

Witness Name: Paul Johnston

Statement No. 2

Exhibits: PJ2

Dated: 09 September 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF PAUL JOHNSTON

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

1. I am Paul Johnston, former Director-General Communities of the Scottish Government. During the period from March 2015 to March 2021, I was Director General for Education, Communities and Justice within the Scottish Government. In March 2021, my role changed to become Director General for Communities. I held this role until March 2023 when I left government. I am now the Chief Executive of Public Health Scotland.
2. I have prepared this witness statement myself by reference to records and factual material provided to me by Scottish Government officials. Unless stated otherwise, the facts 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.

Roles and Relationships

3. In my role as Director-General Communities, I was responsible for ensuring that ministerial objectives and priorities were delivered effectively. I was a member of the Executive Team of the Scottish Government and was Accountable Officer for the portfolios within my area of responsibility. As such, I was accountable for the propriety and regularity of the finances under my stewardship, and for the economic, effective and efficient use of resources. I was the lead adviser to the Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers with responsibility for these portfolios. In terms of policy, I had responsibility for social security, housing, social justice, equalities, human rights, local government and public service reform. I worked with Aileen Campbell as Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government between June 2018 and May 2021, and with Shona Robison as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government from June 2021 to March 2023.
4. During the pandemic, the entire business of government was focused on the pandemic response. As such, significant elements of business as usual were paused and staff across the organisation were expected to contribute to the pandemic response. My involvement in preparing an economic response to the pandemic was limited, given that this was the focus for colleagues in DG Economy. However, in my Director General role, during the pandemic, much of my focus was on the mitigation of social harms, ensuring there was a framework of support for vulnerable individuals, children and young people and communities. The funding of local government and the third sector also fell within my responsibilities and as such the channelling of support to these organisations during the pandemic was a relevant concern of mine.
5. During the early part of 2020, and as the scale of the pandemic was becoming better known, I was involved in many discussions with the Executive Team and with the Ministers whom I supported. Within the

Executive Team, my focus was on supporting Scotland's response to the pandemic, with a particular focus on preventing death and ensuring the NHS could continue to function. Economic and social considerations were seen as less significant, certainly in the earlier days of the pandemic. I think it was both understandable and appropriate that the initial response of government prioritised the measures needed to prevent death and support the continued functioning of the NHS. However, with the consideration and imposition of restrictions such as social distancing, requirements to stay at home and the closure of schools and commercial premises it was recognised that urgent work was needed to mitigate social and economic harm. I recall discussions about both social and economic harm playing an increasingly prominent role once the scale of the pandemic was recognised and the need for non-pharmaceutical interventions established.

6. I was the lead civil service advisor to the cabinet secretaries with responsibility for communities and local government. During the period January 2020 to June 2022 this Cabinet position was initially held by Aileen Campbell and subsequently held by Shona Robison. It would be my practice to meet regularly with Cabinet Secretaries to ensure that the teams I was responsible for were providing them with the support they were expecting and also to ensure that I was aware of their key priorities and to hear about any issues or concerns they had. The bulk of the day to day work was undertaken by a wider group of civil servants for whom I had responsibility. I felt able to engage openly with both Cabinet Secretaries together with the other Scottish Government Ministers I worked with, including the then Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, given his responsibility for education, followed by his responsibility for Covid recovery.
7. The principal concern of the Cabinet Secretaries for Communities and Local Government was around individual and community wellbeing and the relationship between the Scottish Government, local governments,

community groups and the third sector. The relationships with businesses were recognised as of significant importance. However, it was also recognised that those relationships were supported by the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and by officials within DG Economy.

