the adverse impact of measures, as much as possible.
143. I was aware of the likely adverse impact of lockdown on communities at risk, including vulnerable and minority groups. I knew that lockdown would have a more significant

adverse impact on people on benefits and lower paid workers in our communities. As Minister for Communities from June to December 2020, I worked hard developing and implementing strategies to help those most vulnerable, to ascertain what steps could be put into place to assist and to ensure that I as Minister was fully aware of the issues. The Executive did not conduct a specific assessment to ascertain nor quantify the impact of NPIs however this is something which my Department was keeping under constant review.

144. During the specified period I was constantly assessing the impact of restrictions on the most vulnerable within our society for example the Covid-19 community Help Line was established by the Department in March 2020. The help line continued to offer expert advice and feedback while I was Minister, this information was then used in my assessment as Minister as to what initiatives and financial support was required to assist those in need. The helpline provided practical support services and emotional support to those most vulnerable in our community. My Department was available to the expert advisors should they need assistance with clarification on the regulations, restrictions and support available. The helpline offered emotional support and advice to those who were isolated or lonely, and offered practical advice and support about Regulations and restrictions and financial support.
145. My Department made a significant number of emergency changes to social security benefits to assist vulnerable people, including changes to operational practices and legislative changes. All face-to-face personal independent payment (PIP) and disability living allowance (DLA) assessments, as well as attendance allowance reviews, were paused in March until June 2020. In July I took the decision to extend that easement to safeguard people's health and safety while ensuring that my Department continued to provide the most appropriate support to vulnerable disabled people. I kept this decision under constant review between June – December 2020. My officials constantly linked in with the advice sector to keep them updated, to brief them on next steps and get valuable feedback.
146. I knew that older people and people needing help with high levels of daily care would be required to spend more time at home and therefore their fuel bills would be higher. I wanted to help people who were worried about paying their heating bills. The Department under Deirdre Hargey's supervision had implemented the Covid-19 Heating Payment Scheme which provided individuals who were in receipt of specified benefits with additional financial assistance in recognition of the additional costs arising

because of the pandemic. The Covid-19 Heating Payment was made available to people in receipt of Pension Credit as well as those receiving the highest rates of Attendance Allowance, Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance including children.

147. I continued to monitor this scheme particularly as we moved towards the difficult Winter months.
148. I believe that this payment was an important intervention by the Department designed to reduce the financial burden experienced by the most vulnerable in our community, in particular older people and those in receipt of certain disability benefits.
149. I was also alive to the vulnerabilities of the street homeless. The funding for homeless services increased to £15.5m from March 2020 to March 2021. I was Minister from June 2020 to December 2020 and helping homeless charities was a major priority for me. In response to Covid-19, my Department provided additional funding of approximately £7million on top of the main Housing Executive homelessness budget. No person or family should call a hotel or a hostel a home. No one should have to make their bed in the street. On 8 December 2020 I marked that year's Homelessness Awareness Day by confirming £150,000 to the homeless sector for Christmas gifts to those experiencing homelessness.
150. The Department also took steps to prevent evictions from rented accommodation over the course of the pandemic. The Inquiry will be aware that emergency legislation to stay evictions in the private rented sector - The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) (Northern Ireland) Act 2020 was passed on 4 May 2020 with the objective of reducing the risk to tenants in the private rented sector becoming homeless during the pandemic. The Act made provision for the Department to amend the 12 weeks up to 6 months. The Act was originally set to last until the end of September 2020, but on 19 August 2020, I took the decision to extend this legislation to prepare for the second wave of the virus and to protect those most vulnerable, as the furlough scheme and other economic supports were coming to an end or winding down in the Autumn of 2020.
151. In addition to the measures taken in relation to the private rented sector, I monitored the situation relating to Housing Executive rents during the pandemic. To ensure security of accommodation over the pandemic the agreement with social housing

providers to 'no evictions' policy during the second wave was secured. All these measures were designed to ensure that people would not be made homeless because of difficulties in paying rent over the course of the pandemic.

