

Witness Name: John Swinney

Statement No.: 4

Exhibits: JS4

Dated: 11 September 2025

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF JOHN RAMSAY SWINNEY

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In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 request dated 28 April 2025 in connection with Module 9, I John Ramsay Swinney, will say as follows: -

1. I am John Ramsay Swinney of the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP. I was appointed First Minister of Scotland by His Majesty King Charles III on 8 May 2024. I am currently a member of the Scottish Parliament for Perthshire North, having served in this role from 2011. I previously served as an MSP for the North Tayside Constituency from 1999 to 2011 and served as a Westminster MP for the Tayside North Constituency from May 1997 to June 2001.
2. I served as Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth in the Scottish Government from May 2007 to May 2016, Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills from May 2016 to May 2021 and as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery from May 2021 to March 2023. I also served as Deputy First Minister in the Scottish Government from November 2014 to March 2023.
3. This witness statement relates to Module 9 of the Inquiry's investigations which examines the economic response to the Covid-19 pandemic between 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022. During this period, as outlined above, I acted as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, a role within which I had no economic responsibilities. I also acted as Deputy First Minister to the Scottish Government and, subsequent to May 2021, as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery. I did not

have any portfolio responsibilities for matters relating to finance or the economy as a consequence of these roles.

4. 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***

5. My role as Deputy First Minister involved supporting the First Minister in her work, participating in the collective decision making of the Scottish Government and providing leadership and direction on matters which either did not immediately fall within the portfolio responsibilities of my Ministerial colleagues or were cross-government in nature. My role as Deputy First Minister did not include portfolio responsibility for matters relating to the economy or finance which were, in the early stages of the pandemic, the portfolio responsibilities of the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, positions held by Fiona Hyslop and Kate Forbes respectively. Following the election in May 2021, these roles were combined with Kate Forbes becoming the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy.
6. During the pandemic, my role as Deputy First Minister also included additional responsibility for managing the strategic response to Covid-19 on a resilience basis, responsibility for the development and implementation of the Four Harms Framework [JS4/001 - INQ000247192] and contributing to the collective discussions and decision making at Cabinet regarding issues relating to the pandemic. If an issue emerged that did not readily fall within the responsibility of any of my Ministerial colleagues, or was cross-government / strategic in nature, I would provide the necessary leadership.
7. My role as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery was introduced by the First Minister in May 2021 to oversee the policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic and to drive cross government action on Covid recovery in coordination with the

wider public sector. In this role I was responsible for the coordination of the Scottish Government's response to the pandemic which included leading the cross-government coordination of Covid recovery policies, devising a strategy for the relaxation of restrictions and maintaining oversight of the delivery and outcomes across portfolios. In my capacity as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery, I attended cabinet meetings during which the Scottish Government's economic response to the pandemic was discussed. However, as outlined above, I did not hold any power to exercise economy portfolio responsibility which was the responsibility of my Ministerial colleagues, who would take forward necessary dialogue with stakeholders in their policy area, identify key decisions and either take those decisions or seek the necessary authority / agreement to make those decisions. Therefore, my role, in relation to the economic response to the pandemic, was limited to participating in Cabinet level discussions regarding the requirement for funding schemes which would ultimately be taken forward by my Ministerial colleagues with portfolio responsibilities in that area. The role of Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery came to an end in March 2023 when I left government.

8. During the early part of the pandemic, from April 2020, I chaired the Communities and Public Services Ministerial Group which was attended by all education, communities and justice Ministers, along with senior policy officials with social policy portfolios including, the Chief Social Policy Advisor, the Chief Social Researcher, the Chief Scientific Advisor and the Director-General Exchequer. The purpose of this group was to ensure cohesion of the public service response to the pandemic, with a key focus on social harms. It also provided a forum to collectively consider the differential impacts of Covid-19 across different societal groups.
  