8. I did not routinely meet with cabinet secretaries and ministers who were leading on the response to the economy. I did however meet very regularly with the officials who supported those ministers. We met as part of the Executive Team, in the four harms meetings and in our cross-government meetings. I had a close working relationship with DG Economy, Liz Ditchburn, at the time. This ensured that we collaborated on the evolving Covid response. I participated in a wide range of discussions in the four harms group covering issues such as the mitigation of social harm, the support needed for children and young people, and the role and funding of local government and the third sector.
9. I had regular engagement with the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, both in his role as Cabinet Secretary for Education and his subsequent role as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery. In my role as DG Communities, I had lead responsibility for supporting him in his Covid recovery responsibilities. I had infrequent contact with the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, attending meetings that she chaired on the handling of the Covid response, where necessary. I was clear from the engagement I had with both the then Deputy First Minister and the then First Minister that the initial focus of the Covid response should be on the mitigation of direct health harms. I saw an increasing focus on social and economic harm as the response progressed and as the nature of social and economic harm became clearer.
10. As far as I can recall, I had no direct contact with UK Ministers. I did however have regular communication with officials in the UK Government throughout the pandemic. This involved telephone calls and meetings with officials in the

Department for Education. For some time, an informal group was established that brought together officials from the four nations in the UK to discuss matters of common concern in relation to education. I attended these meetings on a regular basis to provide a perspective from Scotland and to support effective sharing of issues across the four nations. These meetings did not get into discussion around the economic response to Covid.

11. I met with officials from the Welsh and Northern Ireland administrations in four nations discussions, as referred to above. As I recall, the principal focus of these discussions was on the handling and mitigation of direct Covid harm together with pressing issues around the closing and re-opening of schools and the mitigation of harm to children and young people. I do not recall discussions about the mitigation of economic harm.

12. I had very regular engagement with local government colleagues. I convened regular discussions with key officers in local government. In particular, at the height of the pandemic, I held daily calls with Sally Loudon, Chief Executive of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and Jim Savege, who was then President of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives in Scotland (SOLACE). I convened discussions with a range of other senior officers in local government throughout the pandemic in relation to issues specific to their areas. In addition, I had some contact with third sector and community organisations. I ensured that civil service colleagues in the areas for which I had responsibility were also engaged in detailed discussions with their counterparts in local government. The DG Leadership Team for which I had responsibility was a forum in which we discussed and agreed on the approach we would take, together with roles and responsibilities for action. We had a clear commitment to fostering a spirit of partnership and collaboration with local government and other partners such as colleagues in the third sector.

Fiscal Frameworks

13. I recognised that the ability of the Scottish Government to increase its funding to local government was dependent on the overall financial settlement that the Scottish Government received from the UK Government. In my view, the funding arrangements between the Scottish Government and the UK Government constrained the Scottish Government's ability to formulate its own social and economic response to pandemic. I do not recall raising specific concerns about the existing financial framework within which the Scottish Government operated, especially given that the early response of the UK Government was to allocate additional resources to devolved administrations to support the pandemic response. I recognised the need to operate within the legal boundaries of devolution, in which the overall funding envelope was largely set by the allocation received from the UK Government.
14. The focus of the Scottish Government Ministers I served was to ensure that all available funding was utilised to best effect in achieving strategic goals. From an early stage in the pandemic response, the UK Government increased its financial support to the Scottish Government, as such my focus was on making best use of available resources and ensuring that the Scottish Government did not exceed this spending or spend more than was available to it consistent with my duties as an accountable officer.
15. Information on the Local Government Settlement, including proposed levels of Scottish Government Grants, forecasts of Non Domestic Rates revenues and assumptions around council tax are routinely published in the annual Scottish Budget document [PJ2/001 - INQ000147383], [PJ2/002 - INQ000147384] and subsequently given effect in the annual Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order following the conclusion of the annual Budget (Scotland) Bill process.

