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Depairtment fur
Commonities

UK COVID-19 Public Inquiry

WITNESS STATEMENT MODULE 2C
DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES

DRAFT-M2C-DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES-01 WITNESS STATEMENT

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I, Beverley Wall, Deputy Secretary of the Strategic Policy and Professional Services Group (SPPSG) (November 2019 – July 2023) in the Department for Communities, Northern Ireland make this witness statement to the UK COVID-19 Public Inquiry Team in response to a rule 9 request relating to Module 2C.

During the period in question, I was a member of the Department's Top Leadership Team and Head of the Departmental Operations Centre (DOC) that was mobilised as a direct response to the impact of COVID-19 on the Department for Communities.

In normal circumstances this statement would have been prepared by the Departmental Permanent Secretary, however the Permanent Secretary during the specified period retired in March 2022, is currently travelling in Europe. Given my previous role I am therefore providing a statement to the UK Inquiry on behalf of the Department.

My statement covers the specific period, 11 January 2020 to 15 February 2022. It provides an overview of the Department and the actions taken by the Department in response to COVID-19, relevant to the scope of Module 2C. In the matters set out below, I stand ready to provide further information as required.

1. Department for Communities (DfC) Background

1.1 Governmental Position

1.1.1. The **Department for Communities (the Department)** was established under the Departments Act (NI) 2016 and is one of nine Departments within the Northern Ireland Executive. The Department delivers a wide range of services to the public – both directly and through its Arm's Length Bodies – that impact the lives of most people at some point as we support people, build communities and shape places.

1.1.2 The Department has one Ministerial role, with said Minister part of the Northern Ireland Executive. This position did not change during the pandemic.

1.2 Ministers

1.2.1 The **Minister for the Department** was Ms Deirdre Hargey MLA from 11 January 2020 until the NI Assembly suspension on 27 October 2022. Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, MLA held the Ministerial role for an interim period (15 June 2020 to 15 December 2020) as Minister Hargey was on a leave of absence due to illness.

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1.2.2. The Minister's responsibilities, as laid out in the Ministerial code, include observing the highest standards involving impartiality, integrity and objectivity; being accountable to Northern Ireland's citizens and communities; stewardship of public funds; responding to requests for information from the Assembly, users of services and individual citizens; conducting their dealings with the public in an open and responsible way; and promoting good community relations and equality of treatment. The Minister is a member of the NI Executive.

1.3 Permanent Secretaries

1.3.1. The **Permanent Secretary** as the most senior official has the primary role of providing strategic advice to the Minister on departmental policy making, implementation of activities and ensuring the effective management of the Department's operations.

1.3.2. The Permanent Secretary is also the Principal Accounting Officer for the Department, with responsibility for ensuring the regularity and propriety of departmental expenditure, promoting value for money, and ensuring there are robust systems of corporate governance and financial control in place.

1.3.3. Ms Tracy Meharg was Permanent Secretary from December 2018 until her retirement on 21 March 2022. The position was subsequently filled by Mr Colum Boyle who took up post on 25 April 2022. In the interim period, the post was held by Ms Moira Doherty (Deputy Secretary, Engaged Communities Group) as Acting Permanent Secretary.

1.4. Structure

1.4.1 During the specified period the Permanent Secretary was supported by five Deputy Secretaries, each of whom manage Business Groups within the Department to deliver effective public services to the community and in conjunction with relevant stakeholders.

1.4.2. Their details can be found in the table below.

Business Group	Deputy Secretary	Dates In Post
Engaged Communities Group (ECG)	Moira Doherty	Full specified period
	Emer Morelli	31 July 2023 to present
Strategic Policy and Professional Services Group (SPPSG)	Beverley Wall	Full specified period

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	Gillian Morton	31 July 2023 to present
Housing, Urban Regeneration and Local Government Group (HURLG)	Louise Warde Hunter Mark O'Donnell	January 2020- April 2020 April 2020 to present
Work and Health Group (WHG)	Colum Boyle Paddy Rooney	Beginning of specified period to Feb 2021 March 2021 to present
Supporting People Group (SPG)	Jackie Kerr John O'Neill Brenda Henderson	Beginning of specified period to March 2021 March to June 2021 June 2021 to present

1.5. Engaged Communities Group

1.5.1. Engaged Communities Group (ECG) is responsible for departmental actions in relation to the voluntary & community, culture, arts, sport, languages, museums, libraries, and heritage sectors, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the Group also took responsibility for providing additional funding to the social enterprise sector, although this sector is primarily the responsibility of the Department for the Economy.

1.6. Housing, Urban Regeneration & Local Government Group

1.6.1. The Housing, Urban Regeneration & Local Government Group (HURLG) aims to deliver decent, affordable, sustainable homes and housing support, to tackle area-based deprivation and to create urban centres that help bring divided communities together. Local Government & Housing Regulation Division is responsible for policy and legislation that sets the administrative and financial framework within which Northern Ireland's 11 District Councils

operate in order to support and enable effective and accountable local government. The Division is also responsible for setting the governance (both democratic and corporate) and accountability framework for Local Government Councils.

1.7. Strategic Policy & Professional Services Group

1.7.1. The Strategic Policy & Professional Services Group (SPPSG) aims to deliver high quality corporate and professional services to the Department. It is responsible for a range of governance and professional functions including finance, contract management, business planning, risk management, COVID-19 corporate recovery, organisational development, people insight & engagement, our people strategy, machinery of government, governance, statistical, economist and analytical services. The Group also leads a number of social inclusion policy areas: Poverty (including Child Poverty), Gender Equality, LGBT Policy, Active Ageing and Disability.

1.8. Supporting People Group

1.8.1. The Supporting People Group (SPG) manages the Child Maintenance Service and aspects of welfare delivered through Pensions, Disability & Benefit Security, including Fraud and Error Reduction.

1.9. Work and Health Group

1.9.1. The Work and Health Group (WHG) delivers £2.4 billion in benefits and financial support to around 350,000 working age people each year and also delivers services to over 0.5 million people on behalf of the Department for Work & Pensions. This includes vital financial support to those who are in financial hardship, supporting people into and towards employment, protecting the vulnerable and ensuring that those with health conditions and disabilities are supported.

1.10. Departmental Management Board

1.10.1. The Permanent Secretary is further assisted by a Departmental Management Board (DMB) which meets on a six-weekly basis. The key aspects of the Board's role include:

- Setting the strategic direction for the Department
- Advising on the allocation of financial and human resources to achieve strategic aims
- Monitoring the overall financial position of the Department
- Monitoring the achievement of performance objectives

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- Setting the Department's standards and values
- Maintaining a transparent system of prudent and effective controls
- Assessing and managing risk and establishing the Department's risk management framework
- Leading and overseeing the process of change and encouraging innovation, to enhance the Department's capability to deliver.

1.10.2. The Board is supported in its role by four Sub-Committees, which are: the People & Resources Sub-Committee; the Policy and Strategy Sub-Committee, Departmental Information Assurance Committee (DIAC) and Departmental Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (DARAC). The People & Resources Sub-Committee provides advice and recommendations to DMB on people issues including Departmental staffing; Performance Management; Absence Management; Learning & Development; Blended Working Approach; Accommodation, IT and Digital; and Staff Engagement. Amongst its roles the Policy and Strategy Sub-Committee's objective is to ensure the Department has a cohesive policy agenda and ensures the Department is well equipped to fulfil its policy responsibilities. DMB in turn supports the Accounting Officer in their oversight of the delivery of the Departmental strategy and business plan.

1.11. Strategic Responsibility

1.11.1. Prior to and during the pandemic the Department had strategic responsibility for setting policy, bringing forward legislation and resourcing in the following areas:

- Helping People find employment
- Child Maintenance
- Urban Regeneration
- Supporting the voluntary and community sector and the regulation of charities
- Sport
- Ulster Scots, Irish language, and British/Irish sign language
- Poverty and promoting social inclusion
- Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI)
- Helping People find housing
- Local Government
- Historic Environment
- Museums & libraries
- Benefits and pensions

- Arts & culture.

1.12. Departmental Responsibility

1.12.1. Areas of departmental responsibility prior to and during the pandemic include;

- Delivering welfare payments
- Delivering child maintenance support and pensions
- Providing advice and support for those seeking employment and those who are unable to work
- Supporting local government to deliver services
- Ensuring the availability of good quality and affordable housing
- Encouraging diversity and participation in society and promoting social inclusion within the community
- Promoting sports and leisure within communities
- Identifying and preserving records of historical, social and cultural importance and realising the value of our built heritage
- Supporting creative industries and promoting the arts, language and culture sectors
- Providing free access to books, information, IT and community programmes through libraries
- Maintaining museums and revitalising town and city centres.