152. Also, on 23 June 2020 I allocated £10 million to enable Co-Ownership to reopen to customers. Co-Ownership is the Department's main delivery partner for affordable housing, it offers people the opportunity to enter home ownership through its products co-own and rent to own. Co-Ownership paused due to the impact of Covid-19, getting this restarted was important as reducing housing stress is extremely important.
153. I continued to monitor the situation in relation to statutory sick pay, The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was passed on 12 March 2020, the Regulations widened eligibility for statutory sick pay, in defined circumstances relating to Covid-19, it also suspended waiting days so that statutory sick pay was payable from the first day of work missed due to sickness or self-isolation, rather than the fourth. To reflect the changing public health guidance, as Covid-19 lockdown measures and shielding advice varied I kept the amendments to Statutory sick pay under review, I realised it was very important to help people follow self-isolation advice and to provide incentives to individuals to follow public health and keep people safe.
154. Discretionary support payments are available in the North to help vulnerable people with short-term living expenses or household items. The Department increased the income threshold for Discretionary Support payment via the Social Security Agency during the pandemic. Therefore, people were able to get financial assistance, such as a Discretionary Support self-isolation grant to help with the cost of living if they or a member of their immediate family was either diagnosed with Covid-19 or were self-isolating in line with the guidelines from March 2020. I kept the Covid-19 Self-isolation grant under constant review because I was determined to do all I could to help people who were diagnosed with Covid-19 or who were advised to self-isolate. On 16 November 2020 I enhanced the existing Covid-19 self-isolation grant, increasing the daily allowance payable and extending the number of days for which an award can be made. This non-repayable Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant assisted many vulnerable people with short-term living expenses during this difficult time. I increased the allowance and number of days as I was concerned about a second wave and wanted to make sure those most vulnerable were able to access support.

155. I was aware that further lockdowns and school closures would deprive the children in low-income families of access to free school meals. Access to food was a critical element of my Department's emergency response. The Department worked with Peter Weir, the Minister for Education, to implement a scheme of free school meal direct payments to families. This step was taken to ensure that vulnerable families of children, who would ordinarily have access to free school meals, obtained financial assistance in place of free school means and would not experience increased financial hardship because of school closures. In July 2020, I extended this scheme, to make payments to the families of children entitled to free school meals over the holiday periods, Summer, Easter, Christmas, and half-term school breaks.
156. I was aware that food poverty was an ongoing issue not just for school aged children but for many people. For too long people have had to decide between heating and eating and this was even more of an issue during the pandemic. Food poverty required urgent attention. I knew that lockdowns would impact low-income families the most and access to food was essential. The Department began working on a food distribution plan for those who would be shielding and for low-income families in March 2020. I continued this work with local bodies particularly in rural areas to identify those most in need and assisted with funding to those bodies to help with the delivery of food parcels. I worked collaboratively across Departments, health and social care trusts, councils, local community organisations and the private sector. My Department supervised the programme to distribute food to vulnerable people across all communities. The Department of Communities invested £10 million from March – June 2020 in these services and over 184,000 food boxes were delivered by 9 June 2020.
157. In June 2020 I agreed an additional investment of up to £875,000 to FareShare, a national network of charitable food redistributors to deliver and increased supply of food to community food providers. The social supermarket's pilot programme showed positive outcome by June 2020, and I extended this to allow for consideration of a full programme being rolled out. This was important for wrap around support alongside the access to food programme.
158. Under my supervision the Department of Communities, continued to engage with the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Leadership Group, which included grassroots and regional organisations who work in the voluntary and community sectors. This group ensured that the Department was being kept fully informed about

the impact of measures in local communities, and identified issues in relation to vulnerable groups in society when they arose.

