

Witness Name: Michelle Canning (Special Advisor)

Statement No: Module 2c, statement 1

Exhibits: N/A

Dated: 28 February 2024

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MICHELLE CANNING

I, Michelle Canning, will say as follows:

1. I was employed as a special advisor to the Deputy First Minister on 19 October 2020. At the time I took up that position I had 30-years' experience in the field of communications. For over two decades, I worked in the media industry as a print and broadcast journalist and news editor. This has included working in Ireland, Britain and the United States. I was Assistant Editor of three regional newspapers before joining the BBC. I was also a former Head of Public Relations and Head of Corporate Communications (acting) for the Housing Executive.
2. I am an award-winning Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR Global), CIPR NI Committee member, accredited PR practitioner and mentor. My qualifications and experience also extended to being a co-founder of Women in PR and a founding member of the Northern Ireland Public Sector Communications Forum. I was involved in Women in Public Life; Women into Politics, The Next Chapter and Queen's University Belfast Emerging Leaders.
3. I hold an MA in Journalism; postgraduate qualifications in Communications, Management and Leadership; an ILM in Leadership and Management as well as industry qualifications in Media Law, Public Affairs, Broadcast Law.
4. I worked as a special adviser to the deputy First Minister from approximately 19 October 2020 until the end of January 2021 providing strategic communications advice and support. My remit as a special adviser to the office of the Deputy First Minister was to provide advice in terms of presentation of messaging and ensuring that the messaging,

predominantly public health messaging, was coherent and clear and without ambiguity so that the public were clear on the position of the Executive from deputy First Minister's perspective. It also included demonstrating that steps that were being taken to keep the community safe and assist in achieving buy in from the public.

5. I had a substantial body of experience in crisis communications up to that point particularly within the public sector.
6. During my brief time as a Special Adviser I did not contribute to substantive decision-making on the actual response to the Covid pandemic. I would advise on ways of presenting or explaining a substantive decision which would provide clarity to the public. I was in this role a relatively short time, as I made the difficult decision to resign in January 2021, following a significant family event in December 2020. I left this role at the end of January 2021.
7. I was not a Special Advisor to the deputy First Minister prior to power-sharing commencing in January 2020. I did not go through any specific process of appointment when power sharing resumed in January 2020. I was a member of Sinn Féin. I have no previous experience as a Special Adviser in any capacity or at any time prior to October 2020.

Your role during the pandemic

8. During my time as a Special Advisor I worked in a communications capacity. This involved providing communications advice and support to the deputy First Minister, which included scripting speeches, press releases, press conferences, media liaison and social media, as well as external engagement.
9. I did not have any role in providing advice to the deputy First Minister based on scientific or medical evidence from SAGE, the UK Chief Medical Officer or the Northern Ireland Chief Medical Officer. My role was solely focused on strategic communications advice.
10. In my role as Special Advisor I attended Executive meetings, all of which were held online. I attended other meetings as and when I was requested to attend, including regular deputy First Minister political meetings. I don't recall these being held on a daily basis. I would have had contact with Executive Information Services officials during my

time there, as well as with officials in the Private Office. I don't recall contact with other civil servants in any official capacity.

11. Most of the Executive business, during my time, was conducted online due to the pandemic. In terms of the relationships between the offices of the joint heads of government, it's important to first say I had little exposure to the First Minister or her team - other than at Executive meetings (online) or when First Minister attended the regular televised press conferences alongside the deputy First Minister. Bearing in mind I was there for just over 2 months my reflections are general rather than specific.
12. It is important to contextualise this against the backdrop of the existence of natural tensions borne out of divergent political and ideological perspectives. There were challenges, frustrations, and differences. However, I sensed a collective willingness to do the right thing and do the best in navigating this greatest of global health challenges and minimising the impact in the north of Ireland. My experience was that the deputy First Minister was always calm, courteous and conducted herself professionally at all times in her dealings with everyone. Her motivation appeared to me to be rooted in the public interest for public and civic good, and firmly guided by the medical and scientific advice that was being offered by the experts.
13. I had little to minimal interaction with other advisers outside of the deputy First Minister's team. From memory, I had fleeting interactions with one of the First Minister's advisers and those interactions were cordial and professional.
14. Any communication (i.e. between advisers/teams of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) were, to my knowledge, cordial and professional. There was a definite willingness to pull together even in this mandatory coalition model. Communications were conducted professionally and cordially and that was my experience, brief as it was, in the few interactions I had.
15. Outside of the offices, I had contact with the Executive Information Service (EIS) staff and my relationship with these staff was always excellent and professional.
16. I am unable to comment on the Executive's initial understanding and response to the Covid-19 pandemic. I was not employed as a Special Advisor until October 2020.