16. The aggregate funding available to local government is distributed between the 32 local authorities on the basis of a needs based distribution formula agreed with COSLA on behalf of local authorities. Funding allocations, along with other pertinent information relating to local authority finances are routinely published in the relevant Local Government Finance Circulars [PJ2/003 – INQ000646076].
17. Where additional financial support is made available to local authorities, irrespective of whether that is outwith, or in response to, a whole system civil emergency, the support is administered through the formal financial governance process including the joint Scottish Government and COSLA Settlement and Distribution Group [JP2/004 – INQ000591016].
18. I sought to ensure that the colleagues working within my area of responsibility operated in a way that was fully consistent with the funding arrangements for local government in Scotland. All elements of the pandemic response took place in a context that recognised the constraints of the funding arrangements. I sought to ensure that the best use was made of available resources, consistent with my duties as an accountable officer.
19. In the early stages of the pandemic, the majority of the Scottish Government funding provided towards business support measures was administered through the Local Government Non-Domestic rates system [PJ2/005 - INQ000182996]. Non-Domestic rates, often referred to as business rates, are a tax on Non-Domestic property. The Scottish Government sets the tax rates and national reliefs, while councils collect and administer the tax and have local relief powers. The Local Government and Analytical Services Division (LGASD) was responsible for the design and implementation of the Small Business Grant Funding Schemes (Small Business Grant Fund and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure (RHL) Grant Fund) in 2020-21. These schemes were aimed at keeping companies in business and maintaining productive capacity

so they could recover. The intention was to protect jobs, prevent business closure and promote economic recovery. The funds were in place for the first half of 2020-21. LGASD's Non-Domestic Rates Team was responsible for the design of Non-Domestic rates reliefs, including the Covid-19 Non-Domestic Rates reliefs in 2020-21, 2021-22 and the first three months of 2022-23 [PJ2/006 - INQ000182928]. LGASD was also responsible for providing any required revenue payments to local authorities in the deployment of these grants and adjustment to local government finance to account for the introduction of Covid-19 reliefs.

20. Liaison with local authorities is led by the Scottish Government's Communities and Local Government Directorate (since April 2022 restructured as Local Government and Housing Directorate). This Directorate sat within my area of responsibility, hence the overall engagement that I took forward with key partners in local government.

21. The discussions between ministers and/or officials and COSLA, referenced above, highlighted the fiscal challenges presented to local authorities, not only in terms of the additional cost pressures they faced but also reduced income from, for example, chargeable services such as parking and leisure facilities. Those discussions resulted in additional funding being allocated to local authorities via existing fiscal mechanisms such as the budget process and associated revisions.

22. The decisions to provide additional funding to local authorities were communicated to Parliament and then formalised in a Local Government Finance Circular. An example of the Local Government Finance Circular from March 2020 is provided: [PJ2/007- INQ000182932].

23. Through regular liaison with colleagues in local government I recognised the significant financial constraints that local authorities were facing and the need

for Scottish Government to provide additional support to local authorities directly and to the communities that they served. I am satisfied that every effort was made to allocate additional funding to local authorities. I was dealing regularly with the most senior officials in local government during the height of the pandemic. The funding issues that were raised in these discussions were taken seriously and were addressed through the range of additional funding sources that the Government put in place.

24. The focus of the discussions that I had with senior officials in local government tended to be less about financial allocations, and more about how we are working together to provide the very best possible support to children, adults, and communities across Scotland. We had extensive discussions about the ability of local government to get direct support to vulnerable people, and around the educational and wellbeing needs of children and young people. While many other issues, including funding, were discussed, my strong recollection is that it was the matter of working together to provide the best possible support that had the greatest attention.

25. Looking beyond the specific circumstances of the pandemic, I consider that there is a need to examine the effectiveness of local authority funding, particularly considering social and economic inequalities facing Scotland. The well evidenced concept of “proportionate universalism” advocates for funding to be greatest in the places facing the most significant inequality. Public Health Scotland has recently published a paper on this subject [PJ2/007A - **INQ000653241**]. The concept was developed by Professor Sir Michael Marmot who has of course also provided expert evidence to the Inquiry and may be able to assist the inquiry further with this matter. The concept recognises the merit of universal service provision, but advocates for these services to be best where they are needed most. The Public Health Scotland paper provides some examples of where approaches marked by

proportionate universalism can be adopted, while recognising that it is not applicable in all situations.

