

Witness Name:

Statement No:

Exhibits:

Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER MCNABB, Head Executive Information Services

I Christopher McNabb, will say as follows: -

MY ROLE IN EIS

1. This witness statement has been drafted with the assistance of the Departmental Solicitor's Office. I have also spoken to colleagues across the Executive Information Service (EIS) and Genesis Advertising Agency.
2. I aim to set out clearly the context under which EIS operates and my role as Head of EIS in response to the pandemic. The Inquiry will be aware, Civil Servants work under the control and direction of Ministers and the Executive.
3. By way of background for the Inquiry, I took up my current post in November 2012. As Head of EIS, my position is equivalent to a Grade 5 Deputy Director in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).
4. I am the most senior civil servant in the EIS management structure (INQ000262757). I am line managed by Chris Stewart, Grade 3 Director in the Executive Office, who is not directly involved in the day-to-day running of EIS or media handling issues.
5. When I took up post in November 2012, my position was under a Grade 3 Director of Communications. The former Director of Communications retired on 12 September

2016 and was not replaced. (INQ000262758).

6. On 13 September 2016 the then First Minister, Dame Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness appointed an Executive Press Secretary to work in parallel with EIS. This was a joint political appointment, and the Executive Press Secretary was in post for a short time after the collapse of devolution in January 2017. (INQ000262759).
7. Following the restoration of the Executive in January 2020, neither the Director of Communications nor Executive Press Secretary roles were reinstated. I am therefore the principal media adviser to the First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Executive.
8. During the three-year period without an Executive, (January 2017 to January 2020), I assumed some of the responsibilities of the previous Director of Communications when Ministers were not in post. This included attending meetings at which he would previously have represented EIS, including the Permanent Secretaries weekly stocktake, Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) (NI) meetings and departmental meetings with senior colleagues. When the Executive returned in January 2020, I continued to undertake these duties as well as managing my increasing workload and pressures associated with the return of Ministers.
9. In relation to government communications, I adhere to the NICS Code of Ethics (INQ000262760) and the Guidance for Ministers in the discharge of their official functions document. (INQ000262761).

OPERATION OF EIS WITHIN THE DEVOLVED INSTITUTIONS

10. It is useful at this juncture to describe how EIS fits within existing NICS and government structures.
11. The Inquiry will be aware that the Northern Ireland Executive is a mandatory coalition government, comprising the Ministers from the nine executive departments, each of which is its own separate legal entity.
12. Given this complicated constitutional structure, the communications team within the NICS has a role vis-à-vis Departments, which is completely different from that in the other three nations.

13. The Executive differs from the Westminster model of cabinet government in key respects. Ministers in the Executive are appointed by their party Nominating Officers, in proportion to the size of their respective party representations in the Northern Ireland Assembly (the d'Hondt arrangements). (INQ000262762).
14. The exception to this is the appointment of the Justice Minister who is appointed by a cross-community vote in the Assembly. (INQ000262763).
15. Individual Ministers have authority to determine policy and operational matters within their departments, without the general requirement to observe a collective cabinet position. However, this is qualified by a statutory requirement for certain matters to be subject of consideration by the Executive, where there are matters which are cross-cutting, significant or controversial, as per section two of the Ministerial Code. (INQ000262764).
16. The Inquiry may wish to note that there are added complexities within the structures established by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (INQ000262765), which are not a feature in other jurisdictions. One of the parties of the NI Executive's mandatory coalition, Sinn Féin, is an all-island party, therefore, it is only to be expected that the majority of policy positions taken by Sinn Féin Ministers and MLAs in Northern Ireland will be in line with the party's position as advocated by their members sitting in the Dail (Irish Parliament).

THE DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EIS

17. The role of EIS is to provide high-quality communication services and support to NI Executive departments through a team of dedicated, professional staff. EIS provides a full range of media services for Executive Ministers, their departments, and senior officials. EIS must ensure that key messages of government are communicated through effective processes, across multiple platforms and in direct interaction with the media.
18. Our core services include:
 - Ministerial and senior official strategic communication support;
 - Media relations;
 - Government Advertising; and
 - Digital communications (including nirect, the public-facing website for government information and services in NI).

RESOURCING

19. Principal Information Officers (PIOs) (Grade 7) and Senior Information Officers (SIOs) (Deputy Principal) work closely with Ministers and senior officials to provide a variety of communication services across a range of communication disciplines including departmental press offices, the Government Advertising Unit and the Central Editorial Team of the nidirect website.
20. PIOs and SIOs are interviewed and appointed by EIS. However, except for those retained to fill posts in the Executive Office, PIOs and SIOs are immediately upon appointment seconded from the Executive Office to each of the other eight departmental press offices, Government Advertising Unit or nidirect. (INQ000262757).
21. PIOs and SIOs are expected to carry out work to an advanced stage, in a high-pressure environment, exercising high-levels of self-reliance, judgement, political awareness and initiative. Within departments PIOs are responsible for overseeing day-to-day communications and media activity by Ministers and use their judgement to identify issues that need to be brought to the attention of Ministers and senior officials.
22. Even though EIS staff are seconded across the NICS, and direct line management responsibility sits within their host departments, I provide media advice and support to them in their roles.
23. When the Executive was restored in January 2020, within the Executive Office, and under my direct line management, two PIOs were responsible for the First Minister and deputy First Minister's press teams. They were supported by a total of four SIOs. As well as providing communication services for the First Minister and deputy First Minister, these PIOs and SIOs were also responsible for providing communication and media support to the two Junior Ministers within the Executive Office. A third PIO was responsible for providing communication and business support until January 2021 when they left the department on promotion. A fourth PIO based within the Executive Office was working on EU Exit communications.
24. Across the departments there were eight PIOs, at Grade 7 level, and 23 full time SIOs posts and one part time post, at Deputy Principal level, based in press offices.
25. Within the Government Advertising Unit there were two part time PIOs working on a job share basis and two full time SIO posts. I had line management responsibility for

Government Advertising Unit and continue to do so.