The response to Covid-19 after Summer 2020

17. I am aware that in August 2020 the Executive agreed the imposition of restrictions in response to high rates of transmission should not be adopted at this time but this option should be kept open. I am also aware that in September 2020 the Executive agreed to localised restrictions. I did not contribute to those decisions as I was not in role at the time. I am, therefore, unable to comment on whether they demonstrate that restrictions were eased too quickly or without adequate planning. I was not qualified to give any advice to the deputy First Minister on the scientific or medical advice which was being provided to her at the Executive Committee or by the Department of Health.
18. I have been asked to comment on a suggestion made at meeting of the Northern Ireland Health Committee on 15 October 2020 that modelling work had significantly underestimated the development of the pandemic at that point. Again, I was not in my post at the time of the meeting and I was not aware of such concerns. My background in communications and journalism meant that my responsibilities including advising the deputy First Minister on presentation of public health advice but not on the substance of such advice. I do not feel able to comment on whether Ministers were prepared for the increase in transmission rates that occurred in autumn 2020. What I can say, however, is that modelling was certainly an issue of importance in Executive meetings.
19. I did not attend meetings of the Executive Committee prior to 19 October 2020 and cannot, therefore, comment on the contributions of Ministers or the CMO. I do not recall any sensitivity around identifying geographical areas with higher rates of infections at subsequent meetings. I am aware that a decision was taken on 16 October 2020 to implement a *"circuit breaker"* but cannot meaningfully comment on the justification and necessity of such a step as it was outside my area of expertise and occurred prior to my taking up my role.
20. I have been referred to the minutes of the Executive Committee meeting of 13 October 2020 and the contribution of the Minister for Agriculture that there was *"no science, just assumptions ... want to see science – didn't get science. Sick of assumptions from experts"* MC/001INQ000065753 I was not in attendance at that meeting but can say that it was my impression from subsequent meetings attended by me, that such comments were not reflective of most Ministers' views and were not, in my opinion, consistent with the approach of the deputy First Minister. She was always alert to the medical and scientific advice being provided to the Executive Committee and, in my view, sought to be guided by it.

21. The proposal at the meeting of the Executive Committee of 9 November 2020 was that existing restrictions would be extended for two weeks MC/002INQ000116294 I do recall the meeting taking place over several days and have reviewed the documentation provided by the Inquiry. I believe the reason that the extension appeared controversial was that the view of most of the parties (including Sinn Féin) was to be guided by the medical and scientific advice that was available and extend the restrictions for a further two weeks, whereas another party (the DUP from my review of the meetings) was advocating a different approach.
22. I cannot explain why the further extension to the existing restrictions was controversial and I can only speculate that this was due to a desire to reopen the economy, as I do recall there were calls from the hospitality sector. To be honest, the Executive meetings were new to me having only started my role in late October 2020. My focus during these meetings was to effectively listen to what was being agreed and create communications around how those decisions could be communicated in a way which was understandable to the general public from the deputy First Minister. Generally, there was a short window of time from the Executive meetings and the regular press conference/address to the public. Decisions were required to be quickly communicated through the joint Executive press briefing from the First and the deputy First Minister.
23. At that same meeting the Communities Minister raised her concerns about flaws in the modelling. I have read the documents provided by the Inquiry to refresh my memory. In my view the documentation clearly show that there were concerns regarding the modelling, and the then Communities Minister also states that this information was "*asked for two weeks ago*". At this stage (09 November 2020), I was in role a few weeks. I would not have been aware of broader concerns within the Executive about the quality of modelling or whether it was sufficiently specific to understand the impact upon certain types of business. However, from the information provided there clearly appears to have been an issue. Unfortunately, given my limited time in role, prior to this meeting, I am unable to comment further. I do not recall suspected flaws in the modelling contributing to any communications policy whilst I was in post.
24. The Inquiry have referred me to several contributions to the meeting of 9 November 2020. This included the comment of the Economy Minister that she was distraught at the tone of the meeting. There were clear tensions between Ministers at this point. This was a long and difficult meeting taking place over three days and during a pressurised

period, especially when discussing whether to extend restrictions, which appeared to be a source of tension in the Executive during my brief time in my role.

