

Witness Name: ROBIN SWANN, MLA

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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF:

Robin Swann

Minister of Health (11 January 2020 – 27 October 2022)

Department of Health, Northern Ireland

UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY

MODULE 2C RULE 9 REQUEST – M02C-RSW-001

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (NI)

may not be prepared for, or have the capacity and capability to deal effectively with, an emergency situation should a major contingency present” [Exhibit RS/26 INQ000205712]. Unfortunately, I was not aware of this paper until it was presented in this evidence and I do not believe it was brought to the attention of the Executive Committee.

65. The Executive Committee held its first substantive discussion about Covid-19 on 2 March 2020 and during that discussion, the Chief Medical Officer observed: “most people – minor illness like cold. 98% will get better. 5% hospital care.... Fatality rate - cd be 2-3%...Modelling -UK/ROI - widespread...Not inevitable. Need to be prepared for weeks/months...Peak could last for 15 weeks. 50%+ of population cd be affected - but lot of minor cases v mild. Planning - 50%+ infected...Need to plan and prepare for all eventualities.” [Exhibit RS/27 INQ000065694]. From a Department of Health and Health and Social Care perspective, there was a high level of urgency and activity from early preparations, but even as the conditions and outcomes were described by the Chief Medical Officer here, I am not entirely sure that the overall impact on society was fully understood by other Ministers and Departments as in my opinion they still perceived this as a health issue that would only impact hospitals.
66. It is my opinion that only at the Executive Committee meeting on the 10 March 2020 was there a realisation and acceptance that the response to Covid-19 was going to have to be more than simply a health response and that all Ministers and Departments would have a role to play. However, even at that time there was not a clear understating of what that response would be.
67. On the 11 March 2020 COBR(M) took the decision to move from the Contain phase to the Delay phase; Northern Ireland followed suit.

3. Early measures in the Republic of Ireland

68. On the 11 March 2020, when the Republic of Ireland announced a package of measures, including the closure of schools, colleges and childcare facilities; cancellation of all indoor mass gatherings of 100 people and outdoor gatherings of over 500 people, I had not received any medical or scientific evidence on Covid-19 and its transmission to validate the decision that the Republic of Ireland Government had taken, and, as [Exhibit RS/28 INQ000083097] records we (the Northern Ireland