

**Witness Name:**

**Statement no:**

**Exhibits:**

**Dated:**

**UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF BERNIE ROONEY**

I, Bernie Rooney, will say as follows:

1. I confirm that I have written this statement, the facts stated are all known to me, or believed by me to be true and the opinions stated, and inferences drawn are mine and mine alone.
2. I joined the Northern Ireland Civil Service as an Administrative Assistant in the Department of Economic Development on 21 August 1989. I was a civil servant with 38 years of experience and a career spanning several Northern Ireland Government Departments including: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM); the Department of the Environment (DOE); the Department for Communities (DfC); The Executive Office (TEO) and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI).
3. I was a Senior Civil Servant (Assistant Secretary) in the Northern Ireland Department for Communities (DfC) between December 2011 and August 2019. I was promoted to the Senior Civil Service (Assistant Secretary/Grade 5 level) in the Department for Communities in December 2011 to the role of Director of Child Maintenance Service Division. I transferred in September 2015 to the role of Director of Housing Performance and Accountability Division which included oversight of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and housing associations in Northern Ireland.
4. In April 2017, I transferred to the post of Director for Social Inclusion Policy Division, where I established a new Division and designed a structure and recruited teams to develop a social strategy, policy, and legislative work programme. The Division's policy areas included gender, disability, sexual orientation, and active ageing. I transferred in May 2018 to be Director of Regeneration within the Department for Communities (DfC).
5. In September 2019, I transferred to The Executive Office (TEO) to a temporary Grade 5, Deputy Director level post to undertake a specific task, a strategic review of civil contingency arrangements in Northern Ireland. On 18 March 2020, my responsibilities in

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The Executive Office (TEO) changed and I was allocated a role as Deputy Chief of Staff in the newly created COVID-19 C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I left the NI Hub in mid-June 2020 to begin a period of annual leave and time off in lieu of accrued working hours whilst working in the NI Hub and waited to be found a suitable post by NICS (Northern Ireland Civil Service) HR.

6. I moved to the post of Director of Gateways and EU Relations in the Department for Infrastructure in September 2020. I was the lead official responsible within the Department for coordinating the Department for Infrastructure's preparations for the UK's withdrawal from the EU. I also had responsibility for 'Gateways,' which involved responsibility for airport, port and railway policy and legislation. I retired from the Northern Ireland Civil Service on 31 March 2022.
7. From 2000 to 2004, I worked in The Executive Office (TEO), when it was known as the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). My role was Private Secretary, Deputy Principal level, to two previous Heads of the Civil Service, Sir Gerry Loughran and Sir Nigel Hamilton. I was responsible for managing the office and the team who supported the Head of the Civil Service.
8. As Private Secretary, Deputy Principal level I was involved in oversight of the diary; managing and dealing with all correspondence which included submissions to Ministers, briefings for meetings, agendas and papers for meetings; managing and dealing with all invitations; drafting speeches; attending and minuting meetings; Secretary to the NI Permanent Secretaries Group which involved preparing the agenda, commissioning papers and minuting the meeting; arranging visit programmes to other jurisdictions and administrations and accompanying on the visit to prepare briefings; minute meetings; liaise with the office and senior officials in the NICS Departments whilst on official visits to Dublin, Brussels, Washington; providing oral and written briefs; managing telephone calls and papers that required the approval of the Head of the Civil Service.

### My Role in The Executive Office (TEO) during the Specified Period

9. On 27 August 2019, Chris Stewart sent me an email and asked me to call him [Exhibit BRO/01 INQ000469455]. On 29 August 2019, the then Department for Communities (DfC) Permanent Secretary, Tracy Meharg, telephoned me to advise that I was going to be offered a temporary position in The Executive Office (TEO), at Assistant Secretary/Grade 5/Deputy Director level, to undertake a specific project. She told me to expect contact from The Executive Office (TEO) Deputy Secretary, Chris Stewart.

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10. On 29 August 2019, I received an email from Chris Stewart which informed me that he proposed to ask the Northern Ireland Civil Service HR to make arrangements for me to transfer to The Executive Office (TEO) on a loan basis for approximately 9 months, with flexibility to meet both the needs of the task, and to allow for career planning of a subsequent post for myself [Exhibit BRO/02 – INQ000183612].
11. I did not have a job description for my post in The Executive Office (TEO) and this led to a degree of confusion in relation to the line management role for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I had not been given a line management role for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. However, I was regularly instructed by Chris Stewart to undertake actions for which I had no line management authority, as I was not anyone's line manager, other than that I was acting upon a direction from *my* line manager.
12. In the NICS, it is a requirement for line management to develop a job description for each post to be managed by them. A Job Description forms the basis, in addition to Corporate and Branch Business Plans, for setting out to the post holder, the role and responsibilities. It forms the basis for discussion with the line manager to agree personal objectives for the business year.
13. NICS HR issued me with a letter of transfer on loan. I transferred on loan from the Department for Communities (DfC) to The Executive Office (TEO) at Grade 5/Deputy Director level on 9 September 2019. I was not provided with a job description when I arrived, but I was appointed to undertake a strategic review of civil contingencies. Chris Stewart was on leave for three weeks in September 2019, at the time I joined The Executive Office (TEO) and in his email of 29 August 2019 had suggested that I meet with a number of key stakeholders. I had no previous involvement with Operation Yellow Hammer or EU exit in my previous post in the Department for Communities prior to joining the Executive Office (TEO).
14. My post was not part of the existing Executive Office (TEO) senior staffing structure. It was an additional temporary post, which within the Civil Service is described as a 'supernumerary' post. I was located in Castle Buildings, 4th floor, Block E, in an office close to the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I had no line management responsibility for staff or budget control for my entire time working in The Executive Office (TEO). I understand that prior to my appointment, the then Head of the Civil Service, Sir David Sterling, had decided to bring into The Executive Office (TEO) a G5/Deputy Director, Chris Matthews, on loan, for a period of six months to work on civil contingencies and in particular, Operation Yellow Hammer.

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15. Chris Stewart had stated in the correspondence of 29 August 2019, prior to my arrival in The Executive Office (TEO), that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch 'should be able to provide me with support' as a Grade 5 would usually have a personal secretary. However, this was not the case as when I arrived the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team were busy with many competing priorities. The Deputy Principal and Administrative Officer posts were vacant. There was a Deputy Principal (on loan) to the Branch who was fully occupied on a C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project.

### Strategic Review

16. My role was solely to undertake a strategic review of civil contingencies arrangements in Northern Ireland, within a nine-month timeframe. My goal was to produce a report with clear recommendations by summer 2020.

17. During September 2019, as I met with the individuals as advised by Chris Stewart in his email dated 29 August 2019, I recognised that I was on a steep learning curve as civil contingencies issues are complex and involve a lot of jargon and technical detail. I was particularly interested in getting an understanding of the planning and risk management stages involved in civil contingencies.

18. Despite my 13 years of experience of working at Assistant Secretary/Grade 5 level, nine months was a challenging timescale to plan and undertake a strategic review, particularly when I was working on my own. There would normally be a small team of staff allocated to support such a review.

19. On 19 February 2020, I set out in an email to Chris Stewart, the governance requirements for the strategic review and my thinking in relation to what needed to be done. I explained what arrangements I had in place to expedite the process for setting up the full strategic review [Exhibit BRO/03 INQ000183602]. I had prepared a draft Terms of Reference [Exhibits BRO/04 - INQ000469456], BRO/05 - INQ000469460 BRO/06 - INQ000469461] a Central Procurement Directorate New Works Form and a business case for the Strategic Review, requesting £120,000 for an external consultancy assignment [Exhibit BRO/07 INQ000469462]. My assessment at that point in time was that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch appeared to have a lack of engagement and capacity to support my work on the strategic review due to a lack of staff and skills within the branch and reluctance to take on new work.

20. In an email to Chris Stewart dated 19 February 2020, I outlined submissions to be prepared and approvals required to progress the strategic review [Exhibit BRO/03 -

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**INQ000183602**. I explained that The Executive Office (TEO) Finance team had asked the Department of Finance to consider the business case (to bring in PwC to undertake an assignment in relation to the strategic review) as a priority, and that I had Cabinet Office agreement to the Northern Ireland The Executive Office's request to appoint PwC to a new assignment at the next Cabinet Office Approvals Board, in March 2020, which monitored the use the external consultants. PwC were originally engaged in Operation Yellowhammer and C3 work via a central contract with Cabinet Office, overseen by NIO and my request was to extend their contractual term to include the strategic review.

21. The draft Terms of Reference for my strategic review were described in a paper submitted to The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board on 25 February 2020. The outputs stated, "A report will be produced on how the aim, objectives and scope of the Terms of Reference have been addressed fully to ensure that Northern Ireland has resilient fit for purpose civil contingencies in place to support the NI Government." **[Exhibit BRO/08 - INQ000205712]**.
22. The aim of the strategic review was to take a strategic and forward-looking perspective and examine the civil contingencies arrangements for Northern Ireland, involving the NICS and wider public sector to ensure that: (i) The arrangements are resilient and fit for the future in a rapidly changing world; (ii) The purpose and required role of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch going forward is well defined **[Exhibit BRO/08 – INQ000205712]**.
23. The strategic review had to examine the purpose, role, functions, responsibilities, organisational structure, and staffing needs for the future. PwC had completed some work connected to this, as reported in their Futures report, November 2019. I was asked by Chris Stewart and Sir David Sterling to further examine this in my review and to consider in more detail planning and risk management. The areas that the strategic review would examine can be categorised into four main areas, as follows: business as usual and the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch future role, maintenance, and upkeep of the NI C3 (command, control, and coordination) Hub (including supporting documents and pool of volunteers), planning and risk management.
24. As part of the strategic review preparations, in September 2019, I had a series of familiarisation meetings with key officials and a wide range of partners and stakeholders. The focus of my role during the period September 2019 – January 2020 was to plan the strategic review, research civil contingency models elsewhere, for example: in councils; other devolved administrations; Ireland; Isle of Man; and elsewhere; learn about civil

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contingency structures; understand the legislative framework in Northern Ireland; understand the relationship with Cabinet Office; understand the cross-border role with Ireland; understand the role of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) in relation to Northern Ireland's critical infrastructure; understand how the National Risk Register operated and its relationship to Northern Ireland and the Executive; build networks; prepare a Terms of Reference; prepare a business case to secure necessary funding to ensure successful delivery of the review and secure the necessary approvals from The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board, NICS Board and Ministers. Based on my discussions with partners and stakeholders including research from my desk research, I developed a proposed Terms of Reference for the Review.

25. I understand that Chris Stewart presented the paper that I had drafted, dated 25 February 2020, to The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board on 26 February 2020 entitled "A strategic review of civil contingency arrangements in Northern Ireland". I was not at The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board meeting, as I was not invited to attend **[Exhibit BRO/08 - INQ000205712]**.

26. I understand from the minutes of that meeting, that "Chris Stewart provided an overview of the paper that had been circulated, recording the review of current arrangements given the changes in the strategic landscape that now impose new risks and considerations for civil contingency preparations. Following discussion, Denis Power, The Executive Office (TEO) Independent Board Member (IBM) noted the timely nature of the proposed review and the importance of engagement with stakeholders and recording of all risks." **[Exhibit BRO/09 - INQ000391222]**.

27. Civil Contingencies staff were unable to assist on the strategic review as they were experiencing challenges within the team as a result of unforeseen absence from work due to sickness, and vacant posts. In autumn 2019, the temporary Head of the C3 Project, who had been the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, was absent due to sickness.

28. In the period, January 2020 to 11 March 2020, I continued to work on the strategic review as that role was my priority. I undertook most of this work at home in the evenings and over weekends as the daily tasks in the office were emerging such as, attending COBR meetings on 29 January 2020 **[Exhibit BRO/10 - INQ000201813]** and 9 March 2020 **[Exhibit BRO/11 - INQ000056219]**; Civil Contingencies Group (NI) meeting on 20 February 2020 and attending C3 Leads meetings as well as coordinating queries and

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responses regarding the Emergency Coronavirus Bill in March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/12 - INQ000469463 ].

29. The paper to the Departmental Board, dated 25 February 2020, did not, and was never intended to, address the acute staffing issues ongoing within the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch at that time. The longer-term future requirements were being considered by way of a strategic review and were separate from the immediate and acute staffing problems being experienced in February 2020 [Exhibit BRO/08 – INQ000205712]. I had a timeline for myself with objectives and targets that enabled me to keep focused to try to meet my goal of a report by summer 2020 deadline. For example, in February 2020, I had planned to put in place the governance arrangements and secure the funding and approval of external consultants. I remained on track with this work. In February 2020, in accordance with my timeline, I prepared a paper for Chris Stewart to submit to The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board related to the strategic review. My work on the strategic review ceased on 18 March 2020.
30. The C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project was a project to build a C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub which had been commissioned by Mark Byers, a Deputy Director in the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). The Executive Office (TEO) had nominated the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch as the lead to work with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and PwC on the project. I had no formal role in the project. The Executive Office (TEO) person with responsibility for the project was the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.
31. My involvement in the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project was as an observer. I had no formal role. I engaged in the C3 Yellow Hammer project to help me understand the doctrine, operation, and workings of C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub. I was also learning about the work underway on Operation Yellow Hammer, the preparations underway in the event of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement, Brexit. All of the EU exit preparations and planning were entirely new to me.
32. PwC had been commissioned to deliver the C3 NI Hub project by a Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Director (Grade 5), Mark Byers as part of the preparations in the event that the UK would leave the EU with no deal. I did not attend meetings with PwC regarding progress on the project. PwC reported directly to Mark Byers, Deputy Director in the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) who had commissioned the project.

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33. Chris Stewart had suggested that it would be helpful for me to understand this project that had been commissioned by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). PwC was proposing a C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub operating model, which included a number of work strands such as enhanced infrastructure, training of volunteers, development of scenario plans for training exercises, development of concept of operations, standard operating procedures for a NI Hub, staffing models, daily rhythm, and development of situation report, Sitrep templates. As part of the strategic review, I recognised it was important to learn about the doctrine, purpose, role, functions, operation of and capabilities of the proposed C3 NI Hub. I also was able to learn about managing civil contingencies from the PwC external experts delivering the project and draw on their knowledge and experience.
34. I engaged directly with the civil contingency experts to learn about the theory of civil contingencies. I was learning how a NI Hub should operate. This really helped me to understand in greater detail civil contingencies, the terminology and how it should operate. This was valuable to informing the strategic review.
35. I recognised the opportunity to learn from the civil contingency consultants who were experts in this field about the theory of a Hub and how a Hub would work and contribute to Northern Ireland civil contingency arrangements. I had the opportunity to ask questions and learn to inform the strategic review and bounce ideas with the PwC team. I participated and contributed to the development of the Hub products, including the design and build and test of the situation reports, known as sitrep template; the daily rhythm; the Standard Operating Procedures; the Northern Ireland Concept of Operations Procedures; developing work patterns; how to identify data and analytical requirements; organisational structure and information flow. I participated in workshops and test exercises, providing senior management feedback as appropriate [Exhibit BRO/13 – INQ000469464]
36. During the period September 2019 to January 2020, I was also asked by Chris Stewart to participate in a variety of tasks in relation to C3, Operation Yellow Hammer. This involved setting up and participating in training exercises as part of the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub Project. All of this was relevant to my strategic review.
37. I had no formal role nor specific responsibilities in relation to Operation Yellow Hammer, which was within the remit of another Deputy Director, Gail McKibbin, within The Executive Office (TEO) with responsibility for Preparedness for UK Exit without an agreement and the joint Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and The Executive Office (TEO) C3 (command, control, and coordination) project.