25. Having reviewed the contributions provided, it seems that there was clearly deep frustration on many levels, attempts were made to find consensus and an agreed decision and to achieve the right balance in terms of the decisions being made. The reference to the apparent leaking of sensitive information to journalists and the threat of the use of a cross-community vote by a DUP Minister are cited, all of which appeared to have, and can only have, escalated tensions. From the documentation, it is clear some felt it could be construed externally as “sectarianising” the decision-making and could present reputational and compliance issues for the Executive as it continued to traverse what was undoubtedly a difficult path. That is clear from Minister’s Long’s comments on the impact for her party’s part in the decision-making were there to be a cross community vote and her requests that a step back be taken to ensure that relationships were not, as she says, damaged at such a crucial juncture.

26. A SitRep dated 17 November 2020 MC/0031NQ000065956 recorded that “*The Executive will do all it can to “protect” as much of the Christmas period as possible. However, Prof Ian Young said mid-December could be the “big risk period” (BBC News).*”

27. On 17 November, I would have been in my role less than one month. However, I feel that enabling people to spend Christmas together was a consideration for the Executive in its decision making. It would not, on its own, have outweighed all other considerations. I understand that likely adherence to rules, impact on mental health and issues around isolation were also considered by the Executive. In my own view, Christmas is a period in the year when for many, contact with family members is important. At that stage, people had not seen or been with family in some time, so there would have been a natural hope and optimism that they would be able to do so and they would have been looking to the Executive to make that decision. However, any decision in this respect would have had to have been weighed up against the risks and considered alongside the medical and scientific advice that was available at that time.

28. Whilst enabling people to meet for Christmas would have been a factor, from my time working as a special adviser to the office of the deputy First Minister, I believe that the medical and scientific advice would have driven the decision-making. In my opinion and brief experience, the deputy First Minister would have pursued a decision based on the medical and scientific advice before her but she would also have had a duty to balance

that with consideration of the societal risks, including dissent or non-adherence by the public and the impact that could generate; the pressing need to protect the most vulnerable in our society, the older population, those who were living alone and felt isolated as a result; and those who were experiencing mental health issues and whose well-being may well have been disproportionately impacted or exacerbated by particular decisions.

29. The next meeting of the Executive Committee took place on 19 November 2020. Executive Paper E (20) 267 (C) on *"Modelling the course of the COVID epidemic and the impact of different interventions"* provided options rather than a clear recommendation. I am aware that the Finance Minister wrote asking for *"clear and concise"* advice to the Executive and to *"spell out exactly what the Executive needs to do in order to bring transmission rates down and protect our health service"*.

30. Having reviewed the minute of that meeting that has been provided by the Inquiry, my general recollection is that the Executive wanted clear guidance from the Health Department, which is reflected in the letter from the Finance Minister. I remember (only with the aid of the documentation referred to) that there was an expectation of clear guidance and there was a view that it was not being provided at that time by the Department of Health. There was a view that the Health Minister was not providing clear recommendations although this was what the Executive required.

31. I have been referred to the handwritten notes of the Executive. In the meeting of 19 November 2020, the Infrastructure Minister is reported to have said *"presented with medical/scientific advice 5 weeks ago. We chose not to act"*. The First Minister is recorded as having responded: *"had advice 5 weeks ago, made different decision. We had hoped R would fall, stay down during restrictions"*, to which the CSA is noted to have added *"thought R would reduce further, stay down longer"*. The Justice Minister is said to have observed *"agreed 4 weeks, schools 2 weeks – clear advice from CSA, we took different decisions"* MC/004INQ000065739

32. I commenced my role in mid to late October 2020. The information presented to the Executive which appears to have led to those comments was discussed prior to my taking up the role. Further, I did not provide advice on substantive Covid-19 policy and do not believe that I can adequately comment on the management of the response to the pandemic in Autumn 2020. On 19 November 2020 I was one month into a new role

as a communications adviser and was not involved in the previous discussions referred to.

