

Witness Name: Madeleine Brindley
Statement No: M2B/WG/05/01
Dated: 13 December 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MADELEINE BRINDLEY

I, Madeleine Brindley, will say as follows:

1. I provide this statement in response to a request made by the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry ("the Inquiry") pursuant to Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006, dated 25 October 2023, and referenced M2B/WG/05 ("the Rule 9 request").
2. The Inquiry has asked me to explain how WhatsApp (and other messaging platforms) were used by core decision-makers as part of the decision-making process during the pandemic, and my role in these messaging groups.
3. As set out in my previous statement to the Inquiry, I did not take any policy decisions in relation to the Welsh Government's response to the pandemic. My role was to advise and support the First Minister, other Ministers, and senior Welsh Government officials about how to best communicate their decisions about the Welsh response to the pandemic to the public.
4. To my knowledge, WhatsApp was not used by core-decision makers to make decisions during the pandemic (relevant period January 2020 to May 2022). Cabinet was (and is) the decision-making forum for the Welsh Government.
5. I am asked to what extent, and in what respects, did the use of informal decision-making systems, including messaging, assist and/or undermine effective decision-making. I am also asked to explain whether my views on their effectiveness in this respect changed throughout the course of the pandemic.

6. To the best of my recollection, WhatsApp was used as a form of instant messaging to arrange meetings and to keep colleagues informed about meetings and emerging issues and to answer questions from Ministers and special adviser colleagues about aspects of the Welsh Government's response or restrictions, all within the quickly evolving landscape of the pandemic at a time when Covid-19 restrictions meant Ministers and officials were working remotely. It was not, in my experience, used to make decisions about the Welsh response to the pandemic – Cabinet was (and continues to be) the place where these decisions were made by Ministers collectively, on the basis of the evidence and the advice in front of them. As such, I cannot state how the use of informal decision-making systems, including messaging, assisted and/or undermined effective decision-making, as in my opinion and to my knowledge, informal messaging was not a 'system' of decision-making, informal or otherwise, as suggested by the Inquiry's question.
7. Finally, I am requested to identify what groups, if any, I was involved in, what they were used to discuss, and to identify other participants of the groups. I was a member of a WhatsApp group comprising members of the special adviser team during the period January 2020 to May 2021, namely: Alex Bevan; Andrew Johnson; NR Clare Jenkins; Dan Butler; Gareth Williams; Ian Butler; Jane Runeckles; Kate Edmunds; myself; Mitch Theaker; Sara Faye; and Tom Woodward. I was also a member of a Ministerial WhatsApp group, which included all members of Cabinet and my fellow special advisers Jane Runeckles and Clare Jenkins.
8. The special adviser WhatsApp group was used, I recall, as a means for colleagues who, until the start of the pandemic, had worked in close physical proximity – usually in the same building, sometimes from the same office – to stay in touch with each other. It provided a means of alerting each other to emerging issues; updating us about meetings and arranging calls and conversations about specific issues to support Ministers. There was also some casual and informal chat between colleagues.
9. The Inquiry has also asked me to provide details and copies of any informal or private communications about the Welsh Government's response to Covid-19 of which I was a part, including informal groups (such as text messages and WhatsApp groups) or private email communications with Ministers, senior civil servants, or advisors.

10. I used my personal mobile phone (for WhatsApp messages) and a Welsh Government mobile phone (for work-related phone calls, text messages and email) during the pandemic.
11. I used my personal phone to send and receive WhatsApp messages. The Welsh Government does not permit the use of WhatsApp on its devices. My personal phone is not set to automatically back-up WhatsApp messages and it has not been my practice to routinely retain WhatsApp messages on my personal phone by other means. Since the disappearing messages facility was made available on WhatsApp, the majority of the groups I am part of have added this function (usually by the administrator).
12. I used my Welsh Government-issued mobile phone to send and receive work-related phone calls, text messages and work-related emails from my work email account.
13. To the best of my recollection, I would have received text messages from the First Minister, other Ministers, Labour Members of the Senedd and councillors during the course of the pandemic. To the best of my recollection, text messages between myself and Welsh Ministers would have been about logistical issues, such as forthcoming meetings and about matters relating to communications, such as arrangements for press conferences. I recall responding to text messages from Labour Senedd Members and councillors asking questions about restrictions at various times in the pandemic. I believe I also exchanged some text messages with journalists, again about aspects of the Welsh Government's response to the pandemic or to answer questions about restrictions. The messages did not relate to decision-making by the Welsh Government or Ministers.
14. I do not have access to the text messages from the relevant period. It was – and continues to be – my practice not to retain text messages on my Welsh Government phone (or indeed on my personal mobile phone). I tend to delete text messages (and WhatsApp messages) regularly as a security measure in case I should ever lose my phone, to prevent someone breaking into it and reading messages.
15. I did not use personal email to communicate with the First Minister, other Cabinet Ministers, senior government officials or special adviser colleagues about the Welsh Government's response to the pandemic.

16. I returned my Welsh Government mobile phone when my employment was terminated in March 2021 before the Senedd 2021 election – I explained this feature of special adviser employment in my original statement. As mentioned above, it is not my practice to routinely retain text messages and at the point I left the Welsh Government I deleted any text messages remaining on the phone for security reasons. Following my re-appointment in May 2021, I received the same phone back.
17. I received a new Welsh Government handset on 23 September 2022. The older handset was returned to IT Services when it was replaced with the newer version. The data from the old handset did not transfer across to the new handset. I recall I had to re-input data into the new handset. I understand that data on my old Welsh Government work phone would have been wiped by IT for security reasons, in line with standard operational procedures, which would have been within a day or so of me returning the handset to IT Services.
18. In terms of my personal mobile phone, which contained the WhatsApp messages from the relevant period, I upgraded this to a new handset in November 2021. The old handset was sent back to my mobile provider in November 2021, and I therefore no longer have access to the old handset. Although it was some time ago, I recall that the data from my old handset did not completely transfer to my new handset. I subsequently changed my personal mobile number in May 2023 when I increased my data limit package. I have checked the new handset which I have now, to see if any of the WhatsApp messages from the pandemic period can be accessed – I can confirm they are not accessible.
19. Although I personally no longer have access to the WhatsApp messages from the two groups mentioned, as mentioned in my first statement, I have been informed the messages will be provided to the Inquiry by others.
20. While the following was not specifically in relation to the Welsh Government's response to Covid-19, for completeness I was the administrator of a WhatsApp group called "Let's Talk about the FM" for the period of the Senedd election campaign to help co-ordinate ongoing First Ministerial work and issues for the First Minister during the election period while he was on the campaign trail. I deleted this group once the election was over as it was no longer active. Other members were special advisers Jane Runeckles, Clare Jenkins, Kate Edmunds, and NR who was the Senior Private Secretary to the First Minister at the time. The group was established

on 5 March 2021 and was no longer used after 4 May 2021. I do not personally have the messages from the group; however, I understand these messages have also been provided to the Inquiry.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

Personal Data

Dated: 13 December 2023