159. The Leadership Group worked with the Department to highlight vulnerable groups, community responses and to identify necessary Departmental interventions over the course of the pandemic. I worked hard to respond to the challenges that community and voluntary organisations faced at this time. In particular my Department introduced a range of flexibilities in terms of conditions around grant funding, including advancing six month's funding for salaries and running costs and reduced bureaucracy.
160. On 1 July I announced the decision to provide additional funding of £4.5 million for the COVID-19 community support fund to top up the £1.5 million that had been released in April 2020, this allowed the local councils to directly support grassroots organisations to help those in greatest need. On 5 August 2020 I announced £3.2 million in additional funding to Council to allow them to support the voluntary and community sector as it continues to recover and help people to get through the covid-19 crisis. This funding supported local grassroots community and voluntary organisations across council areas working with individuals and communities during the pandemic it also was used for community support, access to food and financial wellbeing.
161. On the 10 August 2020 I announced a further £10.8 million of funding to the voluntary and community sector to assist recovery and importantly to prepare for any possible second wave of Covid-19. It was clear from the evidence that the pandemic and the measures implemented to address it negatively impacted the most vulnerable in our society. The funding from my Department allowed the sector to focus on supporting many of those in our communities who most needed help.
162. At this time, there was a concern about a second wave, I wanted to ensure that organisations had the capacity and support in the event of a second wave. On the 25 August I joined forces with some local philanthropists to invest £500,000 in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector. I provided £250,000 to match the funding for a pioneering initiative to tackle social issues. Donations from local philanthropists, matched by my Department helped create 5 new funds aligned with the programme for government's objective to *'improve wellbeing for all by tackling disadvantage and driving growth'*.

163. On 21 July I secured a bid for £2million to support clubs, sporting bodies and sporting organisations. On the 21 September 2020 I opened £1million Covid Safe Sports Pack Fund, this fund was used for equipment to help clubs ensure a safe return to sport for children, participants, coaches, volunteers and parents. In October 2020 I announced a fund of £15 million to help the sports sector. I successfully submitted a further bid for the Sports Sustainability Fund and secured a further £10million for this sector. On 3 December 2020 I launched £25million Sport sustainability fund; I recognised that the restrictions imposed on sport since the start of the pandemic had a serious financial impact on sports Governing Bodies, clubs and sporting organisations. The restrictions which were necessary to protect the health service and save lives resulted in limited opportunities for organisations to generate income in the usual ways, the sustainability fund offered support to alleviate financial hardship and go some way to meeting the financial needs of the sector particularly if a second wave occurred.
164. On 29 July 2020 I announced the reopening of the Covid-19 Charities Fund on 3 August 2020. The funding programme provided financial support to charities which have lost income due to the impact of Covid-19. A diverse range of charities received funding in the initial tranche, and I urged all eligible charities to apply to the funding programme to cover immediate costs and prevent closures. In November 2020 I announced a fund of £5 million for the Covid-19 Charities Fund. On 9 December 2020 I announced a second phase of the Covid-19 Charities Fund. I was aware that we have over 8,000 charities that do invaluable work and provide essential support to people when they need it most, this funding of over £11.7 million helped those charities facing extreme financial pressures because of the restrictions to their fundraising activities to continue to deliver critical services.
165. On 24 September 2020 I allocated a £40 million allocation to councils to help address their financial pressures because of the Covid-19 crisis. I was worried about the significant financial challenges facing Councils particularly with the threat of a second wave. This financial support helped to alleviate the losses thus ensuring Councils could positively contribute to the recovery and deliver public services. On 30 October 2020 I made a further allocation of £15million to councils, I wanted to make sure councils had appropriate funding to ensure positive contribution in the response to and recovery from Covid-19. Councils had been at the forefront of delivering key local public services during this difficult time and I knew if we experienced a second wave, they would be at the forefront once again, further funding was essential.