26. Within the Central Editorial Team working on the nidirect website;
www.nidirect.gov.uk there is one PIO, six full time SIO posts and two part time posts.
27. I am in frequent contact with the team of PIOs, providing media advice and assistance in the development of key public messaging across the NICS. This may be one-on-one or as part of team meetings, and I expect to be consulted by PIOs on all significant, controversial or cross-cutting media issues, but only informed as necessary on routine business.
28. The Department of Health has its own Deputy Director of Communications who is not part of the EIS structure but is the line manager for the PIO within the department.
29. To assist with the response to the pandemic, I re-prioritised a PIO who was working with the EU Exit team within the Executive Office, in March 2020. That individual was still required to provide EU Exit communications support as well as assisting with the Covid-19 public information campaign until January 2021 when they assumed full responsibility for the public information campaign. Additionally, I managed to secure a Grade 7 on loan from the Courts Service to assist with communications activities in the Executive Office for a period of seven months (March – October 2020).
30. In and around April 2020 I had flagged up the necessity for further human resource in EIS as the pandemic was unfolding. I subsequently identified the necessity for a further Grade 5 Director to work alongside me on the communication response to the pandemic. I asked the then Head of the Civil Service, Sir David Sterling and the Permanent Secretary at the Department of Finance, Sue Gray for additional support at Grade 5 level to assist me in responding to the communication challenges associated with the pandemic. I was told there was no Grade 5 with the necessary skill set, within the NICS, who could be released to provide that support.
31. EIS provides a 24/7 service for Ministers and departments. We operate an out-of-hours system whereby SIOs opt-in to a rota system to provide media cover for all departments from 18:00 to 08:00 Monday to Friday, and during weekends and Bank Holidays. Out-of-hours arrangements continued throughout the pandemic, but the majority of journalists contacted me or PIOs directly, regardless of the time, as a more direct route to get the information they needed quickly.
32. I have no responsibility or powers to direct communication teams within Arm's Length

Bodies (ALBs) or Non-Departmental Bodies (NDPBs) and can only influence and advise, based on my position within the NICS.

EIS AND CIVIL CONTINGENCIES

33. I am the current EIS representative on the Civil Contingencies Group (Northern Ireland), and I am the only person with a communications responsibility.
34. Prior to the pandemic, I provided communications advice on civil contingences issues, such as severe weather events. I have also organised training courses for all EIS staff on crisis communications.
35. Within Civil Contingencies Group I provide advice on the NICS communications response. This includes what information and advice should be communicated to the public and the channels used to maximise delivery of key messages if an emergency is likely to occur or has occurred.
36. In the event of an emergency, I am also the key NICS communications point-of-contact for local government and Category 1 and 2 responders regarding the NICS communication response and have attended Gold Command meetings during major previous incidents.
37. Either I, or one of my PIOs, participate in any civil contingency exercises as requested.
38. Before the pandemic, any public health messaging in the event of civil emergencies and specifically pandemics was the responsibility of the Department of Health and Public Health Agency as part of their emergency preparedness work.
39. With the establishment of the Command, Control, Coordination (C3) structure within the NICS, EIS provided daily communications updates to the Northern Ireland Hub established during the pandemic. This included a written communications dashboard that was included in the daily NI sitrep and provided to Ministers, copies of which are exhibited. (INQ000259748 - INQ000259811).
40. During the first wave of the pandemic, I attended daily Civil Contingency Group meetings where I provided an oral update detailing the morning's media coverage, likely media attention for each day and detailing plans for the daily press conference.

These meetings were chaired by the then Head of the Civil Service, David Sterling and attended by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

MEETINGS OF THE EXECUTIVE

41. As detailed in the Conduct of Executive Business, (INQ000259553) as part of my role as Head of EIS, I attend all Executive meetings. Attendance at Executive meetings and associated communications was previously the responsibility of the Grade 3 Director of Communications (paragraphs 5-8 refer). At the end of each meeting, the Executive considers whether a statement to the media should be made on any decision taken or other matters discussed.
42. If Ministers are in agreement, a press statement issues jointly from the First and deputy First Minister and the Minister/s with policy responsibility for the subject matter. The statement would issue after the conclusion of the meeting and, depending on the topic, Ministers may decide to take part in a press conference. Prior to the pandemic, this happened infrequently.
43. During the Covid pandemic, information regarding Ministerial decisions needed to be disseminated quickly, and additional communications support was therefore provided to Executive meetings by EIS. The PIOs for the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with one of my other PIOs from within the Executive Office, attended the virtual meetings to assist with the drafting of Ministerial statements, lines-to-take and public-facing content for the nidirect website.
44. During the initial stages of the pandemic, Executive meetings increased in frequency from fortnightly to three times a week, and then from May 2020, twice weekly (Monday and Thursday). At times meetings took place at weekends and late into the night. A list of Executive meetings at which Covid-19 was discussed has been exhibited. (INQ000259554).
45. After each Executive meeting, my team of PIOs within the Executive Office worked to get a statement drafted and agreed with Ministers, assisted with the drafting of Ministerial speeches, and developed and sought clearance on public facing information for nidirect. Depending on the topic, content was cleared either by officials within the Department of Health or the Executive Office, and then cleared by the First Minister and deputy First Minister before being published.