1.13. Staff and Budget Information

1.13.1. The Department employs around 9 434¹ people across 70 locations. 7,485 are frontline staff, approximately 2,000 of whom deliver services for the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) and 1,949 of whom are agency staff.

1.13.2. The Department has an annual budget of over £8.8bn², made up of approximately £7.7bn Annually Managed Expenditure (AME), £255m Net Capital Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) and £853m Resource DEL. The Department is supported in delivering its services by 15 Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) and a number of Advisory Groups (**Exhibit BW/1 - INQ000101349**). The Department provides support to meet the needs of some of the most disadvantaged citizens, families, and communities in Northern Ireland (NI). A range of

¹ Information correct as at 20/01/2023

² Information correct as at 23/01/2023

supports, interventions and initiatives were delivered through the Department in response to the pandemic whilst also continuing to progress key strategic departmental priorities.

1.14. Emergency Response Measures Prior to the COVID Pandemic

1.14.1. The Department makes emergency flood relief payments when there is flooding; and may also make cold weather payments in certain circumstances. Following a review of flooding in 2017 the Department became responsible for a recommendation relating to co-ordination of community volunteers to enhance multi-agency response efforts. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) is also responsible for the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) which considers a multiagency response to high-risk weather conditions as well as COVID-19.

1.14.2. The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has in place strategic contingency management arrangements via the **Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangement (NICCMA)**.

1.14.3. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic a Departmental Business Continuity Plan (DBCP) was in place that outlined the critical activities and key priorities in the Department around which contingency plans should be based (**Exhibit BW/2 - INQ000101364**). These are:

- Provision of benefits
- Provision of social housing and essential repairs
- Assessment of Child Maintenance Services
- Payment of grants to voluntary sector groups
- Payments to suppliers for goods and services.

2. Link to UK Government

The principle of parity with respect to social security benefits is reflected in Sections 87 and 88 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which provides for a single social security system. This means that a person in Northern Ireland will receive the same level of benefit and be subject to the same qualifying conditions around entitlement as a person in Great Britain who is subject to provisions put in place there.

Section 150 of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 (the GB Admin Act) requires the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in Great Britain (SSWP) to review the rates of certain benefits to determine whether they have retained their value in relation to the general level of

prices. If the benefits have not retained their value, SSWP is required to up-rate them by at least as much as the increase in the general level of prices. When SSWP makes an Up-rating Order under sections 150, 150A and 151A of the GB Admin Act, the Department for Communities is empowered to make only a corresponding Order under sections 132, 132A and 132B of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 (the NI Admin Act). The Department has no power to set different rates of benefits and pensions for Northern Ireland in the annual Up-rating Order.

The Northern Ireland Executive has the power to diverge from Great Britain if it is considered that local circumstances require that there is a need to amend or adjust social security benefits to reflect the needs of citizens here. The Statement of Funding Policy dictates that the cost of any divergence falls to the block grant and thus any divergence requires both NI Executive approval, and an NI Executive decision to fund that divergence. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and His Majesty's Treasury are notified of any proposals to diverge. In practice such divergence has taken the form of additional payments that are made by the Department for Communities (DfC) and available to Northern Ireland citizens only. An example of divergence are Discretionary Support grants, which are payments available to assist people who experience an extreme, exceptional or crisis situation where there is significant risk to the health, safety or wellbeing of the claimant and / or their family.

The differences with regard to Universal Credit are that DfC pay twice monthly by default (monthly in Great Britain) and pay housing costs directly to the landlord rather than the claimant as a default position. There are also some specific Northern Ireland differences in capital that is disregarded such as ex-gratia payments to members of the families of the disappeared and payments made under Article 10 of the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

The Department also delivers services on behalf of the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) across a range of benefits and supports. The Department relies on DWP computer systems, services and underpinning commercial arrangements to administer most of the benefit and child maintenance schemes and to make benefit payments in Northern Ireland.

2.1. Local Authorities

2.1.1. Prior to and during the pandemic, the Department supported Northern Ireland's 11 district councils in delivering strong and effective local government. The Department:

- provides a legislative and policy framework to allow councils to guide local public services (including issuing Local Government circulars)

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- performs Local Government consultations on new local government policy and legislation
- pays the Rates Support Grant, De-rating Grant and Transferred Functions Grant to councils
- develops methods to improve the administration, finance and audit of Local Government
- oversees and liaises with councils
- liaises with the Local Government Auditor.

2.2. Emergency Response Measures Taken in Relation to COVID-19

2.2.1. As part of the **Northern Ireland Command, Control and Coordination (NI C3)** structure all Northern Ireland departments were required to establish full **Departmental Operations Centres (DOC)** for the duration of the COVID-19 response period. DOCs collated and disseminated information, coordinated departmental activities, planned, and filtered/escalated decisions. Departments managed their assigned COVID-19 impacts, in consultation with other departments, utilising previously designed major emergency response plans (MERP) and reported to the NI Hub via Situation Reports (SitRep) See Exhibits BW/68-132 (**Exhibit BW/68 – INQ000196624;**

Exhibit BW/69 – INQ000196625;

Exhibit BW/70 – INQ000196626;

Exhibit BW/71 – INQ000196627;

Exhibit BW/72 – INQ000196628;

Exhibit BW/73 – INQ000196629;

Exhibit BW/74 – INQ000196630;

Exhibit BW/75 – INQ000196631;

Exhibit BW/76 – INQ000196632;

Exhibit BW/77 – INQ000196633;

Exhibit BW/78 – INQ000196634;

Exhibit BW/79 – INQ000196635;

Exhibit BW/80 – INQ000196636;

Exhibit BW/81 – INQ000196637;

Exhibit BW/82 – INQ000196638;

Exhibit BW/83 – INQ000196639;

Exhibit BW/84 – INQ000196640;

Exhibit BW/85 – INQ000196641;

Exhibit BW/86 – INQ000196642;

Exhibit BW/87 – INQ000196643;

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**Exhibit BW/88 – INQ000196644;
Exhibit BW/89 – INQ000196645;
Exhibit BW/90 – INQ000196646;
Exhibit BW/91 – INQ000196647;
Exhibit BW/92 – INQ000196648;
Exhibit BW/93 – INQ000196649;
Exhibit BW/94 – INQ000196650;
Exhibit BW/95 – INQ000196651;
Exhibit BW/96 – INQ000196652;
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Exhibit BW/99 – INQ000196655;
Exhibit BW/100 – INQ000196617;
Exhibit BW/101 – INQ000196618;
Exhibit BW/102 – INQ000196619;
Exhibit BW/103 – INQ000196620;
Exhibit BW/104 – INQ000196621;
Exhibit BW/105 – INQ000196622;
Exhibit BW/106 – INQ000201950;
Exhibit BW/107 – INQ000201951;
Exhibit BW/108 – INQ000201952;
Exhibit BW/109 – INQ000201953;
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Exhibit BW/119 – INQ000201963;
Exhibit BW/120 – INQ000201964;
Exhibit BW/121 – INQ000201965;
Exhibit BW/122 – INQ000201966;
Exhibit BW/123 – INQ000201967;**

Exhibit BW/124 – INQ000201968;
Exhibit BW/125 – INQ000201969;
Exhibit BW/126 – INQ000201970;
Exhibit BW/127 – INQ000201971;
Exhibit BW/128 – INQ000201972;
Exhibit BW/129 – INQ000201973;
Exhibit BW/130 – INQ000201974;
Exhibit BW/131 – INQ000201975;
Exhibit BW/132 – INQ000201976;
Exhibit BW/133 – INQ000201977;
Exhibit BW/134 – INQ000201978;
Exhibit BW/135 – INQ000201979;
Exhibit BW/136 – INQ000201981;
Exhibit BW/137 – INQ000201982;
Exhibit BW/138 – INQ000201983;
Exhibit BW/139 – INQ000201984;
Exhibit BW/140 – INQ000201985).

2.3. Departmental Operations Centre (DOC)

2.3.1. Structure

The various models of a DOC are as follows, although bespoke models may be required depending on the situation at the time:

- **Shadow** – This model is employed if the reporting requirement is minimal (e.g., weekly SitReps), with little impact on Northern Ireland day to day. Although some key DOC staff might be mobilised full time in this model, the majority of departmental DOC staff would primarily conduct their roles on a part time/needs basis, whilst they continued to deliver their business-as-usual jobs.
- **Light** – Should the NI reporting requirement increase during office hours, the Department DOC will stand up a full-time day shift, on a sliding scale. The Head of DOC will determine the staffing requirements and operating hours of the DOC taking into account the NI Hub requirements and the extent of the issues being dealt with by the Department, as well as the pace of resulting changes and impacts on the Department and those it serves.