166. On 12 November 2020 I launched the £3.3million Voluntary, Community and Social Economy Sector Covid Recovery Fund to continue my support of this vital sector. I viewed the Voluntary, Community and Social Economy Sector as our first responders within communities in our fight against Covid-19 I wanted to provide the sector with whatever support I could to ensure they could deliver services to the most vulnerable in our communities.
167. On 10 December 2020 I allocated a further £6.5 million in additional support for vulnerable people severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This programme of help was delivered in partnership with local councils, health trusts, charities and the community and voluntary sector to ensure support was directed swiftly to those most in need. Throughout the pandemic my priority was to help those most in need. The additional allocation of funds at this time was due to my concerns about Christmas and a possible second wave. Additional funding would help provide access to food, access to support around period poverty and to help keep people warm. The funding was directed at the most vulnerable, including children and young people, carers, older people, people living with a disability and anyone who had lost income as a result of Covid-19.
168. I accept we couldn't totally mitigate the adverse impact that NPIs were having on vulnerable groups within our communities. I genuinely believe that I as Minister for Communities and my Department did everything, we could to assist those most vulnerable who stood to suffer the most. I was alive to the need to keep the impact of such measures under constant review. I engaged with groups to ascertain the impact that NPIs were having on vulnerable groups.
169. The North has a relatively small population, it also has a strong network of local community groups and voluntary organisations, who responded to the pandemic by identifying and helping the most vulnerable in their communities. The establishment of the Voluntary Leadership Group meant that there was a direct link between my Department and the community organisations responding to the pandemic. Locally elected MLAs and Ministers also had strong community links. I believe that these were features which enabled us to respond more effectively to the pandemic.
170. I believe my engagement with local charities, sporting organisation and small businesses helped inform the Executive about the impact of the restrictions. Through

direct engagement with local groups, I was able to identify areas where people needed support.

171. I was very conscious that other sectors were also facing significant challenges because of the wider societal and economic consequences of NPIs. My Department announced £1.5 million COVID-19 creative support package to enable artists, creative practitioners and small to medium sized institutions to work on new projects. I announced a further £4 million in support for this sector on 1 July 2020, this funding was a lifeline for the arts sector providing a much-needed boost for the sector including musicians, performers and cultural workers, arts venues and museums as they rebuilt for the future following the devastating impact of Covid-19. It was always expected that much more funding would be required to help protect this sector therefore when the British Chancellor and the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced a significant financial package I made strong representations at the earliest opportunity for additional finance to ensure the short term and long-term sustainability of this important sector. On 24 September 2020 I announced funding of £29million to support culture, language, arts and heritage sectors impacted by the Covid-19. On 9 November 2020 I announced a further £1.465 million of funding for arts, culture, and heritage renewal projects. On the 2 December 2020 I announced a programme targeted directly at individuals in the arts and creative economy, £3.2 million of funding delivered by Arts Councils NI on behalf of the Department.
172. On 3 August I announced £800,000 fund to assist access and inclusion in the Arts sector. I worked with Rural Affairs Minister to launch a programme aimed at promoting a more inclusive society by enabling disabled people to participate more fully in arts, cultural and active recreation activities.
173. The sports sector played a crucial role in supporting communities during the Covid-19 lockdown period. It was vitally important for me to support this sector. As Minister I recognised that sporting organisations at every level, from grassroots to those who compete at an international level faced serious financial challenges because of COVID-19 restrictions. My Department and Sport NI worked extremely hard to support the sports sector deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic by providing financial and practical advice. We launched the sports hardship fund with £1.245 million to enable 620 clubs to receive grants.