46. This process was different to how Ministerial statements, speeches and nirect website content are normally drafted, as policy officials would prepare a draft version which is then refined by either press office or the nirect team in the Department of Finance. The timescales for drafting, refining, and clearing content would normally take place over several days or even weeks.
47. During the pandemic, there was intense media interest around all aspects of Covid, and the demand for official information regarding decisions taken at Executive meetings was acute. The demand for this information came while Executive meetings were still in progress and escalated when they had concluded. Policy officials were not in a position to draft content within the required timescales. EIS therefore worked to provide draft content quickly, and this was then fact-checked and cleared by policy officials.
48. Public communication in relation to the pandemic was taken forward across all Executive departments. Within the Executive Office, my role was to deliver communications to support some decisions of the Executive. Other government departments were responsible for specific communications relating to their work areas.
49. For example, when the Executive agreed to proceed with a High Street Voucher Scheme (a prepaid Spend Local card worth £100 for everyone living in NI aged 18 and above), I provided initial communications advice to the PIO and officials within the Department for the Economy, and the scheme and an associated high-profile media campaign were then taken forward directly by the Department for the Economy and the Economy Minister. (INQ000259555).
50. The Department of Health and Public Health Agency communicated directly across various platforms throughout the pandemic, both proactively and reactively.
51. The Department of Health and Public Health Agency took the lead on communicating various aspects of public health policy such as the vaccination programme. (INQ000259556 - INQ000259557). They were also responsible for the development of any official government digital apps created as part of the pandemic response in Northern Ireland.
52. During the pandemic, EIS did not have resource to identify or track disinformation. The Department of Health and Public Health Agency worked to correct

misinformation and disinformation about public health matters, and published content to counter disinformation online and via social media channels. A series of 'Mythbuster' press releases that aimed to correct inaccurate claims about Covid-19 were also issued by the Department of Health. NI's Chief Medical Officer also addressed this during press conferences. (INQ000259558 - INQ000259562).

53. There was considerable work by the Department of Health and Public Health Agency regarding vaccine disinformation and messaging was developed to communicate with audiences that were being targeted with false information, such as pregnant women and minority ethnic groups.
54. Across the NICS, Arm's Length Bodies and Non-Departmental Bodies were responsible for communicating directly with their stakeholders. For example, Invest NI was responsible for communicating with business. (INQ000259563).
55. Therefore, my statement deals with my role as Head of EIS in the Executive Office and does not cover other communications activity taken forward by EIS staff in the other Departments.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS APPROACH

56. In early March 2020, I established a three-pronged communications approach as part of the overall response to the pandemic. The individual elements were a public information campaign; ministerial press conferences; and online advice and guidance for citizens on the nidirect website. Each channel was designed to reinforce public health messaging to reach as many people as often as possible and to be easily and always accessible.
57. The Executive's strategic communications objectives over this two-year period can be broken down as follows:
 - Provide information about Covid-19 across a mix of media channels to inform and encourage individuals, including those most at risk, to take appropriate action to protect themselves and others;
 - Encourage personal responsibility and adherence to public health advice;
 - Provide hope to the public, businesses and others that the end is in sight provided we all maintain our vigilance and;
 - When available, encourage the public to get vaccinated.

58. At different stages the dial on each of these objectives could be turned up to increase either compliance or uptake or remind the public of the threat posed by Covid-19, and new and emerging strains of the virus.

PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

59. In relation to the Executive's public information campaign, I appointed the Belfast-based Genesis Advertising agency on 23 March 2020, following an accelerated procurement competition to deliver an impactful and multi-channel campaign. A paid-for public information advertising campaign began week commencing 30 March 2020. (INQ000259564).
60. The target audience for this campaign had to be all NI adults, including important sub audiences of those most at risk and those who are most likely to be less compliant with public health advice. From the launch in March 2020 until June 2022, the total budget spend on advertising was £3,905,262 across all media, which includes direct and indirect costs.
61. The public information campaigns and all associated spend were approved by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. (INQ000259568 - INQ000259571).
62. The public information campaigns had a number of different creative expressions depending on the circulation of the virus in the community. At the outset, the agency advised the establishment of a brand platform with a distinctive visual approach which could be rolled across all campaign assets. This was based on World Health Organisation research and the advice to be 'as consistent as possible as this builds trust, and with-it compliance'.
63. Genesis proposed the '*We all must do it to get through it*' strapline and this ran alongside the core actions people needed to take to protect themselves and others from the virus. In the initial stage this was '*Stay at Home, Keep your distance, Wash your hands*'. The core actions changed over time to reflect the steps people should adopt based on the trajectory of the virus and latest health and scientific advice. This branding was placed on all government channels, as well as those of key stakeholders.

64. Campaign guidelines were also produced to aid the implementation of the campaign approach across multiple stakeholders including NICS departments, ALBs, council partners and other organisations on request.
65. From March 2020 to June 2022, working with Genesis, the NI Executive delivered 26 different campaigns, both strategic and tactical, connecting to the platform branding of *'We all must do it to get through it'*. (INQ000259574).
66. Of the 26 advertising campaigns, 11 were large scale multi-channel campaigns that included television (UTV; Channel 4; Sky; ITV Hub; All4; Adsmart), radio (Cool FM; Downtown; Q Radio; U105; Dax; Instream), out-of-home (adshels – bus shelters, shopping malls, street hubs; billboards), digital advertising (online; Mobsta; Captify; Spotify; Google search), social media (X – formerly Twitter; Facebook; Snapchat; Tiktok). These 11 large-scale campaigns and their key messages can be summarised as follows:

CAMPAIGN NAME	START DATE	KEY MESSAGES
Stay at Home	March 2020	Coronavirus is spreading. Stay at home to save lives.
Stop COVID NI App	July 2020	Our health service is now using 'Test, Trace, Protect' to help beat coronavirus. Use the Stop COVID NI App, save lives. Download now.
Face Covering Campaign	August 2020	I wear one (face covering) for... my family; my mates; wear one for everyone.
Rhonda's story	November 2020	Rhonda's story – Rhonda's mum Josephine died of Covid-19, on her own, in a Belfast hospital, and Rhonda told her story to encourage the public to follow the public health advice.
Don't Pass it On	November 2020	Don't spread Coronavirus. Limit your contact with others.

