

Witness Name: Madeleine Brindley

Statement No:1

Exhibits: 47

Dated: 13 October 2023

## **UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY**

### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF MADELEINE BRINDLEY**

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 18 April 2023 and referenced M2B/WG/MB/01.

I, Madeleine Brindley, will say as follows: -

#### **Preface**

1. I extend my deepest sympathies to all those who lost loved ones during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has touched all our lives in many and different ways and has left lasting effects on us all, but especially all those who lost a family member or close friend.

#### **Background**

2. I have had the privilege of working as a special adviser in the Welsh Government since March 2014 to the present day.
3. My professional background is in journalism and communications. I worked as a journalist, specialising in health news and feature writing, for almost 15 years, at several regional and national daily newspapers and for specialist (trade) publications in England and Wales. After leaving journalism in July 2012 – my last job was as the Health Editor at Media Wales – I worked in NHS Wales, as the head of communications and media management at Cwm Taf University Health Board from July 2012 to March 2014.
4. While at the health board, I devised the communications strategy, and ran the communications, for the engagement and consultation phases of South Wales' largest hospital service change proposal – the South Wales Programme – involving five health

boards and the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust. The South Wales Programme focused on the location of four specialist services: consultant-led maternity services, neonatal care, inpatient paediatrics and emergency medicine (A&E). I was appointed the special adviser for health in March 2014, midway through the Fourth Assembly (2011-16) by the then First Minister Carwyn Jones, to work with the then Health Minister Mark Drakeford.

5. Special advisers are appointed by the First Minister and their employment automatically terminates when the First Minister ceases to hold office or when the National Assembly, now Senedd Cymru is dissolved prior to a Welsh general election. This has happened to me three times – each time I have been fortunate to be re-appointed by the First Minister of the day.
6. In May 2016, at the start of the Fifth Assembly (2016-21), following the 2016 National Assembly election, the then First Minister Carwyn Jones re-appointed me as a special adviser to work with the new Finance Minister, Mark Drakeford, with the additional responsibilities of overseeing the passage of the Welsh Government's legislative programme and day-to-day Assembly Business.
7. Carwyn Jones stood down as First Minister in December 2018. Mark Drakeford succeeded him. I was appointed as the First Minister's special adviser for media, with wider responsibility for strategic communications across the Welsh Government. I was re-appointed to this role after the 2021 Senedd election, at the start of the Sixth Senedd (2021-26).
8. The Code of Conduct for Special Advisers (**attached as exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/01 –INQ000222866**) states special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers, while reinforcing the political impartiality of the permanent civil service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support.
9. The Code states that special advisers "should work closely with the ministerial team and with other civil servants and establish mutual relationships of confidence and trust." In addition to directly advising the First Minister about media and communications, I very much see my role as a bridge between Ministers and the civil service.
10. The Code includes the following description of special advisers' work. I believe it captures a large part of what I do on a daily basis:

- a. Giving assistance on any aspect of Welsh Government business and giving advice, including expert advice as a specialist in a particular field.
  - b. Undertaking long-term policy thinking and contributing to policy planning within the Welsh Government.
  - c. Writing speeches and undertaking related research, including adding party political content to material prepared by permanent civil servants.
  - d. Liaising with the (Welsh Labour) party; briefing party representatives and parliamentarians on issues of government policy.
  - e. Representing the views of a Minister to the media (including a party viewpoint) where they have been authorised by a Minister to do so.
  - f. Liaising with outside interest groups (including those with a political allegiance).
11. This statement relates to the period 21 January 2020 and 30 May 2022. During this period, I worked in the Welsh Government as a special adviser.
12. My main role in response to the pandemic was in relation to Welsh Government communications. I provided advice to the First Minister, other Ministers and senior Welsh Government officials, whenever necessary, about how to clearly communicate information in a rapidly-moving and changing pandemic.
13. All the decisions I made were in relation to communications – these were about the best way to communicate a substantive policy decision, which an individual Minister had made in relation to the pandemic or a collective decision the Cabinet had made.
14. I understand the inquiry has received a separate statement setting out the Welsh Government's corporate communications role and functions during the pandemic. I played an active part in many aspects of that process – for example, writing press releases when needed; signing off press releases in line with decisions taken by the First Minister, other Ministers at Cabinet, and Welsh Government reactive press comments; helping advise on communications content and strategy and briefing the First Minister, Ministers and senior Welsh Government officials, as necessary, before media appearances.
15. I made decisions about the themes and content of daily and weekly press conferences – these related directly to the work the Welsh Government was undertaking to respond

to the pandemic and decisions made by the Cabinet collectively or Ministers individually to keep the public safe. Paragraph 17 below gives three examples of press conference scripts I wrote – more than 200 press conferences were held – which relate to decisions taken collectively by Cabinet (a three-week review of regulations) or Ministers (testing).