174. On 18 August 2020 I highlighted the importance of £7 Million fund to support Social Enterprises. Social Enterprises create a bridge between enterprise and social responsibility, they are the key to inclusive growth and had a full role in the rebuilding and reshaping of the economy post Covid. £7million Covid Social Enterprise Fund recognised the important role that Social Enterprises play both as an economic driver and a platform for social change. In November 2020 I secured additional funding of £2.25 for the Social Enterprise Fund. This crucial funding allowed my Department to continue to provide essential support to the most vulnerable in our society.
175. I was acutely aware of the impact of lockdown on small businesses. On 19 June 2020 I allocated £300,000 to Business Improvement Districts. This funding played a key role in bringing local business and other stakeholders together to help regenerate their areas and to improve their local trading environment.
176. On 25 June 2020 I launched a consultation to gather views on how a major development site in Downpatrick should be developed. My Department worked with District Councils to create a larger development scheme to regenerate Downpatrick town centre.
177. I worked with the Rural Affairs Minister to secure support for the economic recovery of small towns and city centres. On 27 July 2020 we announced funding of £11million for the Capital Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme. As a Minister I was fully committed to supporting our towns and city centres as they emerged from the pandemic. On 30 July 2020 I announced the start of a £1.4 million public realm scheme to transform Dromore town centre, my Department worked closely with Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council to support the regeneration of the borough and this scheme to improve the appearance and the safety of the town centre. I recognised that this historic market town offers so much to residents and traders and hoped that the regeneration would encourage visitors and investment.
178. On 13 August 2020 I announced funding of £192,000 to assist with the regeneration of Strabane town centre. From my work with local organisations, I knew it was vitally important for small business to have improvements made to local towns and city centres. Small businesses required funding from the Department to support the economic recovery from the impacts of Covid-19.

179. On 9 October 2020 I announced funding of almost £110,000 for Mullaghmore & Castlevew Community Association. The investment supported the Neighbourhood Renewal Funding which provided much needed services within the centre particularly to support the delivery of essential educational and health programmes.
180. On 28 October 2020 I provided a further £11.6 million for town and city centre recovery to support them in their recovery for the impact of Covid-19 and to prepare a safe operating environment for their customers. On 8 December 2020 the Rural Affairs Minister and I announced a further allocation of £1.7million to councils as part of the Department for Communities Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme.

Public health communications, behavioural management and maintain public confidence.

181. I have been asked to consider to what extent the Executive Committee had oversight of public health messaging or assessment of how effective it was. As an Executive we understood the importance of public health messaging and the effectiveness of our messaging was a matter which was kept under review to ensure effective communication of public health messaging.
182. I have been asked about the issue of combatting disinformation. As Minister I was aware that misinformation was a problem. Addressing these issues was primarily within the remit of the TEO and the Department of Health. However, as the Inquiry knows a Covid Help-Line had been established by the Department of Communities, at the very outset of the pandemic so that there was a publicly available free resource where people could be provided with accurate up to date information and any questions relating to Covid could be addressed appropriately.
183. At the Executive Committee meeting on 13 August 2020 "*The Executive discussed the need for robust messaging in advance to combat resistance to and non-compliance with protective measures and to target complacency among young people*" [INQ000048485]. Looking carefully at this issue and analysing the different forms of media used by Ministers to communicate with the public I accept that the social media platforms normally used by younger people were not used as effectively as they could have been and this is something that we can learn from.
184. I have been referred to the statement provided by The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) for Module 2C of this Inquiry which criticises

the engagement with young people by the Government. I am aware that the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People requested the Executive to hold press conferences for children and unfortunately this did not happen.