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38. On 19 October 2019, Operation Yellow Hammer arranged an exercise to test the preparedness arrangements across the UK. Chris Stewart notified Sir David Sterling that there was going to be a 'soft stand up' of the C3 NI Hub and recommended the team to participate in this exercise should comprise of Chris Stewart, Gail McKibbin, Grade 5/ Deputy Director within The Executive Office (TEO) with responsibility for EU exit planning and myself. The temporary Head of C3 (command, control, and coordination) project was not available due to sick absence. This was an example of an operational event rather than directly related to the strategic review. Chris Stewart was of the view that it would be useful to understand the role and functions of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch which was relevant to the strategic review of civil contingency arrangements across Northern Ireland. I had been asked to substitute as no one was available from the Branch.
39. On 20 November 2019, one of the PwC team of consultants briefed me on the outline report that they were finalising. I was concerned about the issues that PwC were planning to include in their report. I emailed Chris Stewart, as I anticipated that these matters were likely to be raised in a meeting scheduled to take place the next day. I set out in the email that I had been assessing the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch work that had been put on hold. The new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had been undertaking a scoping exercise to develop a work programme for her team. I said in my email that the situation in my view was 'dire.' This was as a combination of my observations to date and a result of the issues that PwC had been presenting in their report. Through the work undertaken in the scoping exercise, it was becoming apparent that there was a backlog of work, spanning a number of years. I commented to Chris Stewart, my opinion, that as there had been a failure to invest in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch over a number of years, and that the current position is a time of focus, (I was referring to Operation Yellow Hammer work), it was with regret that I had to advise that, in my opinion, Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was 'not fit for purpose' [**Exhibit BRO/14 INQ000183597**].
40. I acknowledged that whilst considerable investment had been made to establish a central operations room, I stated that the operations room was of little value without the appropriate support structures in place. I set out three key elements required as staff with the appropriate skills; a stable and viable Civil Contingencies Policy Branch with a dedicated team managing all aspects of the infrastructure on an ongoing basis; and the necessary full-time staff and an appropriate level of funding. In my view, at this time, there was a significant difference between where we were and where and to where they needed to get. This underlined for me the need for me to expedite the strategic review.

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41. I had no formal role nor specific responsibilities in relation to Operation Yellow Hammer. Operation Yellow Hammer was stood down by the Prime Minister on 23 December 2019. At the request of Chris Stewart, I drafted a submission to inform the First Minister and Deputy First Minister that Operation Yellow Hammer had ceased [BRO/15 - INQ000469465]
42. By December 2019, the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project had been completed by PwC and provided a model for a C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub to help inform Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and Ministers in their decision-making. A Hub could be established as and when required. The model could be scaled up or down depending on the circumstances. This was, in my view, a valuable asset available to The Executive Office (TEO), and wider NICS Departments. However, in my opinion there was further work to do to communicate the role of The Executive Office (TEO) and Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I was of the view that the wider NICS Departments needed to better understand the purpose and structures and take ownership of the entire process. This was an issue that I noted to be addressed in the wider strategic review.
43. From January 2020 to 18 March 2020, on a daily basis, I was increasingly asked to undertake a range of tasks, for example: to dial into Cabinet Office meetings (in the absence of the Head of Branch); attend COBR meetings for example, 29 January 2020; COBR Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (M) (2) with Minister for Health and Chief Medical Officer Dr Michael McBride and Health officials [Exhibit BRO/16 – INQ000056226], COBR (F) and on 9 March 2020, with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and their advisors; and Minister for Health; and attended ad hoc meetings with Cabinet Office and attend other ad hoc meetings. The issues were varied; it was important that we tried to stay on top of the Cabinet Office requests, for example, on 1 March 2020, I emailed the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride to follow up on a Northern Ireland input to the UK draft COVID-19 Action plan. Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had not responded to the Cabinet Office request for input [Exhibit BRO/17 – INQ000469466]
44. Chris Stewart asked me to attend a COBR (F) meeting on 29 January 2020 as I was one of very few Senior Officials available in person at Stormont that was in possession of Security Check clearance and digital thumbprint access to the highly secure video conference room. I was asked to support the Minister for Health and Chief Medical Officer.
45. At the meeting COBR(F) on 29 January 2020, Minister for Health, Robin Swann, was accompanied by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride. I reported to Chris

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Stewart a comment that was said at the meeting 'it is anticipated it will become a global pandemic over the next three weeks.' Chris Stewart replied "That is a stark assessment... I would welcome a briefing from the team on existing flu pandemic plans, focussing on the TEO role...." [Exhibit BRO/10 - INQ000201813].

46. I sent a submission, which had been requested and approved by Chris Stewart, to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on 30 January 2020. The submission asked the Ministers to note the Minister for Health was a member of COBR (F); note the current position (as outlined in the submission); note the decisions agreed at COBR (F) on 29 January 2020; and to note the suggested line to take. The submission also stated that the Minister of Health (NI) would provide an oral update at the next Executive meeting [Exhibit BRO/18 – INQ000279353].
47. On the evening of 30 January 2020, I received a telephone call from the Chief Medical Officer expressing his dissatisfaction that I had prepared and submitted this submission. I apologised for my error and explained that I had been asked to prepare and submit it by Chris Stewart and that Dr Naresh Chada, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, had provided input and seen the submission prior to me forwarding it to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister [Exhibit BRO/19 – INQ000469468]
48. The Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael Mc Bride asked for some amendments to be made to the submission and asked me to ensure that Ministers were provided with the amended version. He advised me that all submissions to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and Executive should be cleared by him personally and that this should not happen again. I amended the submission as instructed and ensured with the Ministers' Private Offices that the updated version, including Dr Mc Bride's comments, was the correct version and the one that should be presented to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.
49. On 30 January 2020, Dr Michael Mc Bride emailed asking me to confirm that my submission, dated 30 January 2020 to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister had been updated. He further commented, "Given the professional and technical nature of these papers as Chief Medical Officer I will wish to clear all future Executive papers while the Department of Health remains the Lead Government Department" [Exhibit BRO/19 INQ000469468] , BRO/20 - INQ000469470]
50. I did not attend the Executive meeting on 3 February 2020, as I was not invited to attend. I understand from the minutes of the Executive meeting of 3 February 2020, that "The

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Minister of Health briefed the Executive on protection measures against the Coronavirus” [Exhibit BRO/21 – INQ000048442].

51. During the period January 2020 – 18 March 2020, I was not involved in or informed about what, if any, discussions were ongoing at official level, that is, between the Chief Medical Officer Dr Michael McBride, Chris Stewart and Sir David Sterling, Head of the Civil Service. Nor was I aware of what, if any, correspondence, or briefings were underway between the Minister for Health and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. I was located in Castle Buildings and was unable to observe any such engagement which may, or may not, have been taking place in Stormont Castle. I do not know what briefings were provided to Ministers. I had no information in relation to oral briefings being provided to Ministers. I was only aware of the submissions that I sent, and the submissions copied to me by the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.

### Line Management Role

52. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch staff pointed out that I was not their line manager and that I had no authority to ask them to undertake specific tasks as they were already under significant pressure. The team informed me that they had raised their issues on several occasions, directly with Neill Jackson, a Grade 5/Deputy Director in The Executive Office (TEO), with line management responsibility for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team had all been in post for a long period of time and appeared nervous about change and how it may affect their individual roles and jobs. For example, in November 2019, when the team had to move accommodation from the fifth floor to the third floor in Castle Buildings to the newly built NI Hub facility, with modern up-to-date secure telephony systems and technologies and equipment, the team argued against the move taking place.

53. On 20 November 2019, it was becoming problematic that I constantly had to deal with line management issues when I did not have the appropriate line management governance authority to enable me to deal effectively with the issues. In addition, in light of the information provided to me by PwC regarding the content of their Futures report of November 2019, I stated clearly in an email to Chris Stewart that in my view, that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was not ‘fit for purpose.’ [Exhibit BRO/14 INQ000183597]. As my knowledge increased of the work that PwC was undertaking regarding the NI Hub, and of the issues that needed to be covered in the strategic review, I wanted to ensure that my assessment of the staffing situation was clearly set out on the record. I remained of this view through to 18 March 2020.

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54. One of the Staff Officers, on behalf of the team, sent a long email setting out a series of issues, on 22 November 2019, to the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch who forwarded it to me. I was the person who had conveyed the message to staff, on behalf of Chris Stewart, that the Branch was moving offices within the building [Exhibit BRO/22

- INQ000469471]

55. The email from the team raised a number of issues of concern about the move. On 24 November 2019, Neill Jackson suggested that it may be useful in the first instance to examine the issues as to their validity as there may be genuine security issues [Exhibit BRO/23; INQ000469472]. He advised he thought that "it was important that we took these issues seriously. While I (Neill Jackson), appreciate that I am their line manager, I would appreciate your views given your involvement in the Hub" [Exhibit BRO/22 - INQ000469471]

56. In an email Neill Jackson sent on 25 November 2019, he said he would discuss the branch email with the Head of Branch and subsequently asked the Head of Branch to arrange a meeting with the team [Exhibit BRO/22; INQ000469471]. The meeting was arranged to take place on 26 November 2019. Neill Jackson said it would be helpful if I could attend, so I joined the meeting which he chaired [Exhibit BRO/23; INQ000469472]

57. The same day, the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch demanded clarity regarding who was her line manager. I sent her an email on 25 November 2019, which states, "Chris Stewart is on annual leave and Neill Jackson has gone home for today, I am sorry that I can't advise you with clarity on the line manager question. I will try to speak to Neill in the morning." This was not a satisfactory position for me to be in [Exhibit BRO/24; INQ000469473]. The issue of 'who' was her line manager was the cause of particular concern to the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.

58. There was an ongoing lack of clarity regarding the line management role for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, and this caused confusion for the team, who sought a considerable amount of direction on a daily basis. This was surprising for me, given that two of the officials were G7/Principal level which is a level that carries a degree of responsibility and where officials are required to operate without detailed direction.

59. On 25 November 2019, I emailed Chris Stewart [Exhibit BRO/25; - INQ000469474] seeking clarity on my role. I have been unable to locate a written response. I explained that there appeared to be some confusion and that two members of staff had raised my involvement with management issues as recently as that morning. I explained that 'I did not wish to step on Neill Jackson, the line manager's toes' and mentioned that 'I had been

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dealing with a number of complex management issues with the support of NICS HR since my arrival' (September 2019), I had discussed these with Chris Stewart the previous week and he had asked me to seek to resolve the matters. I set out that line management was not part of my role, I was content to pass the ongoing issues to the line manager Neill Jackson for him to progress.

60. In the email I explained that I had been dealing with a number of sensitive and complex management issues and stated that I was content to hand these over to Neill Jackson the line manager to resolve. I had very little contact with Neill Jackson, and he seldom visited the team in Castle Buildings. I do not know what the level of contact the team had with their line manager. This lack of clarity and authority on my part, made the issues more challenging and sensitive to deal with, as I had no line management authority.
61. I asked for clarification of my position. I have been unable to find a record providing any clarification. However, I recall that on the occasions when I discussed the matter verbally with Chris Stewart, between September 2019 and March 2020, he would respond that if he asked me to undertake a task, then I was doing so under his authority.
62. The ambiguity continued and it was not an ideal nor satisfactory situation for both the team, who had a line manager located off site, and another senior person placing demands upon the team and involved in management issues and for myself.
63. I believe that Chris Stewart may have assumed that I was "de facto" the line manager. However, the branch also continued to liaise directly with their line manager Neill Jackson. It is not possible to act as a "de facto" line manager in the NICS due to stringent governance structures and levels of authorisation. For example, I could not access Branch staff's NICS HR Connect records. I was at no stage told that I was to act as a "de facto" line manager.
64. I do not know why line management responsibility was not formally delegated to me. I assume that it was because I was on loan to The Executive Office (TEO) from the Department for Communities on a short- term basis, my role was temporary and to deliver a strategic review within nine months.

### **Civil Contingencies Policy Branch**

65. Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was a branch within the Executive and Central Advisory Division, within The Executive Office (TEO) which was the responsibility of a Deputy Director, Neill Jackson. The Branch remained within the responsibility of the Deputy

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Director for Executive and Central Advisory Division throughout my time in The Executive Office (TEO). Neill Jackson was located in Stormont Castle and was not on the same site. This is not an unusual arrangement within NICS Departments.

66. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch's role was to work across the public sector in Northern Ireland to promote and encourage the development of effective emergency preparedness to mitigate the effects of a civil emergency on the public and the environment.
67. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was led at G7/Principal Officer level and the post was filled on a temporary basis. The temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had a lot of knowledge and experience in civil contingencies having worked there for approximately 18 years.
68. In September 2019, the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team comprised 6 people as follows: One G7 temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch; two Staff Officers; two Part-time Executive Officer 2s and one Administrative Officer on loan from Private Office. One Deputy Principal (on loan from Freedom of Information Branch) was working on the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project.
69. The temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch made the point of informing me that she was the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and responsible for dealing with civil contingency matters including engagement with senior stakeholders who included: Chris Stewart; Sir David Sterling; Assistant Chief Constable of the Police Service for Northern Ireland; SOLACE Stephen Reid; Cabinet Office, Katherine Hammond; Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Mark Byers. She dealt directly with Sir David Sterling and Chris Stewart on a range of operational issues in relation to civil contingencies and the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub Project.
70. I was not aware of the pressures on that branch prior to my arrival in The Executive Office (TEO), from my experience of working in the civil service for over 38 years, it was clear from the outset that there was a lack of staff within civil contingencies business area to meet the daily volume of varying demands. There were competing tasks from a range of sources. It was a pressurised time due to the ongoing preparations being put in place by Operation Yellow Hammer, a UK led initiative to put in place arrangements in case the UK left the EU without a deal.

**Issues raised by Civil Contingencies Policy Branch Team**

71. On 9 September 2019, the day I arrived in The Executive Office (TEO), Civil Contingencies Policy Branch staff outlined to me their concerns regarding workload pressures and lack of people within the team to manage all of the tasks that they were being asked to undertake.
72. The concerns that were raised with me included: lack of staff to deliver the workload; the C3 NI Hub project consultants were expecting Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team to undertake tasks that were outside of their remit; the work related to Operation Yellow Hammer was placing additional work on the Branch; a Deputy Principal post and an Administrative Assistant post were vacant and the team were having to pick up additional duties as a result of the vacancies. The work of Yellow Hammer was on top of the routine responsibilities of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.
73. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch staff pointed out that I was not their line manager and that I had no authority to ask them to undertake specific tasks as they were already under significant pressure. The team informed me that they had raised their concerns directly on several occasions with Neill Jackson, a Deputy Director in The Executive Office (TEO), with line management responsibility for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.
74. The staffing of the Civil Contingency Policy Branch was a challenge. It was difficult to fill the posts and reach a steady state. During the period 9 September 2019 to 18 March 2020, there were multiple different attempts to try to fill the vacancies and posts within the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. Within the Northern Ireland Civil Service there are a variety of methods that may be deployed for filling vacancies available depending on the post and circumstances. However, during this time, for a variety of reasons, including long term sick absence, it was not possible to achieve a full team with all posts filled. All recruitment processes within the NICS are labour intensive, require supporting documentation and take a number of weeks to process.
75. Between the period from 9 September 2019 to 18 March 2020, as I had been asked by Chris Stewart to assist to fill the vacancies, I put considerable effort into trying to staff the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. This was a continually changing situation due to sick absence and redeployment of staff. The team told me that they did not have the capacity to contribute to Operation Yellow Hammer due to the vacancies within the branch.
76. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team, on top of their routine responsibilities were also involved in preparations for the UK to leave the EU without a deal (Brexit). Between



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September 2019 and December 2019 this was the priority. The possibility of the UK leaving the EU without a deal, was being prepared for, at national level, and was being treated as a potential emergency. The situation was being reported daily in the media.