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- **Extended Days** – If the DOC is required to operate extended days, for example from 7am to 7pm, this model will employ a fully-staffed day shift, with a reduced evening shift. The reporting requirement would necessitate daily SitReps as a minimum.
- **Full** – This model employs all staff roles on a full time, or close to full time, 24/7 basis. This model will only be employed under exceptional circumstances and is influenced by the requirements of the broader C3 structures within NI and the UK Government.

2.3.2. In response to COVID-19 a DOC was mobilised to Extended Days mode on 19 March 2020.

2.4. Head of DOC

2.4.1. The Head of DOC (Grade 5) for the specified period was the senior member of staff overseeing the Department's response to COVID-19 impacts. This role was undertaken by Anthony Carleton, Grade 5 (for the specified period), and Karen Ward (acting Grade 5) shared this role from July 2020. Patricia McIntyre (acting grade 5) took over from Karen Ward in May 2021. Eamon O'Kane, Grade 5 took responsibility for the DOC from November 2021.

2.4.2. The Head of the DOC is accountable to the Department's Deputy Secretary for Strategic Policy and Professional Services (SPPSG), has responsibility for liaising with the Minister's Office to provide updates, enables rapid response and decision-making and ensures that reports are provided to the NI HUB.

2.5. DOC Work Streams

2.5.1. The five Work Streams managed were:

- 1) Communications In
- 2) Communications Out
- 3) Local Government Liaison
- 4) Organisational Development
- 5) Minister's Briefing and Speeches

2.5.2. The structure of the DOC was kept under review during the response period with to enable work streams to be stood down, or additional work streams created as needed. The structure remained the same during the full period (as detailed in paragraph 2.5.3), however the number of staff for each Work Stream fluctuated as the COVID situation changed).

2.5.3. The DOC mobilised from Extended Days to Light mode on 11th May 2020, then to Shadow mode from 01 July 2020. The DOC reverted to Light mode in January 2022 for 4 weeks to address the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

2.6. Capacity & Mobilisation

2.6.1. The DOC was required to have the capacity to collate, analyse and report on information from across the Department, as well as service reporting requirements to the NI Hub, which could vary from a weekly SitRep up to four SitReps over a 24-hour period.

2.7. Staffing

2.7.1. The staffing of the Department's DOC was maintained at an appropriate level to sustain operational tempo without exhausting staff over a protracted operational period (**Exhibit BW/3 - INQ000101376**). Local Trade Union Side (**TUS**) was also kept informed of the DOC's operating arrangements and any changes to these.

2.8. Situation Report (SitRep)

2.8.1. Throughout the pandemic the NI SitRep was the primary means for Civil Contingencies Group NI (CCG NI) and the NI Hub to update the NI Executive and the Cabinet Office and escalate issues for decisions. The Department's SitRep was collated by the "Communications In" Team to ensure that all necessary updates were captured, and that risks and issues were appropriately escalated. (Departmental SitReps can be provided if required)

2.8.2. At the height of the pandemic, the NI SitRep, collated from departmental returns, was produced daily and circulated to the NI Executive and CCG NI. On 10 Feb 2021, the NI C3 met, and a decision was taken to cease the weekly SitRep and move to SitRep exception reporting. On 09 March 2021, as a consequence of the decision to stand down the NI Hub from ALERT status to PREPARE, a final NI SitRep was issued by the NI Hub.

2.9. Ministerial Submission

2.9.1. In addition to the daily SitRep, there was a daily submission to the Minister for Communities to ensure that she was aware of the issues being escalated by her Department. The submission was an opportunity to make the Minister aware of emerging issues (some of which did not require escalation to the NI Hub) and was accompanied by a copy of the SitRep issued to the NI Hub. As the pandemic progressed this submission moved to a weekly, then monthly report. From June 2021 this report was issued to the Department's Top Leadership Team and an exception reporting process was put in place in respect of Minister. (Ministerial Submission can be provided if required).

2.10. COVID-19 Action Plan

2.10.1. A COVID-19 Action Plan was prepared and maintained by the DOC at the request of the Departmental Management Board (**Exhibit BW/4 - INQ000101386**). This Plan detailed the actions required across the Department to respond/react to any additional pressures brought upon our services by the pandemic. Any business disruptions were dealt with internally by each business Group through their local Business Continuity Plan unless an issue was being caused specifically by a COVID-19 related problem, in which case it would have been dealt with through the COVID-19 Action Plan.

2.10.2. The Action Plan was referenced on 31 March 2020 at Departmental Management Board (**DMB**), it was presented at the next meeting (13 May) and it was formally approved at the following meeting on 24 June 2020 with a regular update provided as a standing item at subsequent DMB meetings. The passage of time between the date of presentation of the plan and approval did not have any impact on the Department's response to the pandemic. The plan was maintained as a living document with actions being updated, closed or added as necessary. All decisions around closure of actions were subject to DMB approval.

2.10.3. On 14 April 2021, a paper was presented to the DMB recommending the closure of the Action Plan following a change of status by the NI HUB from RESPOND to PREPARE. The justification for the closure was that, whilst there were still several actions open, the remaining actions had either been already implemented (with progress being reported) or the actions could be incorporated into BAU. This proposal was considered and approved by DMB in April 2021.

2.11. Public Response

2.11.1. On 18 March 2020, Minister Deirdre Hargey MLA, made an early commitment through a public statement (**Exhibit BW/5 - INQ000101399**), to support and provide additional funding to the sectors and people that the Department usually supported, particularly those who were vulnerable and in most need as a result of the pandemic.

2.11.2. Prior to the pandemic the Department had been facilitating cross sectoral meetings with the Red Cross, local council emergency preparedness structures and the voluntary and community sector on issues of community preparedness. When the COVID-19 need for restrictions became apparent, this group was convened and established as the Emergency Leadership Group (ELG). The ELG brought together leaders from the voluntary and community sector and central and local government (**Exhibit BW/6 - INQ000101402**) to

exchange information and discuss immediate and future actions. Officials also liaised with wider voluntary and community sector partners on an ad hoc basis through existing networks and as funding schemes were developed and delivered.

2.12. Emergency Leadership Group

2.12.1. The Emergency Leadership Group (ELG) enabled the Department to quickly receive verified information and advice from groups working directly with local communities. It also provided a means for the Department to communicate updates and advice back to the voluntary and community sector, for example guidance for volunteers. The ELG helped co-ordinate the Department's Emergency Response Programme of actions to assist vulnerable people and guided the Programme's focus to ensure that it pivoted to those most in need. The ELG also undertook real time review work, including commissioning a review (**Exhibit BW7 - INQ000101403 is the final report**) of the departmental/ Emergency Leadership Group response work by a UN Standby Expert, Angus Lambkin, in Spring 2020. Angus had been stranded in NI by the pandemic and used his expertise in civil-military warzone and crisis coordination to provide specific recommendations to improve the Emergency Response Programme's structures, communications, and actions (all recommendations have been implemented). The Emergency Leadership Group provided information to help shape the Department's response. A practical example of this is the ELG's feedback on the protocols adopted to identify individuals in need of a free food parcel – ELG members identified that DfC's delivery partners (primarily local councils) were using inconsistent prioritisation criteria. The Department was then able to consider how to better prioritise as evidence of need and demand emerged, both via the ELG and from other sources.

2.13. Emergency Response Programme (ERP)

2.13.1. The Department's Emergency Response Programme was established to provide vital support in response to immediate needs from March 2020, and during the first lockdown that saw vulnerable people advised to shield. The Programme was coordinated across a number of work streams in partnership with the ELG, councils, Health and Social Care Trusts, the key delivery bodies noted above and local delivery bodies including community groups, local volunteer centres, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and other sporting bodies who mobilised their network of volunteers to deliver food and support vulnerable people.

2.14. Community Helpline

2.14.1. The COVID 19 Community Helpline, commissioned by the Department, went live on 27 March 2020 and operated until 31 March 2021. The Helpline answered calls directly from vulnerable members of the public or from those concerned about them (either individuals or organisations). The objective was to establish a single point of contact freephone helpline

service for citizens to access a range of supports with one call that triaged the requests and then connected the caller to the appropriate service without having to redial. Working in partnership with Advice NI and the wider advice sector over 40,000 calls were answered by the COVID-19 Community Helpline providing a one stop shop for services and supports that vulnerable people could access. The Department did much of the work to design the scripts and advertise the helpline, also the work to link the people who called with council hubs.