9. The First Minister also chaired a Covid Economy Ministerial Group which I often attended. This group comprised of the First Minister, myself, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work & Culture [Fiona Hyslop], the Cabinet Secretary for Finance [Kate Forbes], the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity [Michael Matheson], the Cabinet Secretary for Rural, Economy and Tourism [Fergus Ewing] and the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform [Roseanna Cunningham]. Officials also attended these

meetings including, the Permanent Secretary [Leslie Evans] and the Chief Economic Adviser [Gary Gillespie]. As above, these meetings provided a forum for those Cabinet Ministers with finance and economic responsibilities to present updates and evidence to the group which formed the basis of discussion amongst the members and the setting of strategic direction. Recommendations and / or policy proposals formulated in this group would be taken to Cabinet for further consideration. This group merely focused on the impact of the pandemic on our economy. Copies of meeting minutes have been provided to the Inquiry [JS4/003 **INQ000652029**], [JS4/004 - INQ000652030], [JS4/005 - INQ000652031], [JS4/006 - INQ000652032], [JS4/007 - INQ000652033], [JS4/008 - INQ000652034], [JS4/009 - INQ000652035], [JS4/010 - INQ000652036], [JS4/011 - INQ000652037], [JS4/012 - INQ000652038], [JS4/013 - INQ000652039], [JS4/014 - INQ000652040], [JS4/015 - INQ000652041], [JS4/016 - INQ000652042], [JS4/017 - INQ000652043], [JS4/018 - INQ000652044], [JS4/019 - INQ000652045], [JS4/020 - INQ000652046], [JS4/021 - INQ000652047], [JS4/022 - INQ000652048], [JS4/023 - INQ000652049], [JS4/024 - INQ000652050], [JS4/025 - INQ000652051], [JS4/026 - INQ000652052].

10. Later in the relevant period, as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery, I chaired the Public Services Ministerial Group within the Scottish Government, which brought together relevant parties to create and then oversee implementation of the Covid Recovery Strategy, which is discussed further below. Attendance included a broad range of Ministers and officials with responsibility for public services, including the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government [Shona Robison]. The policy issues discussed at such Ministerial meetings would be fed into cabinet papers and would be the content for decision making at Cabinet. The minutes for these meetings have been provided to the Inquiry.
  
11. Given my limited role in the economic response to the pandemic, I did not have a close working relationship with Liz Ditchburn, the Director- General Economy or Alyson Stafford, the Director- General Exchequer. Since the overall range of my responsibilities was wide, I worked on occasion with a broad range of policy officials. In so far as my Covid Recovery responsibilities were concerned, I worked closely with the Director-General Strategy and External Affairs [Ken Thomson], the

Chief Medical Officer [Gregor Smith], the National Clinical Director [Jason Leitch] and the Director of Strategy [Dominic Munro].

12. At Ministerial level, I worked closely on Covid strategy issues with, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, initially Jeane Freeman and latterly Humza Yousaf as well as the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes and the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Aileen Campbell.
13. My working relationships with all of these individuals were formal, courteous and serious. At all times I would be addressed as “Deputy First Minister” or “DFM” and other Cabinet Secretaries would be addressed by their title or by their formal name. I believe these relationships were conducted in a manner that was appropriate for the nature of the task in hand. The nature of my working relationships with my Ministerial colleagues would invariably involve, my careful consideration of a presentation given by the relevant Ministerial portfolio lead to Cabinet, after which followed thorough and open discussion of the evidence before us, challenging that evidence where necessary. I do not believe that the existence of courteous relationships amongst people who worked intensively together in any way impaired the decision-making process.
14. I also worked closely with the then First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon. Our dialogue would be taken forward formally at various meetings and also in more informal discussions. We would discuss matters around the progress of the pandemic and the nature of the decisions we might have to take on a regular basis.
15. As outlined, until the election in 2021, Fiona Hyslop was responsible for decision making relating to the economy and Kate Forbes was responsible for decision making relating to Finance. Both Cabinet Secretaries worked together on the pandemic support schemes. Responsibility for managing the public funds necessary to tackle the pandemic rested with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, as part of her role in managing the Scottish budget. Along with the First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance was involved in making the case to the United Kingdom Government for the allocation of additional resources to tackle the pandemic. This relationship was overseen by the First Minister who

provided strategic leadership and, in my view, this relationship between them worked well.