Christmas 2020 Activity	December 2020	You can catch coronavirus from anyone. You can pass it on to anyone. Even if you have no symptoms. Limit your contacts.
Let's Keep Saving Lives Together	March 2021	Let's keep saving lives together. Meet fewer people; keep your distance; wash your hands; wear a face covering and if you get symptoms, then isolate and get tested.
Let's Keep Moving Forward	July 2021	We've come a long way in the fight against Covid-19. So keep following the public health advice and let's keep moving forward safely.
Let's Keep Making Safer Choices	November 2021	We're making progress against Covid-19 and want to keep it that way. So, play your part even after you're vaccinated. Make safer choices and let's keep moving forward.
Face Coverings Campaign	December 2021	You must wear a face covering in indoor public spaces – it's the law.
CMO Omicron Variant	December 2021	The new variant of Covid-19 is highly infectious and it's spreading quickly. Get your Covid-19 booster; wear a face covering; keep your distance; limit your contacts and self-isolate if you have symptoms.

67. The 15 tactical campaigns used a mix of the above channels, for example, social media and radio, to reach specific target audiences.
68. The advertising agency worked side-by-side with EIS staff in the Executive Office to develop each new campaign. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser

attended a number of meetings with me, to brief the advertising agency in advance of key campaign development and indicated their preferences for campaign creatives that were presented. A sample copy of meeting notes has been provided. (INQ000259575).

69. EIS staff within the Executive Office liaised with the Public Health Agency and policy officials throughout the development of the various campaigns. Each multi-channel campaign was signed-off by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser, before being approved or noted by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. A sample of submissions provided to Ministers has been exhibited. (INQ000259576 - INQ000259603).
70. The overall objectives of the Executive's public information campaign were to reduce Covid-19 infections and hospitalisation and ultimately save lives. To deliver these objectives, Covid-19 public health advice was communicated widely to maximise awareness and compliance in order to prevent the spread of the virus.
71. An example of a multi-channel campaign that was developed is that of 'Rhonda's story', in November 2020. (INQ000259605).
72. After listening to the stories of bereaved families on the local media, I asked Genesis to approach Rhonda Tait, whose family were one of hundreds who lost a loved one to Covid-19 in NI. Rhonda's mum Josephine died, on her own, in a Belfast hospital after contracting Covid-19 in April 2020. We asked Rhonda to tell her story and created an advertising campaign to challenge complacency and dismissive attitudes.
73. The response to the campaign was positive across all demographics. Around 79% of people surveyed agreed the Rhonda Tait campaign would persuade them to do more to protect themselves and others from the virus.

TARGET AUDIENCES

74. Although the public information campaign needed to resonate with all adults living in NI, a number of key sub-audiences were identified. This included:
 - Those most at risk: 60+ and those with underlying health conditions (c.550k in NI).
 - Those living in economically disadvantaged areas;
 - Young people;
 - Ethnic minorities;
 - People living in areas of higher transmission/ local outbreaks; and

- Those who were least compliant.
75. Target audiences evolved over time and were based on specific campaign requirements. We worked with media suppliers to ensure targeting was as relevant as possible and used a mix of inputs including interests, demographics, intent, behaviours, keywords and location to achieve this.
76. Audiences were also segmented geographically when localised restrictions were introduced.

MEDIA CHANNELS

77. To deliver on the strategic objectives, the public information campaign used a mix of media channels in NI. Television was the lead communications channel which builds high levels of awareness quickly and cost effectively across NI. This was supported through radio, out-of-home (OOH), press, social and digital.
78. Using NI TGI (Target Group Index – an industry market research tool that provides consumer insights and media consumption), Genesis Advertising analysed all NI commercial media outlets for the most effective channels. The media channel selection and weighting were specific to each campaign phase and performance was continually reviewed.
79. The following key media planning principles were considered at each stage in NI:
- Need to raise awareness quickly;
 - Target audiences;
 - Flexible approach - the situation was continually evolving;
 - Campaign saliency - keeping the health issues and protective behaviours and core actions front of mind, for example *'Stay at Home, Keep your distance, Wash your hands'*.
80. Throughout the different phases of the pandemic, changes in the media landscape were considered. For example, during the 'Stay at Home' phase in March 2020, there was a change in media consumption, as TV and video viewing habits were significantly impacted by Covid-19 related restrictions. Obviously with the stay-at-home restrictions, people's TV viewing increased accordingly. Advertising was focused therefore on TV and radio as opposed to outdoor out-of-home advertising such as billboards or bus sides.

81. As with other jurisdictions, Covid-19 and its impact on all aspects of life dominated the news agenda in Northern Ireland for a prolonged period of time. Coupled with the Executive's high-profile public information campaign across a mix of media channels and the UK Government campaign also running in Northern Ireland, we were mindful of the possibility of saturation, which may have weakened public health messaging, and took steps where possible to address this. For example, when UK Government media plans were shared, NI plans were reviewed for any potential overlaps and efficiencies.
82. Media channels were continually reviewed, and learnings were implemented into future media activity.

