

**Witness Name: Fergus Ewing**

**Statement No.: 1**

**Exhibits: FE1**

**Dated: 10 September 2025**

**UK COVID-19 INQUIRY  
MODULE 9**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF FERGUS EWING MSP**

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**In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 request dated 24 April 2025 in connection with Module 9, I, Fergus Ewing, will say as follows: -**

**Introduction**

1. I am Fergus Ewing of the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh EH99 1SP, I am currently MSP for Inverness and Nairn.
2. In preparing this statement, I have received drafting assistance and input from the Scottish Government's Covid Inquiries Response Directorate.
3. Unless stated otherwise, the facts stated in this witness statement are within my own knowledge and are true. Where they are not within my own knowledge, they are derived from sources to which I refer and are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

4. There are some questions which the Inquiry has put to me which I am unable to answer as they fell outside my remit. I have produced this witness statement answering the questions I am able to in my capacity as Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism in the Scottish Government during the relevant period in Module 9.
5. In terms of many of the questions posed, my involvement was limited to being a recipient of internal papers and memos that were copied to all Ministers. My own involvement, referred to below, only intensified as the impact on the sectors I was responsible for became clear with the announcement of restrictions from March 2020 onwards.

### **Overview of Roles and Relationships**

6. From 17 February 2020 until 19 May 2021, I was Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism. Prior to that, from 2018, I was Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy. From 2007 to 2011, I was Minister for Community Safety and from 2011 to 2016, I was Minister for Business Energy and Tourism.
7. As Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Tourism I had overall responsibility for
  - Agriculture and crofting
  - Fisheries and aquaculture
  - Food and drink
  - Highlands and Islands Enterprise
  - South of Scotland Enterprise
  - Rural Scotland
  - Animal health
  - Forestry
  - Tourism

8. My role was to promote the rural economy and the people and business who work in it. That included: oversight of the operation of the Common Agricultural Policy for farmers; to see the growth in productive forestry; to oversee the process of restoration of open cast mines; to promote our fishing sectors, pelagic demersal and inshore; to lead the annual negotiating team at Brussels fisheries negotiation (until Brexit!); and to promote our Scottish Food and Drink Sector.
  
9. I also provided help to individuals who suffered injustice or unfairness in their dealings with government and government bodies, in relation to, for example, failures to make due payments of financial support. I engaged with the people who worked in each sector and attended major events, spoke at major conferences; and worked with the UK Government and devolved administrations where cooperation was required. I tackled emergency issues which arose in the rural economy such as the protection or continuance of businesses under pressure. I was accountable to Parliament in attending committees and addresses by way of Ministerial Statements, and the lead of various pieces of legislation in the Chamber of the Scottish Parliament.
  
10. In conclusion, my role was to do all that I could to help people in rural Scotland and use my ministerial powers, levers and influence towards that end.

### **Early Understanding of Pandemic**

11. I first appreciated the potential scale of the economic emergency after attending an early Scottish Government Resilience Room (SGORR) meeting on 17 February 2020 at which the Chief Medical Officer gave a prediction about the number of lives that may be lost in Scotland. I do not

consider that there was anything that I or anyone else could have done in February and March 2020 that could have improved the response to the rapidly unfolding emergency. I consider that any measures of that type would have had to have been in place long before February or March 2020.

## **Role in Pandemic Response**

12. My overall responsibilities during the pandemic again related to the matters within my portfolio. My main areas of responsibility were farming, fishing, fish farming, forestry, field sports and food and drink, but I also had responsibility for oversight of the two rural Enterprise agencies Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise.
13. In practice, my attentions during the pandemic were largely concerned with trying to provide financial support and assistance for those people and businesses operating within those areas of policy for which I had portfolio responsibility.
14. During the pandemic my role changed radically. On a human basis I ceased to travel. This was a massive change as previously I tried to attend events around the country of Scotland and was out of my office in St Andrews House in Edinburgh more often than not. After lockdown I worked from home, and spent the majority of each working day, and also some weekends, on conference calls.
15. My main role was to help devise schemes of compensation to those whose livelihoods were impacted by the pandemic and in particular by the lockdown and thereafter oversee the administration and distribution of financial support. That was an utterly absorbing function and took up a large part of my working day.