26. There is scope to make better use of targeted funding in order to address the long-standing inequalities that saw people from our most disadvantaged communities facing disproportionate impact from the pandemic. Once again, on this point, I would draw attention to some of the evidence that has been produced by Sir Michael Marmot and his colleagues at the Institute of Health Equity (IHE) at University College London. I would highlight to the Inquiry, for example, the report relating to local authority expenditure in England. [PJ2/007B - INQ000653242]. The IHE are undertaking similar analysis for Scotland. I think that the areas of Scotland that face the greatest level of deprivation require the greatest funding so that additional support can be provided for those who need it in areas such as whole family support, childcare, support with employment, help in maximising income and mental health support. In addition, I think it is reasonable to argue that health services should also be best where they are needed most. We know that poorest areas generally experience the lowest healthy life expectancy with many individuals enduring long periods of ill health. High quality, preventative health care with ease of access and continuity of care for those who need it could help prevent early illness and enable people to stay well for longer. Work on this is a current area of focus for Public Health Scotland, working in partnership with Professor Sir Michael Marmot and the Institute of Health Equity in our Collaboration for Health Equity in Scotland. I would invite the Inquiry to consider the funding arrangements for local government in further detail, to examine how this has changed over recent years, and to draw on the evidence around the need for the funding to be linked more closely to levels of deprivation so that local authorities are better able to tackle deprivation-based inequalities.

Support for Jobs – Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)

27. In my capacity as Director-General Communities, I had no involvement in the design, delivery, monitoring, review, amendment, or cessation of the CJRS (a UK Government scheme) therefore, I do not consider that I was sufficiently close to the policy of this scheme to comment on these matters. I understand that colleagues within DG Economy would have been leading on these matters in so far as there was an opportunity to tailor the approach to Scotland.

28. I was, however, updated on the impact of the CJRS during the Executive Team meetings I attended, as well as during the four harms meetings, from colleagues within DG Economy who were liaising regularly with businesses to ensure a full understanding of the CJRS. One area of interest that I brought into these discussions was the need to secure funding for third sector organisations who were struggling financially in light of reduced scope for them to operate and raise revenue. From these meetings I recognised that the CJRS was devised rapidly with minimal consultation due to the emergency situation with which we were faced. My recollection, overall, is that the CJRS was a vital and successful initiative to support businesses and other sectors in Scotland which extended to a suitably wide range of businesses and other employers.

Scotland Furlough Support Grant

29. As Director- General Communities I had no role in the design or delivery of this Scottish Government scheme. Given that I was not involved in the policy decisions in relation to the Scotland Furlough Support Grant, I do not feel able to offer any comment on these matters. This was within the remit of colleagues in DG Economy.

Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)

30. Similarly, I had no involvement in the design, delivery, monitoring, review, amendment, or cessation of the UK Government SEISS. Given my lack of involvement in this scheme, I do not feel able to offer any comments or suggest any recommendations in this regard.

Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme

31. My colleagues in DG Economy were responsible for the design and delivery of this Scottish Government scheme. I was not directly involved in this area of work, however, I was present during Executive Team meetings where aspects of the scheme were discussed. However, as the design and delivery of the scheme did not fall within my area of responsibility, I have no recollection of making any substantive contribution to the discussion. Given my lack of involvement, I am unable to comment on the approach taken by the Scottish Government to the design and delivery of this scheme.

Support for Businesses: Support Administered by the UK Government

32. I am aware that the UK Government introduced a number of schemes to support businesses, namely, the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme, and the Covid Corporate Financing Facility. Again, I had no involvement in the design or delivery of these schemes, nor did I have any role in liaising with the UK Government about these schemes. This was out with my portfolio responsibilities, and I believe colleagues in DG Economy at the time are better placed to offer a view on these matters.