77. From September 2019 to March 2020, I was the only The Executive Office (TEO) Senior Civil Servant working on civil contingency matters located in Castle Buildings which was where the 'on site' development of the NI Hub project was taking place. Civil Contingencies Policy Branch staff had direct access to me to ask questions and raise their concerns. Their line manager Neill Jackson, Deputy Director of Executive and Central Services Division and his senior manager Chris Stewart were both located in Stormont Castle. I was increasingly drawn into meetings, including 'daily stand-ups,' planning and execution of test exercises and development of guidance and proposals to build an NI Hub.

### Internal Review of Civil Contingencies

78. On 12 November 2019, Chris Stewart requested me to undertake a 'short sharp' review of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch [Exhibits BRO/26 - INQ000469475 BRO/27 - INQ000469476]. This was a small part of the wider review. To the best of my recollection, Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had a wide range of responsibilities which included: Secretariat for Civil Contingencies (NI) Group; liaising with Cabinet Office; developing, managing and sharing guidance disseminated from Cabinet Office to Northern Ireland Departments; liaising with other Devolved Administrations; managing civil or public emergencies when they occurred, for example, flooding incidents; Thomas Cook collapse on 23 September 2019; representing Northern Ireland Departments on various working groups, including, Chair of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments C3 Leads Group (Operation Yellow Hammer working group), Flu Readiness Board, both at local and national level; stakeholder engagement with strategic partners including Local Government, Police Service for Northern Ireland, Fire Service and Ambulance Service, and developing a retrospective business case for the Northern Ireland contribution to Operation Yellow Hammer [Exhibit BRO/28 - INQ000145799].

79. The Branch work programme involved: review and update of guidance to enable departments to prepare plans and arrangements covering health, excess deaths and wider impacts of an influenza pandemic; review of Civil Contingencies Group (NI) protocols and Lead Government Department guidance and update in light of learning from recent emergencies; emergency planning exercises to work with NICS departments to plan and exercise scenarios to enhance effective multi- agency co-ordination through

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facilitation of a large scale tactical and strategic exercises to test multi-agency roles and responsibilities, including the recovery phase of an emergency; for example, the Department for Infrastructure had requested an exercise in relation to flooding; National Security Risk Assessment: a new methodology had been introduced and Cabinet Office was putting pressure on Northern Ireland, Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to complete an NI Risk Assessment, the most recent one had been done in 2013. The branch participates in the Cross Border Emergency Planning Group.

80. There were areas of work that Civil Contingencies Policy Branch should have been participating in but were not as there were not enough staff to participate or contribute to the work. This included: Cabinet Office winter and summer resilience network. Northern Ireland was the only devolved administration not participating in this area of work, reviewing lessons learned from major emergencies, for example: Salsbury, Manchester, Kerslake, Grenfell. Strategic partner organisations were reviewing these reports, however, staff in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch did not have time to undertake this work, due to other priorities such as Operation Yellow Hammer and the C3 (command, control, and coordination) project [Exhibit BRO/14 - INQ000183597].
81. The team were also of the view that their primary role was to provide secretariat to the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and its three meetings per year. In my view, the work of C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project had placed an additional layer of work on the branch and the immediate needs disrupted the work programme.
82. In my view, until the scoping exercise had been undertaken by the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, there was no clear visibility of what the Branch work programme was, and what needed to be done. It was through the scoping exercise that the extent of the lack of organisation and backlog of work became visible.
83. There was a lot of activity in the branch on a daily basis and a lot of the work was reactive and involved responding to live situations such as telephone calls or specific requests for information within a short timeframe. I observed from September 2019 to March 2020, that members of the team worked many additional hours in evenings and weekends on a rota basis to provide out of office cover arrangements. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was the first point of contact for wider public services to report an incident.
84. I have not been able to locate a copy of my internal review report of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. If it comes to hand, it will be forwarded. To the best of my recollection my review of the Branch found that there were a number of management issues that needed

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to be regularised. For example, Civil Contingencies Policy Branch staff had accrued a large number of flexible working hours and annual leave.

85. Chris Stewart then asked me to meet with NICS HR to address the issues that had been identified in my Civil Contingencies Policy Branch report. I had advised Chris Stewart that staff within the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had exceeded normal working hours and had accrued excessive flexible working hours and annual leave balances [Exhibit BRO/29 - INQ000183619]. NICS HR colleagues advised that the team were entitled to rest periods and that management plans had to be put in place to reduce the flexible working hours that had been accrued and reduce annual leave balances. I agreed plans with the team and monitored them.

86. I was asked to undertake a variety of tasks by my line manager, Chris Stewart, that were not directly related to the strategic review. For example: preparation of a Job Description for the new G7/Principal Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch [Exhibit BRO/30 - INQ000469477]; preparing, agreeing and monitoring a G7/Principal Officer's return to work plan after a period of sick absence [Exhibit BRO/31 - INQ000469478]; managing recruitment processes; listening to and noting staff concerns; dealing with requests for overtime payment without prior approval; working with the team to prepare, put in place and manage flexible working hours and annual leave reduction plans for the team who had accrued excessive hours during a pressurised period when the small Branch had a vacant post; liaising with PwC consultants on issues with Civil Contingencies staff, such as lack of engagement, lack of skills and not turning up for meetings; assist in development of Branch business plan, balanced scorecard and risk register [Exhibits BRO/32 - INQ000469479], [BRO/33 - INQ000145798], [BRO/30 - INQ000469477], [BRO/28 - INQ000145799], [BRO/34 - INQ000469484].

87. My involvement in dealing with sensitive and complex management issues was time consuming and a distraction from the work on the strategic review of civil contingency arrangements in Northern Ireland. I progressed this work at home in the evenings and at weekends.

88. The NICS has formal governance arrangements in place regarding the line management role. For example, it is a requirement that all staff have a Job Description defining their role; individual objectives for each business year are discussed and agreed between the individual officer and their line manager and these are formally recorded on the Personal Performance Agreements on the IT system known as HR Connect.

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89. This provides an opportunity for both parties to be clear about their role, expectations, and delivery within the business year. The Personal Performance Agreements are formally recorded and agreed on the HR Connect around April of each year, that is, at the beginning of the business year. This line management process had not been undertaken for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch for the business year 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. I did not have the delegated authority to exercise a line management function.
90. I was uncomfortable with being put in this position and did raise the matter with Chris Stewart, who responded that if he asked me to do something, then I had his authority to do it. I did explain to the team when Chris Stewart gave me a direction. However, this explanation did not satisfy the team.
91. As issues arose in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, as I was on site, I would deal with them. In responding to the team, I would explain that my authority was from requests or directions made by Chris Stewart, and I was careful to communicate to the team Chris Stewart's direction or instructions.
92. On 24 September 2019, I briefed Chris Stewart that a member of the team had shared concerns with the external PwC consultant about the lack of staff to support the work of the Branch; personal issues; and disappointment at not being successful in a NICS wide promotion competition. The PwC consultant raised his discomfort with this situation with me. PwC were concerned that the member of staff may not be suitable to take forward the remaining necessary work as the pressure was likely to escalate over the next few weeks on the Northern Ireland Operation Yellow Hammer [Exhibit BRO/35] - INQ000183615].
93. I explained to Chris Stewart that I had spent time with an officer from the team since I joined The Executive Office (TEO) where the member of the team had raised issues in relation to lack of staff to support her due to the vacancies within the Branch and personal circumstances. I mentioned that the officer was finding it difficult to come to terms with the fact that they had not been successful in an NICS promotion competition. I noted that I had suggested to the officer that they may wish to consider availing of the NICS counselling service, then known as 'Inspire' to provide personal support. I was concerned about the wellbeing of this officer [Exhibit BRO/36] - INQ000183616, [BRO/37] - INQ000469485 ].

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94. On 24 September 2019, I identified that the then temporary Head of Branch had a backlog of unopened emails. I brought this to the attention of Chris Stewart [Exhibit BRO/38 - INQ000183614].
95. Although I had no line manager responsibility, I raised my concerns both orally and in writing with Chris Stewart regarding the lack of staff in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and the pressures that staff were reporting to me. These were recorded in emails 24 September 2019 [Exhibit BRO/37 - INQ000469485], 30 September 2019 [Exhibit BRO/36 - INQ000183616 - BRO/39 - INQ000469486], 20 November 2019 [Exhibit BRO/14 - INQ000183597], 10 December 2019 [Exhibit BRO/40 - INQ000183639], 23 January 2020 [Exhibit BRO/41 - INQ000183632] and 4 February 2020 [Exhibit BRO/42 - INQ000469488].
96. During the period 9 September 2019 to 18 March 2020, these incidents set out in this statement and the issues raised within the emails listed above, as well as risk assessment and recommendations outlined in the PwC Futures report of November 2019 contributed to, and compounded my view, that there was a lack of stability and capability within Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to deal with a major emergency or crisis.
97. On 24 September 2019, I emailed Chris Stewart to inform him that a member of the team had shared concerns about the lack of staff in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and personal issues with the PwC lead consultant [Exhibit BRO/37 - INQ000469485].
98. On 30 September 2019, I sent an email to Chris Stewart and Neill Jackson informing them, as the line managers, that the PwC lead consultant once again, had raised with me concerns about a member of the team in relation to the individual's health and wellbeing and were questioning whether she was suitable to continue to lead the project [Exhibit BRO/36 - INQ000183616].
99. On 30 September 2019, Chris Stewart responded in an email thanking me for drawing this matter to his attention stating that "wellbeing of our colleagues must, of course, be our top concern". He commented that 'our' approach, had been to allow the recently appointed Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to get up to speed with the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch role, allowing the other G7/Principal Officer who had filled the role on a temporary basis to concentrate on C3 (command, control, and co-ordination) NI Hub Project. I am not aware of any other action being taken and the officer was absent due to sickness shortly afterwards. I saw little action being taken over and above email replies [Exhibit BRO/39 - INQ000469486].

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100. In October 2019, when the temporary Head of the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project was absent from work due to sickness, the C3 project and Operation Yellow Hammer was escalating, and demands were increasing on the C3 NI Hub project.
101. On 23 January 2020, I sent a memo to Chris Stewart setting out the current issues that Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had reported to me that day which I believed raised matters giving rise to a 'duty of care' on the part of NICS. I said that there was currently a critical lack of staff capacity and requested approval for work to be put on hold, including The Executive Office (TEO) actions contained in the Civil Contingencies (NI) Resilience Programme and prioritise work to key issues and top priority matters. I asked Chris Stewart to issue a note to NI Permanent Secretaries to inform them of the necessity to review and prioritise the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch work programme and that the wider work programme has had to be put on hold. I provided a draft note for consideration and issue. I do not recall any action being taken. I have not been able to locate a record of the note being sent to NI Permanent Secretaries [Exhibit BRO/41 - INQ000183632].
102. I was becoming increasingly concerned about the strain that the workload was having on some members of the team. This was a particularly pressurised period in relation to Operation Yellow Hammer as speculation increased and the media was reporting that there was no sign of the UK reaching any form of agreement to exit the EU. The pressures and impact that it was having on staff was difficult for me to observe.
103. By December 2019, a number of actions were underway which started to address issues outlined in the PwC Futures report, November 2019. For example, a permanent Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had been appointed; an Internal Trawl competition for a Deputy Principal was ongoing and there was an opportunity from this competition to provide a list of reserve candidates; and an indicative agreement from Chris Stewart to try to seek additional baseline funding for more posts in the Branch. A scoping exercise was complete and governance documents had been developed for the Branch. [Exhibits BRO/28 - INQ000145799, BRO/30 - INQ000469477, BRO/32 - INQ000469479, BRO/33 - INQ000145798 and BRO/34 - INQ000469484]
104. Under normal circumstances this would have been substantial progress. However, in January 2020, in parallel, the potential pandemic was escalating, and daily distractions were increasing in volume. The daily demands continued to be the immediate priority. The business planning for the branch had to be paused.

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105. I sought to reassure the team that actions were being taken to fill the vacancies to alleviate the pressures and explain that the processes take time [Exhibit BRO/43 - INQ 000183643]. I issued a memo to inform all staff setting out a plan for a way forward as agreed by Chris Stewart in my next steps submission dated 10 December 2019. The then Head of the Civil Service, Sir David Sterling, commented that this will be a useful and necessary piece of work [Exhibit BRO/44 - INQ000183626].
106. I was flexible and undertook each of the tasks that I was asked to address by Chris Stewart, my line manager. From a corporate perspective and with a degree of compassion, I tried to offer support to the then Head of the C3 (command, control and coordination) NI Hub project and to help build the confidence of the new recently promoted G7/Principal, Head of Civil Contingency Policy Branch, who was settling into the new grade and job and needed some guidance on how to build up the knowledge and foundations for her Branch. I did this as the line manager was not located on site, and not involved in the Branch on a day- to- day basis, to provide direction.
107. I shared governance templates from my previous Division in the Department for Communities, to enable the official to visualise what the end product would look like. Although not my responsibility, rather the responsibility of a line manager, during November 2019 and December 2019, I worked with the Head of Branch to develop the suite of documents which included a job description for G7/Principal Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch post [ BRO/30 - INQ000469477 ], development of a Branch Business Plan for the period 1 April 2020- 31 March 2021 [BRO/28 - INQ000145799], a Risk Register for the Branch [BRO/34 - INQ000469484] and a work programme including actions to be completed [BRO/33]- INQ000145798]. The Head of Branch also needed to have a clear understanding and comprehensive overview of the work of her Branch.
108. The management tasks that Chris Stewart asked me to undertake in relation to the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch were time consuming. This involved considerable work to try to fill vacancies as they arose within the Branch and was a constant distraction from the work on the strategic review.

### Recruitment challenges

109. I put in considerable effort to try to recruit staff for the Branch and to support the work of the C3 (command, control, and coordination) project and Operation Yellow Hammer. There are a variety of ways to fill vacancies in the NICS. It is the responsibility of the direct line manager when a vacancy arises to consider the most appropriate method to recruit

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a replacement to fill the post. All recruitment methods in the NICS take at least three months to process. There is no quick fix. A number of the actions that were undertaken in attempt to deal with the lack of staffing are outlined below. It was not possible to reach a steady state for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch at that time. In addition, unforeseen circumstances arose, such as sick absence and redeployment of staff on the restoration of devolution. It was a challenging time in terms of trying to obtain staff.