33. I do not believe that I am qualified to answer from an informed perspective, whether any decisions or any part of the strategic response to the pandemic could have been better or achieved a better outcome. What I can say is, in my experience during that brief period of employment, the overriding motivation of the deputy First Minister was to seek to make sure that the health service and its staff were not overburdened or overwhelmed in the face of this crisis. All decisions were taken with integrity and aimed at public protection.
34. It is fair to say this was a terrifying time globally and it was no different in the North of Ireland. We were all facing a potential existential threat. People were afraid and struggling to process this unprecedented event. This was new ground and certainly in the political field had no recent comparator in terms of crisis response. Decision making, communicating a pandemic and societal crisis management were imperative. Responses and the need for exceptional measures had to be conveyed to people so they felt confident that individual and societal wellbeing was a priority among decision makers. My role was to contribute to a communications strategy which would make people feel more confident that they understood that decisions that were being taken and the rationale underpinning those decisions. My experience is that Executive Committee of Ministers and those working with them were trying to do the right thing.
35. On 3 December 2020, the Executive Committee discussed the restrictions that would be put in place when the Regulations expired on 10 December 2020. They were reviewed and amended again throughout the month as the health advice changed. They led to an announcement that the jurisdiction would enter into a period of restriction from 26 December 2020. These restrictions would be in place for six weeks. There would be a one-week period of additional restrictions from 26 December to 2 January. On 21 December 2020, it was announced that there would be an additional limitation in that Christmas bubbling would be reduced to one day only on a date between 23 and 27 December.
36. During the month of December 2020 there was a significant family event in my life. It led to me taking the very difficult decision to leave my role as a Special Advisor to the Office of the Deputy First Minister. December 2020 was a very challenging and busy time for all of us working within our roles and remits. I believe that the decisions taken

in December 2020 were based on the medical and scientific advice being given to the Executive including the R number and risk of transmission while also consideration was being given to the time of the year and the public expectations around the Christmas period, a time of important cultural, social, and religious aspects.

37. I cannot explain the rationale other than to say such decisions would have been guided by the medical and scientific advice being given at the time, the risks associated with that advice and with a consideration of the time of the year. Christmas was not just any other day.

38. I have been asked to comment on why if the situation deteriorated further on 21 December 2020, the decision was taken that individuals could travel and meet with others in a bubble. I assume that this was to seek to strike a balance with controlling transmission and infection and allowing people to mark Christmas. People had been separated and Christmas is a poignant time of the year and a time of traditional social cohesion. However, this is an assumption on my part rather than a recollection of how the decisions were made by the Executive Committee. I do not recall whether the CMO or CSA provided any advice on the rules. I do not feel that I can comment on whether these decisions led to the peak of transmission in January 2021. This is not my area of expertise.

39. The witness statement from Holly Clark, Deputy Director of the Constitution and Rights Group, NIO to Module 2C states: *"As Christmas 2020 approached, the UK government proposed a joint approach towards restrictions during this period with all Devolved Administrations. A joint statement to be issued by all UK jurisdictions regarding restrictions was then proposed on 16 December 2020 (exhibit MC/005INQ000091442). Alignment on this statement was encouraged by the NIO and CDL, but the NIE decided not to endorse this statement, which was published with the support of the Scottish and Welsh governments. Instead, the NIE adopted a different course regarding NPIs over the Christmas period, and published their own statement on 21 December 2020 to this effect."*

40. I do not specifically recall these proposals but I assume that this was tailored to the current environment in the North. The virus wasn't based in a single geographical area. I assume that the decision was made to have a solution that matched the situation in the North.

41. I was involved in discussions with the EIS and an external agency around public health messaging but do not recall specifically when this was. But one area of advice from the British Government was to open windows and that advice was not, to my recollection, replicated here. There were discussions around ensuring that our advice was not confusing. There was precedent for different approaches and nuances in different jurisdictions. The messaging was tailored towards the advice that was given here. Regarding Christmas and public confidence, my understanding is that the audience in the North connected to their own news channels. I believe that residents of this jurisdiction would have taken advice from devolved Ministers rather than from the British Government. There was, in my view, a recognition that rules in effect in Britain might not apply here and vice versa.

42. I have been asked to comment upon a WhatsApp message sent by the Minister for Health to the "Health 4 Nations Group". He refers to a joint PM/FM/DFM/DFM's statement prepared last week. He stated that it did not issue as "our DFM refused to sign at the last minute for political reasons". MC/006INQ000095177 have no recollection of this proposed statement. I cannot reasonably comment upon it without seeing the actual proposed statement.