Support Administered in Scotland to Support Businesses

33. A number of key business support schemes were introduced by the Scottish Government including, but not limited to, Non-Domestic Rates Relief, the Small Business Grant Fund and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund. Further details on each scheme are provided below.
34. I am aware that the Scottish Government introduced two Covid-19 Non-Domestic Rates Reliefs on 1 April 2020. The first relief was a 1.6% universal Non-Domestic Rates Relief, which was automatically applied by councils to all Non-Domestic properties' rates bills and the second relief was a 100% relief for retail, hospitality, and leisure properties in Scotland.
35. The Small Business Grant Fund and the Retail Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund were announced on 18 March 2020 [PJ2/008 - INQ000587030]. The decision making around these schemes fell within the remit of my DG area, however, I do not recall having any direct involvement in the decision making regarding these schemes due to the range of work that was underway, the breadth of my responsibilities as DG and the need for decisions to be made at pace.
36. The measures taken by the Scottish Government to support business were designed to protect businesses that were unable to trade fully due to the pandemic and the measures taken to prevent health harms. Economic policy was focused on survival support following the non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) required, so that the economy could operate normally. Support was also intended to enable businesses to comply with the NPIs. At this point economic harm was one of the four harms which was considered in ministerial decision making. While it was relevant to aspects of my work, my primary focus was on the mitigation of social harms.

37. The overarching strategy employed by the Scottish Government to support businesses was a matter for Cabinet to decide. The portfolio lead was provided by the Cabinet Secretary for Economy working alongside colleagues in DG Economy. The strategy was kept under regular review by the cabinet and by relevant ministers. It was also discussed at the four harms meetings which I attended. As the pandemic progressed, ministerial oversight of both social and economic harm was considered in the Communities and Public Services Ministerial Group that I supported. These meetings were chaired by the DFM and included a wide range of Cabinet Secretaries, including the Cabinet Secretary for Economy.

38. I was responsible for considering the support needed for the third sector as a distinct employer and provider of support. One tangible example of targeted support was the development and implementation of the Third Sector Resilience Fund (TSRF) and following that, the Community and Third Sector Recovery Programme. The TSRF opened on 25 March 2020 and was allocated £20m. Policy officials within my area of responsibility worked with external partners including the Corra Foundation and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations on the design and delivery of the fund. While supporting the overall establishment of the funding support I did not have day to day involvement in its design or delivery.

39. It was recognised that the quantum of funding available for specific schemes such as the TSRF was subject to the overall funding of the Scottish Government.

40. Data in relation to the size, function, and requirements of the third sector was available within Scotland and I do not recall requesting access to HMRC data.

Transport Schemes

41. I had no involvement in the design or delivery of schemes to support the transport sector, such as the Covid-19 Support Grant, Covid-19 Support Grant-Restart, or the Network Support Grant. These schemes would have been under the Portfolio responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Michael Matheson.

Alleviating Hardship

42. I had no input into decisions to apply uplifts of Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits therefore, I am unable to comment on the design of the uplifts. These are reserved matters, and I would not expect to have had involvement in them. Equally, I had no involvement in monitoring the operation and effect of the uplifts, so I am unable to comment on the Scottish Government's monitoring of the operation and the uplift.

43. My recollection is that the uplifts were welcomed by the Scottish Government as they provided additional income that supported individuals and families through the pandemic. However, I do not have direct evidence as to their effectiveness in Scotland.

44. I recall significant concern on the part of Scottish Government Ministers about the cessation of the uplifts, and colleagues within my area of responsibility prepared correspondence for Ministers to send to their UK counterparts to make the case for continued support to be provided [PJ2/009 – INQ000620528]. Any decisions on cessation of the uplift were taken by the UK Government. My recollection is that the representations made by the Scottish Government around the need for these uplifts to continue did not result in change. Ultimately, the Scottish Government was limited in its ability to make up the shortfall that the cessation of the uplifts created for individuals

and families, at least in the short term. The key area of work that was being taken forward was around the continued development of the devolved system of social security in Scotland and, in particular, the development and introduction of the Scottish Child Payment. Following its initial launch, consideration turned to the scope for increased payments to be made to eligible families.