110. On 30 August 2019, to address the G7/Principal, Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch vacancy, Chris Stewart had put in a request to appoint a G7/Principal Officer, from the Northern Ireland Civil Service Promotion Competition from The Executive Office (TEO) list of successful candidates [Exhibit BRO/45 - INQ000469487]. This was successful, and a new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was appointed in October 2019.
111. Chris Stewart had ceased all work on Programme for Government and moved staff from the Programme for Government team to support the work on Operation Yellow Hammer. In September 2019, when I arrived, a Grade 7/ Principal Officer, from within Chris Stewart's Programme for Government team had designed and co-ordinated the development of the Northern Ireland Civil Service training module for volunteers to the C3 (Command, control, and coordination) NI Hub. In December 2019, this work was completed and handed over to the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to maintain and update. The Grade7/Principal Officer returned to his post in The Executive Office (TEO) around January 2020 on the restoration of devolution. I do not recall the exact date.
112. In October 2019, the temporary Head of C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project was absent from work due to sickness.
113. From around November/ December 2019 to January 2020, I am unable to recall exact dates, a Grade 6 on a short-term loan, (two-three months), from Prison Service NI, worked on civil contingencies and worked with PwC on the C3 (command, control and coordination) NI Hub project, developing and preparing the exercises to test the C3 (command, control and coordination) NI Hub model's operating capacity.
114. In February 2020, the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch left the branch, after six months, due to unforeseen long-term sickness.
115. On 22 October 2019, Chris Stewart emailed colleagues at Director level within The Executive Office (TEO) asking if staff at a number of grades could be released on either



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transfer or loan to Civil Contingencies Policy Branch within The Executive Office (TEO). The result was that no staff were made available

116. NI Assembly staff had been re-deployed (on loan) to work in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and on Operation Yellow Hammer tasks. These staff returned to their respective jobs on the return of devolution in January 2020.
117. In December 2019, the staff on loan to deal with Yellow Hammer pressures included three Grade 7/Principal Officers and one Deputy Principal returned to their respective Departments on the restoration of the Executive.
118. In December 2019, Chris Stewart transferred the former temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and C3 Project Lead in The Executive Office (TEO,) to work solely as The Executive Office (TEO) C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project. This was not a permanent position. Chris Stewart had created this temporary post to close the C3 project and ensure that all of the governance arrangements were in place. The purpose of the temporary post was to support the PwC work on the C3 NI Hub, ensure that all of the appropriate and necessary governance arrangements were in place and closure of Operation Yellow Hammer project and C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project.
119. On 28 January 2020, Chris Stewart approved a business case submitted by the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch on 24 January 2020, asking for funding to recruit one Administrative Assistant and one Deputy Principal [Exhibit BRO/42 - INQ000469488].
120. In January 2020, one Staff Officer out of two in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, was re-deployed to the First Minister and Deputy First Ministers' Private Office in The Executive Office (TEO) on restoration of devolution. The individual had previous experience of working in the Ministers' Private Office and the restoration of devolution and return of Ministers was the priority.
121. In January 2020, Chris Stewart transferred the former temporary Head of the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project to cover on a temporary basis the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch post as the Head of branch left in February 2020 following a period of sick absence.
122. In February 2020, a Personal Secretary was recruited from an Agency to provide administrative help to me [Exhibit BRO/46 - INQ000469499].

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123. I was aware of a Grade7/Principal Officer in the Department for Communities who was looking for a career development move; however, the individual had agreed to another post and was unavailable. I tried all possible routes to obtain staff for the Branch.
124. By February 2020, the disruption of staff starting and leaving the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and Operation Yellow Hammer coupled with lack of staff in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch due to vacant posts remained the cause of concern to me. Whilst exhaustive efforts were being made in an attempt to fill the vacancies, no real progress was being made. There were unforeseen circumstances that arose due to sick absence.
125. The Deputy Principal Internal Trawl competition which commenced in October 2019, had concluded in January 2020, and the successful candidate's start date was delayed due to a Ministry of Defence backlog in processing security clearance applications.
126. The new Deputy Principal started at the end of February 2020 and left on 18 March 2020, due to unforeseen circumstances.
127. In February 2020, the Civil Contingencies Branch had 2 vacant posts and the threat of a pandemic was escalating daily. Given the pressures, Chris Stewart transferred the temporary Head of the C3 project back in as temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. This individual was a very experienced individual who had 18 years of knowledge and experience of working on civil contingencies.
128. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had a fractured team. The Deputy Principal post was vacant, one of two Staff Officer posts was vacant, and the Administrative Officer post was vacant. The Deputy Principal working on the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub Project paused work on the project and helped in the Branch. This meant that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team comprised four people plus one Deputy Principal (on loan) working on the C3 NI Hub (command, control, and coordination) project.
129. During the period 9 September to 18 March 2020, although I had no line management responsibility, I provided significant support to Chris Stewart to manage the administrative processes involved in the various recruitment processes to try to secure staff for the Branch. This involved: meetings with NICS HR colleagues; drafting Job Descriptions; drafting Internal Trawl Notice for Deputy Principal competition; liaising with individuals to discuss the work of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. It was laborious and time-consuming work that unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, did not secure a full team of

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staff for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and the C3 (command, control, and coordinate) NI Hub project during this period.

130. On a personal level, I put a considerable amount of effort into trying to secure staff for the Branch, despite the fact this was not my role. This involved liaising with NICS HR colleagues, completion of HR forms, development of Job Descriptions and expediting recruitment processes to ensure no delays. I was being distracted from progressing work on my strategic review during the day, so I progressed my work at home in evenings and weekends. As I observed workload pressures that led to tensions in the Branch, I believed that the best solution was to work to recruit staff to fill the vacancies.

### December 2019 – Next Steps

131. I submitted a proposal on 10 December 2019, entitled “C3 Project: PwC Report and Recommendations – Next Steps” to Chris Stewart for consideration and approval [**Exhibit BRO/40 - INQ000183639**]. The paper set out a proposed way forward for the entire civil contingencies work programme. The submission asked Chris Stewart to: note the design, build and completion of the NI C3 arrangements which include having trained and tested a cadre of staff operating from the strategic coordination and civil contingencies operations room, known as the NI Hub; note that the NI C3 (command, control and coordination) Hub had been tested and secured Full Operating Capacity, as aligned to the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat guidance; and note the PwC reports of May and November 2019 and the 75 recommendations and consider the proposed Terms of Reference for a strategic review of civil contingencies.

132. My submission identified three work streams which were linked and had inter-dependencies however, involved separate and distinct roles. It was my intention to clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities to the two G7/Principal Officers: Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and the temporary Head of the C3 (command, control, and coordination) project. In parallel, I had been putting arrangements in place, as per my 19 February 2020 email and Chris Stewart’s paper dated 25 February 2020 to The Executive Office (TEO) Board. I saw this as the opportunity to drive forward work to implement the recommendations, as far as possible from the PwC Futures report, November 2019, by progressing the strategic review [**BRO/48 - INQ000183646**].

133. On 11 December 2019, Chris Stewart responded stating that he had noted the points in the submission and agreed the proposed implementation of arrangements for the PwC report, the suggested Terms of Reference for the proposed review, subject to the

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endorsement of The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board and the NICS Board [BRO/49 - INQ000183647].

134. On 8 February 2020, I emailed Peter Toogood, Director of Finance within The Executive Office (TEO), to follow up on a meeting that I had with his Finance team in December 2019, regarding a business case that I was preparing in relation to the strategic review [BRO/04 - INQ000469456]. The purpose of this business case was to seek £120,000 to engage external consultants to undertake an assignment on the strategic review. I explained that I estimated the assignment would be three months in duration and aimed to address the lessons learnt from the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project. I explained that I had completed the Central Procurement Directorate new work request and attached documents for his consideration.

135. Chris Stewart asked me to give some thought to a paper for The Executive Office (TEO) Board and, thereafter, the NICS Board. He commented that "I think that we should show both Boards the entire list of recommendations (to illustrate the amount of work to be done). But separating out the 'internal' or lower-level recommendations (which are for us to decide) from the strategic changes on which we would seek broader strategic change." [BRO/49 - INQ000183647].

136. I prepared the paper from Chris Stewart, dated 25 February 2020, for the February 2020 meeting of The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board to seek the Board approval. This paper was presented by Chris Stewart on 26 February 2020 [Exhibit BRO/08 - INQ000205712].

### Capacity and capability of Civil Contingency Structures within TEO

137. The Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework entitled Building Resilience Together sets out the structure for dealing with emergencies and the PREPARE, RESPOND and RECOVER phases. This document is published on The Executive Office (TEO) website. The Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) arrangements model was also in place in 2020. Northern Ireland resilience is managed at the local level on a daily basis. When an emergency occurs which is likely to have a serious impact to all or part of Northern Ireland, central crisis management arrangements can be activated to enable a clear understanding that organisations have within the framework have moved from PREPARE to RESPONSE mode. That escalation enables increasing levels of strategic and then government coordination. In such circumstances, it is likely that the emergency has or threatens to cause damage to human welfare, the

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environment or the security of Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole. It is likely that only some level 2 or level 3 emergencies will require activation of Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA).

138. The levels of an emergency or crisis are described in the NI Civil Contingencies Framework as follows: Level 2 is a serious emergency: has or threatens a wide and/or prolonged impact requiring sustained NI Executive co-ordination and Level 3 is a catastrophic emergency: exceptionally high and potentially widespread impact and requires immediate UK Government direction and support.
139. The Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework describes triggers for escalation if an emergency cannot be dealt with by a single council, Local Government Department, or emergency responder then sub-regional, regional, or national co-ordination can occur. Local co-ordination is the norm. PSNI or Local Government can co-ordinate the response by standing up Tactical Co-ordination Groups as required.
140. The NI Civil Contingencies Framework explains that the likely triggers for local coordination include: people/environment affected confined to local area; disruption to services/public confined to local area; incident capable of being dealt with by organisations acting on a local basis; short-term impact on delivery of local supply chains and services; small number of District Council areas impacted; some impact on the economy; an unusual event which has multi-agency impacts and small-scale human health issue.
141. In February 2020, the emerging pandemic escalated on a daily basis. The Executive Office (TEO) had the following structures in place to deal with an emergency, namely a small Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and a central crisis management framework known as Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) which provided for the establishment of the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) when any of the triggers were met; that is when an emergency or crisis could not be dealt with by a single council, Lead Government Department or emergency responder. In addition, there was a newly designed, built, and tested C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub underpinned by the relevant documentation that had been completed as recently as December 2019 and was ready to activate.
142. Whilst, I have little understanding of what activating Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) entails for The Executive Office (TEO), over and above emailing notification of its activation, it was my belief that Civil Contingencies Policy

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Branch in The Executive Office (TEO) would be responsible for managing the response to the crisis on escalation by the Lead Government Department.

143. This would involve actions such as, supporting Civil Contingencies Group (NI); (to support the Executive) NI Emergency Preparedness Group; C3 Leads in NICS Departments; Emergency Planning Groups in Belfast, North and South regions; and the flow of information and a daily sitrep.
144. My understanding is that in an emergency situation the timely interaction and accurate flow of information and communication between these groups is essential to inform decision making. It was my belief, that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team was not able to manage the response to a major emergency of this scale due to lack of staff numbers and the scale of the pandemic required the machinery of the NI Hub **[Exhibit BRO/50 - INQ000255362, BRO/51 - INQ000255364]**.
145. In the period January 2020 – 18 March 2020, the Department of Health was the Lead Government Department and was managing the situation. I was not aware of what, if any, activity on planning or cumulative impact assessment work was being undertaken within The Executive Office (TEO). A submission was prepared and sent to 1. Chris Stewart and 2. Sir David Sterling by the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch on 27 February 2020, entitled, “COVID-19: Proposed NI Civil Contingencies Preparedness and response arrangements” **[Exhibit BRO/52 - INQ000469495]** This submission stated that co-ordination arrangements are required to be in place to deal with the rapidly escalating situation.
146. The paper recommended to: note the escalating position in relation to COVID-19 and agree the need for co-ordination arrangements to support the effective discharge of The Executive Office (TEO) responsibility for wider preparedness; note the plans for activation of the NI Hub as the central operations room to support multi-agency co-ordination and shared situational awareness in accordance with the proposed operating model at Annex A; note that the NI Hub was designed to be fully scalable and agree that the operating model will be reviews on a regular basis and be scaled up/down according to business need; request NI Departments to put in place appropriate arrangements to manage their own preparedness and response and to support the NI Hub via the establishment of their Departmental Operating Centres and associated reach back arrangements; request that NI Departments nominate Departmental Liaison Officers to operate from the NI hub when required to ensure co-ordinated working and agree that a letter can be issued to NI volunteers inviting them to support COVID-19 emergency response. A draft NI Hub

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activation plan was attached to the paper. The paper was copied to me and I can recall working with the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to develop an NI Hub activation plan and work out the proposed weekly timeline that was described in this paper [Exhibit BRO/52 - INQ000469495 BRO/53 - INQ000469496 - BRO/54 - INQ000469492] I have not been able to locate a response to this submission.

147. In regard to cumulative planning, I was aware that there were reasonable worst case scenario planning and cumulative impact assessments ongoing in the Cabinet Office. Karen Pearson, a Director within The Executive Office (TEO) on 4 March 2020, stated that she was keen to discuss how the EU exit preparedness work and C3, Operation Yellow Hammer might intersect, and to see what the EU exit team could offer from their preparedness work to assist in the civil contingencies risk analysis. I am not aware of what happened in relation to this matter [Exhibit BRO/55 - INQ000218494].

148. I did not know if the Department of Health officials, as the Lead Government Department, were undertaking any such work. DOH Gold in an email dated 6 March 2020, advised that 'the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency are unaware of any modelling taking place in Northern Ireland and have communicated the same to the Department of Health and Social Care. To quote our Public Health Agency colleague 'we rely on the PHE modelling subgroup work which is shared through the UK IMT. [BRO/56 - INQ000258367].

### The ability of TEO to respond to a large-scale civil contingencies emergency in March 2020

149. In relation to the ability of The Executive Office (TEO) to respond to a large scale civil contingency in March 2020, in my view, the weaknesses that were a cause of concern to me included: vacancies in key posts in Civil Contingencies Policy branch and that, with the exception of the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, the team had largely, disengaged from the work on Operation Yellow Hammer and the C3 (command, control and coordination) NI Hub and did not have the full training to operate a NI Hub. Three posts were vacant, one Deputy Principal, one Staff Officer and one Administrative Officer. The Deputy Principal (on loan) at that time was fully occupied on work in the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project. In my view, the team were not in as good a position to take control of an operations room as they could have been, to deal with an unprecedented coronavirus pandemic. It was very pressurised, demanding, and impossible to predict what might emerge next.

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150. However, in relation to The Executive Office (TEO's) structures, a C3 (command, control, and coordinate) NI Hub model had been developed, tested and Full Operational Capacity had been declared to Cabinet Office in December 2019 [Exhibit [BRO/40 - INQ000183639]]. The structure to establish a NI Hub at short notice to support a major emergency was in place and ready to implement with the capacity to scale up or down, as necessary [Exhibit [BRO/57 - INQ000469497]].
151. I did not have the authority to set up a NI Hub, at Grade 5/Deputy Director level. In March 2020, the decision was ultimately made by the Northern Ireland Executive on 16 March 2020. I was not at the meeting as I was not invited to attend [Exhibit [BRO/58 - INQ000147485]]. I do not have the knowledge of when the Executive felt it had the capacity and capability to deal effectively with a pandemic.
152. A C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub relied upon staff from across the NICS and wider public sector and strategic partners for it to operate effectively. For example, NICS Permanent Secretaries and senior personnel in emergency services including Police Service for Northern Ireland and Local Government would have to have been consulted and agreed to release their staff to work in the NI Hub. I did not have the authority to make such a request or to establish a Hub.
153. I was aware that as part of the Operation Yellow Hammer work, before I joined The Executive Office (TEO), a cadre, or pool of volunteers had been identified across NICS Departments and were trained to operate a NI Hub. In theory, a pool of candidates existed and had been trained and were ready to be called upon to be released from NICS Departments at short notice to move into and operate the NI Hub. In practice, at the time of the event, few volunteers were available to come to work in the COVID-19 NI Hub. The Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson, and I had to explore every opportunity to obtain people to join the Hub. Anthony Harbinson liaised with the then Permanent Secretary at the Department for Justice and fifteen staff became available to work in the Hub.
154. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had informed Anthony Harbinson that they would not be available to work in the NI Hub and would work from home in order to protect either themselves or a family member. I believe that one Staff Officer did come into the office to support the work in the NI Hub whilst others worked remotely from home.
155. I do not know what discussions were taking place at a more senior level within The Executive Office (TEO) and the Lead Government Department, the Department of Health, regarding activating the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements



(NICCMA) and establishing a C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub. The temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch may have been engaged in discussions as this was an operational matter in which she had a detailed knowledge and expertise. I do not know. The temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch submitted a paper to Chris Stewart on 27 February 2020 in relation to the need for coordination arrangements to be put in place to deal with the rapidly escalating situation [Exhibit BRO/52 – INQ000469495 – BRO/53 – INQ000469496 – BRO/54 – INQ000469492].