185. I recognise that as an Executive we could have done better on this issue and I accept that more should have been done.
186. I have been referred to a briefing to the NIO Permanent Secretary dated 11 May 2020 which stated "It is essential that UKG decides and defines how the new messaging is expected to run in the devolved administrations. The NI Executive has joined the other in asking that the UKG campaign does not run in NI" [INQ000091366]. The Minutes of the Executive Committee meeting of 22 July 2021 recorded: *"The Secretary to the Executive...drew attention to the update on adherence and communications work which had been provided drawing on recent concerns raised by the Minister of Health. The picture was not as negative as some commentators might suggest. She pointed to the risks of confused and contradictory messaging in other parts of the UK as well as in NI all of which reinforced the need for the Executive to be clear and consistent about decisions and messaging, particularly in response to the increased cases"* [INQ00022453].
187. I have been asked about whether inconsistency between public messaging as between the North and Britain and also between the North and South was problematic and also what worked well in terms of public health messaging locally. In my view inconsistency in public health messaging, whether, east/west or north/south, was a problem which we did our best to respond to by trying to be effective in our public health messaging. I believe that the daily briefings with the use of a sign language expert, worked very well. In general, I believe that the public health messaging in the North during Covid-19 was clear, for example the 'stay home stay safe' messaging and the need to be vigilant was consistent and the clarity of our messaging minimised the difficulties arising from inconsistencies as between messaging in different jurisdictions.
188. Unfortunately, I did receive some abuse during the pandemic. When I was Communities Minister difficult decisions had to be taken to protect lives. I mentioned earlier my decision to issue a letter on Friday 16th October 2020 before the Coleraine and Ballymena United game that spectators would not be allowed to attend games to try and curb the spread of the virus and save lives, this resulted in derogatory remarks being made about me. A unionist commentator and blogger Owen Polley wrote "If

you've got a ticket for an Irish League game, please go to the ground. We won't be told what to do by an odious Provo hag". This comment was misogynistic in my opinion.

Executive Committee decision-making

189. I have been asked to comment on the impact of decision making based on '*mandatory coalition*' in the North and in particular what challenges did it pose and whether it impeded decision-making.
190. Our Executive is a mandatory coalition, bringing together the main political parties. This can be challenging because of the need to secure consensus and at times it was very challenging trying to achieve political agreement on; the imposition and the removal of restrictions; and the timing of restrictions. However, in general I believe Ministers did try their best to work together.
191. I am aware that the Inquiry is interested in understanding the extent to which individual Ministers were able to rise above political differences or act independently of their political interests (or their parties) to make decisions in the public interests of all. I believe Ministers in the Executive tried for the most part to work together. In my opinion Ministers often set aside party-political differences to make decisions in the best interests of the public.
192. I believe there were differences in the approaches of Ministers in terms of how to respond to the pandemic. The DUP Ministers, were generally, slower to move to implement restrictions, and quicker to seek to lift them. From my perspective Sinn Féin's broad approach was to be guided by the medical and scientific evidence, albeit interrogating the advice we received as was appropriate for those with ultimate responsibility for decision-making. My approach was, broadly speaking, a cautious one.
193. I have been asked to comment on whether Ministers came to Executive meetings with pre-determined positions. At Executive meetings Ministers would fully discuss all issues and analyse all proposals, papers and the medical and scientific data which we were provided with. Prior to Executive meetings I attended Sinn Féin ministerial meetings, the purpose of these meetings was to make sure we were fully prepared and updated on all issues. We did not have a pre-determined position. As a Minister I fully

engaged in all Executive meetings to assess all the data and evidence and ask Questions before forming an opinion.

194. The Inquiry is aware that during the pandemic there were five cross-community votes held within the Executive. Two of which took place on 9 November 2020 when I was in office. I disagreed with the use of the cross-community vote mechanism during a health emergency, that is not what a cross-community vote is designed for, rather it is designed to protect minority rights, which was not the issue on 9 November 2020.
195. I do not believe that the cross-community vote mechanism should have been used in the context of the pandemic. The cross-community vote mechanism was negotiated as part of the Good Friday Agreement. Its purpose is to protect minority rights in the context of institutional discrimination and abuse of human rights. I believed that the use it was put to, during the pandemic, to prevent a two-week extension of restrictions was entirely inappropriate.
196. I have been asked to comment on the extent to which there was collective responsibility for Executive Committee decisions during the pandemic. Generally, Ministers worked very hard to find consensus on issues. The Executive did come to agreed positions on many difficult topics, despite differences of opinion because Ministers wanted to work together and in general, I believe there was collective responsibility.
197. During my time on the Executive, I believe that the Health Minister was fully supported by the Executive Committee, save that there were clearly issues in relation to the 9 November executive committee meeting. All Ministers appreciated the pressure the Health Minister was under and the scale of the job he had to do.
198. I have been asked about whether there were any concerns in relation to the extent of the responsibilities of the CMO and CSA. The fact that the Executive itself did not have a Chief Scientific Adviser was identified as an issue and steps have been taken to recruit a Chief Scientific Adviser to the Executive.
199. During my tenure as Minister there were tensions about the imposition of and lifting of restrictions. This was particularly evidence in the October November period.
200. On numerous occasions one or more Ministers complained about leaks of papers and papers and the content of Executive Committee were leaked. This was a constant