45. My recollection is that the introduction of the Scottish child payment in February 2021 was seen as an important measure in Scotland to mitigate poverty that would have been made worse by the cessation of the universal credit temporary uplift. I saw the Scottish Child Payment as a very significant anti-poverty measure. To the best of my knowledge, Scotland remains the only nation in the UK to make this payment in addition to other benefits. My concern as Accountable Officer was around the affordability of the payment from within the budget for which I had responsibility. However, given that the introduction and funding of the payment was a priority for the First Minister and Cabinet as a whole it was agreed that funding would be made available centrally to cover anticipated and actual costs. There was no expectation that the existing DG Communities budget would bear the additional costs of the Scottish Child Payment.

Support Administered in Scotland to Alleviate Hardship

46. The Scottish Government introduced a number of funds to alleviate hardship including, the Local Authority Discretionary Fund [PJ2/010 – INQ000646080] and the Local Authority Covid-19 Economic Recovery Fund [PJ2/011 – INQ000553486].

47. The Local Authority Discretionary Fund (LADF) was specifically designed to give local authorities flexibility to support businesses in response to local need [PJ2/010 – INQ000646080]. With some parameters the fund gave local

authorities wide discretion to support specific businesses impacted by Covid-19 restrictions although in many cases the smaller local authorities simply replicated or drew heavily on the schemes created by larger local authority areas.

48. The Covid-19 Economic Recovery Fund was introduced to provide targeted support for business and communities in Scotland [PJ2/011 – INQ000553486].

49. The overarching policy rationale of the Scottish Government for introducing measure to alleviate hardship was to minimise social harm. These funds were outwith my area of responsibility and were taken forward by colleagues in DG Economy. Colleagues in DG Communities were responsible for providing advice to Ministers on the operation of the Scottish Welfare Fund, liaising with other officials in the Scottish Government on the overall budget available for the fund. I do not recall any personal involvement in the preparation of guidance on the operation of the fund. This was delegated to officials within DG Communities who worked closely with local government colleagues on the operation of the Fund and on the preparation and updating of guidance on the fund. However, the operation of the fund was within my overall authority as accountable officer within DG Communities.

50. In addition, I had responsibility for the development of devolved benefits that were administered by Social Security Scotland. These benefits were designed to provide support to individuals who were experiencing poverty and hardship. I chaired the Social Security Programme Board which had responsibility for overseeing the development of the range of devolved benefits that now exists.

51. A significant element of the publicly funded support that is available for people experiencing hardship continues to come from the UK Government led benefits system. This was not within my responsibility.

52. Work was underway to ensure effective collaboration with DWP on the devolution of benefits, and on connections at a local level to ensure that individuals experiencing hardship could receive effective, joined up support.

Inequalities and Vulnerable Groups

53. Equality Impact Assessments played an important role in assisting the Scottish Government to comply with its Public Sector Equality Duty [PJ2/012 – INQ000590788]. Scottish Government completed an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on the Strategic Framework which was used as an overarching EQIA for all business support grants given the pace at which we provided emergency support funding to businesses. While these EQIAs were published retrospectively officials assessed the impact of these funds across all demographics during policy development.

54. Individual EQIAs were completed retrospectively because given the severe economic impact of the necessary public health measures in place throughout the pandemic, the Scottish Government's priority was to ensure emergency payments reached businesses as quickly as possible, support sectors most impacted by restrictions, and protect jobs.

55. In addition to business support, the Scottish Government sought to provide a wide range of support to individuals who were most at risk of harm during the pandemic. This was a significant focus of my work as DG Communities. For example, a national assistance helpline was established for those who were most at risk of harm during the pandemic to access support for essential services. Funds were made available to tackle isolation and loneliness. Funds

were put in place to support most acutely impacted minority ethnic communities and additional funding was put in place to support women and children at increased risk of violence and abuse. A temporary ban was put on eviction notices in private and rental sectors. A community recovery fund was put in place to support youth work and community education. Significant funding was provided to support education recovery in recognition of the huge impact that the pandemic had on children and young people. The Scottish Government recognised that the impacts of the pandemic were borne unequally and sought to ensure that equality and inclusion placed a central role in recovery – reflected in the covid strategic framework document [PJ2/013 – INQ000302532].