2.15. Access to Medications

2.15.1. The Department worked with the Community Development and Health Network to ensure the safe delivery of medication from community pharmacies to vulnerable and isolated people who were self-isolating or unable to arrange for the collection of their medication.

2.16. Volunteering

2.16.1. Volunteer Now ran a public campaign using our regional online volunteering platform, BeCollective, to coordinate new volunteers and match them to opportunities to maximise their impact. The Department worked with Volunteer Now to ensure that volunteers were supported and that organisations involved in coordinating volunteers were given support and robust guidance, particularly in relation to regulated volunteering and safeguarding vulnerable people. The Department's role was to fund and coordinate activity across Volunteer Now, Health Trusts, Sports Governing Bodies as well as information coming in from London and the ELG, to inform the Volunteer Now publications.

2.17. Homelessness

2.17.1. The Department worked with all partners to ensure the information available could effectively inform better decisions around homelessness. Specifically, the Department worked closely with the Department of Health (DoH) and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) in terms of rough sleepers from abroad who had 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) and therefore were not eligible for housing assistance. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) (**Exhibit BW/8 - INQ000101404**) between Department for Communities, Department of Health and Northern Ireland Housing Executive was signed in March 2020 and extended to June 2022 and finally replaced by a Letter of Understanding (LOU) (**Exhibit BW/9 - INQ000101405**) bringing the arrangement to a close by end of August 2022. Over the course of the period April 2020 – August 2022, approximately 73 individuals were accommodated under the terms of both the MOU and LOU. We cannot say definitively that all these people would have been rough sleeping but undoubtedly some would have had no other alternative.

2.18. Face to Face Health Assessments

2.18.1. In March 2020, as the risks of COVID-19 became apparent, the Minister directed Assessment Providers, who carry out health assessments on behalf of the Department to determine a claimant's entitlement to benefit, to temporarily suspend all face-to-face assessments. This helped to protect claimants and supplier employees from the higher risk of COVID-19 infection posed by face-to-face consultations. To ensure continued delivery of health assessment services and to protect claimants' safety, the Department's Contract Management Team worked collaboratively with operational colleagues, the Department's Health Assessment Adviser and Assessment Providers to implement an online telephone assessment service. The suspension of assessments ended on April 1 2020, as a telephony-based solution was implemented. Face-to-face assessments resumed, for those who could not take part in a telephone assessment, in July 2021.

2.19. Staff Redeployment

2.19.1. At the start of the first lockdown in March 2020, the Department redeployed 419 staff to support the front-line delivery of Discretionary Support (the aim of which was to provide emergency financial assistance to people experiencing financial pressure due to having to self-isolate) and Universal Credit (a **benefit payment to support an individual on a low income or out of work.**) as caseloads surged. The Discretionary Support Scheme ran from late March 2020 and is still available to those who continue to meet the eligibility criteria. From March 2020 to December 2022 26,790 awards have been made with a total spend of almost £4.058m. Since Universal Credit fully rolled out in Northern Ireland the number of new claims steadily increased to an average of around 7,000 each month. However, in March and April 2020 the number of new claims increased to 35,440 and 20,560 respectively. The number of claims dropped again in May 2020 but were still higher than previous levels at 10,070. This large increase in claims was as a result of the restrictions that were introduced throughout the country because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

2.19.2. The Department supported the Executive's emergency response at community level also, redeploying staff to support the Community Helpline and providing data sharing advice and expertise to enable the Priority Home Delivery System for Vulnerable People, Access to Food Packages, and the Department of Education's Early Admissions, Free School Meals, and Free School Uniforms programmes. The Department assessed customer touch points and reviewed and edited telephone messages and online content to accommodate changes to benefits and pensions provision. All face-to-face assessments for disability benefits were temporarily suspended, debt repayments were suspended for three months, and easements were applied to six different benefits. Engagement took place with the Advice Sector, Law

Centre & Housing Rights in May 2020, in relation to the debt recovery pause. Key stakeholders were kept fully informed of all changes impacting the people who rely on the services delivered by the Department.

2.20. Changes to Benefit Claiming Processes

2.20.1. In May 2020, the Department's Benefits Security Division put in place a new Universal Credit (UC) telephony evidence verification team. The work of this team helped ensure that UC could be paid to customers in greatest need. In December 2020 a new postal process followed. In January 2021 an online solution was developed and implemented to support the allocation of National Insurance Numbers to reduce the need for customers to come into the office to verify their identity on a face-to-face basis. It was a DWP planned change that was fast tracked because of the pandemic.

3. Shared Government Policy

3.1. During the specified period the Department's areas of responsibility for government policy did not change, however; the response to the pandemic required cross cutting work with other government Departments, agencies and public bodies.

3.2. During the COVID-19 pandemic, staff liaised with other areas of government on emergency response measures pertinent to the culture, languages, arts, heritage, sport, charities, and social enterprise sectors. This included:

- Supporting the NI Executive, through representation on a Cross Departmental Working Group, in their decision making around and drafting of The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 for the culture, languages, arts, heritage, sports and the wider voluntary community sectors.
- Supporting the Public Health Agency in terms of the Test, Trace and Protect agenda, focusing on the advice, help and support (including financial) available to individuals and communities to keep them safe. The Department disseminated information via the ELG and Community Helpline.
- Supporting the culture, languages, arts, heritage, sport, charities, and social enterprise sectors in interpretation of, and compliance with, emergency response measures taken in relation to COVID-19, including local restrictions, social distancing and use of face coverings. The Department established a Return to Sport Expert Working Group that included key representatives from sport's governing bodies and experts in their field from across the sector. This Group discussed the measures that needed to be implemented

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within each sport to ensure a safe return to sport for all participants including grassroots, professional and spectators.

- Working with councils to coordinate civil contingency actions. There was extensive work undertaken with councils in March and April 2020 to design and stand-up emergency hubs that connected back to Volunteer Now, the Helpline, medicine delivery and food box programmes. Officials attended Council ELG meetings, the Engaged Community Group Deputy Secretary met council CEOs regularly and other departmental colleagues worked directly with councils on food boxes. Work continued with councils to maintain services, direct additional funding, and share information throughout the pandemic.
- Liaison with other Departments on funding interventions and formally on cross cutting issues such as funding for the charities sector (which required Executive approval).
- The Department shares responsibility for the charities sector with other Executive Departments. Funding for charities would normally be confined to support for areas within the relevant departmental ambit. To discharge COVID-19 support across the sector, the Department acted on behalf of the Executive due to the cross-cutting nature of the sector.
- The Department's Discretionary Support (DS) team liaised with the Department of Health regarding how the DS COVID-19 grant would help to support low-income families/people comply with Public Health Agency (PHA) guidelines. Public Health Agency communications had guidance on the details of the DS support available.
- For homelessness, the Department helped set up a group chaired by the Simon Community to co-ordinate the homelessness response (including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Public Health Agency, Department of Health, Trusts, Homelessness Providers). This included supporting and providing additional funding for greatly increased temporary accommodation and ensuring the most up to date public health advice was available to providers.

4. Key Departmental Officials (4)

Name	Role	Area of Responsibility
Tracy Meharg	Permanent Secretary	Senior Accounting Officer for the Department.

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Moira Doherty	Engaged Communities Group Deputy Secretary (February 2019 – July 2023)	Emergency Response Programme, provision of advice in relation to Engaged Communities Group sectors, and disbursement of support funds.
Emer Morelli	July 2023 - present	
Beverley Wall	Strategic Policy and Professional Services Group Deputy Secretary (November 2019 – July 2023)	Departmental Operations Centre, health assessments, finance, governance issues, and provision of data to support policy development and operational delivery through Professional Services Unit.
Gillian Morton	July 2023 - present	
Louise Warde Hunter	Housing Urban Regeneration and Local Government Deputy Secretary	Housing, Urban Regeneration and Local Government issues.
Mark O'Donnell	Housing Urban Regeneration and Local Government Deputy Secretary	Housing, Urban Regeneration and Local Government issues.
Colum Boyle	Work & Health Group Deputy Secretary (11 Jan 2020 to Feb 2021)	Social Security Benefits.
Jackie Kerr	Supporting People Group Deputy Secretary (11 Jan 2020 to March 2021)	Sickness related benefits and child maintenance.
Paddy Rooney	Work & Health Group Deputy Secretary (May 2021 to Present)	Social Security Benefits.