16. I wrote the majority of press conference scripts for the First Minister and Minister for Health and Social Services (MHSS) Vaughan Gething – and subsequently for Eluned Morgan – for the Chief Medical Officer Sir Frank Atherton, Wales' Chief Scientific Officer for Health Dr Rob Orford, and for Dr Gill Richardson, Head of Wales' Covid-19 Vaccination Programme.
17. I attach three examples of press conference scripts to this statement – a three-week review of the coronavirus regulations press conference held by the First Minister on 29 October 2021; (**attached as exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/02-INQ000090715**) a press conference by the then Health Minister Vaughan Gething on 30 April 2020 about testing, NHS capacity and the establishment of the First Minister's Covid-19 BAME Advisory Group (this is covered in more detail at paragraph 67) (**attached as exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/03-INQ000227480**); and the script for a joint press conference held by the Chief Medical Officer for Wales Sir Frank Atherton and the Chief Scientific Adviser for Health Dr Rob Orford on 27 January 2021 about the emergence of new variants (**attached as exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/04-INQ000227481**).
18. I took a leading role in disseminating information about the Welsh Government's response – for example sharing public health guidance, details about restrictions, the latest facts and figures about the spread of the virus – to external stakeholders, including all Welsh politicians (Members of the Senedd and Members of Parliament), to local authorities and local resilience fora by developing a daily coronavirus email to help keep them informed about the large amount of guidance and advice we were producing. I attach examples of these as (**M2B-WG-MB-01/05-INQ000227483, M2B-WG-MB-01/06-INQ000227485, M2B-WG-MB-01/07-INQ000227484 and M2B-WG-MB-01/08-INQ000227969**).
19. I developed many written briefings, on a wide variety of topics relating to the pandemic and the pandemic response, to support members of the Cabinet and Members of the Senedd. As an example, I attach two exhibits (**M2B-WG-MB-01/09-INQ000227816 and M2B-WG-MB-01/10-INQ000227814**), these are the core script relating to Wales' Covid-19 vaccination programme, which was updated daily between January 2021 and

March 2021 to include key messages, facts and figures and any public issues, which I prepared for the FM and MHSS and a written briefing about the omicron variant, which I updated daily from late November 2021 to 31 December 2021 for Cabinet members.

20. Cabinet was the main decision-making forum for Ministers. I attended Cabinet meetings as an observer but was not directly involved in the decision-making process. I understand the inquiry has access to documents relating to Cabinet meetings and the decisions Ministers made at these meetings between the period 21 January 2020 and 30 May 2022.
21. I attended a number of other regular Ministerial meetings during the pandemic as an observer – for example, meetings about local restrictions; First Ministerial meetings leading up to the official three-week review in Cabinet; the First Minister's weekly Covid-19 vaccination meetings with senior officials; the First Minister's weekly Test, Trace, Protect meetings with senior officials; the First Minister's weekly Covid-19 catch-up meetings with the Chief Medical Officer and officials from the Technical Advisory Group.
22. I did not use WhatsApp or any other messaging platform as part of the Welsh Government's decision-making process during the pandemic. I was a member of a WhatsApp group which included all Cabinet Members and my fellow special advisers Jane Runeckles and Clare Jenkins. This group was used to inform Ministers about meetings and upcoming announcements. I was also a member of a special advisers WhatsApp group, which was used to keep colleagues updated about events, and inform colleagues about meetings set up at short notice. I no longer have copies of these messages, but I understand the inquiry will receive copies from another member of these groups.
23. I have sought to include in this statement the key documents relevant to the information that I have provided. I did not maintain a diary or prepare contemporaneous notes during the relevant period.
24. I worked very closely with senior special adviser Jane Runeckles, health special adviser Clare Jenkins, head of strategic communications Toby Mason and senior members of the Welsh Government's press office throughout the pandemic. I had no contact with special advisers in either the UK Government or the Northern Ireland Executive during the pandemic. I do not recall speaking to any special advisers in the Scottish Government.