16. I was dealing with people in the tourism sector including hoteliers, self-caterers, the owners of Bed and Breakfasts, guest houses, but also visitor attractions, guides, rangers and tour operators who, overnight, found that their whole business or livelihood was removed and they could either not function at all, or function in a more limited way; Some people had built up businesses over their whole working lives and they lost these overnight so this task of trying to do all that could be done to help them was urgent. Many of those whom I was speaking to each day on conference calls were under enormous stress resultant from the loss of all income suddenly and with no warning. I was acutely aware of my responsibility and the need to give the job my whole effort and attention over the whole of the pandemic period.

### **Relationships during Pandemic Response**

17. My relations with other Cabinet Ministers and Ministers were collegial but constrained by the fact that once lockdown was implemented there was no opportunity to meet face to face. I worked closely with Kate Forbes the Finance Secretary in particular. I cannot recall any issue arising between myself and other Ministers which caused any irresolvable problem. On the contrary, we were all clear what we needed to do and did it - or did our best to do so.

18. I had good working relationships with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. My main interchange with them was to attend the weekly cabinet meetings. These were very much business meetings rather than a forum for general debate and discussion. We each had a lot to do and got on with it. It was clear that the First Minister took advice from her advisers, in particular the Chief Medical Officer, and my contributions to cabinet were mostly related to progress made or progress which I sought to be made in

helping with the financial compensation aspects. I did however, seek to enable some areas of the rural economy to be able to continue, and farming did continue more or less as normal, other than markets sales etcetera; and forestry continued, though seemed to be impacted to a greater degree than I felt was necessary. For example, I was sceptical that forestry activity needed to be restricted as this was mostly outdoor work.

19. However, as a non-clinician and having no direct responsibility for developing Covid-19 policy I restricted those few contributions I made, other than regards finance and compensation, to asking questions and putting concerns on record.
  
20. I had a professional relationship with civil servants, and, with those with whom I worked frequently and over a long period, this was cordial and amicable. From time to time, differences may arise between Ministers and officials, and this did occur in my time however I do not consider that this was an issue which caused difficulty during the pandemic. I did not regularly engage with the Director General (DG) Economy and there was no need to do so as the majority of the work which I did was largely devoted to dealing directly with various sectors of the tourism and hospitality economy - by speaking to them and above all listening to them and how they were impacted and what assistance they reasonably needed to help them survive covid and their businesses and livelihoods coming through "the other side."
  
21. I have not mentioned officials by name, because I think it unfair to single out any one or even a few people for praise, but I can say that, in general, the level of support they provided to me during the pandemic period was substantial and effective, and we worked extremely closely together for a prolonged period. Delays arose from time to time or the decisions on particular points of detail would involve much deliberation and compromise

but overall the standard of support over the period of the pandemic, specifically on matters related to Covid-19, was high.

## **Relationships outside of Scottish Government**

22. Relations were cordial with other UK administrations. There were regular meetings with counterparts by conference call; For the Northern Ireland Assembly it was I recall mostly civil servants we dealt with, not Ministers.

23. My relationships and engagement with people outwith Government were crucial, before and after the period of the pandemic. I sought advice from leading figures in business, academia, and other parties, such as voluntary bodies, charities, non-departmental public bodies, agencies and so on. This was an essential condition of success in the task of devising and implementing schemes of support. As Minister, it was important to listen to the people who worked in each sector. The question of from whom to take advice was an important matter of judgement, and therefore one had to take care to exercise that judgement prudently.