43. I have been asked to comment upon the establishment of the Executive Committee Taskforce in December 2020 and whether that new approach by the Executive reflected changes at United Kingdom government level. I have no clear memory of the reasoning for the establishment of the Executive Committee Taskforce nor do I recall whether it was motivated by a desire to replicate what was being done at United Kingdom government level. I do not recall any hesitation or opposition from any Minister or Department in the establishment of the ECT. As I have indicated above, I experienced a significant family event at this time and I do not believe I can assist further. I also cannot comment on how effective the ECT was, as I left my position in January 2021.

Coordination with the Republic of Ireland

44. I did not offer political advice to the DFM on engagement and/or co-ordination with the Irish government. I cannot comment on the All-Ireland Memorandum of Understanding and its effectiveness. Equally, I did not advise on whether adequate structures existed or could be altered to achieve a greater degree of co-operation and co-ordination. These matters were not within my remit.

Advice in relation to public health communications

45. In any crisis, communication is essential. Decisions made by the Executive Committee were largely communicated in joint public briefings. These consisted of regular broadcasted updates, which were predominantly led by the joint heads of government. As I understood it, this approach was agreed (before I arrived) to ensure that there was regular, clear, accurate and consistent messaging from the Executive to the public during the largest public health issue of our time.
46. Press releases were also issued by the Executive Information Services (EIS) in which both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would be quoted. A multi-channel public information campaign was also launched in the run-up to Christmas by the Executive to ensure compliance and support for the Executive response.
47. To ensure accessibility and to communicate to the widest possible audience, sign language interpreters in British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language were present at all the joint press conferences and there was, to some extent, consideration of diverse audiences, audience segmentation, for example specific targeted communications to and with young people.
48. The strategic approach was one of viewing tailored and effective communications, with a local focus, as a vital component in the battle to save lives and ensure compliance with public health advice in the context of a global health pandemic being visited upon the north. This approach ensured that communities were active participants in mitigating against the spread of the virus. From deputy First Minister's perspective, her approach was to communicate with genuine empathy and concern but with frankness and honesty.
49. I have been asked what impact, if any, I consider alleged breaches of rules and standards by Ministers, officials and advisors had during the pandemic. I cannot speak specifically to breaches, alleged or otherwise. One would also have to determine the indicators that would reflect and evidence the impact on public confidence in the North.
50. During the very short period I was in role, there are no alleged breaches that I can recall which related to any members of the Executive or their close staff. In general terms it was my view that in the North, people did follow the rules and public adherence was good overall.

51. In this jurisdiction much of the public watch news media and public health messaging that comes from three broad sources (the NI Executive, central United Kingdom government and the Irish government). The issue particular to the North of Ireland was that the general public were exposed to a proliferation of information - not just on local TV, broadcast, online and print platforms - but also from platforms that were operating in Britain and in the South. So, it definitely contributed to a complexity in messaging and communications and the potential for confusion was obvious. It was vital that we must ensure that people in the North understood the geographically tailored advice and communications from The Executive.
52. In my view multiple sources of public health information can only present the potential for challenges. This could become more acute when different approaches were being adopted at different times and complex public health messaging was being communicated during a global health pandemic across two islands with two of those sources from governments on one island, and three in another, and where there was any difference in approach and messaging.
53. When done effectively, communications can facilitate public trust and compliance. My time as adviser was short and I can only speak to this question from a predominantly personal opinion formed in hindsight and over the duration of the pandemic. I believe there was credibility afforded by the public to the public health messaging being shared in the North of Ireland because it was jurisdictional (local) and coming from people who understood the community's perspective. There appeared to be general trust in local decision-making and its motivations. I base that observation on the widespread societal compliance with public health advice and with the restrictive rules.
54. If the exploration is as to whether, or not, this hindered the efficacy of public health messaging in the North, then one would have to consider the factors that would evidence this, and no doubt they would be many and complex. I do not believe, and I may be wrong, that any research was commissioned at the time, or since, to ascertain the levels of public confidence, trust or the issues that may have been posed by different messaging from across multiple sources but viewed by one audience, and the consequences of that.

