

Statement No.:

Exhibits:

Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RICHARD BULLICK

I, Richard Bullick, will say as follows: -

Background, role and qualifications

1. I served as a Special Advisor in the Department for Regional Development from 2000 to 2002; the Department of Finance and Personnel between 2007 and 2008; and for the First Minister from 2008 to 2017. I also worked as Head of Policy for the Democratic Unionist Party ("DUP") from 2002 to 2007. I was Head of Public Affairs for MCE from 2017 to 2019, and was an independent public affairs consultant from 2019 to 2021. I was called to the Bar in 1996 and worked as a barrister until 2000. I am also qualified to practise law in the State of New York.
2. I was Special Adviser to First Minister Paul Givan from July 2021 to February 2022.
3. The responsibilities within the First Minister Special Adviser team were divided across policy areas and I had no formal role in relation to the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. I do not have a comprehensive record of the division of responsibilities, but these should still be held by the Executive Office. However, my responsibilities would have had an economic focus and included issues around post Brexit arrangements. In ease of civil servants, the responsibilities of the Special Adviser team are divided across areas of responsibility. These include a division of oversight on other departments and a division within the responsibilities of TEO. During this case they were divided between Philip Weir any myself. That meant that any papers which fell into a particular adviser's responsibilities were passed to the relevant Special Adviser to offer comments and advice to the Minister. This was the common practice on both

the FM and the dFM side since 2007 at least. During the Specified Period, I do not believe any of my areas of responsibility had a connection to Covid-19. In terms of 'informal involvement', I would have been present during discussions about Covid-19 and would have contributed to these discussions. However, my contributions were not informed by a detailed consideration of the relevant papers. There is a process for the appointment of Special Advisers. It is a matter for Ministers. My involvement in that process as far as I can recall is being offered the position and providing a CV.

4. During the period when I was Special Adviser, the First Minister role was held by a person other than the leader of the DUP. Part of my role involved liaising with the DUP leader. In relation to Covid-19, this liaison was limited as I believe the First Minister would have liaised directly with the party leader on these issues. This developed as a practice but was not on foot of a formal decision or arrangement. Rather, in areas where the First Minister was regularly in conversation with the party leader, such as on issues related to Covid-19, I did not believe there was any value duplicating this effort in an area within which I only had limited familiarity. I was not privy to the discussions between the First Minister and the party leader but I would imagine they related to the approach of lifting restrictions.

The Covid-19 response

5. While I had no formal role in relation to advising in respect of Covid-19, I would have attended some meetings and offered advice in an *ad hoc* way. I distinguish between formal and informal involvement as I regard formal involvement as involving reading and considering relevant advice from officials in an area from which I had responsibility and offering considered advice. I regard informal involvement as participating in discussions on the basis of what I observed largely through the media. My involvement fell primarily into the latter category. It seems to me that there is a legitimate distinction to be drawn between the two. Therefore, most 'advice' I offered in this area was *ad hoc* in the sense that it was unsolicited and was correctly regarded with an importance associated with this status.
6. As such, I had no formal role in advising the First Minister about advice being provided to him by (i) SAGE; (ii) the UK Chief Medical Officer; (iii) the Northern Ireland Chief Medical Officer; briefing on modelling outcomes; strategic advice; or deciding what issues needed to be put before him as priorities; or the daily agenda. Any advice I offered would have been limited and informal. I would have occasionally attended meetings related to Covid-19 but I was not the lead Special Adviser on pandemic-

related issues. I hold no documentation and have no record regarding which meetings I attended. The Executive Office may or may not hold such documentation/information. In general, I would often have joined online meetings as an observer and simply to keep myself abreast of the up-to-date position. To the best of my recollection, I never spoke during these meetings and would often have been working on other matters as the meetings took place. I had no role whatsoever. I may have contributed on occasion in group chats but I do not believe I ever offered written advice. Therefore insofar as my contribution rose to the level of 'advice', such advice would have been verbal. This would have been limited in its frequency and extent, and I have no record or recollection of it. In any event, it would also have been limited because, as explained above, it was not my responsibility to advise in this area, and my contributions were therefore not intended to be authoritative. It would have been conversational and unstructured, and not informed by any detailed consideration of advice from officials.

7. In the period between July 2021 and February 2022, I regarded the relationship between the First Minister and deputy First Minister as constructive. Issues were approached in a civil manner and, notwithstanding a difference of emphasis on issues, compromise outcomes were almost always secured.
8. As I was not a Special Adviser prior to July 2021, I am unable to comment on issues touching upon the absence and then return to power-sharing; including the nature of the working relationship between the then First Minister with the deputy First Minister at that time. I am also unable to assist as to the awareness within the First Minister's office about the development of the Covid-19 pandemic, nor the advice, briefings, or strategy/policies adopted, in terms of the imposition of lockdown, its subsequent lifting, and the plans made for, and decisions taken from late Summer to the end of 2020 as cases rose again.
9. I am also not in a position to offer an informed assessment of the role of the Northern Ireland Hub, nor work done to assess the effectiveness of the civil contingencies arrangements generally. I can say that between July 2021 and February 2022, the arrangements appeared to work satisfactorily. However, my involvement in these matters was extremely limited and my analysis should be assessed accordingly, but it appeared to me that relevant information and advice was provided in a timely and constructive manner. Similarly, my capacity to comment on the performance of the Executive Covid Taskforce ("ECT") is limited but I believe that during my period as Special Adviser the ECT appeared to work reasonably well i.e. information that was provided by the ECT permitted informed decisions to be taken. It is possible that

someone with greater familiarity with the work of the ECT would take a different view. If that were the case then I would suggest that they would be in a better position to comment.