16. I would attend a range of inter Ministerial meetings with the UK Government which changed character and format over the duration of the pandemic. The main meetings I attended were the General Public Services Ministerial Implementation Group (GPSMIG) and, in my role as Cabinet Secretary for Education, Four Nations Education Ministerial calls. I did not engage with economy or finance ministers from the UK Government, nor did I attend the Economic and Business Response Implementation Group. As outlined, this was the responsibility of my Ministerial colleagues.
17. In my capacity as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, up to May 2021, I would participate in calls with my counterparts in the UK, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments, including Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Kirsty Williams MS and Peter Weir MLA respectively. I would also interact with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP in relation to general pandemic handling matters and had the occasional interaction with the First Minister of Wales, Rt Hon Mark Drakeford MS and the Counsel General of Wales, Mick Antoniw MS. I found these interactions courteous and professional. I did not have any engagement with economy or finance ministers in the UK Government or devolved administrations, this would have been taken forward by other Ministerial colleagues and I would have no direct experience of this.
18. Advice in relation to the handling of the pandemic would be provided to me by a range of civil servants across a number of disciplines, including the economy, to assist me in fulfilling my responsibilities as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery. I recall that economic advice was provided, often in the form of presentations by the Chief Economist, Gary Gillespie, to the Covid Economy Ministerial Group regarding the impact of Covid-19 on the economy. These presentations were detailed and provided Ministers with important data regarding the sectoral impact of the pandemic upon which decisions would be made by those with portfolio responsibility. I considered this data only as part of my collective decision making responsibilities and for my wider purposes, I considered the data to be detailed and sufficiently thorough.

19. I received a broad range of advice to enable decisions to be made within my portfolio and to support discussion with Cabinet colleagues. For example, in the summer of 2021, I met with more than 60 stakeholders from business, the third sector, local government and academia with key stakeholders including COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) , SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) and the Scottish Resilience Partnership which informed my development of the Covid Recovery Strategy.
20. Gold Command meetings were “pre meets” where there was preliminary discussion about the issues that had to go to Cabinet. They were not decision making forums but rather they provided a forum for key Cabinet Secretaries to discuss issues prior to attending Cabinet meetings, enabling the formulation of coherent government positions. For example, it was through this forum that the Four Harms Framework was developed. To my knowledge, there was certainly no intention to exclude Kate Forbes from attending these meetings, and, as far as I am aware, Ms Forbes was invited to the meetings between September 2020 and January 2021, in accordance with my expectation that all relevant Cabinet Secretaries were invited to attend.

### ***Funding and Fiscal Frameworks***

21. The financial rules applied by the UK Government essentially require the Scottish Government to live within a fixed budget once a financial year has started. The Fiscal Framework, which is agreed between HM Treasury and the Scottish Government, prevents the Scottish Government from creating reserves to withstand future economic shocks as might arise from the economic consequences of a pandemic. The ability to hold reserves to make provision for future events is strictly limited by the terms of the Fiscal Framework.
22. The measures taken by the Scottish Government to tackle the pandemic were funded through the Scottish Budget, under the control of the Scottish Government, and as approved by the Scottish Parliament. Those funds were comprised of a combination of revenue provided through the block grant from the UK Government and taxes raised in Scotland, namely income tax, landfill tax, land and buildings transaction tax and non-domestic rates. The Scottish Government took a series of

decisions essentially within the parameters set by its existing budget and any additional allocations from the UK Government. This would have involved reallocating resources that were intended for other purposes within the Scottish budget. The scale of additional resources required to deal with the pandemic was out with the scope of the Scottish Government to raise within its existing powers. Therefore, in relation to Covid-19, additional funding, in recognition of the significant costs arising out of handling the pandemic, was calculated in proportion to allocations to equivalent UK Government departments and made available through the block grant received from the UK Government. This included, for example, additional funds that were received by the Scottish Government in accordance with the Barnett Formula in recognition of additional funding provided to NHS England / Department for Health and Social Care to support the response to the pandemic. Decisions by the UK Government, for example, to pay furlough were a source of significant relief to the Scottish Government as such an approach would have been inconceivable within the resources of the Scottish Government.

23. In my view, the Fiscal Framework between the Scottish and UK Governments constrained the Scottish Government's ability to formulate and maintain the economic response to the pandemic as the current framework does not provide any flexibility to deal with emergency situations, such as a pandemic. As the budget is fixed at the start of the financial year, there is no flexibility to build up reserves to respond to unexpected events. The Scottish Government did not receive much notice from the UK Government about additional funding through Barnett consequential and, although the Scottish Government could decide how to spend the money, there was generally an expectation that it would be spent in accordance with what the UK Government was doing. I believe my Ministerial colleagues shared similar views and that those with portfolio responsibility for these matters raised similar concerns with their counterparts in the UK Government.

24. I consider that the funding arrangements between the Scottish Government and Local Authorities worked well and enhanced the ability of the Scottish Government to respond to the pandemic. My Ministerial colleagues had a good level of

engagement with these and other stakeholders and many financial schemes were developed as a result of this engagement.