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John O'Neill	Supporting People Group Deputy Secretary (April 2021 to May 2021)	Sickness related benefits and child maintenance.
Brenda Henderson	Supporting People Group Deputy Secretary (May 2021 to Present)	Sickness related benefits and child maintenance.
Paul Price	Director of Social Housing Policy & Oversight	Delivery of support to vulnerable people in the 4 thematic areas: young people, older people, people experiencing homelessness and mental health and disability services.
David Polley	Director of Housing Supply Policy	Policy lead on Homelessness protection work, Safe reopening of the Housing Market, Affordable Warmth and the Private Rented Sector.
Iain Greenway	Director of Historic Environment	Leading design and delivery of COVID funding schemes during 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.
Kathryn Hill	Director of Active Communities	Leading coordination of sports governing bodies during the early response period and design and delivery of COVID support to the sports sector in 2020/2021.
Maeve Walls	Director of Culture	The Arts.
Anthony Carleton	Grade 5	Departmental Operations Centre.

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Karen Ward	Acting Grade 5 (July 2020 to May 2021)	Departmental Operations Centre.
Patricia McIntyre	Acting Grade 5 (May 2021 to Nov 2021)	Departmental Operations Centre.
Eamon O'Kane	Grade 5 (Nov 2021 to Present)	Departmental Operations Centre.

5. Role in Advice/Decision-making Regarding Efforts to Reduce Spread of the Virus

As Minister for the Department, Minister Hargey was part of the Northern Ireland Executive, and any decisions made at the Executive were taken collectively. Department of Health, having responsibility for Health in Northern Ireland were responsible for bringing forward Executive Papers in relation to the spread and delay of the virus. The Department made a number of Statutory Rules in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and a list of these can be found at **Exhibit BW/10 - INQ000101350**. The Department supported the NI Executive in their decision making and drafting of The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 for the culture, languages, arts, heritage, sports, wider voluntary community sectors, Liquor licensing, gambling, pavement cafes and shop opening hours. This was largely done through relevant DfC officials contributing to discussions of the Cross-Departmental Working Groups led by The Executive Office (TEO) relevant to the sectors above. TEO set the agenda for these meetings, these discussions then drove engagement between the Department and their stakeholders which led to advice around regulations, restrictions and development of guidance documentation.

5.1. Executive Papers/Briefing/Advice

5.1.1. The following advice/papers were taken by the Minister for Communities to the NI Executive for consideration;

Date	Topic	Document/Briefing	Summary
Apr-20	Department Executive Paper on Community & Voluntary Sector	Departmental Executive Paper Exhibit BW/11a - INQ000101351	Paper to advise the Executive of ongoing progress in enabling the Voluntary and Community sector response to COVID-19 and to seek agreement that all Departments

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	COVID-19 Response EXEC-0058-2020	Exhibit BW/11b - INQ000101352 Exhibit BW/11c - INQ000101353	follow the Department lead on grant funding flexibilities.
Apr-20	Proposed Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill EXEC-0069-2020	Departmental Executive Paper Exhibit BW/12 - INQ000101354	Paper to update Private tenancies bill to allow more protection to tenants
May-20	Supporting People COVID-19 Response EXEC-0128-2020	Departmental Executive Paper Exhibit BW/13a - INQ000101355 Exhibit BW/13b - INQ000101356	Paper makes the case for the Executive to fund this bid, potentially in part from the £10M being held by the Department of Finance for interventions to support vulnerable groups.
May-20	COVID Impact on Local Councils EXEC-0129-2020	Departmental Executive Paper Exhibit BW/14a - INQ000101357 Exhibit BW/14b - INQ000101358	Details COVID impact on essential services
Jun-20	Confirmation of Indicative Dates already in the Public Domain; and Elite Sport EXEC-0197-2020	Departmental Executive Paper Exhibit BW/15 - INQ000208832	Executive had already approved that elite athletes may leave home for outdoor training. It was proposed at that time in-door training also be permitted but the time was not right. The various sporting organisations had been preparing. An early date would enable training indoors to resume when ready. This was now

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			reconsidered and CMO and CSA were content this time. The Executive was asked to approve.
Jul-20	Cross-Departmental COVID-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan <u>EXEC-0212-2020</u>	Departmental Response to Department of Health Exec Paper Exhibit BW/16 - INQ000101359	Response includes multiple suggested amendments and comments
Aug-20	Department of Health Face Coverings - Review Point EXEC-0247-2020	Departmental Response to Department of Health Exec Paper Exhibit BW/17 - INQ000101360	Response issued in support of paper and recommendations
Aug-20	Draft Executive Paper – Recovery of The Justice System EXEC-0260-2020	Departmental Response to Department of Justice Exec Paper Exhibit BW/18a - INQ000101361 Exhibit BW/18b - INQ000101362	Response in relation to evictions (possession cases) in Private Rented Sector
Oct-20	Limited Number of Spectators at Sporting Events	Departmental Executive Paper	Details of spectators at sporting events

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	EXEC-0353-2020	Exhibit BW/19 - INQ000101363	
Dec-20	Draft Executive Paper – Use of Coronavirus Regulations – Social Distancing in Licensed Supermarkets EXEC-0428-2020	Departmental Executive Paper Exhibit BW/20a - INQ000101365 Exhibit BW/20b - INQ000101366	The purpose of this paper was to seek the Executive's agreement to use The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 to allow the sale of alcoholic drinks at any point of sale in a licensed supermarket.
17-Apr-20	Support to vulnerable people	Verbal Brief to Executive	Minister briefed the Executive on shielding, distribution of food parcels and support to vulnerable people and those experiencing food poverty - Briefing was verbal but was likely to include information from documents
18-May-20	Supporting People Programme: Costs of Covid-19	Departmental Paper Exhibit BW/21 - INQ000101367	Supporting People Programme: Costs of Covid-19
08-Jan-21	Post Primary Transfer exams.	Private office email exchange to TEO Exhibit BW/22 - INQ000101368	Minister is proposing to cancel Post Primary Transfer exams.

6. Role in key decision-making relating to the imposition of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs)

6.1. The Department did not make any direct decisions relating to the imposition of NPIs, however official representation was provided on the Executive COVID Taskforce and Cross Departmental Working Group, and the Department supported development of the Executive's

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Pathway to Recovery in relation to the culture, languages, arts, heritage, sports and wider voluntary community sectors. The Department put forward proposals to ease restriction for Department of Health to consider and advise the Executive for the above sectors when appropriate. See Exhibits BW/23 – BW/67 (**Exhibit BW/23 – INQ000101369;**

Exhibit BW/24 – INQ000101370;

Exhibit BW/25 – INQ000101371;

Exhibit BW/26 – INQ000101372;

Exhibit BW/27 – INQ000101373;

Exhibit BW/28 – INQ000101374;

Exhibit BW/29 – INQ000101375;

Exhibit BW/30 – INQ000101377;

Exhibit BW/31 – INQ000101378;

Exhibit BW/32 – INQ000101379;

Exhibit BW/33 – INQ000101380;

Exhibit BW/34 – INQ000101381;

Exhibit BW/35 – INQ000101382;

Exhibit BW/36 – INQ000208833;

Exhibit BW/37 – INQ000101383;

Exhibit BW/38 – INQ000101384;

Exhibit BW/39 – INQ000101385;

Exhibit BW/40 – INQ000101387;

Exhibit BW/41 – INQ000101388;

Exhibit BW/42 – INQ000101389;

Exhibit BW/43 – INQ000101390;

Exhibit BW/52 – INQ000188840;

Exhibit BW/53 – INQ000188842;
Exhibit BW/54 – INQ000188844;
Exhibit BW/55 – INQ000188846;
Exhibit BW/56 – INQ000188848;
Exhibit BW/57 – INQ000188850;
Exhibit BW/58 – INQ000188852;
Exhibit BW/59 – INQ000188854;
Exhibit BW/60 – INQ000188856;
Exhibit BW/61 – INQ000188863;
Exhibit BW/62 – INQ000188865;
Exhibit BW/63 – INQ000188867;
Exhibit BW/64 – INQ000188870;
Exhibit BW/65 – INQ000188873;
Exhibit BW/66a – INQ000188874;
Exhibit BW/66b – INQ000188875;
Exhibit BW/67 – INQ000188877).

7. Role in Promoting Equality

7.1. The Department for Communities has no specific role or responsibility to provide advice or guidance to the Executive Office or any other department on equality issues, nor to make equality assessments on their behalf. Rather, overall responsibility for supporting NICS departments to effectively discharge their duties under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 rests with The Executive Office. All departments are required to have due regard to the equality and good relations duties conferred by section 75 in the discharge of their functions. The relevant section 75 categories are religious belief, political opinion, gender, race, disability, age, marital status, dependants, and sexual orientation.