56. A significant challenge was around the scale of harm vulnerable groups faced and the limited level of funding available to the Scottish Government. In addition, there was a need to weigh competing priorities to decide how best to get support to those most in need. For example, free food boxes were delivered directly to people facing the highest clinical risk from Covid-19 while, in other cases, third sector organisations were given discretion to provide support based on their assessment of need. Ultimately very significant economic and social inequalities continue to persist and indeed were made worse by the pandemic. While I am confident that the government's measures mitigated some of the most immediate harms, there remains the need for significant effort across Scotland to address social and economic inequality and the harm that this brings, including harm from a future pandemic.

57. In my view, the Scottish Government led the way in considering the need to tackle inequalities within the resource constraints it faced and in the emergency context of the pandemic, including the needs of vulnerable groups in its response through recovery that I have described above.

58. While the measures introduced by the Scottish Government were valuable there remains a need to secure greater progress in tackling inequalities across the system.

Data and Modelling

59. Work on data and modelling was taken forward in part by colleagues within the Local Government and Analytical Services Division which sat within the Directorate for Local Government and Communities, within DG Communities. This Division provided regular data in areas such as local government finance and the funding of the third sector that informed the policy decision making that has been described in this statement. The data and modelling that they produced was shared with Ministers and with officials in forums such as the four harms group. There was an awareness that due to the emergency nature of the pandemic response the data and modelling on which decisions required to be made were limited. The main source of data and modelling that informed the pandemic response was not taken forward by officials from within my area.

Analysis and Reflections

60. I acknowledge my limited ability to respond in detail to many of the questions asked by the Inquiry due to the fact that many of the decisions around the economic response to the pandemic were the responsibility of other colleagues working within the Scottish Government. I would, however, offer the following concluding reflections:

61. The Scottish Government worked closely with businesses, local government and third sector organisations to ensure that the funding available from the UK Government was utilized to best effect to support those facing the greatest and most immediate hardship from the pandemic.

62. Local government played a crucial role in providing business support and worked at speed to deliver this help. There is learning around the pace of support and the extent to which close partnership working between the Scottish Government and local government enabled effective local support. On a personal level, I was reminded time and again during the pandemic that local government was often better placed to work locally than national government and had many of the existing mechanisms and relationships in place that could be utilized and adapted where needed to support the pandemic response. One example of this was the work to establish a telephone helpline to assist vulnerable people who needed help with food, medicine, or other needs. In discussion with local government colleagues, I was reminded of the existing telephone support lines that they had available and ultimately the national service that was put in place directed callers in a seamless way to the existing (or enhanced) local authority support line.

63. Local authorities also had existing relationships within their communities through mechanisms such as democratically elected councillors and community councils. This ensured that they were hearing what was going on in communities. In addition, they had well established networks with a range of third sector and community organisations providing a wide range of support in areas such as befriending and social and personal care.

64. Further, as the providers of early learning and school education, local authorities could report directly on the views of teachers, parents, and young people. When schools were closed, they led on the provision of an in person offer for the children of key workers. It would have been difficult if not impossible for national government to develop the key worker offer at the pace needed. Local government developed and implemented the offer within days, tailored to local need and availability.

65. Huge regional economic inequalities persist in Scotland, and we know that the people facing the greatest inequalities are more vulnerable to harm from a future pandemic. It is vital that we have a resolute focus across the public and third sector, and with business, to address these inequalities across Scotland. That is a focus for me in my current role in Public Health Scotland, working closely with both the Scottish Government and local government. The publication of the Population Health Framework (reference) [PJ2/014 – INQ000646081] represents an attempt to lay clear foundations for a long term and cross sector approach to addressing these inequalities. The Collaboration for Health Equity in Scotland, led by Public Health Scotland and the Institute for Health Equity, specifically focuses on accelerating improvement in three local areas and applying the learning from these areas on a national basis.

66. I am very happy to provide any further information or evidence that the Inquiry might find useful.

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.

Personal Data

Signed: _____

Dated: 09/09/2025