**Function and responsibilities in response to Covid 19 (between January 2020 and March 2020)**

25. My first recollection of coronavirus in relation to the Welsh Government was in late January when the then MHSS Vaughan Gething published his first written statement about the emergence of “Wuhan novel coronavirus” (**attached as exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/11-INQ000227810**). It was – and still is – my practice to try to read all Welsh Government written statements published by Ministers.
26. In February 2020, Wales was hit by two very large storms in very close succession – Storms Ciara and Dennis – which caused significant flooding and damage to infrastructure, especially in South Wales. Cases of coronavirus began to be confirmed in Wales in the immediate aftermath of the storms, as communities were still cleaning up. The first case confirmed in Wales was on 28 February 2020. The first time the First Minister specifically referenced coronavirus in his regular press briefing was on 2 March 2020 (**attached as exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/12-INQ000227479**). The First Minister had been holding a press briefing on the first Monday of the month following his appointment as First Minister in December 2018. This was something I put in place. I wrote the script for the 2 March 2020 press conference, which referenced the first confirmed case in Wales; preparations for the arrival of coronavirus in Wales and a COBR meeting he had attended, chaired by the Prime Minister.
27. As the situation escalated, between 24 January and 16 March, the Welsh Government published 16 written statements to update members of the public about preparedness – for example, PPE was issued to GPs and a press statement was issued by the then MHSS Vaughan Gething on 9 March 2020, (**a copy of which is exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/13-INQ000227572**). The Chief Medical Officer for Wales issued a statement on 9 March to confirm two more people in Wales had tested positive for coronavirus, (**a copy is exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/14-INQ000048729**). The Chief Medical Officer published a further four statements; the Ministers made a number of sets of regulations in relation to coronavirus and Ministers made five oral statements about preparations in Plenary.
28. I did not advise the First Minister – or other Ministers or senior government officials – about specific strategies to limit the spread of coronavirus in the early phase of the pandemic, whether that was community testing, surveillance or the use of lockdown. My role in this period (January to March 2020) was to advise the First Minister – and other Ministers and senior government officials – about how we communicated the

latest developments and public health advice to the public, in an increasingly fast-moving situation. I wrote briefings for Ministers and Members of the Senedd and I helped the First Minister prepare before media interviews and First Minister Questions.

29. I do not recall being involved in any decisions about the Stereophonics concert or the Scotland v Wales rugby match. It is likely I may have been involved in the development of Welsh Government media statements about these events – part of my role was (and still is) to review and sign off reactive press lines.
30. We made full use of press conferences – open to all journalists who wanted to attend, to ask questions and broadcast live on social media. We used a BSL translator at our press conferences; we incorporated slides, which were available to download, with the data, on our website; later in the pandemic, the press conferences would be broadcast live by BBC1 Wales and S4C. We made full use of opportunities for the First Minister to record short, scripted messages, which were broadcast by the Welsh media in English and in Welsh. We used this method to communicate the lockdown announcement on 23 March 2020, followed up by a press conference on 24 March 2020. (**Exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/15-INQ000090545** refers).
31. The inquiry asks whether I considered the co-operation, co-ordination and information-sharing between the Welsh Government and UK Government was sufficient and asks me to reflect on my assessment of the situation. In this early period, my assumption was that the response to the emerging pandemic was nominally based on a four-nations approach, as set out in the UK Coronavirus Action Plan.
32. Health, and public health, is devolved. Decisions about how Wales would respond to a public health emergency in Wales, in real-time, would be made in Wales. It was my view at the time – and remains my view today – that having a joined-up approach, with the four UK nations acting in lockstep with each other; sharing intelligence and scientific advice; sharing resources and supporting each other as the pandemic progressed would have strengthened the UK's overall response to the pandemic. It did not happen in this way.
33. The main decisions about the direction of the response in the early days appeared to be driven by the UK Government. It is my understanding the UK Coronavirus Action Plan was led by the UK Government; I understood UK Government initially had access to advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and I understood the decision to lockdown originated from UK Ministers. I also understand the *stay at*

*home, protect the NHS, save lives* messaging came from the UK Government – the messaging was part of the Prime Minister's lockdown speech on 23 March 2020.