7.1.2. The section 75 duties apply to the discharge of the Department for Communities' functions, as they do to all public authorities. In practice, this means that a Department that leads on a given policy is responsible for assessing its equality impact and, if a negative impact is identified on any section 75 group, for considering any appropriate mitigations. The lead business area within that Department would therefore be responsible for carrying out the necessary screening (section 75; rural needs analysis; regulatory impact assessment etc.) on any COVID-related policies, including NPIs.

7.1.3. The Department for Communities is responsible for social inclusion policy and strategy in respect of a number of specific social groups. These are anti-poverty/child poverty; disability; gender equality; older people; and LGBTQI+ communities.

7.1.4. The Department's work in respect of social inclusion policy is centred on bringing focus to the Executive's collective efforts to promote social inclusion for the groups specified above. This includes medium to longer term interventions targeted at achieving societal change, such as the development of the Executive's social inclusion strategies, as well as specific population-level policy work including reviewing and, where necessary, updating relevant legislation. In respect of disability policy, the Department is responsible for ensuring that appropriate legislative protections are in place for disabled people. This role includes keeping under review the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and leading on the development of the Executive's cross-departmental Disability Strategy. Individual departments remain responsible for ensuring their policies and programmes have due regard to equality and good relations as prescribed by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

7.1.5. The Executive Office (TEO) approached the Department in August 2020 to request information on disability organisations with which they should engage in respect of policy relating to the wearing of face coverings. This was the first time The Executive Office had requested contact details for disability groups from the Department for Communities. The Department provided targeted contact details to facilitate prompt and effective engagement. The contact details provided were for Disability Action NI, the North West Forum of Persons with Disabilities and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People. The Department for Communities offered to provide The Executive Office with contacts for a greater range of stakeholders, should wider engagement be required. No further approach was made in this regard.

The Department did not otherwise work with The Executive Office to produce specific policies or guidance that related to the wellbeing or protection of disabled people during the pandemic,

nor did it carry out any specific assessments as to how the pandemic was impacting disabled people.

The Department had ongoing contact with representatives of disability organisations, but this was principally in respect of social inclusion and Disability Strategy development. The Department had no role in consulting with these organisations in respect of non-pharmaceutical interventions beyond providing contact details to The Executive Office as set out above.

8. How DfC Discharged its Duty to Promote Equality

In terms of Housing, the Department discharged its duty by focussing urgent interventions on those groups particularly at risk during a health emergency for which a major mitigation was access to home – in which to stay and lockdown etc. This meant in practice the prioritisation of effort and resource on:

8.1. The Supporting People Programme

8.1.1. As part of its sponsor role for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Department provides the policy and funding framework for the Supporting People Programme. Supporting People services enable vulnerable households to live as independently as possible; particularly young people leaving care, elderly people, including people with dementia, people with disabilities and learning difficulties, homeless people and those fleeing domestic violence. Funding enables the provision of support for up to 19,000 service users across NI. Supporting People services can help prevent problems that may often lead to hospitalisation, institutional care or homelessness. There are a number of services that are jointly funded with the Department of Health that cover: young people, older people and mental health and disability services. This illustrates the extent and interdependence of SP housing support services and related Department of Health provisions.

8.2. Homelessness

8.2.1. The Department provides the legislative framework and supports (at a departmental Level) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the discharge of its Homelessness Statutory duties (including Homelessness policy).

8.3. Private Rented Sector

8.3.1. The Department has responsibility for the legislative framework and oversight for Private Tenancies, including operating the Landlord Register.

8.4. Social Tenants

8.4.1. The Department put in place measures at the start of the pandemic to make the tenancies of social tenants more secure than they otherwise would have been. Minister Hargey announced these measures on 27 March 2020. Following the “stay at home” directive from the NI Executive and in agreement with the Department, the Housing Executive (NI’s largest social landlord to 84,000 social homes) stopped all but emergency repairs to tenants’ homes. All Housing Executive public offices were closed with the only access being by appointment and only to the most vulnerable (if the issue could not be sorted out over the phone). Housing Executive staff were encouraged to work from home where possible. Social distancing and hand sanitising were in place for staff when working from home was not possible. The Housing Executive provided support to contractors and suppliers in accordance with Procurement Guidance Notes (PGN) 1/20 and 2/20. From 2 July as restrictions eased the Housing Executive restarted external maintenance and change of tenancy repairs with social distancing commitments in place from contractors.

8.5. Funding

8.5.1. The Department also took all required actions in line with the Department’s statutory duties in relation to promoting equality, including appropriate screening of policy and funding decisions. COVID-19 related funding schemes were all screened out on the basis that they sought to stabilise sectors and mitigate the impact of the pandemic to preserve the facilities and services that existed prior to the pandemic – i.e., in most cases they weren’t funding any new activity, and therefore determined the support did not raise any equality implications.

9. Engagement with Vulnerable or at-Risk Groups Suffering Particular Disadvantage

Because of the potential implementation of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions and in a context where “staying at home” had such importance, it seemed both self-evident and urgent that those at risk of losing their home or of not securing one needed to be a particular priority focus. From the outset it was considered that the chronic homeless (including, but not generally in NI, rough sleepers) represented a vulnerable group as they often had poor general health (including addictions and mental health issues) and lived informally or in communal settings. This put them more at risk of infection and increased the risk they could infect others.

9.1. Homelessness

9.1.1. As referenced earlier, the Department helped set up a group chaired by the Simon Community to co-ordinate the homelessness response (including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Public Health Agency, Department of Health, Health Trusts,

Homelessness Providers). This included supporting and providing additional funding for greatly increased temporary accommodation and ensuring the most up to date public health advice was available to providers e.g., changes were made to heroin-substitute provision for recipients living in hostels. This group met initially weekly and continued throughout the period.

9.1.2. The Department established powers (vires) and funded the 'everyone in' rough sleeping response in Northern Ireland that was delivered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. This included housing those with no recourse to public funds/ entitlement to homelessness assistance. The Department worked with Health colleagues to develop and regularly update guidance for Homelessness providers, including information on infection control for operators of communal living establishments. The Department attended a homelessness 'Four Nations' (initially in April 2020 and throughout 2020-2021) meeting to co-ordinate responses and share best practice.

9.2. Private Rented Sector

9.2.1. The Department developed and constantly updated Guidance on NI Direct (the **official government website for Northern Ireland citizens**) for private landlords and tenants during the pandemic. The Department took emergency legislation through the NI Assembly (accelerated passage) that received Royal Assent on 4 May 2020. This legislation was to extend the notice to quit periods. Subsequent secondary legislation was taken forward during the pandemic to extend the emergency period on 3 occasions (September 2020 (SR 2020 No. 192), March 2021 (SR 2021 No. 41), and September 2021 (SR 2021 No. 242). The Department also liaised with The Courts Service and Department of Justice in April 2020 regarding repossessions (courts amended processes to have regard of the Department guidance during the emergency period) and this was led by councils.

9.3. Supporting People Policy & Oversight Branch (SPPO)

9.3.1. This Departmental team engaged with Northern Ireland Housing Executive who were responsible for the management of NPI's for the following vulnerable groups; young people leaving care, elderly people, including people with dementia, people with disabilities and learning difficulties, homeless people and those fleeing domestic violence. There were weekly engagement meetings between SPPO and Northern Ireland Housing Executive to provide regular updates regarding PPE usage, the implementation of COVID-19 guidance and voids within Supporting People schemes.

9.3.2. From late March 2020 the Department established a food box scheme. This was initially intended to support those identified as shielding however was quickly expanded to support

anyone who was in critical need of food support. The scheme delivered in excess of 204,000 boxes between April and July 2020 and was taken forward with the support of local councils, voluntary and community sector organisations and other local stakeholders.

9.3.3. The Department provided support to groups and individuals at risk. This included the shielding group who were provided with free food boxes and access to support for medicine delivery. The Department also funded the establishment of a free helpline to allow people to self-identify as vulnerable and in need of help. Those who self-identified as vulnerable and isolated were referred to their local council hub to receive direct support.

9.3.4. In response to The Executive Office's advice on vulnerable groups including those who may be less likely to wear face coverings, the Department supported the provision of 40,000 face coverings to relevant groups in NI. The Department's Engaged Communities Group worked with the Big Sew Project and Ulster Supported Employment (USEL) during July and August 2020 to fund, produce and distribute the face coverings. USEL took over leadership of the project from late summer 2020.

9.4. Warm, Well and Connected

9.4.1. The Department ran the Warm, Well and Connected wellbeing initiative over the winter of 2020/21 when another lockdown was in force, and this aimed to provide wellbeing support to communities across NI suffering from issues including social isolation. Whilst this programme was open to all, funded groups were mindful of the needs of s75 groups and s75 representative bodies were encouraged to get involved in the delivery of the programme. The Warm strand of the Programme provided a short-term fuel support element to those finding themselves unable to heat their homes. Funded groups delivering this strand of the programme were again mindful of the needs of those more vulnerable groups when considering requests for support.