ACCESSIBILITY

83. The accessibility of information to the general public was critical during the pandemic to ensure widespread understanding of both public health information and Executive decisions. Information was made available in different formats, including braille and sign-language, as well as multi-language options. Special campaigns were also developed for several hard-to-reach target groups such as young people, students and farmers. (INQ000259606 - INQ000259607).
84. In addition to our public information campaign, the Department of Health and Public Health Agency were simultaneously communicating public health advice through their already established networks. This can be expanded upon by the Department of Health and Public Health Agency in their own evidence.
85. Trusted NI-based influencers were identified and engaged as part of the communication effort to reach and engage young people aged 18-to-24 years via social media platforms such as Tik-Tok and Instagram. They were also used to communicate key messages around Bank Holidays and holiday periods such as Easter and Christmas (INQ000259608 - INQ000259609).

MONITORING, RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

86. In the early stages of the pandemic, during March 2020, after agreement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I commissioned qualitative research to seek insight on public perception of Covid-19 and to help inform the Executive's communication approach and key public information messages. (INQ000259610).

87. Due to the risks associated with bringing people together the research company was unable to hold focus groups at short notice. One-to-one in-depth interviews were held virtually between 18th – 20th March 2020 and the profile of the adult population was taken into consideration to ensure a mix of gender, age/life-stage and socio-economic grouping. The research was carried out by Red Circle, an independent research and communication consultancy.
88. The research examined views and attitudes to Covid-19, in particular what information sources people were using and what was seen by them as being a credible source for information. The findings indicated that television news and the BBC website were viewed as a trusted source of information by the public with credibility that other sources, such as social media channels, did not have. It also indicated that information that was based on science had credibility and that the public saw the need for decisions to be based on science rather than politics.
89. In May 2020 the FM and dFM agreed that EIS should undertake polling on Covid-19 to test public opinion of the performance of the NI Executive in dealing with the pandemic. EIS procured Social Market Research (SMR) to conduct three surveys, representative of the adult population in terms of key factors such as age, gender and social class, that took place over a nine-week period. (INQ000259611 - INQ000259616). The dates of the surveys were as follows:

Survey	Date	Sample size
One	6 – 11 June 2020	500 interviews with the NI general public aged 16+
Two	23 – 30 June 2020	500 interviews with the NI general public aged 16+
Three	8 – 19 July 2020	1032 interviews with the NI general public aged 16+

90. The three opinion polls were consistent in their findings in relation to the performance of the Executive in dealing with Covid-19 with the final report showing that some 77% believed that the NI Executive was performing either very well or quite well.
91. The Executive also scored consistently well in building trust with the public, with 73% stating they are getting the information they need from the Executive; 70% believing the information is accurate and 68% trusting the information.
92. During the initial phases of the pandemic, Cabinet Office also shared the results of daily polling, provided by YouGov that provided NI with a snapshot of week-on-week variations between public attitudes within the four devolved administrations. The findings from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA) Coronavirus Covid-19) Opinion Survey were also used to inform campaign direction. Samples of the NISRA Opinion Survey have been provided. (INQ000259617 - INQ000259621).
93. Concept and campaign tracking was undertaken for all major campaign strands. The advertising agency commissioned independent market research company (Cognisense Ltd.) to conduct quantitative surveys as part of the Cognisense Ltd. online Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey. The Omnibus Survey contains questions about a wide range of topical issues and is carried out on a regular basis to provide a snapshot of the lifestyle and views of people living in NI. (INQ000259622 - INQ000259720).
94. Each survey presented key findings and comparisons, where appropriate, and all results were weighted to be representative of the Northern Ireland population in terms of age, sex, socio-economic group and area.
95. Insights from the campaign tracking research (including attitudes towards the key safety behaviours) were used to inform media planning and campaign strategy. Research reported that campaigns drove behavioural change with 77%-84% of the audience agreeing that it would persuade them to take steps to protect themselves and others from infection. A summary graph of the key results across five campaigns has been exhibited (INQ000259747).
96. Performance of paid-for activity was monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis by the advertising agency. Performance reports were provided, initially on a weekly

basis and then monthly, and if necessary, adjustments were made to media channels as required. (INQ000259812 - INQ000259846 and INQ000263135 - INQ000263160).

97. Across all campaign phases the advertising achieved very high levels of reach and frequency, and it was therefore seen and heard at sufficient levels to gain understanding and encourage action. This can be summarised as follows:

Campaign advertising period	Average number of Opportunities to See (OTS) and Opportunities to Hear (OTH) over the campaign period*
March 2020 to October 2020	174
November 2020 to April 2021	246
May 2021 - Mid June 2021	35
Mid June 2021 - March 2022	106
* NB – There were different levels of spend, media channels and weights per campaign period. OTS and OTH figures for NI adult population.	

WORKING WITH UKG

98. The UK Government also ran its public information campaign in Northern Ireland which allowed for increased media buying from the UK Government to further amplify public health messaging. This was managed through two communication groups that were set up and chaired by Cabinet Office. Both groups were made up of communication professionals from across the four nations and they met on a weekly basis.
99. The first group brought together the heads of communications from the devolved administrations. It was strategic in nature and included the Director/Deputy Directors of communications from all the devolved regions and territorial offices. It is my recollection that this group was established in May 2020 after England moved from the 'Stay at Home' message to 'Stay Alert'.
100. This group developed over time and became a forum for communications leads to update colleagues on their communications activity based on the latest policy decisions. Over the lifetime of this communications group, I was able to ensure that only UKG public information communications that were consistent with the policy position in Northern Ireland appeared on NI media channels.

