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Mr David Hall
02C Module Solicitors

Our ref: SSUB 287/23

8 December 2023

Via email: 02cmodulesolicitors@covid19.public-inquiry.uk

Dear David

I am writing to formally submit the Fact-finding Investigation Report into Mobile Devices used by former Northern Ireland Ministers and Special Advisors on behalf of the Covid-19 Inquiry Reference Group that I chair.

By way of background, the Inquiry wrote to The Executive Office (TEO) on 31 July 2023 seeking information on the use of informal communications.

TEO responded on 11 August 2023 to provide initial notification that the NICS phones issued to TEO former First Minister, deputy First Minister and Special Advisors were currently reset to factory settings, and that at present, no data was available from them. TEO advised that it was working to determine the exact circumstances of how this occurred.

Further investigation by TEO identified that mobile devices issued by NICS to former Northern Ireland Ministers and Special Advisors for the other NI departments may also have been reset. As a result, the HOCS Inquiry Reference Group commissioned a Fact-Finding Investigation to be carried out by the Head of Internal Audit with five objectives:

- i. To physically locate and secure the relevant mobile devices;
- ii. Establish what mobile devices or relevant policies, procedures, guidance and processes were in place across the NICS at the time of the devices being returned;
- iii. Establish what specific guidance or instructions have been issued relating to retention of information held on mobile devices for the Inquiry;
- iv. Establish what steps (if any) were taken to identify and/or retain relevant information on the mobile devices; and

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- v. Document the circumstances that led to a number of mobile devices being erased/rest prior to being returned or on return, including whether this was in line with the relevant policies, procedures and guidance in place at that time.

The report addresses each of the objectives outlined above.

The investigation team, having reviewed the relevant NICS policies and guidance and speaking with officials, has concluded that Private Office and IT Assist staff operated broadly in line with those policies and guidance.

The NICS is committed to provide the Inquiry with all the information it requests and across Departments, have already submitted a significant volume of material.

In relation to information potentially relevant to the work of the Inquiry that may have been lost as a result of how devices were handled on their return to Departments, I have commissioned further work now that the fact-finding investigation is complete.

This work will determine what information, if any, is on the devices issued to former Ministers and SpAds and an update will be provided through the response to the Rule 9 request issued to me on 8 November 2023.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

JAYNE BRADY
Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service



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