Leaks

55. I was familiar with and adhered to my obligations as a Special Advisor concerning confidentiality of official documents and discussions. It goes without saying that as a Special Adviser the expectation is to adhere to the highest standards to ensure documents and discussions were kept confidential. I was provided with a copy of the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers, when I started my role, which I read carefully and fully adhered to whilst in the role.

56. I am aware that the Inquiry has been provided with minutes of Executive meetings during which Ministers complain about leak of papers. Two of the documents that I have been directed to by the Inquiry, regarding Ministers complaining about leaks of papers or the content of meetings being passed to journalists, happened during my short time in role, namely the 9th November 2020 Executive Meeting [MC/0071NQ00048497 page 8], where the minutes record the Minister for the Economy raising that journalists were live tweeting the proceedings of the Executive meeting; and secondly the Executive meeting of the 5th November 2020 [MC/0081NQ000065757 page 1], where the handwritten minutes record that the First Minister raised the leaking of a late paper to the press. I was aware that this had been raised as an issue, however, during the very short time that I was in role, I do not recall this being presented to me as a huge issue.

57. I cannot comment authoritatively regarding the extent to which leaks inhibit open discussion or decision-making within the Executive Committee. I would not have known what the alternative approach would have been. I was relatively new to the role by the time of the 5th and 9th November Executive meetings, and I had no prior knowledge of how open the conversations would have been at Executive Committee meetings, so this is not something that I would have been aware of or in a position to compare. I do not recall it being expressed to me that Executive meetings were less open than had previously been the case. I do not recall the deputy First Minister ever being less open and candid than she would otherwise have been due to a concern about leaks. I do not recall leaks being an issue that adversely affected public confidence during my time in role. I was not aware of any evidence that there was any erosion in public confidence because of leaks. The only rudimentary evidence would have been that people were continuing to adhere to the official regulations.

58. I can confirm to the Inquiry that I never disclosed the whole or part of an Executive paper or brief a journalist about such content. I did not personally ever disclose the content of an Executive Committee meeting to a journalist whilst that meeting was

ongoing. I was not aware then, or at any time since, of who was responsible for leaks of Executive papers to the media.

Part 3: Communications and documents

59. I was issued with a NICS mobile phone, laptop and iPad on my first day in the role of Special Advisor.

60. I did not use any private device to conduct government business during the specified period. I only used the mobile phone and laptop. I do not believe I ever used the iPad.

61. I do not believe that I used devices for informal communications such as WhatsApp or other informal means of communication. I do not believe that I was part of any WhatsApp groups that discussed government business, I cannot recall specifically. This was a role I held for a very short period of time (a few months) some three and a half years ago. It may well have the case, and it is entirely possible, that I may have used platforms for informal messaging which may have related to administrative issues, such as clarification on timings and meetings. I was aware of the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers and certainly would not have breached that.

62. I was aware of the rules on keeping accurate official records, including minutes of relevant meetings, and the requirement to handle information openly and transparently as set out in the Northern Ireland Code of Conduct for Special Advisors. All the official government meetings that I attended would have had an official minute taker and, to the best of my knowledge, the only meetings I would have attended during my short time in the role were Executive Committee meetings.

63. I was in position as a Special Advisor for approximately 2 months. I left at the end of January 2021. As requested, I returned all the NICS issued devices when I left the role. To the best of my memory, I did not use personal devices for any government or official business. I did not deliberately or inadvertently delete any communications or emails on any devices. I do not specifically recall whether I reset any device. It may be that the device was reset but I do not have any clear memory of this. Since leaving the role I have had three different job roles and each role had a new set of devices. I have tried to recall the precise circumstances of my returning the NICS devices but have found it difficult to be definitive. I cannot definitively recall at this stage who I returned the devices to. It most likely that I returned the devices to the Private Office.