156. The Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride made it clear to me during his conversation of 29 January 2020, and in his email of 30 January 2020, that the Department of Health was the Lead Government Department managing the Covid -19 threat [Exhibit BRO/19 – INQ000469468]. Chris Stewart reiterated that fact to me during our conversations, for example on 4 March 2020 when I reported to Chris Stewart that the C3 Leads were of the strong view that the NI hub should be established, Chris Stewart in an email informed me, 'as we discussed, in this planning stage my priority is the cumulative impact analysis, not standing up the Hub' [Exhibit BRO/55 – INQ000218494].

### **Sector Resilience**

157. I was aware that, on 6 February 2020, Liz Redmond, Director of Population Health in the Department of Health, the Lead Government Department in correspondence stated that 'I do not consider it necessary to activate NICCMA arrangements at this time'. This was not in my remit. As I had been in post for 6 months at that time, I did not have an informed understanding of what was meant by sector resilience. It was the responsibility of the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I was not the line manager for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. My focus had been on my role to undertake a strategic review. I had not reached the stage of examining a number of issues including sector resilience [Exhibit BRO/59 – INQ000201713].

158. I was aware, from my work on the strategic review, and informed by the PwC consultants, that staff within the existing Civil Contingencies Policy Branch lacked the expertise, expertise, and skills to undertake a cumulative risk assessment of the emerging pandemic. This was outlined in the PwC Futures report and in a number of conversations with PwC consultants was a matter that was to be addressed in the strategic review. I had been researching the purpose, role, and skills requirements to undertake this type of work to inform the strategic review. I do not know what steps were taken to escalate information within The Executive Office (TEO) and amongst Ministers on the pandemic apart from my

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submissions and those prepared by the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch [Exhibits

BRO/36 - INQ000183616

BRO/37 - INQ000469485

BRO/60 - INQ000469498

BRO/46 -

INQ000469499].

159. In February 2020, as I was only working on civil contingencies matters and the review for less than six months, I had limited knowledge and experience of managing an emergency. I was of the view that due to the compounded problems as detailed within my statement, that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch lacked stability, capacity and skills to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. It was my view that arrangements should be put in place to plan for the establishment of a COVID-19 Hub. I had no authority to activate Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA), nor establish an NI Hub.

160. These decisions were discussed by the Executive on 16 March 2020, I did not attend the meeting as I was not invited. I understand from the minute of that meeting that Ministers agreed to: *“activation of the strategic response arrangements (NICCMA) to provide coordination and direction to deal with the developing wider non-health impacts of COVID-19; noted the wide ranging and protracted non health sectoral impacts and associated mitigations arising from COVID -19; and agreed to monitor these impacts and associated mitigations to ensure the cumulative risks are managed.”* [Exhibits BRO/58 - INQ000147485]

### Business Case to increase Civil Contingencies Policy Branch Staffing

161. On 4 February 2020, I had asked Chris Stewart if he would consider a request to marginally increase the budget for staffing for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. Chris Stewart indicated that he was willing to consider the request [Exhibit BRO/42 - INQ000469488]. Any request to increase funding to increase numbers of staff required the approval of The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board. A business case requesting an increase in budget for staffing was prepared by the Head of Civil Contingencies on 24 January 2020, which was submitted to Chris Stewart on 28 January 2020. Chris Stewart approved the request in early possibly 4 February 2020. I am unable to recall the exact date [Exhibits BRO/42 - INQ000469488] and BRO/46 - INQ000469499].

162. Following Chris Stewart's approval, a draft paper February 2020 was being prepared to seek approval from The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board to increase funding for staff for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I have been unable to locate any record of this paper being finalised or issued to Chris Stewart nor The Executive Office

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(TEO) Departmental Board. I think I was working on developing a paper that could be submitted to senior management in The Executive Office (TEO) to request an increase in baseline funding to provide additional staff for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. This appears to be a draft paper, that was work in progress [Exhibit BRO/61 - INQ000183555 and Exhibits BRO/46 - INQ000469499].

163. This paper appears to have been prepared by me but was not completed and was not formally submitted. At the time, I believe that the then Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was working on drafting a business case to accompany the paper [Exhibits BRO/46 - INQ000469499]. I have been unable to recall the exact reason, but from memory, I think that it may be because the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was absent from work due to sickness in February 2020. In addition, this was a very pressurised time when a lot of activity was going on.

164. The paper was intended to address, as an interim measure, the lack of staff in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch in February 2020. It highlighted that there were insufficient staff in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to carry out all of the work required to ensure that Northern Ireland is prepared and can respond to any civil contingency emergency. The organisation chart attached to this paper was the proposed model that was envisaged after the strategic review which would encompass new and additional responsibilities. Therefore, that chart ought to have been edited to reflect the interim posts sought at that time.

165. The draft submission explained that staffing numbers in the Civil Contingency Policy Branch had reduced over the past 10 years with two Deputy Principal posts and one Staff Officer post being removed due to budget cuts [Exhibits BRO/61 - INQ000183555]. These staffing reductions resulted in certain areas of work ceasing or not being carried out to the extent that they should be. Some examples of this are: a risk assessment for Northern Ireland has not been completed since 2013 with the GB one being used despite the risk not necessarily being in the same order of priority leading to a lack of governance of identification of risks; the suite of civil contingency policy documents which Civil Contingencies Policy Branch have ownership of had not been fully revised since the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) became The Executive Office (TEO) (this in itself was considered to be a huge piece of work); Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had not had the staff to attend numerous meetings to which they should have input in order to ensure effective horizon scanning; there had been very little engagement in terms of a Critical National Infrastructure paper; and Civil Contingencies (NI) Resilience Programme actions had not been taken forward [Exhibits BRO/28 - INQ000145799].

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[BRO/30 - INQ000469477], [BRO/32 - INQ000469479], [BRO/33 - INQ000145798], [BRO/34 - INQ000469484].

166. The February 2020 paper mentioned that a strategic review is due to commence shortly. It states that the PwC Futures report, November 2019, sets out a change of direction for the Branch. The paper comments that approval has been given for a Deputy Principal (on loan) to work on the C3 (command, control, and co-ordination) project role until such times as permanent staff can be recruited.

167. The paper further says that “a business case for additional staff based on the proposed organisational structure attached as an Annex was approved by XXX.” This indicates to me that at that point in time, the business case had not been approved. I do not believe that the business case had been fully developed at that stage. This paper was seeking one Deputy Principal and one Staff Officer, as an interim measure to deal with the immediate staffing shortfall until the strategic review was complete [Exhibits BRO/61 - INQ000183555]. A further business case requesting an increase in the baseline funding for staffing, would have required robust evidence which would have been provided through the work of the strategic review.

168. Chris Stewart asked me to meet with NICS HR to address the issues in my Civil Contingencies Policy Branch review report. Over a period of time, a range of actions had been undertaken to try to fill the vacancies in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I was in a position where I could do very little beyond meeting NICS HR, other than ask HR colleagues to be aware of the vacancies should staff become available across the wider NICS and ask them to expedite internal recruitment competitions as far as possible. NICS HR colleagues did support the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to expedite the Internal Trawl competition to recruit a Deputy Principal. I had previously met NICS HR in September 2019 and outlined the position in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.

169. In the NICS, a vacancy has to be managed and the position filled by the direct line manager. This in effect meant that it was the responsibility of the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to put in place the necessary arrangements and supporting documentation to fill the Deputy Principal post. Due to lack of knowledge and experience, the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch relied on me to inform her how to take forward these matters, which were entirely within her responsibility. It was the responsibility of the Head of Branch to ensure that the appropriate funding was in place to fill the Deputy Principal vacancy, by whichever means deemed most suitable. However, the Head of Branch continued to raise her concerns with me regarding lack of staff in the

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Branch. All I could do was offer guidance on the process that she had to undertake. I was not the line manager and had no formal role in filling the vacancies.

170. As I was on site, in Castle Buildings, I had to step in to pick up on a range of tasks and issues: dealing with a high volume of telephone queries from strategic partners and NICS Departments seeking information on the emerging pandemic and asking if the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) was going to be activated and if so, when; substituting at meetings for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch; as well as trying to manage and coordinate queries and responses with Cabinet Office for the reasonable worst case scenario planning; oversee and manage the arrangements for a Civil Contingencies Group (NI) meeting which took place on 20 February 2020, involving Ministers; including the briefing for First Minister and Deputy First Minister. All recruitment options had been exhausted. However, the pressure and the pace continued and was relentless.

171. I also mentioned 'without doubt' insufficient staff and skills to address the overall challenge would be raised by PwC [Exhibits BRO/14 - INQ000183597]. I commented that it was 'with disappointment and regret that I had reached this position' that is, to reach the conclusion that the branch was not operating as it should. On a personal level, I was putting considerable effort into trying to secure staff for the Branch, despite the fact that I was not the line manager. There were tensions within the teams, and I was being distracted from my work on the strategic review due to listening to staff sharing their dissatisfaction. I was becoming increasingly frustrated with the situation.

172. On reflection, whilst Operation Yellow Hammer was a priority, I observed PwC asking the team to undertake tasks and be involved in preparation of exercises that involved a lot of work that was in addition to their normal duties and tasks. The team did so reluctantly. This was challenging for the team who strived to support PwC but at the detriment to the responsibilities of the Branch [Exhibits BRO/28 - INQ00014579, BRO/32 - INQ000469479 and BRO/33 - INQ000145798].

173. Given that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had a lack of governance documents in place, such as a Branch Business Plan; Balanced Scorecard to monitor progress against objectives; Personal Performance Agreements detailing agreed objectives for the year, I do not believe that line management, located in Stormont Castle, really understood the reality of a typical day in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I would describe it as firefighting, rather than a professional structured business organisation. There was only so much a skeleton team could manage to deliver in any one day and the issue of vacant

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posts coupled with staff joining and leaving the Branch was protracted over a period of time and the problem was being compounded.

174. I had arranged a meeting with the team, who had engaged the Trade Union regarding their concerns, to keep them informed about the proposals for the way forward. My aim was to reassure the team that there was work underway to try to alleviate the pressures. On the day some of the staff were not available. On 16 December 2019, I issued a memo to inform all staff setting out a plan for the way forward and next steps [Exhibits [BRO/62 - INQ000183600] and [BRO/63 -INQ000471308].
175. A number of actions were underway to address the issues outlined by PwC. For example, a permanent Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had been appointed; an Internal Deputy Principal Trawl competition was complete, and this provided one member of staff to fill the vacancy as well as a reserve list to draw from to fill future vacancies.
176. By December 2019, the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project had been completed by PwC and provided a model for a C3 NI Hub which could be established. This was, in my view, a valuable asset available to The Executive Office (TEO) and wider NICS Departments. However, in my opinion, a communication gap existed. The general view across NICS departments was that this belonged to The Executive Office (TEO), rather than an asset for the wider NICS. This was not the case and required ownership and promotion by Civil Contingencies Group (NI) members. This was an issue that I noted to be addressed in the wider strategic review.
177. In December 2019, a new temporary Grade 7/Principal role was created to finish the legacy and residual work on the C3 project and close The Executive Office (TEO) element of the joint project. PwC closed their project in December 2019 and the NI Hub was handed over to Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to manage and maintain. At the time it was estimated that this work should be completed by the end of February 2020. Chris Stewart had decided in August 2019 (prior to my arrival in The Executive Office) that this was a possible option if a permanent G7 was appointed [Exhibit [BRO/45 - INQ000469487].
178. On 23 December 2019, the Prime Minister agreed that No Deal planning, including the C3 Operation Yellow Hammer project should cease for a January 2024 exit [Exhibit [BRO/57 - INQ000469497]. At the request of Chris Stewart, I prepared a submission on 23 December 2019 to inform the First Minister and Deputy First Minister that the C3 Project and Operation Yellow Hammer had ceased [Exhibit BRO/15 – [INQ000469465].

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179. In January 2020, whilst Operation Yellow Hammer threat had been removed, residual work carried on to complete tasks such as finalising the retrospective business case, paying final invoices and preparation of project closure governance documentation.
180. On 17 January 2020, I attended at the request of Chris Stewart a training exercise to stress test the capability of the NI Hub. Again, this did not fall within the remit of my strategic review, however, was of some relevance. It involved a significant time commitment, and I was conscious of the timeline that I was working to and the continual distractions and requests to be involved in a range of tasks. I provided feedback on the event to Chris Stewart and said that it was an informative and worthwhile event for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I was not clear that I gained the same value from the event [Exhibit BRO/13 – INQ000469464].
181. On 20 January 2020, on my return from leave, I received an email from the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch explaining concerns regarding the staffing position in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch [Exhibit BRO/64 - INQ000183601]. In my absence on leave, Chris Stewart had re-deployed a Staff Officer from Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to Private Office to support Ministers. Restoration of devolution was a priority matter and the individual had previous experience of working in Ministers Private Office. I had no standing as a line manager to influence the allocation of staff.
182. NICS HR informed the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch that the Deputy Principal vacant post would have to be filled using a process known as an Elective Transfer and that this would take a minimum of 11 weeks to complete the process. At this time, the Branch already had a vacancy at Deputy Principal level and the loss of a Staff Officer compounded the lack of staff in the Branch.
183. In the email dated 20 January 2020, the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch highlighted that the Branch had conflicting and competing demands and there were not enough people to attend all of the meetings. For example, the Head of Branch was required to attend two meetings which occurred at the same time, on the same day. In normal circumstances a deputy would attend on her behalf, however, as two posts were vacant, there was no staff to substitute. This resulted in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and Northern Ireland not being represented in some national forums [Exhibit BRO/64 - INQ000183601].
184. In February 2020, the lack of staff in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch remained the cause of great concern to me. Whilst exhaustive efforts were being made to fill the

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vacancies, no real progress had been made due to unforeseen circumstances and there was a lack of stability in the team. The new Head of Branch was absent from work due to long term sickness and left the Branch at the end of February 2020. The Deputy Principal post was vacant. One of the two Staff Officer posts was vacant. To alleviate some of the pressure on the Branch, Chris Stewart transferred the former temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy from the C3 Project back as temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.

185. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch within The Executive Office (TEO) were, on a daily basis receiving requests from a variety of sources and with short, non-negotiable turnarounds and deadlines. The requests came from a variety of sources including: senior officials in The Executive Office (TEO); Operation Yellow Hammer regarding project closure, Cabinet Office requesting information to inform their scenario planning; Northern Ireland Office (NIO) on issues relating to the C3 (command, control and coordination) Project; C3 Hub Project tasks being undertaken by PwC; Cabinet Office routine information notices; NICS Departments seeking guidance, advice or information; District Councils and a wide range of strategic partners; other devolved administrations; NI Assembly queries; responses to press enquiries.
186. The Branch also represented the Department on behalf of the NICS at a wide range of groups, such as Pandemic Flu Readiness Board (PFRB) chaired by the Cabinet Office, departmental working groups such as the Department of Health NI Pandemic Flu Readiness Board and C3 Leads Group in relation to Operation Yellow Hammer; Cross-Border Emergency Management Group and Devolved Nations groups and the Devolved administrations working group. There were a wide range of Groups at local and national level that Civil Contingencies Policy Branch were expected to participate in.
187. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had an advisory role in reviewing NICS Departments' major emergency plans. The permanent Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, in December 2019/January 2020, was of the view that the Branch did not have the time or staff to undertake this task and that within the Branch and that there was a lack of knowledge within the team.
188. As the pressures and pace in The Executive Office (TEO) increased from January 2020 to 18 March 2020, in what were unprecedented times, the staffing position in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was of great concern to me. The Head of Branch, Grade 7/Principal was absent from work due to sickness and was not returning to the branch. The Deputy Principal post was vacant and whilst an internal competition was



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underway to fill the post, the successful candidate, already an official in the NICS, was unable to start to work in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch until the required security clearance had been secured from the Ministry of Defence. At that time, there was a backlog in applications and The Executive Office (TEO) had been advised that there could have been a delay of up to six weeks. The other concern to me was that when the individual joined, they would need a period of induction and training in order to get up to operating capacity.

189. In January 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive was restored, and Ministers returned to office. This increased demands on workloads across the entire Northern Ireland Civil Service. There was an increased level of activity to support the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive and additional sources of requests for information such as Assembly Questions; Committee queries; Executive and Ministerial correspondence had to be managed and dealt with across all Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments, including within the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. This involved requests from business areas at short notice within set timeframes. These are priority matters and must be dealt with on receipt and responded to within the deadline.

190. This continued throughout the month of February 2020.

191. In March 2020, in addition to the daily demands for information and coordination of the queries continued and new work started to emerge. Work had commenced in Whitehall to develop an Emergency Coronavirus Bill. This involved drafting amendments to the Emergency Coronavirus Bill

192. Chris Stewart asked me to support him in liaising with the Departmental Solicitor's Office and the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC) on developing the Emergency Coronavirus Bill amendments.

193. This was a new piece of work and moving at a rapid pace. Chris Stewart sought my assistance, and I was content to offer my support given the circumstances. I explained to Chris Stewart that changing legislation was not an area of work that I had experience of and he assured me that he had a lot of experience and would guide me. He asked me to coordinate a large volume of queries and responses between the Office of the Legislative Counsel and the Departmental Solicitor's Office in liaison with NICS Departments [Exhibit BRO/65 - INQ000469501 and Exhibit BRO/66 - INQ000258062]. The pace was fast and pressurised. This was an intense piece of work in addition to all of the other issues going on simultaneously.

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194. At this point in time, I paused my work on the strategic review due to the fact there was simply too much going on and I had to reprioritise. On 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic, I emailed PwC to inform them that, in light of all that was happening, it was not possible for the proposed strategic review assignment to proceed at this point in time [Exhibit BRO/67 - INQ000469502].
195. I was aware of the demands on resources across the NICS and, as I was on loan to The Executive Office (TEO) from the Department for Communities and that as all departments were experiencing challenges, I could have potentially been recalled to the Department for Communities at any time.
196. In my view, at this pressurised time, February 2020, Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had vacancies in key posts, that is: the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was absent on sick leave and the post was being covered by the former temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, one Deputy Principal post and one Staff Officer post was vacant and an Administrative Officer post was vacant. This remaining team consisted of one Staff Officer and two part-time Executive Officer 2s and a Deputy Principal working on the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project.
197. In my view, a weakness was that the team, with the exception of the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, had not engaged in the development and operation of an NI Hub and lacked this experience and knowledge. I do not have the knowledge of when the Executive felt that it had the resources to deal effectively with a pandemic.

### COVID -19 NI Hub

198. A draft submission dated 27 February 2020, from the temporary Head of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, set out a proposal and timeline for establishment of a COVID-19 NI Hub to manage the response. The proposed times were as follows: Week 1 (2 March 2020) activation of the NI Hub, staffed by Civil Contingencies Policy Branch staff but from week; 2 (9 March 2020) NI Departments should establish their Departmental Operating Centres and provide remote points of contact to the NI Hub. In week 3 Departments will be asked to send Liaison Officers to the COVID -19 NI Hub. This submission was sent to Chris Stewart for consideration and approval [Exhibit BRO/54 - INQ000469492].
199. Chris Stewart responded in an email on 27 February 2020, to the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch saying, "Good work! I am content with the proposals subject to our (The Executive Office) retaining the discretion to delay the full stand up

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(shown from week 3) if circumstances permit – I am not yet convinced that we need that level of operation at this time. Nevertheless, we clearly need to call for our volunteers to be ready for stand up. [Exhibit BRO/ - INQ000472327].

200. Also in February 2020, in preparation for a potential establishment of a C3 (command, control and coordination) NI Hub, I had sought advice from Peter Toogood, the Executive Office (TEO) G5/Deputy Director responsible for Finance in the Department, [Exhibit BRO/45 - INQ000469487.] In anticipation of the establishment of a C3 NI Hub, I drafted a NI Hub activation plan with the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, on 16 March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/68 - INQ000183592]. Chris Stewart, having advised that Anthony Harbinson had been appointed as Chief of Staff, formally asked for arrangements to be put in place on 19 March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/69 - INQ000208416].

201. The model for the NI Hub was built and had been tested in December 2019, was ready to be established at short notice. Through the various testing exercises, the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub model was accredited to meet the Cabinet Office standard of 'Full Operating Capacity' [Exhibit BRO/40 - INQ000183639]. The model was supported by a suite of documents including the Northern Ireland Concept of Operations Standard Operating Procedures [Exhibit BRO/50 - INQ000255362] and [Exhibit BRO/51 - INQ000255364].

202. It is my understanding, in the event of an incident or major emergency being declared, where the Lead Government Department identifies and triggers the need for central coordination (as set out in the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) protocol) and it has been decided by Ministers to establish a NI Hub, responsibility for managing the event is relinquished by The Executive Office (TEO) Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and becomes the responsibility of the C3 (command, control and coordination) NI Hub. Ideally, Civil Contingencies Policy Branch form the staffing in the C3 NI Hub in the initial set up and the Hub is scaled up or down in response to the need of the emergency. An up-to-date and fully tested model was ready and available to The Executive Office (TEO) to implement.

203. The NI Hub has no decision-making authority and exists to co-ordinate and manage the flow of information. The daily sitreps collate and escalate information to inform Civil Contingencies Group (NI), Ministers and the Executive to make informed decisions.

204. The COVID-19 NI Hub was established on 18 March 2020 following the decision by the Executive. The staffing of the COVID-19 NI Hub escalated over the first couple of

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weeks as people came, some had to leave to shield or care for vulnerable family members. Andy Cole, a Grade 5/Deputy Director in The Executive Office (TEO) joined me at an early stage as a Deputy Chief of Staff. In the midst of inducting new staff to the NI Hub, familiarising external consultants with the building and the NI Hub as well as managing the information flows, we successfully managed to issue the first sitrep on 20 March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/70 - INQ000371638].

205. In my view, the work of the external consultants to develop and test structures, systems, information flows and develop guidance such as the Standard Operating Procedures provided a very valuable asset and provided a platform from which the Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson and the leadership team could quickly establish an operating COVID -19 C3 (command, control and coordination) NI Hub. NICS Departments had been involved and engaged in testing the model, a pool of volunteers had been created, and a significant number of staff across the NICS had been trained in a variety of roles such as, Departmental Operating Centres, Liaison Officers, including several NI Hub roles. This project provided a recent and up-to-date foundation to build upon and in my view, enabled the establishment and early operation of the NI Hub to effectively command, control and coordinate the Executive's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The ability of TEO to respond to a large-scale civil contingency in March 2020.**

206. I remained of the view between September 2019 and 18 March 2020, as demands escalated that civil contingencies structures, due to lack of people in posts, disruption of people joining and leaving the team and sick absences within the team, that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch team, would not be able to support the demands of the work programme and increasing demands of a potential emergency. I had tried all possible methods available to recruit staff for the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch.

207. I was aware of and took some comfort from the fact that the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub model, only completed in December 2019, was up to date, had modern telephony and IT equipment, and was relevant, available to implement with immediate effect. It was dependent upon people from across the wider NICS and public service to operate. NICS HR had a pool of volunteers which had been established as part of the Yellow Hammer exercise. I did not have the authority to activate a C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub. This was for a decision at more senior levels.

208. In February 2020, The Executive Office (TEO) did have the organisational structures in place to deal with an emergency, and, by this I mean, a small Civil Contingency Policy

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Branch that may have been capable of activating Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA). In addition, it had a newly designed, built, and tested C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub supported by relevant documentation that had been completed in December 2019 and was ready to activate. However, in my view there were insufficient staff in post in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch at the time to operate the structures.

209. The former temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was working solely on closure of the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub Project and was focussing on completing a retrospective business case for C3 Operation Yellow Hammer and project closure [Exhibit BRO/71 - INQ000471317] and [Exhibit BRO/72 - INQ000207849]. Because of the rapidly escalating situation, in response to the emerging crisis, Chris Stewart moved this officer in February 2020, back into the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, on a temporary basis in the absence of the Head of Branch due to long-term sickness.
210. I did not have the authority to take strategic decisions in relation to the emerging pandemic such as to set up a NI Hub. I don't know what discussions were taking place at a more senior level within The Executive Office (TEO) and the Lead Government Department, Department of Health regarding activating Northern Ireland Central Management Crisis Arrangements (NICCMA) and establishing a C3 NI Hub. It was made clear to me by the Chief Medical Officer Dr Michael Mc Bride and Chris Stewart that the Department of Health was the Lead Government Department and was responsible for providing advice in relation to timing [Exhibit BRO/19 - INQ000469468]. Ultimately the Executive made the key decisions on 16 March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/73 - INQ00023224].
211. The C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub had to be resourced from across the NICS and wider public services and Permanent Secretaries would have to have been involved to enable this to take place. A cadre of volunteers had been identified and trained as part of Operation Yellow Hammer, and in theory, a pool of people was ready to be called to be released from their departments and operate the C3 NI Hub. NICS HR had a role in managing this.
212. An Executive paper dated 16 March 2020, informed the Executive that 'Given the current scientific advice and the move to 'delay' phase, it is now appropriate that the Executive puts the necessary arrangements, suitably staffed, in place to protect the citizen, business and wider society during this challenging period. In line with this, a Ministerial level meeting of the Civil Contingencies Group was held on 12 March 2020

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and a further more detailed meeting s scheduled for Wednesday 18 March 2020. It is anticipated that Civil Contingencies Group (NI) will meet regularly throughout the COVID-19 response period.” [Exhibit **BRO/73 - INQ00023224**].

213. The paper invited colleagues to discuss and agree: “activation of the strategic response arrangements (NICCMA) to provide coordination and direction to deal with the developing wider non health impacts of COVID-19; the leadership of NICCMA by Civil Contingencies Group (NI) chaired by First Minister and Deputy First Minister, or the Head of the Civil Service with a membership comprising of Ministers, Permanent Secretaries and senior representatives from the emergency services and local government: and the phased stand up of the NI Hub; the main operations centre under NICCMA supporting CCG (NI) and the Executive coupled with the stand-up of the Departmental and sectoral responsibilities; and the strategic decision making function in respect of issues referred from the Civil Contingencies Group (NI).” [Exhibit **BRO/73 - INQ00023224**].

214. At this point in time, my view is that the situation was being monitored by colleagues in the Department of Health, and I had limited knowledge of what information might have been available both within the Department of Health as the Lead Government Department, and at senior and Ministerial level within The Executive Office (TEO) or across the Northern Ireland government departments more generally on how serious the situation was, or could be.

215. I sent a submission on 30 January 2020, to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister entitled, Update from COBRA meeting, 29 January 2020 re: coronavirus preparedness and attached the minute of the 29 January 2020 meeting [Exhibit **BRO/18 - INQ000279353**]. I understand from the official record that a submission from The Executive Office (TEO) was sent to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister by the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, on 3 March 2020 entitled, COVID -19 Civil contingencies preparedness and response arrangements [Exhibits **BRO/74 - INQ000145786** **BRO/75 - INQ000289786** and **BRO/76 - INQ000183558**]. Also from the record, a paper was discussed by the Executive on 16 March 2020 entitled Emergency Response to COVID-19 [Exhibit **BRO/73 - INQ00023224**].

216. I am not aware of what consideration was being given within The Executive Office (TEO) as to whether COVID-19 was a coronavirus rather than influenza. I do not know of comparisons between the two being raised or whether flu pandemic plans would be effective against a coronavirus. In my view those would be issues that would require the advice of the Department of Health.

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217. I was informed in person by Chris Stewart on 18 March 2020, that the strategic review of civil contingency arrangements for Northern Ireland that I was undertaking was being 'stood down' and that a Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson had been appointed to set up an NI Hub to manage the response to the emerging COVID -19 pandemic. I was advised that I should expect Anthony Harbinson (the Hub Chief of Staff) to be in contact that day and that he would direct me thereafter. On 19 March 2020, Mr Stewart issued an email to me, the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies and NICS HR asking for arrangements to be put in place to commence the set-up of an NI Hub [Exhibit BRO/69 - INQ000208416].
218. I worked as Deputy Chief of Staff in the COVID-19 Hub and was tasked with shadowing Anthony Harbinson, the Chief of Staff. I assisted the Anthony Harbinson to set up the NI C3 Hub and attended and recorded the minute of the Chief of Staff meetings which involved matters outside of the daily rhythm such as the appointment of external consultant, providing information to team developing the business case, liaison with the Ministry of Defence and liaison with Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency (NISRA) during the initial response phase from 18 March 2020 to 12 June 2020. The COVID-19 Hub produced first Sitrep for Civil Contingencies Group (NI) on 20 March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/70 - INQ000371638] and the last Sitrep was produced on 12 June 2020 [Exhibit BRO/77 INQ000065823].
219. The Covid-19 NI Hub was scaled down from mid-June 2020. The Civil Contingencies Group (NI) meetings were ceased from 4 June 2020 [Exhibit BRO/77 - INQ000065823]. Following an intense period of time from January 2020 – June 2020, which involved monitoring the emerging situation, establishment and set up of the NI Hub and working in the 'response phase', I left the Hub in mid - June 2020.
220. The focus of the C3 NI Hub project was all geared towards a UK exit from the EU without a deal scenario. However, fundamental principles of how to manage a major emergency or incident were common. For example: supporting Civil Contingencies Group (CCG); Sitreps; supporting Ministers; situational awareness; managing fast effective and accurate communications; stakeholder engagement and preparing papers to inform decision making. Collaboration was a critical factor as The Executive Office has no legislative authority to direct or control any other NICS departments or agencies or partner organisations.
221. By engaging in the C3 NI (command, control and coordination) Hub project and through working with PwC, I had contributed to the development of the Standard Operating Procedures; development of the daily rhythm; exercises to test the C3NI Hub,

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and the many issues that needed to be considered and taken into account when establishing a central Hub. There was the identification of priorities and inter-dependencies across departmental issues and the need to ensure timely and accurate data and information to help inform senior civil servants, policy advisors and Ministers, the Executive.