issue and was completely unprofessional in my opinion. There was no policy, informal or otherwise, of leaking proposed policies to test public reaction. The practice of leaking papers was unacceptable and undermining of the Executive in my view.

201. I have been asked to comment on what if any tensions existed between the impact of the respective roles of Department of Health and Department for the Economy in terms of the Executive's ability to formulate a collective response to Covid-19. There was a tension around the speed and the timing of the implementation and lifting of restrictions as I have mentioned earlier. The Department of Health's primary role is protecting public health and the Department of the Economy was responsible for the economy, clearly restrictions had significant adverse economic consequences such that tensions did manifest themselves.
202. I believe the Executive Committee was the most effective structure for the government in the North to respond to the pandemic. While the fact that the Executive was only up and running in January 2020 was not optimum, it was my perception, as an MLA and as a Minister, that Ministers worked extremely hard to protect the public. The fact that we were a local Executive with local knowledge was a strength. The engagement by the Department of Communities with different community and voluntary groups would not have happened under direct rule. I believe real and meaningful engagement with those we represented was important and helped secure a community buy-in to the measures we were taking.
203. I have been asked about public confidence in the Executive Committee's decision making and in particular if public confidence was impacted by a number of differences or disagreements between Ministers which became public. As a general observation, clearly public disagreements can impact upon public confidence, equally Ministers have a leadership role and may on occasion consider that it is necessary to speak publicly on matters of importance.
204. There were public differences between the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to the closure of schools [INQ000083098]. As the Inquiry is aware I was not a Minister during this period. I do however recall parents being very worried about their children and very anxious about sending their children to school. Many parents removed their children from school and many schools closed before the first lockdown was announced. I recall the Deputy First Minister's public statement regarding the need to close schools and I fully agreed with that position. Given that the public were

- moving before the Executive, I think it was correct for the deputy First Minister to make the call she did. I believe public confidence in the Executive was being undermined by the perceived lack of action on the part of the Executive in response to the pandemic.
205. I have also been referred to the deputy First Minister's criticism of the Health Minister [INQ000083114]. Again, I was not a Minister at the time, but there had been a problem with the speed with which the Executive had moved initially, and I believe that people needed to see that local leadership would be provided into the future.
206. I have also been referred to Minister Poots contradicting public messaging about restrictions [INQ000083129]. Again, these statements were made when I was not a Minister. The Inquiry will know, however, that I agreed with a cautious approach to lifting restrictions, because I considered the protection of public health to be our number one priority, and public statements which amounted to calls for the relaxation of restrictions, which were at the time contrary to the advice of the Department of Health had the capacity to undermine public support for restrictions and to undermine compliance.
207. I have been referred to contradictory statements made by the Economy Minister and the Health Minister about lockdowns [INQ000083161]. My answer is as outlined above, there was a need to be cautious about undermining in public, restrictions which needed to be imposed, because of the potential impact on public compliance with the public health messaging.
208. Finally, I have been referred to the statement of Edwin Poots, when he suggested that the rates of transmission were higher in nationalist areas as compared to unionist areas. I think this comment can be distinguished from the comments above, it was unsupported by any evidence base, it caused a lot of upset and distress and it had the potential to cause division on sectarian grounds in the middle of a pandemic which was highly irresponsible and, in my opinion, unjustifiable.
209. I have been asked whether public confidence in the Executive's decision-making was impacted by breaches of rules and standards by public figures in the North or in Britain. I believe that this impacted on public confidence. I attended the funeral of my dear friend Bobby Storey in a personal capacity, and I accept that in doing so I caused hurt to families who lost a loved one during the pandemic. I apologise for the hurt caused by my actions.