34. We used variations of this in the days immediately after lockdown - the First Minister's press conference on 24 March 2020 used the phrase "stay at home to protect yourself and to protect the NHS"; NHS chief executive Andrew Goodall asked "everyone to contribute to this effort, protect our NHS and help to save lives," on 26 March, for example. But by 31 March, we were using the *stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives* messaging routinely in press conferences. It also featured on our wider pandemic communications, including on road matrix signs. I exhibited these press conference scripts as **(M2B-WG-MB-01/15-INQ000090545 (exhibited above), M2B-WG-MB-01/16-INQ000227543 and M2B-WG-MB-01/17-INQ000090548)**.
35. There were communications challenges, created by an ambiguity and lack of clarity that the UK Government was acting for England only when making and lifting domestic coronavirus regulations. Throughout the pandemic, the making of domestic regulations was a devolved function – Wales was making coronavirus regulations (the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations) – for Wales; Scotland for Scotland and the UK Government was acting for England. However, there were many occasions when UK Ministers did not make that clear in press conferences or in subsequent media interviews whether they were speaking about the UK or about England, giving the impression they were acting on behalf of the whole UK.
36. As an example, on 23 December 2020, the then Health Secretary Matt Hancock, opened his press conference with an overview of cases, hospital admissions and deaths "across the country" – he did not make it clear whether that country was the UK or England. He then spoke about new tier restrictions for specific parts of England before moving on to talk about testing. He referred to "expand[ing] testing capacity here in the UK" and "all those who work in care homes in England will receive two rapid tests a week, in addition to their weekly PCR test".
37. While the pandemic increased overall awareness of devolved governments' functions and powers – in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – I believe it also gave rise to some confusion in the media about differences in each of the four UK nations, in part because of the UK Government's dual role in the pandemic – to act for England only in devolved areas and to act for the whole of the UK in other aspects of the pandemic response, such as the furlough scheme, and border and international travel restrictions – and the lack of clarity from UK Ministers about that dual role.



38. I set out in paragraph 96 how the Welsh Government press office spent a lot of time explaining to the media – both Welsh and UK national media – when announcements by the UK Government related to England-only or to the UK as a whole, and clearing up ambiguity created by statements from UK Ministers.
39. There were times when it felt – to me at least – that the UK Government was more interested in winning a race only it was competing in (to be the first to defeat the virus and the restrictions) and scoring political points, rather than in effecting the best possible public health response for all UK citizens. I give two specific examples – the first when the Prime Minister set out his four-step roadmap, with concrete dates, to remove all restrictions on 22 February 2021, declaring: “We’re travelling on a one-way road to freedom”.
40. The second was when the Transport Minister removed all the remaining international travel restrictions, just in time for the Easter holidays in March 2022, even though coronavirus was still circulation domestically and internationally. “The UK is leading the world in removing all remaining COVID-19 travel restrictions,” the Transport Secretary said in a UK Government press statement dated 14 March 2022 (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/18–INQ000308409**). “I said we wouldn’t keep travel measures in place for any longer than necessary, which we’re delivering on today – providing more welcome news and greater freedom for travellers ahead of the Easter holidays.”

#### **Role in relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions**

41. As I have outlined in the previous section, I was not directly involved in any decision-making.
42. I did not attend COBR meetings with the First Minister, although I was usually aware when they were taking place. I attended Cabinet meetings – the main decision-making forum for Welsh Ministers – as an observer only.
43. The inquiry asks about my role in relation to working from home, the reduction in personal and social contact and self-isolation requirements. These would have been regular parts of the press conferences, as the First Minister and MHSS conveyed the latest public health advice to the public throughout the pandemic.
44. Wales has continued to encourage flexible working – either working from home or from a remote working hub – after the last coronavirus restrictions were lifted in July 2022.

45. Communications relating to the closure of school and education settings were primarily managed by the former Education Minister Kirsty Williams' team, between February 2020 and March 2021 and then by the current Education Minister Jeremy Miles' team after May 2021 (following the Senedd election). I regularly included references to the latest advice and guidance for schools in the First Minister's three-week coronavirus regulations review press conferences.
46. On 11 August 2020, the Technical Advisory Cell published its *Updated Advice on Face Coverings*, (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/19-INQ000228031**) which discussed the emerging evidence about airborne transmission of the virus and the latest EMG/NERVTAG paper, which suggested "cloth face coverings are likely to have some benefit in reducing the risk of aerosol transmission". Wales adopted a face-covering mandate on 14 September 2020 which was shared in MHSS's press conference on 14 September (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/20-INQ000227544**).
47. It will be helpful for the inquiry to know that I took leave during August 2020 – I had been working a seven-day week since early March. This would be my normal working pattern throughout the pandemic – I worked seven days a week all year round and took three to four weeks off in August, as the virus retreated.
48. When I returned from leave on 2 September 2020, cases of the virus were increasing – there were "hot spots" emerging in parts of the South Wales Valleys. There were discussions in Ministerial meetings about whether a stronger set of national measures, including a face-covering mandate, working from home and a rule of six, were needed.
49. This package of measures was subsequently agreed and announced via a First Ministerial press conference on 11 September 2020, which I wrote (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/21-INQ000090608**). The then MHSS Vaughan Gething held a press conference on 14 September when the new measures came into force. Again, I wrote this (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/22-INQ000227529**).
50. Throughout autumn 2020, until the introduction of the firebreak on 23 October, there was a rolling programme of local restrictions as coronavirus spread through Wales. Reflecting now, with the benefit of hindsight and having subsequently experienced the extremely high rates of infections associated with omicron, the threshold for action in autumn 2020 was set very low. When local restrictions were introduced in Caerphilly in early September 2020, the rate in the borough was 55 cases per 100,000 population; in January 2021, when alert level two restrictions were introduced in Wales during the

first omicron wave, there were more than 2,300 cases per 100,000 people in Wales. But autumn 2020 was before the vaccine was available and at a time when we knew less about the virus. I believe it was thought, at that time, that these restrictions would help to slow the spread of the virus and hopefully, ultimately, prevent a further lockdown.