9.5. Sectors Impacted by the Pandemic

9.5.1. The Department identified that charities, social enterprises, arts, cultural, sporting, heritage and Voluntary and Community Sector organisations had been negatively impacted by the pandemic and required public funding to support them to manage the impacts of the pandemic and to allow them to continue to deliver important services and outcomes for citizens. Organisations were funded because they demonstrated financial need. These decisions did not make value judgements about the type of activity an organisation carried out (or its impact on equality) into account. (The charities fund criteria allowed for prioritisation on purpose of the charity, but these prioritisation criteria did not need to be deployed.) The Department worked closely with officials in other UK jurisdictions from April 2020 and

throughout the pandemic period to understand need (whilst recognising that this may have differed between jurisdictions for structural and other reasons). Whilst need in Northern Ireland was not necessarily different from other jurisdictions in terms of economic and social impact, the underlying structure of NI differs from other jurisdictions, particularly in respect of reliance on public funds and the makeup of the voluntary and community sector. For example, NI has a greater number of smaller and/or religious based charities. These factors were taken into account when developing policy frameworks to support organisations impacted by the pandemic. Funding applied was in large part provided to NI through the Barnett consequential from HMG interventions.

9.6. Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce

9.6.1. Minister Hargey established a Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce in May 2021 to advise on these sectors' needs. The Taskforce identified that individuals working in the arts and heritage sectors had been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and were in need of specific support. Funding awards were made to assist individuals in 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.

10. Work to assess potential impact of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) on vulnerable or at risk groups of people

The Department advised on the changing of restrictions relevant to the sectors for which it has responsibility for. In making these recommendations evidence was provided, indicators and rationale for proposing the relaxations. The Department also considered information from a range of sources on the impact of restrictions when determining whether additional funding support was necessary for the sectors for which the Department is responsible.

In relation to provision of advice to other departments, DfC's officials attended the TEO-led Cross Departmental Group and reviewed proposed changes to Regulations. Departmental officials prepared advice in relation to restrictions, completing templates that were subject to the Minister for Communities' approval before onward submission to Department of Health and The Executive Office which had decision making responsibilities. Templates were prepared drawing on officials own knowledge of the sectors; advice received from the Department's Arm's Length Bodies; reference to any correspondence or information submitted by sectoral organisations; and any advice received from sectoral partners and expert groups established to provide sector specific advice.

For example, Sports Branch officials prepared a template in July 2020 regarding Indoor Golf and Snooker Halls that had been required to cease business under the Coronavirus

Regulations. The Minister approved the template which was submitted to the Department of Health with a request that the Department of Health ask the Executive to ease restrictions on Indoor Golf and Snooker Halls in recognition that they fell within the category of 'Indoor Leisure', for which restrictions were expected to be eased from 17th July. The template returned set out the detrimental impacts of the restrictions on Indoor golf and Snooker Halls alongside the likely risks associated with easing the restrictions in place at that time. The template provided a note of the proposed dates for reopening indoor leisure activities in neighbouring jurisdictions (England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland) to inform decision makers on other governments' timescales.

Arm's Length Bodies, including Sport NI published guidance based on their own expertise and engagement with sectoral partners. Expert groups were established in relation to a number of sectors to provide views and advice to the Department for Communities. These included the Sport Expert Group and the Return of Spectators (to sports venues) Group. The Expert Group provided technical advice and worked with Sports Governing Bodies to inform return to sport protocols and ensure compliance with Covid restrictions.

Other advice provided by DfC to decision making departments related to the reopening of a range of venues including libraries, cinemas, museums, and galleries.

In relation to development of grant funding schemes, DfC gathered evidence from a range of sources to inform the development of grant funding schemes to disburse additional funds to organisations and individuals impacted by the pandemic. Sources included Arm's Length Bodies, expert groups, other jurisdictions, published papers, sectoral partners, and individual sectoral organisations.

COVID grant funding schemes in 2020/2021 were subject to normal approvals processes, including full business cases that included details on evidence of need for the following schemes:

10.1. Department gathered Information about the impact of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) upon vulnerable or at risk groups of people.

10.1.1. All guidance on NPIs came from the Public Health Agency (PHA) and Department of Health (DOH). Northern Ireland Housing Executive, on behalf of the Department, followed this guidance regarding the imposition of NPIs for all vulnerable or at-risk groups. Supporting People Policy and Oversight Branch did not gather information specifically relating to the imposition of NPIs. In the homelessness sector, the Department worked very closely with health bodies. In later phases of NPIs the Department worked with Health and Executive Office

officials to establish the need for the housing market to remain open (safely) in order to avoid further disruption that might increase the risk of homelessness and housing stress.

11. Briefings to Executive to Identify At-risk or Vulnerable People

11.1. The NI Executive was briefed on the need for homelessness and Supporting People to be the target of additional COVID-19 funding in order to maintain housing support and homelessness services now of even greater importance due to the pandemic. This secured the necessary decisions. **(Exhibit BW/44a - INQ000101391 and Exhibit BW/44b - INQ000101392)**

11.2. Minister briefed the Executive on shielding, distribution of food parcels and support to vulnerable people and those experiencing food poverty on 17 April 2020.

11.3. The Minister brought proposals to the Executive in May 2020 to support the charities sector and prevent closure of charities and loss of key services. After the Executive agreed to allocate £15.5m to the Department to support charities, the first phase of funding support was opened for applications on 15 June 2020. A further phase was opened in late 2020 and further support was also provided to charities in the 2021/2022 financial year. **(Exhibit BW/45a - INQ000101393 and Exhibit BW/45b - INQ000101394).**

12. Departmental Engagement in the Interests of the Vulnerable, at-risk or Disadvantaged

12.1.1 The Department had engagement with representatives from the Supporting People sector at bi-annual Client Reference Group meetings. The Client Reference Group (CRG) is a representative group of Supporting People Service Providers (the SP Sector) and was established to enable the service provider sector to contribute to the effective implementation of change following the 2015 review of the Supporting People Programme. This allowed representatives from the sector to voice any concerns and represent the interests of vulnerable or at-risk groups. There were 4 meetings within the period 11 January 2020 – 15 February 2022. These were 17 January 2020, 28 August 2020, 11 May 2021 and 09 December 2021. Concerns raised on behalf of vulnerable groups at these meetings included, the availability of single let isolation units depending on area in Northern Ireland, engagement with DoH regarding acquisition of PPE in the early days although this improved with time, and client mental health issues increasing with regards to coming out of lockdown and reintegration into society.

12.2. The Department helped found and attended a sector led group (Homeless Connect ran it and the Simon Community Chaired) to co-ordinate efforts to protect the chronic Homeless, gather Information and facilitate communication. The Department engaged with organisations working with and representing the interests of vulnerable sectors and individuals, including the Department's arm's length bodies, Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI), Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), Commission for Older People Northern Ireland (COPNI) and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY); the Emergencies Leadership Group; the Culture, Arts and Heritage Recovery Taskforce; and informal engagement with the voluntary and community sector to discuss the need for direct interventions and additional funding. The COVID Community Helpline was co designed with the Age Sector and COPNI to ensure that the access needs of those older people were heard, and a 'red flag' system was designed in to ensure that anyone presenting as 'urgent need' due to a pre-existing vulnerability was fast tracked for support.

13. Information Gathering and Communication

13.1. Great Britain (GB) introduced a Test & Trace payment of £500 that was administered through local authorities. The Department took this forward for NI and liaised closely with GB colleagues on this resulting in the introduction a Discretionary Support self-isolation grant in NI on 24 March 2020³.

13.2. As previously mentioned, the Department attended a 'Four Nations' Homelessness group throughout the pandemic, which also covered Private Tenancies issues such as eviction and longer notices to quit.

13.3. The Department engaged with officials in UK Government and other devolved administrations included sharing information on funding approaches to support the sectors for which the Department has responsibility.

13.4. In addition, Sports Policy officials engaged with their counterparts in the home nations and Republic of Ireland in terms of the approaches on a phased return to sport across the sports sector i.e., from grassroots sports to professional sports events. This was particularly important for all-island sports governing bodies such as the GAA, Rugby, Cricket and Hockey

³ The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (legislation.gov.uk)

where differing approaches to the return to sport would have an impact on sporting competitions.

14. Data Modelling

14.1. The Department received updates from Northern Ireland Housing Executive specifically denoting cases and deaths due to COVID-19 within Supporting People funded schemes. This information was shared with the Minister for Communities on a monthly/weekly basis accordingly, dependant on infection rates within schemes.