10. In terms of the relationship with the Republic of Ireland, I cannot recall providing any advice to the First Minister with regard to engagement and/or coordination with Republic of Ireland between during my period as Spad between July 2021 and February 2022, but I also do not recall that cooperation, or the lack of it, had any material impact on the Covid-19 response.

11. I was not the lead Special Adviser on either communications nor Covid-19 during the period from July 2021 and February 2022 and therefore am not in a position to comment on the extent to which there was a joint approach by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to communications about Covid-19. Though there was often a different approach before and in Executive meetings, as far as I can recall, once a decision was taken all Ministers publicly endorsed the decision that has been taken during this period. It is clear from the public record that this was not always the case in the period before my appointment. In my experience the effectiveness of communication cannot be divorced from the decision-making process and the former is often an excuse for the latter i.e. it is often the case that senior politicians blame their failures to take decisions or the quality of decisions on the ability of communications professions to communicate them. They do not regard the decision to be the problem rather the communication of the decision.

12. I can say that in a Northern Ireland context high profile breaches of covid rules (if not laws) and Executive decisions had a catastrophic impact on public confidence. I have no examples of this specific to Covid-19 during my time in office.

Communications and documents

13. I worked on the presumption that all government business is to a greater or lesser degree subject to duties of confidentiality. The Department of Finance holds any relevant documentation such as guidance, the Code of Conduct and policies governing this aspect of my role.

14. My role was over a short and less contentious period in terms of the Covid-19 response. As such, from July 2021 and February 2022, I consider that leaking was more of a presentational irritation than any particular threat or inhibitor to decision

making. I was not conscious of the leaking having any effect on discussion at Executive meetings but I would not be well-placed to make a definitive assessment. I doubt public confidence was affected by leaks during this period.

15. Throughout the Specified Period, I did not ever disclose the whole or part of an Executive paper or brief a journalist about the contents of an Executive paper nor did I ever disclose the contents of an Executive Committee meeting while the meeting was ongoing. I also have no knowledge of any other individual having done so.

16. I was issued with an iPhone, an iPad and a computer by the NICS for use between July 2021 to February 2022. I regularly used my personal mobile phone as it contained all my contact details.

17. I would have used text messages and WhatsApp but not Slack, Signal or Microsoft Teams chat channels. I believe all or almost all relevant communications took place on my personal iPhone.

18. I do not hold information as to the names of those individuals or groups with whom I communicated in my capacity as a Special Adviser. I used messaging platforms for organising meetings or communication during meetings. I recall there was an Executive group chat on WhatsApp which I presume included Ministers and advisers. It may have included others though I cannot recall. I would also have communicated with Philip Weir and the First Minister and that may have been on a WhatsApp group. I do not recall if there was a Special Adviser only WhatsApp group during this period. To the best of my recollection there was not, and even if there were, I would be surprised if there was much, if any, discussion of Covid-19 issues. It did not occur to me to retain any such communications as I would not have regarded them as particularly relevant to the Inquiry's task. However, as they would also have been held by others, it is likely that they have not been lost to the inquiry.

19. I did not take any notes of any meeting as it is not my practice to do so. In my experience there was almost always an official present to take minutes.

20. In terms of whether the Code for Special Advisers was interpreted as permitting Special Advisers to conduct official business using messaging platforms, I would be surprised if any Special Adviser asked that question, much less answered it. I was not aware of any policies related to the use of Messaging Platforms during my tenure. Messaging Platforms were used on personal devices for convenience. I do not believe they were used by Ministers or Special Advisers as an alternative to formal or minuted

meetings. I did not take any steps to formally retain and record any such communications. I do not recall deleting any messages though I assume my NICS-issued phone was restored to factory settings. In any event, it would have had few, if any, messages on it. I replaced my personal phone last Autumn and I no longer hold it. I do not have access to old messages. I returned my NICS devices to The Executive Office. I did not delete any messages but I may have had the devices reset to factory settings. To the best of my knowledge, I did not delete messages on my personal phone as I would have had no reason to do so. Any messages I sent were likely to have been held by multiple other people.

Leadership, key challenges and lessons learned

21. By the time I joined the department in July 2021, the most difficult periods of the pandemic were over. I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the events before I joined the department as I have no first-hand experience of this period.

22. During the period July 2021 to February 2022, I believe that both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister worked constructively together. Ministers often approached issues around Covid-19 with a different emphasis on the considerations which would inform decisions. That could have had the potential to create difficulties in relationships or a failure to reach timely decisions. In my experience this was never the case and Ministers worked through issues in a constructive way and were often prepared to compromise in order to reach agreement around which progress could be made.

23. The key lessons I have learned from my experience in participating in or supporting core political and administrative decision-making connected to the response to Covid-19, is that leaders should avoid mixed messages and lead by example. This conclusion was reached before my time as a Special Adviser in relation to senior Ministers who said one thing and did another. By way of example, you may wish to review events concerning the funeral of former IRA member, Bobby Storey.

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: 11 March 2024