## **Pandemic Response - Support Schemes**

24. As a general observation, one constant practical issue which arose when trying to design compensation schemes of support was to define who would and would not be eligible; The lack of any register of businesses in some areas held us back in that regard; Had there been a register of small businesses providing self-catering and other types of accommodation, then that could have been used as a basis to establish eligibility however such a register was not in place and would have taken some time to assemble as legislation would have been needed. Therefore, the difference between those who were running a commercial

business, and those who were essentially providing an occasional service of one form or another was difficult to define.

## **Fiscal Framework**

25. As I was Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, I am unable to comment on funding arrangements for the Scottish Government and the fiscal framework that exists between the Scottish Government and the UK Government or the funding arrangements for local governments in Scotland and the fiscal framework that exists between the Scottish Government and local governments.

## **Job Retention Scheme**

26. I had no input into the design of the Covid Job Retention Scheme as it was a UK Government scheme however I attended meetings with the UK Tourism Minister, Victoria Atkins, and the devolved administrations who were pressing the UK Government for a furlough scheme. I had no formal role in its delivery but observed how it operated. The furlough scheme applied to employed people which immediately raised the problem regarding the self-employed because they were ineligible. I consider that the Covid Job Retention Scheme was a relatively easy scheme to administer and it was a fairly effective scheme.

27. The way in which we sought to monitor it (and all other schemes) was substantially through engagement with individuals, businesses and their representatives. I cannot overemphasise the importance of that work; these people were often the financial victims of the pandemic but were also the “eyes and ears” who could provide on the ground intelligence of the real impacts on their sector. Much of this engagement related to the quantum of support and the rules for eligibility.

28. The main problem facing me during the pandemic was the complexity of the tasks of devising schemes to identify those entitled to receive financial help, and the quantum of support that was fair - neither to over or under compensate.

29. I find it hard to make specific recommendations of value, and that may be because of the passage of time, but primarily because even at the time, I did not feel that there were, in any significant ways, things that we could have done substantially better. My concerns were often that there was a modicum of discretion when deciding upon eligibility and I regarded my role as to be the champion of those who felt that they were wrongly excluded, provided always of course that they could prove loss, which in itself is an easy criteria to recognise but often much more difficult to apply.

### **Scotland Furlough Support Grant**

30. I did not have any involvement in the design of the Scotland Furlough Support Grant. I had no executive responsibility for making decisions about the allocation of funds but when my opinion was sought, I would have provided it and strongly argue the case for support to be provided to people who needed it in order to be able to survive.

31. I do not feel that I can comment on the efficacy of this scheme or whether it was susceptible to fraud. One of the problems is that we were flying blind. We did not know precisely how people would be affected when schemes were being designed. We were always conscious of the need to prevent against fraud and I do recall having conversations about this although I do not recall who these were with.

## **Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS)**

32. I had no role in devising SEISS other than to try to ensure that people were not refused compensation where they could prove loss, which as stated, is not always a straightforward matter for a self-employed person whose income, by definition, usually varies, sometimes considerably.

## **Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme**

33. I had no role in the design or delivery of the Self Employment Income Support Scheme which was a UK Government scheme, but it was always going to be more difficult to help self-employed people than employed people because the records are more complicated. While I had no role in the delivery, I do remember arguing that it seemed most unfair that the self-employed would not receive support because their accounts are prepared retrospectively [FE1/001 - INQ000650943 and FE1/002 - INQ000650944].

34. I was adamant that those operating in field sports who could not do so received support [FE1/003 - INQ000650942]. Also, those operating in the ski resorts should receive support, but in these types of areas, it was often more difficult to establish and quantify losses, in order to make a reasonable assessment of what compensation was fair.

## **Support for Businesses**

### *Support Administered by the UK Government*

35. I was lobbied by business in relation to the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme and the COVID Corporate Financing Facility [FE1/004 - INQ000650947, FE1/005 - INQ000650948 and FE1/006 -

INQ000650950]. I tried to make sure that the companies in question, if they qualified, got support as quickly as possible. There were inevitably some delays of necessity because of the need to balance compensation with fraud avoidance but I cannot comment further on the efficacy of the schemes as a non-finance Minister.