15. Behaviour Management

15.1. The rule 9 request asked if the Department provided any advice and briefings on the use of behaviour management, the use of public communications and the maintenance of public confidence in the response to the COVID-19 virus. This was not within the Department's remit and was taken forward by The Executive Office.

16. Legislation and Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions

16.1. The Department led on efforts to co-ordinate all parties to allow a safe restart of the housing market. A virtual housing group was set up to enable this. The 'Virtual Housing Panel', comprised of a range of Executive Departments and experts from across the housing sector, including housing advice and rights, financial, legal, academic and local government. The list of organisations represented can be found at **Exhibit BW/46 - INQ000101395**. The Department worked with Department of Health and The Executive Office officials to make changes and interpret COVID-19 Regulations for the sector. This included publishing and regularly updating Guidance. The Housing Market was reopened in England at short notice without much consultation. The Department discussed reopening and Guidance with Scottish and Irish Government. This work commenced on 30 April 2020 with the formation of a stakeholder panel. On 22 May 2020 work commenced with Department of Health and The Executive Office officials on interpretation of COVID Regulations. The Executive permitted the reopening of the housing market on 11 June 2020. Work on guidance to account for ongoing regulation changes continued until all restrictions were removed in 2022.

16.2. The Department contributed to discussions of the COVID-19 Executive Taskforce and COVID-19 Cross Departmental Working Group led by The Executive Office, (for example on

a phased return to sport), and reviewed Statutory Rules developed by other departments to ensure accuracy of content related to Engaged Community Group sectors.

16.3. The Return to Sport Expert Working Group included key representatives who were experts in their field and were from a range of sporting backgrounds. This Group reviewed the return to sport protocols that Governing bodies developed and reviewed the proposed measures to be implemented within each sport to ensure a safe return to sport for all, when appropriate, including grassroots participants, elite competitors and spectators.

17. Advice and briefings prepared by the Department on the Public Health and Coronavirus Legislation and Regulations Proposed and Enacted.

17.1. Minister Hargey made a statement to the COVID-19 Ad Hoc Committee of the Assembly on 9 April 2020 outlining the key interventions her Department was taking forward to support vulnerable people and communities during the pandemic. She provided a further update in a plenary session of the Assembly on 19 May 2020. Her temporary replacement, Minister Ni Chuilin, provided a further update to the Ad Hoc Committee on 9 July 2020.

17.2. Minister Hargey issued a letter to the NI Assembly on 26 May 2020 that outlined all the Social Security measures taken by the Department in response to COVID-19. **(BW/47 - INQ000101396)**

17.3. The Department was involved in reviewing or suggesting amendments to public health legislation that was introduced by the government in Northern Ireland and/or the Northern Ireland Assembly, in later phases of the pandemic. For example, the re-opening of the housing market required a process of engagement to change Regulations to allow this. This also included taking emergency primary legislation to extend Notices to Quit in the Private Rented Sector.

17.4. The Department's Engaged Communities Group contributed to discussions of the COVID-19 Cross Departmental Working Group led by The Executive Office, for example, proposed changes discussed at the Cross Departmental Working Group were submitted to the Communities Minister for consideration and, if approved, for onward referral to the Department of Health NI. A specific template was developed for this purpose.

18. Reviews and lessons learned

18.1. Success and difficulties or challenges encountered by the Department and its Officials in Supporting Core Political and Administrative Decision-making with the Executive Committee and Other Departments.

18.1.1. The Executive Office rapidly set up structures and mechanisms to establish pandemic related decisions, reporting and information sharing and this greatly aided NICS responsiveness in the early days of the pandemic. These structures included the CCGNI (NI Civil Contingencies Group), Executive COVID Taskforce and Cross Departmental Group. The Department worked collaboratively alongside all other Government departments to address the crisis in three stages – Response, Recovery & Renewal. All departments followed broadly the same approach, with the cross departmental group managing these phases. The approach to each of these three phases followed three key themes – societal, economic and health & well-being impacts.

18.1.2. At the NI Executive level, departmental Ministers met weekly to discuss Recovery. The principle of subsidiarity applied with Departments resolving those issues that they could, bringing only major and cross-cutting issues to the Executive. This helped to regulate and direct workflows to the appropriate decision-making tiers.

18.1.3. Officials in the Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive worked closely with counterparts in the Department of Health due to the similarities in Supporting People services delivered to young people, older people, people experiencing homelessness and mental health and disability services. The collaboration looked at issues such as testing and vaccination; and monitoring the numbers of COVID-19 positive cases within provider organisation (clients and staff) to track trends and implement contingency plans.

18.1.4. The collaboration with Department of Health ensured jointly funded Supporting People staff and the services provided remained consistent. Weekly COVID-19 meetings were held between the Department, Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Department of Health, to ensure priority COVID-19 testing and vaccinations for the Supporting People Sector in line with those funded by Department of Health. It was agreed that Northern Ireland Housing Executive would procure and provide PPE to all Supporting People schemes and Department of Health ensured that relevant Public Health Agency and Department of Health guidance took the Supporting People Sector into consideration when being produced.

18.1.5. This collaborative approach to ensuring service delivery was key to reducing the impact of COVID-19 on Supporting People service users and staff. It demonstrated the importance of collaboration on services that fringe the health system which in turn helped to

manage demands on front line health services and ensure appropriate funding for health-related services.

18.1.6. At the Early stages of the pandemic, Minister Hargey offered full flexibility in grant terms and conditions to all community groups receiving funding from the Department so that they could maintain service viability and continue to trade. She established a Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group specifically to shape and inform a collective response to community need. This created a successful relationship that has been sustained to ensure engagement on new emerging issues such as cost of living. She also facilitated several easements and changes to legislation and operational processes to meet demand for benefit services.

18.1.7. Pandemic working and responsiveness across partners has helped to deepen the respect and understanding between the Department and its partners. It enabled partners to see government policy and decision-making processes from the inside and showed that even experienced officials and established processes are open to new insight in terms of what works, and what doesn't.

18.2. Internal/External Reviews Undertaken

18.2.1. The Department has undertaken a number of reviews that include the following, each report has been provided in Exhibits xxx;

- Department for Communities Work & Health Benefit Recovery Programme – External Report (**Exhibit BW/48 - INQ000101397**)
- External report on departmental business continuity arrangements during COVID-19 Pandemic were reviewed 15 April 2021 (**Exhibit BW/49 - INQ000101398**)
- Post Project Evaluations are ongoing regarding grant funding projects
- Internal Audit Review of the Management of Easements in Benefit (Pensions, PIP, Disability and Carers) Delivery. (**Exhibit BW/50 - INQ000101400**) (No recommendations made)
- Internal Audit Review of Covid-19 Communication and Engagement (**Exhibit BW/51 - INQ000101401**) (No recommendations made)

18.3 Implementation of Recommendations

18.3.1. In relation to the **Department for Communities Work & Health Benefit Recovery Programme** External report, the following recommendations have been implemented;

- A level of formal reporting from the Benefit Recovery Working Group to the Benefit Recovery Board;

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- A standard reporting template was introduced and used monthly to monitor and track progress;
- Activities finalised to produce a baseline plan of work;
- Conducted workshops and regular planning meetings with each impacted business area;
- Used the Microsoft Project Timeline to minimise manual effort; and
- Introduction of a communications plan.

18.3.2. The external reporting on **Departmental Business Continuity Arrangements during COVID-19** Pandemic was reviewed 15 April 2021.

The following changes have been implemented;

- The Departmental Business Continuity Framework (the Framework) was revised to provide information that Business Continuity Plan (BCP) owner was required to list their priority work functions and outline the minimum number of staff required to complete the priority functions.
- Business Continuity Plan action plan for 22/23 was updated with the recommendation that Key roles within the DOC, including the leads for each of the five workstreams should be assigned to particular individuals or positions within the DOC.
- Testing guidance was issued to all Business Units with a note highlighting the need to review local Business Continuity Plan in light of the response to the pandemic and on a regular basis aligned with the guidance of the Framework.

18.3.3. A recommendation was made that the Major Emergency Response Plan requires to be aligned with the Draft Framework and to include reference to the DOC and other governance instruments invoked and established as part of the pandemic response. This will be included in the 23/24 action plan.

19. Statement of Truth

As the former Deputy Secretary, Strategic Policy and Professional Services of the Department for Communities I declare to the best of my knowledge and belief that the events and contents of this statement are true and accurate and reflect the Department's actions during the period of the Rule 9 spanning January 2020 to February 2022.

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Signed -

Personal Data

Date - 16 August 2023