101. I also used this forum to express concern at the terminology used by UK Ministers during some press conferences, where the impression was given that restrictions/relaxations applied to the whole of the UK but were in fact England only and was assured that my concerns had been shared across Whitehall communication leads. An example of this is when, from 19 July 2021, it was no longer a legal requirement in England to wear a face covering in shops and when using public transport. In NI, the legal requirement to wear a face covering in enclosed public areas and when using public transport remained in place until 15 February 2022. This caused confusion locally as to what restrictions were in place in NI at the relevant time.
102. The second communications group was at an operational level and it included the sharing of UKG creatives and media plans. A representative of EIS in the Executive Office and the Public Health Agency NI attended this meeting. In the early stages of the pandemic the group met twice weekly and over time this reduced to once a week.
103. There was a level of overlap in both the meetings, but a constant theme was whether it was appropriate for UKG creatives to feature in devolved communications channels and whether it reflected the policy position of the devolved regions.
104. It was often the case that media assets designed for England could not run in NI because of policy differences. During the weekly meetings, the representatives from the devolved regions were given advance sight of any new campaigns that were being launched in England, and asked if it was appropriate for it to appear locally. When this happened, I checked with the Department of Health and the Chief Medical Officer if the campaign was suitable to appear locally given the latest policy position in relation to the regulations on Covid-19. If it was deemed appropriate to run in NI, we were included in the Cabinet Office media plan at no cost to the Executive or NI departments. When it was not appropriate to run because of policy differences, the Cabinet Office were able to develop media plans which excluded NI. These decisions were also made within days to allow Cabinet Office to finalise its advertising media buying plans.
105. The group provided a valuable platform for communication officials to work collaboratively, discuss issues such as hard to reach audiences and vaccine hesitancy, and to share research and ideas. Outside of the weekly meetings, officials were in contact on a frequent basis, regarding creatives and media planning. The need for these meetings was triggered by the difficulties anticipated when UKG

decided to move out of lockdown in advance of the other devolved regions. While initially the establishment of these groups were in response to that policy change and the communications challenges that posed for each administration, it became an invaluable meeting in ensuring that policy decisions in each of the regions were reflected appropriately in UKG campaigns.

OTHER PAID-FOR COMMUNICATION ACTIVITY

106. During the initial phase of the pandemic, in April 2020, a NI specific leaflet was developed for every household. (INQ000262962 - INQ000262963). The aim of this was to achieve maximum awareness of the advice and help available for people living in NI. The leaflet covered:
- Symptoms of coronavirus
 - How to look after your mental health while staying at home
 - How to talk to child about coronavirus
 - How to protect yourself from coronavirus scams
 - How to help others
 - How to help yourself – contact details for help and support
107. EIS liaised with policy officials across the NICS and the Public Health Agency regarding the content. The decision to proceed with a maildrop of a leaflet was taken during the last week in March 2020. As well as being delivered to every household (807,000) in NI, the leaflet was made available in different formats on request. It was also available in audio and sign-language formats. The designed leaflet was signed-off by FM and dFM on 2 April 2020 and shared with Executive Ministers. (INQ000262962 - INQ000262963).
108. The Department of Health and the Public Health Agency NI took forward the roll-out of the vaccination programme and took the lead regarding all associated communications. This can be expanded upon by the Department of Health and Public Health Agency in their own evidence to the Inquiry. Although the Executive Office had no responsibility in the communication of public health messaging relating to the Covid-19 vaccine, the Executive Office incorporated a 'get vaccinated' message into key campaigns and fully supported the work being carried out by the Public Health Agency to encourage vaccine uptake. (INQ000262964).

PRESS CONFERENCES

109. There was unprecedented demand from the media to speak to all Executive Ministers, but in particular the First Minister and deputy First Minister, throughout the pandemic. In addition to Ministers accepting interview requests, daily press conferences with Executive Ministers helped to meet this demand. A list of daily press conferences has been exhibited. During the initial phase of the pandemic this was an opportunity for Ministers to reinforce the key public health messages and later, to explain relaxations and restrictions as we moved through different phases of the pandemic. (INQ000262965).
110. The press conferences were carried live at 16:10 on BBC Radio Ulster's Evening Extra programme and streamed through the Executive's Facebook page. (INQ000262967 - INQ000263034).
111. Operationally, the press conferences were organised to start at around 16.10 to be covered live on BBC Radio Ulster. This is the flagship radio news programme at this time and commands large audience figures. It also gave both UTV and BBC time to package their coverage for the teatime television news programmes (at 18:00 and 18:30 respectively), both of which had a surge in Northern Ireland viewing figures as the public sought information in relation to the pandemic, thus maximising reach of Executive messaging.
112. Health professionals regularly participated in the Executive's Covid-19 press conferences. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser joined the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Health Minister to explain the latest position with the transmission of the virus and the use of infographics became increasingly important in explaining the R number at any particular time. Other health professionals who participated in the Executive's Covid-19 press conferences included, but is not limited to:
- Patricia Donnelly, Head of NI Covid-19 Vaccination Programme;
 - Prof Siobhan O'Neill, Mental Health Champion;
 - Matt Wills, Head of Mass Testing in NI;
 - Dr Cathy Jack, Chief Executive, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust;
 - Jennifer Welsh, Chief Executive, Northern Health and Social Care Trust;
 - Mr Charlie Martyn, Medical Director, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust;
 - Sean Holland, Chief Social Worker;

- Medical and nursing staff from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.
113. Over time, other key stakeholders also participated in the press conferences, such as the PSNI Chief Constable, Kevin Holland Chief Executive, Invest NI and John McGrillen, Chief Executive, Tourism NI.
 114. To make the press conferences as accessible as possible, both British and Irish sign language interpreters were used from the beginning of the pandemic. The sign language interpreters appeared on screen for the duration of each daily press conference.
 115. It was my responsibility to organise the press conferences which, after the first few, the majority were conducted virtually with Ministers and technical staff in the room and the media joining by zoom. I selected the media to join the press conference. The media in attendance always included BBC NI, UTV, Press Association and Downtown Radio (the largest commercial radio station in NI) and one journalist from the local papers on a rotational basis. Occasionally, Sky, RTE and Channel 4 covered the press conferences.
 116. For each Minister appearing at the press conference, their PIO provided draft introductory remarks. I then opened the floor to media questions.
 117. In total, EIS organised 115 NI Executive Covid-19 press conferences, with the vast majority being conducted by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

NIDIRECT

118. The third element of the communication approach was providing the public with the information they needed through the nidirect website. (www.nidirect.gov.uk).
119. This is the citizen facing website for all government services and has a style guide which presents information in easy to digest chunks for the public to understand. It is an objective source of official government information for the public and is free from political comment.
120. A Covid-19 campaign page was first published on the nidirect website on 19 March 2020 and a banner was placed on the homepage to ease navigation for the user. All

public information campaign creatives carried the nidirect campaign url:
www.nidirect.gov.uk/coronavirus.