51. I was present, as an observer, at the meetings to discuss local restrictions. The respective local authority leaders attended these. I wrote many of the written statements and press releases which were issued following these meetings. We had also moved to a three-times-a-week press conference in September, to help keep people informed and updated about the rapidly developing situation. I attach the written Ministerial statement Local Coronavirus Restrictions Update published on 25 September 2020 by MHSS Vaughan Gething as an example (this is **exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/23–INQ000227531**).

52. I had no involvement in decisions or discussions about international border controls. I understand these discussions and decisions were led by UK Ministers, as was the timing to relax restrictions – the Welsh Government had little influence over these decisions, despite the potential public health impact. I supported Welsh Ministers – mainly MHSS Eluned Morgan – in communicating these via written statement by working closely with the Welsh Government officials who drafted these statements.

53. I have focused my substantive comments in this section on three specific events in the pandemic:

- a. The March 2020 lockdown
- b. The firebreak (23 October 2020 – 9 November 2020)
- c. The December 2020 lockdown (Kent/Delta variant)

54. In respect to the decision to lockdown on 23 March 2020, I believed at the time that there was an inevitability about this decision/announcement. It felt as though we were all waiting for it to come. The public health situation in the UK had been deteriorating rapidly; speculation was high in the media that the Prime Minister would take such a decision; it was only a matter of time before such a decision was made. When the COBR meeting was called, I suspected this was the meeting which would decide the UK lockdown.

55. My sole focus from that moment became about how we would tell three million worried people in Wales their lives were about to change irrevocably and how we would continue to communicate important public health information to them during a pandemic and answer the many thousands of questions they would have.
56. At the time, I had no views about whether the lockdown was being implemented at the right time – my focus was on the huge task in front of us. That remained my focus for the next two years.
57. In relation to the firebreak (23 October to 9 November 2020), I played no role in the decision-making process – my role was to support the communication of this – but I would have been present, as an observer, at meetings to discuss the public health situation and the strategy.
58. I recall thinking it was a risk and a lot to ask the public to do – most of Wales by that point had been subject to local restrictions for a number of months in a bid to slow the spread of the virus and now we were asking Wales to shut down for two weeks to try and break the cycle of infections.
59. SAGE and our own Technical Advisory Group had recommended the use of “circuit breakers” as a means of controlling the spread of the virus (**exhibit M2B-WG-MB-01/24–INQ000227967 refers**).
60. My focus was on how Ministers told the public what we were about to do and why. We used the First Ministerial press conference on 16 October (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/25-INQ000090621**), 23 October (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/26-INQ000090627**), together with a Facebook Live Q&A session and many media interviews to help people understand when it would happen and why.
61. We had been using slides and data in our press conferences since June 2020 – on 16 October we used an animation of the virus spreading across Wales, using data from the SAIL Databank team at Swansea University Medical School.
62. The language was important – in the press conference, the First Minister spoke about the “*virus waking up for the winter*” and described the firebreak as a “*short, sharp shock to turn back the clock.*”
63. I recall the December 2020 lockdown coming very suddenly. The Cabinet was presented with worrying but compelling information on 19 December 2020 about the new Kent (now known as Delta) variant, which had just emerged (**exhibited as M2B-**

**WG-MB-01/27–INQ000227847**). The Covid-19 vaccination programme was just starting, and this was a virulent and potentially deadly variant, which was spreading quickly.

64. I was present at the Cabinet meeting as an observer and can remember being shocked by the briefing and the stark warning that without lockdown restrictions (alert level four) (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/28–INQ000227576**) in place, there was a very real risk large numbers of people could fall seriously ill and possibly die. But I also remember feeling relieved that there was a reason why Wales was experiencing such high coronavirus rates at the time – they had escalated rapidly from the end of November 2020 onwards.
65. Cabinet made the decision to move to alert level four immediately. The First Minister made a statement, which I wrote (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/29–INQ000227931**) – at the time, it was the most important statement I had written for him. The government was making a decision to lockdown Wales just before Christmas and with immediate effect. The UK Government had decided on a different course of action for England – it would introduce a lockdown after Christmas.
66. The inquiry asks about whether the Welsh Government gave sufficient consideration in its decision-making to the impact of NPIs on “at-risk” and other vulnerable people. I was not directly involved in decision-making, although I was an observer at many Ministerial meetings where the needs of people who were in the shielding cohort were specifically discussed.
67. There was a focus on the needs of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. The BAME Covid-19 Advisory Group was set up by the First Minister under the leadership of Judge Ray Singh. It had two sub-groups, chaired by Professor Keshav Singhal and Professor Emmanuel Ogbonna. Professor Singhal’s group examined the immediate risk to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic health and social care workers during the pandemic, which led to the development of the two-stage self-assessment Welsh Workforce Risk Assessment Tool and was put into widespread use in the NHS and social care in Wales and other workplace settings. Professor Ogbonna’s group examined the socio-economic factors, which contributed to the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