Communications with ministers, advisers, political party officials and civil servants via electronic device(s)

210. I was issued with a mobile phone and iPad device for business purposes by the Northern Ireland Civil Services. All mobile devices used by me during the pandemic were handed back to the Department of Communities in October 2020. The devices were handed back in the condition I received them. I did not reset the devices. I did not delete any messages or emails. I did not alter the settings. I have no knowledge of what happened to the devices after I returned them. After the devices are returned Ministers are locked out of same. I used the devices for logistical and administrative purposes only.
211. On the 21 January 2022 I changed my personal mobile phone, during the transfer process I lost some text messages. I no longer have this device. I would like to reiterate that I did not conduct any official business on my personal mobile, I used this device for logistical and administrative issues only.
212. I have been asked whether I used messaging platforms in my professional capacity as a Minister either on my own personal electronic devices or on the devices issued by the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I occasionally used WhatsApp and text messages to communicate on logistical and administrative issues such as setting up meetings, asking for times of meetings to be confirmed, confirming diary entries, never for official business. The purpose of the messages was to arrange and confirm meetings or seek clarification not policy discussions. All information and communications relating to decision points and policy formulation concerning the pandemic were formally recorded by departmental officials who have retained these records. The people I would have communicated with in this matter were those in my private office, Roisin Thompson, Maura Doherty, Louise Anderson. I also communicated in this manner with my Sinn Féin Ministerial colleagues, on logistical and administrative issues (as described above).
213. I did not conduct any Government business on any device other than by email, nor did I conduct Government decisions on any messaging platforms. All devices were handed back.

214. The devices are linked to the Northern Ireland Civil Service email system so all emails would have been handled in line with Civil Service procedures. The Civil Service can advise on what happened my NICS-supplied mobile devices once I returned them and assist the Inquiry in relation to the content.
215. All my meetings and decisions were recorded by the private office. I am not aware of any text-based communications or chat function as part of video conferencing meetings being recorded. Any notes kept by my office will be shared.

Lessons Learned

216. I have been asked to identify any key areas in the Northern Ireland Executive's response to the pandemic during the Specified Period which I consider worked well and any missed opportunities.
217. I believe having a local assembly and Executive worked very well because local Ministers were able to interact directly with people on the ground and voluntary groups to establish the impact of the restrictions on those most vulnerable in our communities. I believe this direct engagement with the public allowed Ministers to implement measures to protect those most vulnerable in our society.
218. I believe the Executive had a collegiate approach and I witnessed Ministers working extremely well together to find solutions to extremely difficult issues.
219. I believe an independent CSA, accountable to the Executive is something that would assist any Executive in the future.
220. I believe that greater information sharing and co-operation between the Irish and British Government, with each other and with the Northern Ireland Executive would enhance all of our abilities to secure the best response to a pandemic in the future. Part of that process should be a greater recognition of the advantages which islands have in such circumstances and the need for consideration to be given to dealing with the islands of Ireland and Britain as single epidemiological units for health purposes. I believe that the failure to align more closely with the Irish Government, particularly at the outset of the pandemic was a lost opportunity.

221. Lessons must be learned, I have met with families who have been bereaved as a result of Covid, I have listened to their experiences, and I am conscious of the pain, hurt and distress they continue to feel.
222. I recognise that it is vitally important that we learn from this awful experience, and I hope this Inquiry gives voice to bereaved families and enables us to be better prepared for a pandemic in the future.
223. I believe that all of us, in the Executive, and beyond, have lessons to learn, to ensure that we are better placed to protect lives in the event of a future pandemic, but also better placed to recognise and adapt restrictions so as to both: protect life; and, to protect the most vulnerable in society.

Statement of Truth

224. I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated:

12/03/2024