25. In so far as funding and the Fiscal Framework is concerned, I would invite the Chair to consider making a recommendation to the extent that any Fiscal Framework should be sufficiently flexible in order to deal with an emergency situation such as a pandemic.

***Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)***

26. As outlined above, I did not have portfolio responsibility for matters relating to the economy or finance during the specified period. Therefore, I did not have any involvement in the design, delivery or monitoring of the CJRS, which was a UK Government scheme, nor did I have any engagement with the UK Government in relation to the review, amendment or cessation of the scheme.

27. I considered the CJRS to be a welcome measure to address the economic harm created by the pandemic. I was not sufficiently close enough to the details of the scheme to offer any further comment on the workings of the scheme however, I believe that my Ministerial colleagues would have made representations to their counterparts in the UK Government as necessary.

***Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)***

28. Similarly, I did not have any involvement in the design, delivery or monitoring of the SEISS, another UK Government scheme, nor did I have any engagement with the UK Government in relation to the review, amendment or cessation of the scheme. I am therefore unable to provide any further views on the operation or delivery of this particular scheme.

***Newly Self Employed Hardship Fund***

29. The Newly Self-Employed Hardship Fund was introduced by the Scottish Government to direct financial support towards those who were impacted by Covid-19 restrictions but who were not eligible for the UK Government SEISS. I was present during a Cabinet meeting on 21 April 2021, during which the Cabinet

Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture [Fiona Hyslop] confirmed that £34 million was allocated by the Scottish Government to create a Newly Self Employed Hardship Fund. However, I was not involved in the design, delivery or monitoring of this scheme other than to contribute towards cabinet level discussions regarding the work that would be taken forward by portfolio Ministers. The Inquiry has already been provided with Cabinet meeting minutes.

***Support Administered by the UK Government***

30. My expectation would have been that relevant Scottish Ministers and officials would have had discussions with HM Treasury and other UK Government departments on the support schemes introduced by the UK Government including, the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme, the Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme and the Covid Corporate Financing Facility. I was not involved in these discussions or in the design or delivery of any of these UK Government schemes, as such, I am unable to comment on the operation of them however, the final decisions on the design and delivery of these schemes would have rested with the UK Government.

31. I had no input into the decision of the UK Government to apply uplifts to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit. As this work was taken forward by other Ministerial colleagues I do not feel able to provide any further comment on this scheme.

***Support for Businesses Administered in Scotland***

32. A number of key schemes were administered in Scotland to support businesses including, Non Domestic Rates Relief, the Pivotal Enterprise Resilience Fund, the Local Authority Discretionary Fund and the Local Authority Covid-19 Economic Recovery Fund. These funds were introduced in order to address gaps which had been identified in some of the UK Government funds.

33. The Non Domestic Rates Relief, Pivotal Enterprise Resilience Fund and the Local Authority Discretionary Fund were taken forward by the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture [Fiona Hyslop] whilst the Local Authority Covid-

19 Economic Recovery Fund was taken forward by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance [Kate Forbes]. My involvement in these funds was limited to participation in Cabinet level discussions whereby the portfolio leads would provide key updates to Cabinet. Given the parameters of my role, as outlined above, I did not have any direct responsibility for these schemes, accordingly I consider that other Ministerial colleagues are better positioned to comment on the design, delivery and monitoring of these particular schemes.

### ***Transport Schemes***

34. Similarly, I was not involved in the design or delivery of schemes to support the transport sector, such as the Covid-19 Support Grant, the Covid-19 Support Grant Re-start or the Network Support Grant. Whilst these schemes were within the devolved competence of the Scottish Government, they were out with my portfolio responsibilities and would instead have been the responsibility of Michael Matheson as Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport at the time. I am therefore unable to comment further on the design or delivery of these schemes.

### ***Inequalities and Vulnerable Groups***

35. As Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery, I was acutely aware of the need to ensure that inequalities and economically vulnerable groups were considered as part of my key decision making. There was a realisation that disabled people and people with vulnerabilities had to have services and support measures that directly targeted and addressed their circumstances. This was reflected in the Covid Recovery Strategy which was published on 5 October 2021 [JS4/002 - INQ000131075]. The purpose of the strategy was to address the systemic inequalities made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic, make progress towards a wellbeing economy and accelerate inclusive person-centered public services.