68. The advisory group's work and the development of the self-assessment risk-assessment tool was highlighted by the First Minister and MHSS Vaughan Gething in their press conferences – it was the sole focus of the press conference on 22 June 2020 (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/30–INQ000228028**).
69. Professor Ogbonna's report of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Covid-19 Socioeconomic Subgroup (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/31–INQ000227599**) led to the development and publication of the Welsh Government's Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan in January 2023 (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/32–INQ000227788**).
70. In October 2020, MHSS announced outreach workers would be employed by the NHS to support people from ethnic minority backgrounds in recognition of the disproportionate impact the pandemic was having on people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.
71. A series of analyses were drawn together to support the work of a steering group commissioned by the Welsh Government's Disability Equality Forum to consider and report on the impact of Covid-19 on disabled people in Wales. In July 2021, the Disability Equality Forum published the *Locked Out: Liberating Disabled People's Lives and Rights in Wales beyond COVID-19* report (**exhibited as M2B-WG-MB-01/33–INQ000227530**). As part of its response, the Welsh Government set up the Disability Rights Taskforce which is continuing its work today to improve disabled people's rights, based on the social model of disability.
72. Ministers and officials regularly discussed Covid-19 vaccination uptake among people with protected characteristics, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups at the weekly First Ministerial vaccination meetings. They were focused on understanding if there were any disparities in take-up and if there were, what could be done to improve take-up rates among the most vulnerable. Examples of successful interventions include the first vaccination clinic to be run in a mosque during Ramadan in March 2021, which was organised with Muslim Doctors Cymru in Newport, to help increase coverage in the Muslim community and to dispel some of the misinformation about the vaccine.
73. Children's rights and feedback from the *Coronavirus and Me* survey – launched on 13 May 2020 and a partnership between the Welsh Government, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, the Welsh Youth Parliament and Children in Wales – were regularly raised and discussed by Ministers at Cabinet meetings as part of the three-

week review of coronavirus regulations. The statutory 21-day review of the coronavirus regulations had been in place – and had taken place – since the March 2020 lockdown.

74. Impact assessments were carried out and published to determine how coronavirus control measures affected equality of opportunity.

75. All press conferences used inclusive language and featured a BSL translator – we continue to use a BSL translator as a routine feature in all our press conferences post-pandemic. Wherever possible Ministers used Welsh in their press conferences – if journalists asked questions in Welsh, Ministers would also provide an answer in English.

### **Role in divergence of approach**

76. As I previously stated in this statement, my role during the pandemic was to advise the First Minister – and other Ministers and senior government officials, when necessary – about communications related to the pandemic. I was not involved in policy decisions or decision-making.

77. While the overall approach to the pandemic response was broadly similar across the UK, there were differences in each of the four nations, which reflected devolution and the particular needs and political values of each country. For example, in Wales, the Test, Trace, Protect programme was run within the public sector and not outsourced to private contractors, as it was in England – this reflected the Welsh Government's wider beliefs and values that public services should be run by the public sector and not for profit. There was also a difference in pace – in terms of both removing and re-introducing NPIs and restrictions as infections waned and surged – which reflected how each of the four UK governments responded to the public health situation in their nation and its impact on society.

78. Decisions about the timing of the firebreak; the introduction of the December 2020 lockdown and when to start easing lockdown restrictions after both the March 2020 and December 2020 lockdowns were based on the current public health situation in Wales. At times, this meant there were differences in what people could do on either side of the Wales-England border.

79. This put a greater emphasis on the need for clear and coherent communications from the Welsh Government, which explained both the nature of the restrictions at the

current time and the reason for them. I will expand on this further in the section on public health communications.

80. I understand the inquiry has received a statement about the Welsh Government's corporate communications role and function, which sets out the development of our core Keep Wales Safe brand in May 2020. This was used throughout the pandemic after the first lockdown and marked a divergence away from the UK Government's "stay alert" messaging and other publicity campaigns, including those which drew on guilt and fear, such as the "look into their eyes" stay at home campaign in January 2021.