222. In my view, the work of the external consultants to develop and test structures, systems, flow processes and guidance provided a valuable platform for the COVID-19 emergency response. Departments had been involved and engaged in testing the model, volunteers had been identified, and a significant number of staff across the Northern Ireland public sector had been trained in the operation of a NI Hub. This provided a relevant, up-to-date foundation for the creation of a NI Hub to deal with the response to COVID-19 pandemic.

223. Once the instruction was given to establish a NI Hub on 18 March 2020 and on the appointment of a Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson, responsibility for managing the pandemic, I believe, transferred from the Lead Government Department, Department of Health to Civil Contingencies and the Executive with the central operations room the COVID-19 NI Hub providing a secretariat role managing the flow of information. The primary role of the NI Hub is to command, control and coordinate the response to the pandemic. The NI Hub is an enhanced Civil Contingencies Group (NI) coordination room to collate and disseminate information, coordinate multi-departmental/agency activities and planning, and filter/escalate decisions. As part of this the NI Hub will provide secretariat services to support the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and the Executive (and any other meetings necessary). The NI Hub will support working groups to inform Civil Contingencies Group (NI) decisions, with a focus on issues escalated from Northern Ireland departments and other local stakeholders, as well as the cross-cutting NI 'cumulative impacts.

224. The Hub has no decision-making authority and exists to coordinate the NI C3, manage and escalate issues and decisions, to advise and support Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and the Executive's decision-making.

225. The potential UK Exit from EU without a Deal preparedness work had enabled Departments to identify priorities and undertake risk assessments. Whilst this was related to the potential UK Exit from EU without a Deal, it did encourage collaboration and support Departments to identify potential risks and to develop possible mitigations. This process and experience, which took place over a number of months, was both recent and relevant



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and provided a foundation to build upon. NICS departments and their contingency planning teams were involved and understood the purpose and structure for operating in an emergency situation. In my view this was valuable work that helped form a robust foundation to support the C3 NI Hub in the Covid-19 pandemic response phase.

226. A key issue across the NICS at that time was lack of supply of staff at all grades and staff budgets had been significantly reduced. Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB), despite considerable efforts to fill posts, did not have during the period September 2019 – March 2020 (when the NI Hub was established) a full staffing complement and was operating with insufficient resources, skills, and personnel, to respond to a major emergency.

227. In November 2019, PwC produced a report assessing The Executive Office (TEO's) situation regarding Northern Ireland and Civil Contingency Policy Branch's fitness to deal with a major emergency. The November 2019 report entitled, 'Futures Report' included 75 recommendations for improvement and raised an assessment of risk. It also became apparent when the new Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was assessing the overall work programme for the Branch that Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had, due to lack of resources, 'put on hold' specific pieces of work. On 20 November 2019, I sent an email to Chris Stewart to alert him of the PwC assessment which was being reported to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) as project lead **[Exhibit BRO/14 – INQ000183597]**.

228. The official record demonstrates that Mark Byers, Deputy Director in the Northern Ireland Office and lead on the C3 NI Hub project, emailed Chris Stewart and copied the memo to Neill Jackson, line manager for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch informing them that PwC in their weekly report, dated 28 November 2019 on the C3 NI Hub project had escalated The Executive Office resourcing risk to a Black issue **[Exhibit BRO/78 - INQ000183596]**. That is, the most severe risk rating which may be used, indicating risk of threat to life or limb or national security. He commented that he was aware, The Executive Office (TEO) lead on the C3 NI Hub project raised this issue with Chris Stewart **[Exhibit BRO/78 - INQ000183596 and BRO/79 - INQ000183621]** was not copied into this email as I had no formal role in the C3 NI Hub project and no line management role. However, prior to this, on 7 October 2019, I had emailed Chris Stewart a copy of the PwC risk register on the C3 project. I explained that although the project was presented as a 'joint project' the reports were submitted directly to Mark Byers, the Grade 5/Deputy Director in the Northern Ireland Office (NIO). I did not receive PwC reports on the C3 project as I had no formal role in the project **[Exhibit BRO/79 - INQ000183621]**.

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229. Chris Stewart responded in an email, 'I am astonished to see some of the commentary in the risk register and am at a loss to understand why the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch capacity risk was not escalated earlier- although it fits the emerging pattern

[Exhibit BRO/79 - INQ000183621].

230. The Department of Health was the Lead Government Department in relation to possible flu or coronavirus pandemics. On 6 February 2020, in a letter to Chris Stewart from the Director for Population Health, Liz Redmond commented "I do not consider it necessary to activate NICCMA arrangements at this time unless or until the infection appears in Northern Ireland and impacts are experienced here" [Exhibit BRO/80 - INQ000218470].

231. Despite being copied into emails, I was not familiar with the flu pandemic plans and was not informed about the details of the plans which were an operational matter and the responsibility of the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I was copied into emails about many issues including the flu planning towards the end of 2019. My work was focussed on desk research and identifying other civil contingency models, such as, the other devolved nations, Ireland, Isle of Man and elsewhere that I could learn from. I was copied into emails from Civil Contingencies Policy Branch staff about many issues, including flu plans, towards the end of 2019, but had no operational involvement with that work.

232. I am unable to offer a view on whether flu pandemic plans would be effective against a coronavirus, or whether they could be adapted to meet the different challenges that coronavirus might present.

233. On 31 January 2020, Chris Stewart said that we should do some "quiet" thinking and planning on Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICMMA) stand-up and an operations room [Exhibit BRO/81 - INQ000201713]. My understanding is that this was a reference to the need for some informal planning and the requirement (articulated in all COBR meetings) to be careful in what was being communicated at the time, an instruction from UKG, and that we would do some internal work within The Executive Office (TEO) on possible requirements. I was not present at NICS Board meetings so do not know about what planning took place at that level. It was my understanding that at this stage, TEO ought to have been putting plans in place to start up the Hub including notifying NICS HR that staff would be needed, but I do not know whether that "quiet planning" took place, nor did I take part in such "quiet planning." [Exhibit BRO/81 - INQ000201713].

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234. On 22 January 2020, the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, following a meeting of the Pandemic Flu Readiness Board, sent a memo to myself and the line manager for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, Neill Jackson, Grade 5/Deputy Director within the Executive Office, and Chris Stewart providing an update on Pandemic Flu preparations that impact on The Executive Office [Exhibit BRO/82 - INQ00092712]. In the memo, the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch states that "Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was allocated responsibility for taking forward the sector resilience element of Pandemic flu preparations a few years ago. It is allocated to Civil Contingencies Group (NI) Sector Resilience Programme". It was her understanding that this was a non-health related issue. "No work had commenced on it due to competing priorities and then the impact on the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch of the EU exit preparations." She then stated, "this has resulted in Northern Ireland being more than 18 months behind the rest of the United Kingdom in terms of ensuring sector resilience to any Pandemic flu outbreak. She stated that "there is a pressing need to move this forward."

235. I do not know how this assessment was made as I joined The Executive Office (TEO) in September 2019. This work was outside the remit of my strategic review. I do not know what work would be involved to undertake this exercise. I have no reason to challenge this assessment [Exhibit BRO/82 - INQ00092712].

236. The Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch commented in her note of 22 January 2020 that the Branch is currently understaffed and that a business case setting out the need for additional staff and a paper to the Departmental Board is being prepared and these papers were work in progress. The Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had previously advised the Cabinet Office that Northern Ireland had hoped to complete this area of work by the end of June 2020.

237. Dr Liz Redmond, Director of Population Health in the Department of Health, had also attended the same meetings and she wrote to Chris Stewart on the issue of sector resilience on 6 February 2020. The purpose of the letter was to 'highlight the need for The Executive Office (TEO) Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to urgently consider sector resilience in the face of a growing threat from novel coronavirus (2019-nCov)." The letter further stated that the UK Chief Medical Officers have agreed that given the potential health and social consequences of a major epidemic, it is now appropriate to plan for the reasonable worst-case scenario (RWCS) of influenza pandemic moderate severity, without a vaccine. Existing pandemic flu guidance is therefore being used to plan for the potential impact on health and society while the Cabinet Office is currently collating information in order to devise a RWCS for the 2019-CoV outbreak" [Exhibit BRO/80 -

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**INQ000218470**]. The Director of Population Health, Liz Redmond in the Department of Health and Lead Government Department as stated in her letter dated 6 February 2020 stated that she “did not consider it necessary to activate at this point in time”.

238. This was outside the remit of the strategic review and was a matter for the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. However, I note from the record that at a COVID -19 Working Group (C3 Leads), on 11 March 2020, all Departments were asked to send outstanding Sectoral Resilience plans to TEO C3 inbox by noon on 12 March 2020 [Exhibit **BRO/83 - INQ000469504** and **BRO/84 - INQ000469505.**]

239. In November 2019, I was aware that there was work that had been ‘put on hold’ by the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. The PwC report raised concerns about this. I alerted Chris Stewart to the PwC report and concerns. I had not undertaken any assessment of this work or the potential impact. My focus was on planning a strategic review, undertaking desk research, and trying to develop an understanding of civil contingencies and models elsewhere. Daily issues such as this emerged which I was copied into and helped to inform me of relevant considerations for the review, however they were not within my remit and responsibility.

240. My understanding from the records is that the Cabinet Office had commissioned a piece of work to be undertaken and that this work had been ‘put on hold’ due to lack of resources within the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I had been informed on previous occasions by the then temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch that a programme of work had been put on hold and that this had been agreed with the Deputy Secretary. In his submission of 25 February 2020 to The Executive Office (TEO) Departmental Board, Chris Stewart had said that “over the past 3 years an extensive work programme has been put on hold due to lack of resources” [Exhibit **BRO/08 – INQ000205712**

241. I was aware of the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) and understood it to be the Northern Ireland civil contingencies protocol that sets out the framework, triggers, and decision tree for assessment/escalation. I had no knowledge or experience of how this worked in practice.

242. I was not aware of what steps were actually being considered to prevent transmission to Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) is an operational matter and was outside of my remit of the strategic review. I

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did not have the authority to activate Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA). I believe that this decision would have been for Ministers.

243. From the record, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister circulated a paper to their Executive colleagues dated 16 March 2020 to ask them to agree to the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) to deal with the impacts of Covid-19. The paper was discussed by the Executive on 16 March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/73 - INQ000023224].

244. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. On 18 March 2020, The Executive Office (TEO) ramped up its capacity and capability through standing up the NI C3 Hub to support Ministers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I do not have the knowledge of when the Executive felt it had the resources to deal effectively with a pandemic. The COVID-19 C3 Hub was resourced to meet its objectives approximately three weeks after launch on 18 March 2020 by around the beginning of April 2020. The resources were scaled up from 18 March 2020 over the first two weeks. It was estimated that the NI Hub would require 30-40 staff to build three teams in order to run the Hub seven days a week.

245. On 11 March 2020, the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy chaired a meeting of a Northern Ireland cross-departmental working group on civil contingencies, attended at Grade 7/Principal Officer level, known as 'C3 Leads'. These meetings occurred on a routine basis. I was not a member of the Group but had attended meetings as part of my research for the strategic review [Exhibit BRO/84 - INQ000469505]. A note of the meeting recorded that: all members review their and associated Arm's Length Bodies / Sectoral Groups Business Continuity Plans and critical public service provision against reasonable worst case scenario Planning Assumptions and provide assurance to The Executive Office (TEO), Civil Contingencies Policy Branch that they can continue to function with a 21% reduction to the workforce; all Departments to seek assurance from respective critical infrastructure; all Departments were asked to send outstanding Sectoral Resilience Plans to The Executive Office (TEO) C3 inbox by noon on 12 March 2020 [BRO/84 - INQ000469505].

246. The Departmental C3 Leads raised concerns at the 4 March 2020 meeting and asked for their views to be escalated to senior civil servants within The Executive Office (TEO). It was my opinion that their views were strongly held in relation to stating the need for a NI Hub to be established due to the increasing number of requests for information from Cabinet Office [Exhibit BRO/55 - INQ000218494].

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247. The issues raised included: lack of guidance from NICS HR regarding staff absenteeism, concerns about a lack of structures being in place across the NICS to respond to the Cabinet Office requests and in particular the legislative requests for input to the Emergency Bill and C3 Leads expressed a need for Departmental Operating Centres (DOCs) to be established with immediate effect. The C3 Leads reported that staff in departments were under pressure following the return of the Executive. **[Exhibit BRO/55 - INQ000218494]**. Most members were of the opinion that a NI Hub needed to be established within The Executive Office at this point in time. There was considerable concern voiced by C3 Leads about the media reports and members asked me to report that C3 Leads were of the view that the NI Hub needed to be established to provide guidance, direction to NICS Departments and support to manage the emerging situation.
248. When I reported this to Chris Stewart, he pointed out on 4 March 2020 that this may not be a view that would be welcomed by Departmental colleagues as it would deprive them of staff **[BRO/55 - INQ000218494]**. He responded "that in this key planning phase my priority is the cumulative impact analysis, not standing up the Hub. 'That is a major challenge, and our capacity is limited.' Chris Stewart was going to meet with Karen Pearson, Grade 3/Director in The Executive Office (TEO) and Gail McKibbin, Grade 5/Deputy Director within The Executive Office (TEO) to discuss whether any help might be provided from the very busy Brexit team and stated "subject to Ministerial views, I am not above asking the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) for a bit help."
249. A Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson was appointed on 18 March 2020 to establish a C3 NI Hub to support the Executive's response to COVID-19 global pandemic. I have no knowledge as to what considerations were taking place regarding the timing of activating the Hub. I was not involved in the decision-making on the establishment of the Hub.
250. During March 2020, I had email exchanges with Chris Stewart in regard to the pandemic preparations. On Sunday, 8 March 2020 Chris Stewart had WhatsApp messaged me to say he was on a call, which I presume was with Cabinet Office. A slide presentation was being prepared for Ministers for a meeting of COBR on 9 March 2020 **[Exhibit BRO/85 - INQ000325143]**.
251. From the record, I believe that counterparts in Cabinet Office were preparing documents and papers for the COBR Covid-19 (M) (8) meeting scheduled to take place on Monday 9 March 2020. The First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Health Minister were invited to attend the meeting **[BRO/11 - INQ000056219]**.

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252. I believe that Northern Ireland was asked to provide some input to the preparation of papers including a 'slide deck.' This may have been a document commonly known as a Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP), but I am unable to confirm the actual document for which information was being requested. Papers were being prepared by Whitehall officials for the COBR meeting scheduled to take place on 9 March 2020. Chris Stewart and I were liaising with NICS Departments to obtain responses (part inputs) to the queries raised by Cabinet Office.