64. During my time in post it was never my belief that Ministers were using messaging platforms on NICS supplied devices or their own personal devices as an alternative to formal or minuted meetings.
65. I do not still hold the personal devices that I used during the time I was employed as a Special Advisor. I did not keep any personal diaries, notebooks, daybooks or planners during this time.
66. My experience of working with the deputy First Minister was that she was compassionate, understanding and motivated to do the right thing for the public good. She was always professional in her approach. I found the deputy First Minister to be calm and adamant about being guided by the medical scientific advice. My experience of the First Minister was from the Executive meetings, and these were all online. I only recall one in person meeting, where the First Minister and deputy First Minister were present. During this period, business was being done online.
67. I have reflected on the key challenges in the management of the pandemic response and what went well and what did not go well. Certainly, a sense of connection and empathy by elected representatives/decision-makers who were locally based helped in sharing an understanding of the novel and complex nature of the pandemic and the impact of how it would change the way of life at that time. The North has always maintained that sense of community and there was a sense of people pulling together and predominantly doing what was best for civic good in challenging circumstances. I think people feel more connected to their political representatives here as they tend to be very much community-based and accessible. It's important that we can harness that sense of connectedness and, inevitably, accountability. That connectedness and commonality might not necessarily be reflective of other jurisdictions. Being able to speak to people in a way that they understood, identified with and ultimately agreed with, even whilst difficult messages were being delivered, is vital.
68. Our politicians were able to do that and to generally try and reach a united position, where possible, even against the backdrop of a mandatory coalition situation. The decision by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to hold press briefings together was indicative of the approach they had decided to take, in order that the public could visibly see that unity of purpose, this approach was comforting and reassuring to many at a time of fear of the unknown. Being able to communicate a position openly

and transparently is essential so that people felt they could trust the decisions being made. The situation was ever-evolving and fast paced and we had a somewhat unique circumstance here in the North. We had bodies of governance across five jurisdictions on two islands, operating within and around us and the response was not necessarily the same or being communicated at the same time. There is a natural question as to what the particular challenges would have been if there had been a one or two island approach to the pandemic, particularly in terms of joining up on approach and messaging. From a communications perspective, it would, in my opinion, be helpful to see research and a critical evaluation to be commissioned into the communications response to the pandemic in the North of Ireland; and a comparative study with other jurisdictions/regions to determine what constitutes effective crisis communication by government in a public health crisis and what we can learn from that. It would be helpful to gauge if mapping, either through regular datasets and surveys, was gathered during the crisis on pertinent and relevant communications approaches/issues particular to this region which would help to inform future practice. And to document the experiences of those people who were most disproportionately impacted, or whose lives were affected, by this pandemic. What can we learn from them?

69. The deputy First Minister's motivation, appeared to me during my time there, to be rooted in the public interest, and for public and civic good, and firmly guided by the medical and scientific advice that was being offered by the experts. This was undoubtedly positive. Public health messaging, and the communication of such, was vital in efforts to protect society, and we can never lose sight of the motivations for that.

70. Untold pain and heartache and loss was visited on our communities, on families, and particular groups within our communities were disproportionately impacted. These are the people, our families, friends, neighbours, communities, who were depending on the right decisions being taken for the right reasons, to protect and respect them. This wasn't about statistics being read out at a press conference, about saying the right thing, or being at arms-length from what was unfolding. There was a cognisance that for every statistic, behind it was a life lost, a grieving loved one, someone who was in hospital alone and afraid, healthcare staff overwhelmed with little prospect of optimism at times, people we all knew. A huge burden of responsibility sat on the shoulders of our leaders and decision-makers and upon reflection I genuinely believe they tried to make the best decisions and to find a united pathway out of the pandemic. It was undoubtedly a delicate balancing act to determine what were the best decisions. From a personal perspective, I myself benefitted from their decision-making in the months

after leaving. I lost my dad in October of 2021. He had been in the Cancer Unit of a local hospital without any visits due to restrictions. However, in the days before he died restrictions were eased and we were able, with the use of PPE, to spend time with him on his last day in ICU. I do not take for granted that, as a family, we were able to spend that time with him because of the decisions that were made by politicians and the actions of the public which set us on a path out of the pandemic.

71. It is not lost on me that many families did not get to say their final goodbye to a loved one or to hold each other in grief and loss and love. Their testimonies and experiences must be remembered and respected and shared so that we all can learn from this, not just from a political and administrative perspective but as a society. There should never be a disconnect of policy from people; we must do everything to ensure that connection is always in place. What the pandemic has taught us thus far is that we must have leadership of empathy and compassion to the fore as much as expertise and evidence and we must do that based, to an extent, on the learnings from the lived experiences of people. Their voices and their trauma must also be accounted for and heard for us to learn lessons for the future.

Statement of Truth

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

PD

Dated: 28/2/24.