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

81. I did not provide any scientific or medical expertise during the pandemic, nor did I provide any data modelling to Ministers or senior government officials to aid decision-making.

82. However, I drew on the expertise of our senior medical and scientific advisers regularly – to help brief Ministers before media interviews; to check facts and the latest understanding about how the virus was behaving – and used data regularly in our Welsh Government press conferences.

83. The Chief Medical Officer Sir Frank Atherton, Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr Chris Jones, Chief Scientific Adviser for Health Dr Rob Orford, the co-chair of the Technical Advisory Group Fliss Bennee and Head of Wales' Covid-19 Vaccination Programme Dr Gill Richardson all became regular contributors to the Welsh Government press conferences and regular – and trusted – media interviewees during the pandemic.

84. We started using bilingual data slide sets in Welsh Government press conferences from June 2020 to show the progression of the virus. I developed a very good relationship with our Knowledge and Analytical Services (KAS) team within the Welsh Government which produced the slides – often at very short notice – ensuring the data was correct and available on our website for public use and scrutiny (I attach as examples **M2B-WG-MB-01/34-INQ000090714**, **M2B-WG-MB-01/35- INQ000090650**, **M2B-WG-MB-01/36-INQ000090682** and **M2B-WG-MB-01/37-INQ000090646**).

85. I produced a series of daily briefings for Ministers following the emergence of the "South African variant of concern" in February 2021 (I attach an example as **M2B-WG-MB-01/38-INQ000227482**) and the omicron variant in late November 2021 until the



end of December 2021 (I attach an example as **M2B-WG-MB-01/39–INQ000227818**). The omicron briefing drew on published scientific information from a range of sources including UKHSA, World Health Organisation and Public Health Wales and, as the situation developed, included the action the Welsh Government was taking. These briefings were designed to support Ministers in interviews and help them answer questions from Members of the Senedd in Plenary sessions.

### **Role in public health communications**

86. This section expands on information provided in paragraphs 13 to 18, and on comments in paragraphs 78 and 79.

87. As previously stated, my main role was in relation to Welsh Government communications – providing advice to the First Minister, other Ministers and senior Welsh Government officials about how to clearly communicate often complex information in a simple and easy-to-understand way, in a rapidly-moving and changing pandemic.

88. I supported the Welsh Government's corporate communications function by writing press releases when needed; by signing-off reactive media statements and Ministerial media statements and advising about media interviews. I supported the First Minister, other Ministers and senior government officials before they undertook media interviews or Facebook Live sessions – we held a number of these sessions in 2020 as restrictions were gradually lifted to give people direct access to Ministers, including the First Minister, and to help answer their questions about restrictions. Some were more successful than others.

89. My main contribution to pandemic communications was the Welsh Government press conference. I had put in place a programme of weekly press conferences after Mark Drakeford became First Minister in December 2018 – the First Minister would do the first week of the month; other Ministers would do a press conference in weeks two, three and four.

90. These press conferences became the centrepiece of how Ministers – and particularly the First Minister – was able to speak directly to the public about the pandemic and our response to it. They were open to all journalists who wanted to attend virtually and were complemented by a BSL translator. We broadcast them on our social media, and they were broadcast live on BBC1Wales and S4C.

91. The televised Welsh Government press conference would become a trusted source of information during the pandemic. We held more than 200 press conferences during the pandemic – at its height, we held a daily press conference at lunchtime to ensure people had the latest information about the progress of the virus, the latest public health advice and the latest developments in testing and vaccination. We also used them to disseminate information about our bespoke business support schemes, which were additional to the support provided by the UK Government.
92. I wrote the vast majority of the press conference scripts. I kept the language simple, accessible and inclusive to help people understand the public health advice we were providing and the latest restrictions.
93. In the early phase of the pandemic (March 2020 lockdown) we used the “*stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives*” messaging which was common across all parts of the UK. We also thanked people, saying “*together we are making a difference*” or “*together we can do this,*” reflecting the sense of community in Wales, as the First Minister did in his press conference on May 11, 2020, exhibited as **(M2B-WG-MB-01/40-INQ000090562)**. After the first lockdown, later in 2020, this had evolved into the Keep Wales Safe messaging, examples are exhibited as **(M2B-WG-MB-01/41-INQ000227944** and **M2B-WG-MB-01/42–INQ000227942)**.
94. The Welsh Government commissioned its own focus group research throughout the pandemic, which I found to be a useful touchstone resource for the content and tone of the press conference scripts. I also drew on the findings of IpsosMORI’s online panel survey tracking public views about Covid-19 in Wales **(M2B-WG-MB-01/43–INQ000227616)** and Public Health Wales’ regular *How Are We Doing In Wales?* survey to which I exhibit as **(M2B-WG-MB-01/44–INQ000227950** and **M2B-WG-MB-01/45–INQ000227862)** and the ‘How are we doing in Wales – with a focus on Ethnicity as exhibit **(M2B-WG-MB-01/46–INQ000227812)**, which asked people about their understanding of coronavirus and how the measures to prevent its spread were affecting their physical, mental and social wellbeing, as well as other ad hoc surveys carried out by polling companies, such as YouGov. This data tracked the public’s perception and understanding of the current situation and helped me understand whether I needed to place a greater emphasis on certain aspects of our response or public health information in the press conferences, for example.
95. Wales had a general election in May 2021, which was mid-way through the pandemic. This was the first opportunity to meet people in real life and to hear their experiences