36. My understanding was that the Bounce Back Loan Scheme was incredibly susceptible to fraud but this was a UK Government scheme and I had no direct role in that scheme other than to raise questions about it.

37. As the pandemic unfolded, rumours arose about the abuse of the UK Bounce Back Loan schemes, and there have been press reports of some egregious examples which led to prosecution. I was very much aware of the risks of fraudulent applications, especially where any support was virtually automatic without checking, however I have no particular expertise on this point.

#### Key Schemes Administered in Scotland

38. One of the fastest schemes to be designed and administered was for inshore fishing businesses. They were either the first or amongst the first group of people to receive support as they could no longer operate. The reason we were able to act quickly to assist this group of people in the rural economy (a small group) was because we held records in respect of each fishing vessel and therefore the problem of definition of the qualifying cohort was fairly simple; The process of checking and monitoring was carried out by the team of officials who advised me on fisheries and who were, as most officials "up for" the task. They were able to ascertain very quickly those fishermen who did not receive payment - they were generally not shy about informing us directly or through their local

representatives. I was pleased that this task was carried out so quickly and I believe efficiently.

39. The task of providing support of necessity involved making sure that (a) value for money was obtained, and (b) there was neither over nor under compensation and (c) that we were not unmindful of the risks of fraudulent applications.

40. Whilst I had no role in the devising of schemes for those outwith my portfolio areas, I did have a role to play in the provision of compensation for those operating hotel businesses: Hotel Support Programme [FE1/007 - INQ000650955]. In particular, I strongly argued that the Limit of Rateable Value which was a cut-off point above which support was denied was too low, and therefore, in Scotland, we enabled some hotels above that figure to be in receipt of compensation.

41. This was because whilst many hotels are parts of large “chains” which owned several hotels, many are also independent businesses, usually family owned and run, and often owning one hotel; Many of these were above the Rateable Value limit, and, as a direct result of engagement with businesses, I worked hard to persuade my colleagues to enable more of them to obtain this support; In that work I received the support of the Finance Secretary and the administration was conducted by the Enterprise Companies Highlands and Islands Enterprise(HIE) and South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE). I regarded with some satisfaction that this cohort or group was able to access that support, as I was conscious that many of them suffered severely in financial terms and incurred substantial debt.

42. The way we would gauge whether schemes were efficacious was generally by liaising with trade bodies. When providing support for self-

catering tourism businesses, I would work closely with officials and we had very regular calls with the Association of Scotland's Self Caterers and its Chief Executive Officer Fiona Campbell. Jackie Baillie MSP was extremely diligent on behalf of her tourism constituents. I think we had three or four conference calls with a group of businesses. The results from the fisheries scheme were very good. This was done first.

43. I had Ministerial oversight of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the South of Scotland Enterprise and I liaised with their stewardship regarding their role in issuing financial support. That was a collaborative exercise. When a business enquired about support, I passed on the inquiry to officials and sometimes directly to HIE or SOSE. I had a very good relationship with both bodies and we worked together well.

44. I occasionally asked questions about the scientific basis for the Covid-19 restrictions and in particular the social distancing rules, since the consequences in hospitality were colossal. In restaurants, two metre social distancing rules were applied that would render the business unviable whilst one metre could be managed with partial lifting of lockdown [FE1/008 - INQ000650952].

### **Analysis and Reflections**

45. Proper records are required for there to be an effective compensation regime. Had there been a register of those operating tourism as a business, as there is I believe in Portugal, it would have been much easier to administer.

46. I cannot recall the detail of these matters after the passage of time. But I did, as a matter of general habit and practice, pursue as Minister in all my work, the approach recommended by Rudyard Kipling when he said;

“I keep six honest serving-  
(They taught me all I knew)  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who....”

### **Additional Documents and Informal Messaging Platforms**

47. I did not use WhatsApp or any other messaging platforms to communicate with Ministerial colleagues during the pandemic.

### **Statement of Truth**

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

**Signed:**

Personal Data

**Dated:** 10 September 2025