121. On 25 March 2020, I wrote to all 90 MLAs asking them to highlight issues that were being raised by their constituents on Covid-19 issues. The rationale for my approach was to help inform the development of relevant content for the website which would be of most use to citizens. The responses I received helped inform the early structure of the Covid-19 section on the website and focused content on matters of specific concern to the general public. (INQ000262966).
122. Analytics from the website from 1 March 2020 to 31 May 2022 shows that Covid-19 pages were viewed 38.8 million times by 16.4 million users, of which 13.4 million were new users. The majority of those who visited the campaign page did so on mobile devices (some 73%) with a further 21% on desktop and the remainder on tablet devices.
123. Content was continuously updated to reflect evolving advice and the campaign page was developed on a number of occasions over this two-year period to ensure that the information was easy to find and accessible to the public.
124. Other than the landing page, the most frequently viewed page was 'What the restrictions mean for you' which had 3.6 million page views recorded during this period. In addition to health advice, the campaign section also included information and advice on travel (almost 3 million page views) and testing (1.7 million page views).
125. A total of 19 videos were posted on nidirect which were also signed for access to the deaf community. The nidirect YouTube channel hosted the information videos and by October 2022, these videos had been seen almost 135,000 times.
126. The nidirect social channels were used heavily to promote the Executive's Covid-19 messages. On Twitter, there were 3520 posts between 1 March 2020 and 1 May 2022 and a similar number on Facebook over this same period.
127. There were more than 27.5 million Twitter post impressions and almost 7.7 million Facebook accounts reached and followers to both these Executive-owned channels increased by 43% for Twitter and 55% for Facebook.

ONGOING COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITY

128. In parallel with the three main strands of the communications approach, EIS took forward a range of activities to keep the public informed of the Executive's decisions and public health advice throughout the pandemic. Examples of this are set out below.

News releases and social media

129. News releases and organic social media content outlining Executive decisions were issued regularly throughout the pandemic. (INQ000263161 - INQ000263163). Individual departments were responsible for drafting news releases and social media content on their respective policy areas. Given the volume of communications output from government departments in Northern Ireland during the first phase of the pandemic, EIS staff in the Executive Office compiled and published daily news updates summarising any announcements, information and advice from across all departments.

Lines-to-take

130. To help ensure a cohesive communications approach, EIS staff in the Executive Office compiled a lines-to-take document (INQ000263164 - INQ000263308) which was updated across all departments on a rolling basis to reflect Executive policy and Ministerial decisions. Each department has its own process for developing lines-to-take. In the Executive Office, lines were developed both proactively (providing communications support around Ministerial decisions) and reactively (in response to media queries).
131. The general process of formulating lines was for officials to provide a draft on which EIS would give presentational advice before offering to Ministers for clearance.
132. In the Executive Office, given the joint nature of the office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, all lines to take needed to be cleared on both sides before a line was finalised or could be issued.
133. The Executive Office press office issued an email each morning to colleagues across the eight other departmental press offices requesting any updates to the daily Covid-19 Key Issues and Lines-to-take document. Responses were requested by 2pm each

day and the document updated with any changes or additions made accordingly. The document also contained a section on Latest Advice which was updated by the Executive Office press office based on any decisions taken by the Executive that day. Once compiled and updated, the document was distributed to all Ministerial Private Offices and press offices in advance of the daily press conference by Ministers.

134. During the course of normal business, and as issues arose, I was able to update relevant PIOs regarding issues that were raised at meetings, such as the Executive Covid Taskforce or Adherence Group, and to suggest lines-to-take and messaging based on the various decisions that were agreed.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

135. EIS is not responsible for stakeholder engagement across the NICS. Business areas within NICS departments engage with stakeholders to ensure that policies are developed with a full understanding of stakeholder needs and that all relevant impacts are assessed.
136. During the pandemic, stakeholder engagement was led by policy officials. At times, EIS attended stakeholder meetings in a listening capacity to hear at first-hand what issues stakeholders were facing. This information was used to develop communications materials in an effort to provide some assistance to stakeholders. For example, face covering posters were created for business owners/shops and were available to download from nidirect.

PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

137. Partnership and collaboration across government and its stakeholders was an important element of EIS's communications approach. Early in the pandemic I established a Covid communications group with local government/district council communications leads to enhance reach of the Executive's messaging. I provided regular updates on the approach at different stages, supplied resources and encouraged the sharing of messaging in their respective geographical areas. (INQ000263309 - INQ000263336). These relationships were useful in amplifying messaging in particular areas – for example, when localised restrictions were introduced in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area in October 2020.
138. EIS shared creative assets with public sector organisations to display on all their owned communications channels. Public information and campaign materials were

also added to nidirect for local businesses, voluntary and community organisations to access.

139. EIS had a working relationship with wider public sector organisations, including the PSNI, and assisted where possible in supporting their Covid-19 communications. This included, with the agreement of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, providing a platform to the Chief Constable to participate in press conferences, enabling him to set out the police approach to engaging with the public on Covid-19 restrictions. For example, the Chief Constable took part in a press conference alongside the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 9 April 2020 to highlight adherence issues and the policing approach over the upcoming Easter holiday period.