of the pandemic. I was with the First Minister throughout the election campaign. He was repeatedly greeted by people who had watched all the press conferences on television and wanted to tell him that they had followed the rules and were glad they lived in Wales.

96. Wales has a relatively small and under-developed indigenous media – the majority of people in Wales consume England-based media, which has traditionally given little focus to Wales and devolved issues. However, for perhaps the first time since devolution in 1999, the pandemic put a focus on devolution and the different powers and approaches taken by devolved governments.
97. The Welsh Government press and communications teams worked very hard to ensure our messages – including differences in approach, such as Test, Trace and Protect; details about the Welsh Covid-19 vaccination programme and where restrictions differed – were understood and reflected in media reports, especially UK (England-based) media. The Welsh Government press team spent a lot of time explaining such differences clearing up ambiguity created by statements from UK Ministers and in the UK media. We answered a lot of questions along the lines of “UK Government has announced X, does this apply in Wales?” and “England has done X, when is Wales going to do the same...” The Welsh Government press office also spent a lot of time explaining that when the UK Government announced figures for the Covid-19 vaccination programme, for example, or that appointments could now be booked for a certain age group, this applied to England only.
98. First Ministerial press conferences about the three-week reviews of the coronavirus restrictions would regularly be preceded by an extensive early morning round of UK and Welsh radio and television interviews, followed by up to an hour of questions from journalists and further television interviews. Together with senior members of the press office, I helped to prepare the First Minister for these interviews.
99. My other main contribution to pandemic communications was in a stakeholder management role. By the end of March 2020, I started a coronavirus update email, which was a round-up of the Welsh Government coronavirus-related news, newly-produced guidance (highlighting when easy read, Braille, BSL and versions in other languages were available) and the latest public health advice. I started the email because we were producing a lot of guidance and information every day and I wanted to make sure key stakeholders were aware of this. We were being asked a lot of questions by Members of the Senedd and Welsh MPs about the pandemic – the

answers to which were often to be found in the information on our website. The daily email was sent to every Member of the Senedd, Welsh MP, to the Welsh Local Government Association, to local resilience forums, to members of the Shadow Social Partnership Forum and to civil servants across the Welsh Government. This took the form of a daily email when the pandemic was at its most active; when infection levels fell and restrictions were removed, I sent the email weekly. The last email update was sent on 30 July 2022.

100. I also produced bespoke briefings and Q&As, primarily for Cabinet members and politicians to help them understand aspects of the pandemic – from business support and PPE to the impact on dentistry and the use of vitamin D – to support them as they were trying to support and respond to questions from their constituents.

### **Key challenges lessons learnt**

101. I provided some verbal personal reflections to an internal Welsh Government lesson's learned review about the civil service response to the pandemic. I did not make any notes before providing these reflections and did not keep any notes. The report is exhibited as **M2B-WG-MB-01/47–INQ000227664**.
102. In response to the inquiry's question about lessons learned, I have used some of the communications measures/products I put in place during the pandemic to support wider government communications to help keep Ministers, Senedd Members and other stakeholders updated about emerging issues.
103. As the Welsh Government launched its super-sponsor scheme as part of the UK Homes for Ukraine scheme in March 2022, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I developed a regular email update about Welsh Government support for Ukraine, which was sent to Welsh MPs, Members of the Senedd, Local Authority contacts and other external stakeholders to keep them updated. I have also developed and maintained regular briefings for Cabinet members about a variety of topical and emerging issues, including the cost-of-living crisis; our response to Ukraine, the financial fallout from the Liz Truss mini-budget and the identification of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in the wider public estate.

**Statement of Truth**

I believe 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**

Madeleine Brindley

**Dated:** \_\_\_\_\_ 14/10/23 \_\_\_\_\_