253. On 6 March 2020, Cabinet Office raised a query in relation to 'impacts of non-pharmaceutical interventions' and were seeking input by 7 March 2020. I emailed DOH Gold to check if they had seen the request for information and asked if the Department of Health were aware of the request and intended to respond on behalf of Northern Ireland. DOH Gold replied 'No-the request for information is from Departments – not Devolved Administrations.' I responded stating that this 'is a national exercise. Northern Ireland will need to input as Minister for Health, Robin Swann, First Minister, and Deputy First Minister are attending COBR on Monday 9 March 2020 when this is going to be discussed.' DOH Gold then informed me 'in all of their correspondence, Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CSS) have been clear as to what is a Department (Whitehall) and Devolved Administrations. There has been no request to Devolved Administrations to contribute to the XHG sitreps. We have not planned to do anything with this.' On 6 March 2020, I concluded by saying, 'Ok, thank you. If you are clear that this is the case. Thank you. I asked whether the Chief Medical Officer was planning to support Ministers (Department for Health Minister, First Minister, and Deputy First Minister) at the meeting scheduled to take place on Monday 9 March 2020.' DOH Gold advised that a briefing is being prepared by Health Protection Branch. It will be ready on Sunday and that the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael Mc Bride would be attending to Support the Health Minister, Robin Swann. [Exhibit: BRO/56 - INQ000258367]. I then informed DOH Gold that I was aware that Chief Medical Officers from other regions were planning to dial in to the COBR meeting.

254. I sent a WhatsApp message to Chris Stewart stating, 'a complete lack of interest from DOH Gold.' I don't have a clear recollection of the telephone call [Exhibit: BRO/85 - INQ000325143]. However, from the record, I understand that officials from the then Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) England were preparing a presentation (a slide deck) on economic impacts for the COBR Covid-19 (M) (8) meeting on 9 March 2020. I believe that this is may have been what my WhatsApp message to Chris Stewart refers

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255. I had no day-to-day contact with DOH Gold over the period January 2020 to 18 March 2020 and I am unable to comment on their broader role in decision-making. The operational contact with The Executive Office (TEO) would have been with the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. I had not got to the stage in my strategic review of examining in-depth local plans.

256. Departments were regularly in contact with me asking when they were going to get instructions from The Executive Office (TEO) on what to do. There appeared to be a view from some NICS Departmental officials that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch had more information than that which was shared with Departments and that The Executive Office (TEO) ought to be directing or instructing Departments. The C3 Leads group had asked me to escalate concerns that they had raised during the meeting which took place on 11 March 2020 [Exhibit BRO/84 - INQ000469505].

257. Departments were not required to report to The Executive Office (TEO) on their planning so I wouldn't necessarily have had any visibility on the level of preparations they were doing. They were raising though through telephone calls that they needed guidance from The Executive Office (TEO). The Department for the Economy was keeping the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch updated on their own planning which is why I commented to Chris Stewart that they were providing evidence of planning, but I had little information in regard to the other departments. My comment was based on my impressions from telephone calls and the C3 Leads 4 and 11 March 2020 meetings. Chris Stewart said on 9 March 2020 that "we are not in the good books" of the Chief Medical Officer. I do not know what that is a reference to. I did report to Chris Stewart that the Chief Medical Officer was 'ok' at the COBR meeting which I also attended [Exhibit BRO/85 - INQ000325143].

258. I reported to Chris Stewart on 9 March 2020 that the temporary Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was in a 'panic' about workload. I am not clear what the specific issue was on 9 March 2020 that gave rise to my concern. I had recognised as set out earlier in this statement that the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was significantly under-resourced and having to deal with many issues. I think my comment on Civil Contingencies Policy Branch being 'unbelievably poor' was due to there being an absence of staff in the time that an actual emergency was arising Exhibit BRO/85 - INQ000325143].

259. On 17 March 2020, I attended a Cabinet Office, Civil Contingencies, Ad hoc Officials tele-conference at 2.30pm arranged by the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat. The agenda for the meeting was: 1. Situation report (a) introduction of additional



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intervention measures; 2. Update on governance structures and cross government coronavirus response and 3. Next steps. There was some discussion about the draft Emergency Coronavirus Bill, participants were asking questions regarding specific points of detail [Exhibit BRO/86 - INQ000469506].

260. The intended purpose of the meeting as per the agenda issued in advance of the meeting was to explain the new governance structures of the Covid-19 response for the UK and offer departments the chance to ask any urgent questions. In so far as I remember, I felt the meeting was chaotic because there were many attendees, who raised questions across a wide range of topics, they were talking over each other, internet connections were being lost with them having to reconnect to rejoin the meeting. It was not a well-structured meeting.

261. On 21 March 2020, Peter Toogood, Director of Corporate Services, and his team in The Executive Office (TEO) had been requesting information on numbers of staff joining the Hub, and associated costs [Exhibit BRO/87 - INQ000211277]. It was the initial set up period, and it was not possible for me to provide accurate information at that point in time because changes were occurring rapidly. On 21 March 2020, I emailed Peter Toogood and commented 'At the minute I am a one person Hub' [Exhibit BRO/87 - INQ000211277]. My comment was not a literal comment and was reflecting the fact that at that specific point the Hub was only being set up by the Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson, and NICS HR were trying to get the appropriate numbers of staff in to work in the Hub. The Hub initially consisted of the Chief of Staff and myself however, by the day the situation rapidly changed. I cannot recall how many staff were available to the Hub on 21 March 2020 when I emailed Peter Toogood, but it was not many. The model of the NI Hub allows for it to be scaled up and down on the basis of business need in response to the crisis. It does not work on absolute and fixed numbers of staff.

262. I did not have a clear understanding as to how many volunteers would put themselves forward or be available to be released from their respective Departments. In the early days, first week, it was not clear how many staff and what skill set might be needed to operate the COVID -19 NI Hub. In addition, I was also uncertain over my personal situation at that time. I was waiting to be informed about whether I had a role in The Executive Office (TEO) or not, as my work on the review had been stood down. I was on loan from the Department for Communities, and it was possible that I could have been asked to return to the Department for Communities.

263. The C3 (command, control, and coordination) project undertaken by PwC in 2019 had designed and developed a C3 NI Hub model that had been tried and tested and was ready to implement. However, it was for the new Chief of Staff who had just arrived on 18 March 2020, to decide if this was his preferred option. The Chief of Staff was actively liaising with a variety of stakeholders and key decision-makers. Ultimately, after careful consideration of all of the NI Hub documents and operating procedures, it was decided by him to implement the C3 NI Hub operational model developed by PwC. It was consistently reviewed and revised as it evolved, and lessons were learnt through live experience.

264. Prior to the establishment of the NI Hub, there had been limited resources devoted during the period January to March 2020 to preparing for the structures needed to respond to a pandemic. The Civil Contingencies Policy Branch was a small branch and, in my opinion, the branch had a heavy workload and were involved in many different meetings, co-ordinating information requests and managing a variety of issues.

#### **Effectiveness of CCG and the NI Hub**

265. The role of an NI Hub is an enhanced Civil Contingencies Group (NI) operations room set up to collate and disseminate information, coordinate multi-departmental activities and planning, and filter/escalate decisions. As part of this, the NI Hub provides secretariat support to Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and the Executive.

266. In my view, the C3 NI COVID-19 Hub met the objective of supporting the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and the Executive. Daily situation reports, Sitreps, were collated and presented by the Hub Chief of Staff to inform the daily meetings of Civil Contingencies Group (NI) chaired by Sir David Sterling, which was attended by all NI Departmental Permanent Secretaries, the Police Service, Fire Service, Ambulance Service, Local Government. The meetings provided the opportunity to share information, raise issues, and seek additional data about the impacts of the pandemic. Civil Contingencies Group (NI) Departmental Permanent Secretaries in turn were able to report to their respective Ministers for Executive meetings.

267. I was part of the COVID-19 NI Hub leadership team. The Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson's leadership was effective as he fully embraced the Chief of Staff role, as I understood it from Operation Yellow Hammer and the C3 (command, control, and coordination) NI Hub project. As Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson immediately took ownership for establishing the Hub and ensuring that it operated in so far as possible in

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accordance with the guidance that had been developed by PwC. The model was constantly reviewed and revised to fit the circumstances of this particular crisis.

268. The COVID-19 NI Hub was effective, and we did our best in exceptional circumstances. We were working very long hours (minimum of 12 hours in the office plus work at home) and most weekends, to ensure that the Hub was meeting its objectives. The Hub gathered information from each of the nine Departments and collated a daily Sitrep for submission to Civil Contingencies Group (NI) for its use in managing the response to the crisis. The Hub could, if necessary, provide other information as necessary such as policy papers for presentation to Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and or the Executive.

269. In my view Civil Contingencies Group (NI) was effective. On a daily basis the Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson, presented the Sitrep and would respond to questions and challenges from its members. Members would update the Group on key issues within their respective departments. Actions would be agreed. A note of the meeting recorded actions and decisions. In my opinion, the Sitrep was used to help inform decision making by Civil Contingencies Group (NI) and the Executive. Department of Health would open the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) meeting with a Health-focussed Sitrep.

270. My last day working in the Hub was sometime in mid-June 2020. I went on annual leave and was subsequently transferred to the Department for Infrastructure. I had no involvement in any issues regarding The Executive Office's (TEO's) arrangements for responding to the pandemic following my departure from the Hub in mid-June 2020 and so cannot comment on any issues that occurred after that date.

### **NISRA and data analytics**

271. On 17 April 2020 in the NI Hub, I raised with the Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson an issue of concern [Exhibit **BRO/75 - INQ000289786**] regarding data and analytics that had been raised with me by the consultants EY (Ernst Young) who were working in the Hub.

272. EY were providing a data analytics resource to the Hub and two Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statisticians had joined the COVID-19 NI Hub on 16 April 2020. EY felt that would be not enough statisticians to handover the work they had been doing to support the Hub. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) were approached by the Hub Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson on 20 April 2020

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[Exhibit BRO/75 - INQ000289786] to discuss what additional support might be available to the C3 NI Hub.

273. A meeting took place between the Chief of Staff of the COVID-19 Hub and the Chief Executive Officer of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) on 20 April 2020, which I attended [Exhibit BRO/88 - INQ000469508]. Anthony Harbinson informed the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) Chief Executive Officer, Siobhan Carey that the response from departments for data for the Hub Sitrep had been patchy, which I understood to mean that we were not getting information from all departments. I am aware that there were issues of availability of relevant data from departments for the Hub for example on how much Personal Protective Equipment was available to hospitals, on deaths from COVID-19 at weekends, passengers using public transport.

274. Between April 2020 to June 2020, up to five NISRA statisticians worked with the EY Data Analytics team to provide data for the Sitreps. This provided ad hoc research of interest relating to emerging issues or international trends; identified relevant and available official statistics; and provided part inputs to the daily Cabinet Office return. However, my understanding from Anthony Harbinson's email to Sir David Sterling on 30 April 2020 is that NISRA did not have the capability to take over the work of EY on data analytics for the NI Hub [Exhibit BRO/89- INQ000304901 and Exhibit BRO/90 - INQ000469509].

275. The EY NI C3 Hub Lessons Learnt Review was completed in June 2020 [Exhibit. BRO/91 - INQ000023222] I was no longer in the C3 COVID-19 NI Hub as I left the Hub in mid-June 2020. I had attended the Civil Contingency Group (NI) daily meetings. The Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson presented the Sitreps to Civil Contingencies Group (NI), which included all Departmental Permanent Secretaries, explaining developments over the past 24 hours. In my view, this relevant and timely daily information helped to inform Civil Contingency Group Members to enable them to advise their respective Ministers.

### Response to the pandemic after the initial lockdown

276. I left the COVID-19 NI Hub in June 2020. The last Sitrep was produced on 20 June 2020. I understand that a business case was approved in November 2020 by The Executive Office Departmental Board to increase the staff in the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch. From the record, I believe from memory that the new staffing structure reflects

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the proposal that I discussed with PwC and is detailed in the PwC Futures report of November 2019.

277. The business case sought approval for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch to comprise of a total of 12 posts - one Grade 7/Principal Officer, Head of Branch, four Deputy Principals, three Staff Officers, one Executive Officer 1, two part-time Executive Officer 2s and an Administrative Officer and a Personal Secretary. This amounts to six additional new staff to undertake the work of the Civil Contingencies Policy branch. The new Civil Contingencies Policy Branch comprised twelve posts and a personal secretary to support a Grade 5/Deputy Director [Exhibit BRO/72 - INQ000207849].

### Exercise Nimbus

278. From the record, I understand that an invitation to attend the Nimbus Ministerial Table Top Ministerial training exercise was sent to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. On 6 February 2020, the First Minister and on 10 February 2020, the deputy First Minister decided that the Minister for Health 'should continue to represent Northern Ireland' and attend the Ministerial Exercise Nimbus on 12 February 2020 [Exhibit BRO/92- INQ000469510].

279. I was not in attendance at the meeting, however the minutes of the 12 February 2020 meeting circulated by Cabinet Office record that the Minister for Health for Northern Ireland, Robin Swann dialled in to the exercise [Exhibit BRO/93 - INQ000195891].

280. The agenda and papers for the meeting were circulated on 11 February 2020 [Exhibit BRO/94 - INQ000052012; INQ000052013; INQ000052014; INQ000052015]. A Lessons Identified note was produced by the Cabinet Office and was circulated on 19 February 2020 following the exercise [Exhibit BRO/95 - INQ000329360].

281. I do not know whether Northern Ireland officials were invited to attend. Northern Ireland officials were not recorded as being in attendance [Exhibit BRO/93 - INQ000195981]. I do not know if any specific action was taken by the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch following this exercise. There was a lack of staff working in the Branch at that time, due to sickness and vacant posts. This was an extremely pressurised period due to the global spread and escalation of work in respect of the pandemic.

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

282. I had an Executive Office (TEO) allocated mobile phone, iPad, and laptop. I communicated only with civil servants on these devices. I had no direct communications with Ministers, advisors, or party officials. I returned the mobile phone, iPad, and laptop to The Executive Office (TEO) when I left the Department when I transferred to Department for Infrastructure in September 2020. I used The Executive Office (TEO) devices and have no recollection of using any personal devices to communicate about the pandemic.
283. I would have used WhatsApp and text messages (SMS) to communicate with civil service colleagues. I do not remember everyone who I might have been texting or WhatApping. My main contacts were Chris Stewart, the Head of Civil Contingencies Policy Branch, Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson, and Deputy Chief of Staff, Andy Cole. I had no interaction on devices with Ministers, Advisors or Party Officials. I would not have been liaising with members of the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) directly.
284. I understand from the record that I was added to WhatsApp group "XO" Meeting 3 11 2020, for a brief period. This was in relation to my new Grade5/Director role in the Department for Infrastructure on EU exit work. It did not relate to COVID-19
285. I was not the Grade 5/ Deputy Director with line management responsible for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch and I do not recall being part of any messaging groups relating to civil contingencies during my time in The Executive Office (TEO). My post was a temporary post at Deputy Director level, for a period of around 9 months to undertake a strategic review of civil contingency arrangements in Northern Ireland.
286. I communicated with individuals in The Executive Office (TEO), civil servants, about civil contingencies work, and from 18 March 2020 on the work of the NI C3 (command, control, and coordination) Hub.
287. I am aware of information being shared and issues having been discussed informally. I am not aware of any decisions being made outside of the formal government processes. I do not know to what extent messaging platforms were used by Ministers, Civil Servants, and Advisors about the response to COVID-19. I had very limited contact with Ministers and Special Advisors. My contact would have been at civil servant level, within The Executive Office (TEO) primarily.

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288. I returned my mobile phone to The Executive Office (TEO) and did not record any communication that took place on it. I do not recollect using my personal phone for communication about the pandemic.

289. I returned my mobile devices to The Executive Office (TEO) in September 2020 when I left The Executive Office (TEO) to take up a permanent Director post in the Department for Infrastructure. I do not recall whether I deleted any messages or not.

**Statement of Truth**

290. I believe that the facts 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: 27 March 2024**