COVID TASKFORCE AND ADHERENCE

140. The Executive's Covid-19 Taskforce was established in December 2020 under the leadership of HOCS to lead and co-ordinate the Executive's ongoing response to, and recovery from, the pandemic. This includes four work strands, including adherence. I participated in Covid-19 Taskforce meetings and Adherence Group meetings.
141. On an ongoing basis, I was able to update the relevant PIO regarding issues that were raised at meetings and to suggest lines and messaging based on the various approaches that were agreed.
142. The Adherence Group brought together departmental stakeholders as well as enforcement agencies in order to provide input into how changes in law and guidance impact on adherence, how to best encourage compliance with the public health messaging and to work with behavioural science experts to support efforts to reduce transmission of the virus.
143. As part of the work of the Adherence Group, the NI Innovation Lab and Behavioural Insights Team, within Department of Finance, were commissioned to examine enforcement issues, attitudes and behaviours relating to adherence to Covid-19 guidance and legislation. Behavioural Science papers were presented to the Adherence Group and discussed. EIS used the findings to inform citizen-facing communications relating to face coverings, self-isolation, social distancing, Covid-19

testing and ventilation. Input was also used to inform harder to reach audiences such as young people.

CHALLENGES

144. The population of Northern Ireland is just over 1.9m people according to the most up to date census figures. That is almost one million people fewer than Greater Manchester and yet has an Assembly of 90 MLAs representing 18 constituencies, 18 MPs and 462 councillors across 11 council districts.
145. The news output from the Northern Ireland media is extensive. BBC NI alone has seven hours a day radio output Monday to Friday dedicated to news and current affairs, starting at 06.30 and finishing at 18:00. On top of that there are hourly radio news bulletins and a morning, lunchtime and prime-time TV news programme at 18:30. BBC NI also has an extensive online presence.
146. Ulster Television News (UTV) is part of the ITV network and regularly attracts the largest news television audience for its 18:00 evening programme, UTV Live. In addition, RTE News (Ireland's national television and radio broadcaster) is available to NI homes, Sky has a dedicated NI correspondent and there is a strong independent radio sector and three regional daily newspapers (Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and Newsletter), a Northern Ireland edition of the Daily Mirror and Northern Ireland correspondents in the Dublin-based Irish Times.
147. I am providing this background to the Inquiry to set out the strength and breadth of the media landscape in Northern Ireland in the context of the size of the region.
148. With so many hours of airtime to fill, and column inches to write, the demand from the media to speak directly to Ministers, to report on Executive decisions and explain the differences in the approach being taken across the UK and Ireland to the handling of virus were unprecedented and challenging.
149. Trying to meet that demand was a huge undertaking for EIS in the context of such a competitive news environment, where journalists want to be first with the latest story, coupled with a complex government approvals process.
150. This inevitably meant that Executive decisions were reported, in full or in part, on the news or social media in advance of any formal Executive statement. There was also an ongoing problem that we had to contend with regarding information being leaked from the Executive meeting about matters that were being discussed in real time.

This was particularly challenging when the decision arrived at was different from that which was originally proposed in Executive papers.

151. In an ideal scenario, communication materials would have been prepared in advance of Executive meetings to reflect the proposed decisions of an Executive paper. That would include an Executive statement, content for the nidirect website, information graphics and Ministerial speaking notes for press conferences. The nature of mandatory coalition government meant that it was impossible to front load the work to any great degree as decisions had to be taken by the Executive that carried a consensus opinion of Ministers. That resulted in EIS staff working on statements, speaking notes and infographics during Executive meetings while subsequent relevant discussions and decisions were still ongoing and required attention.
152. EIS staff endeavoured to produce timely information that accurately reflected the decisions of the Executive, while coming under pressure from media to provide detail. Communications material often had to be considered by officials and cleared by the Health Minister, First Minister and deputy First Minister before we were in a position to issue anything. Drafts may also have required different iterations before being finalised, taking account of Ministers' views, then needed re-cleared by all Ministers. This operating environment was challenging for EIS.
153. EIS enjoys a positive relationship with the majority of the NI media, however it is not without tension at times, not least because of the aforementioned difficult operating environment which can be a source of frustration for journalists with deadlines to meet. During the organising of the daily press conferences, I took the decision to always include BBC, UTV, Press Association and Downtown Radio to maximise the coverage of Executive messaging to as large an audience as possible. Reporters from the three morning papers were admitted on a rotational basis and on occasions approached me to advocate for increased participation.
154. As the press conferences were available to all media at the same time through the Executive's Facebook account and all the morning papers carried the Press Association copy, for logistical reasons and so as not to dilute important public health messaging, I took the decision not to change the format of the daily press conferences.
155. Not all interviews conducted by Ministers during the pandemic were organised by EIS. Northern Ireland has a number of well-respected political correspondents who enjoy strong working relationships with all the political parties. On a number of

occasions, Ministers would appear on the media for interviews organised through the party, and EIS only became aware of these when the interview was being aired or shortly afterwards.

SUBOPTIMAL RESOURCING LEVELS

156. While EIS successfully delivered a wide range of communications activity this came at a significant personal cost to staff's work-life balance. The failure to re-appoint a Grade 3 Communications Director left a considerable gap in the team capacity as there was an absence of another senior communications professional working alongside me. In terms of delivery of service, huge reliance was placed on the goodwill of myself and my team to continue to deliver an excellent service, notwithstanding the suboptimal resourcing levels. The willingness of the team to work long hours, seven days a week meant that quality of service was maintained but the price for that was paid by staff on a personal level.

Personal Data

[STATEMENT OF TRUTH]