36. The Covid Recovery Strategy was underpinned by the Four Harms framework and recognised that the impact of the pandemic was not felt evenly. There was a recognition that Covid affected people's health in different ways, with higher levels

of morbidity and mortality in certain groups including older people, men, disabled people, minority ethnic groups and those living in the most deprived areas. The strategy also recognised that lower income households were less able to save and have taken on more debt, existing job market inequalities have been reinforced with women, disabled people and minority ethnic people facing persistent employment and pay gaps. Specifically in relation to the economy, the strategy recognised that the pandemic exacerbated and reinforced existing job market inequalities including, persistent gender employment and pay gaps with a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities and unpaid household work borne by women and gaps in employment rates for minority ethnic people, particular minority ethnic women.

37. In my preparation of the Covid Recovery Strategy, equality matters were discussed during the Public Services Ministerial Group meetings I chaired, as referred to above. These meetings were also attended by officials within the Equalities, Inclusion and Human Rights Directorate within the Scottish Government who would provide advice on equalities matters, as necessary. These meetings provided an important forum in which Ministers and officials could share critical intelligence about stakeholder attitudes and concerns. Ministers were also engaged in their own constituency activity that provided an important channel of information about the issues that were arising in communities. All of that feedback was openly invited and considered to be crucial to ensuring the pandemic response of the Scottish Government addressed the concerns raised by stakeholders and members of the public.

38. I also held a series of four open dialogue events with stakeholders over the summer of 2021 to gain further insight from a broad range of organisations working directly with people adversely impacted by the pandemic as well as from local authorities, business organisations and third sector organisations including Child Poverty Action Group, Scottish Women's Aid, Scottish Refugee Council and Glasgow Disability Alliance. The collective national focus on recovery was welcomed by participants.

39. A fundamental consideration in the policy making process of the Scottish Government is the necessity to ensure that all policy measures are compatible with

the legal duties of Scottish Ministers as provided for in the Equality Act 2010. The awareness of that duty is clearly understood within the Scottish Government and should be applied in all circumstances. The then Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People, wrote to all Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers in April 2020 to remind all Ministers of the requirement to properly consider the duties of the Scottish Government under equalities legislation in relation to all actions during the pandemic. Paying particular regard to the needs and perspectives of vulnerable groups was a critical component of the Four Harms Framework. Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA) were also prepared by the Scottish Government, with various Directorates advised on the necessary considerations by the Equalities Directorate. I understand copies of the EQIAs undertaken have been made available to the Inquiry.

40. Early in the lockdown period, Ministers acknowledged the multiple harms that could be created from Covid-19; direct health harm, indirect health harm, social harm and economic harm. This acknowledgement led to the establishment of the Four Harms Framework which acquired a central role in enabling Ministers to evaluate the impact of multiple harms on society and the economy and, as outlined above, underpinned the Covid Recovery Strategy. I gave Ministerial leadership to the formulation of this framework and consider it provided a very strong, core analytical tool to enable effective Ministerial decision making in ensuring societal recovery from Covid-19. This Framework, along with Ministers exercising their responsibility to consider the implications of all decisions from an equalities perspective, enabled Ministers to take into account the differential and specific impact of Covid-19 restrictions on all walks of life.

41. I believe the interests of vulnerable groups were effectively and appropriately considered by Ministers. I cannot comment on how and to what extent the UK Government take into account inequalities and economically vulnerable groups in its economic response to the pandemic as I have no direct experience of this.

### ***Data and Modelling***

42. I have addressed above at paragraph 18 the contexts and purposes for which I used economic data and modelling. Relevant economic data and modelling was

also routinely integrated into the Four Harms framework and analysis used to support key decision making across the pandemic. I do not recall any particular challenges arising from the quality or quantity of this data in relation to my responsibilities or in relation to the collective decision-making processes in which I took part. I cannot comment on the use of data, economic modelling or scenario analysis by the UK Government as I have no direct experience of this. I have no specific recommendations in this area to make to the Chair.

### ***Analysis and Reflections***

43. On reflection, I consider important lessons to be learned from the economic response to the pandemic include; a need for greater financial flexibility to be able to handle an eventuality of this type as, whilst devolved governments can set some tax rates, this must be done before the financial year starts. In my view, it would be beneficial to have the option to build up reserves as a means of smoothing the financial impact thus providing a greater ability to respond to the challenge. Furthermore, I consider that greater interaction with the UK Government regarding the financial implications of planning for a pandemic is crucial. In my view, it would also be helpful to undertake scenario planning to aid understanding of what different sets of interventions look like to protect the public and the economy in difficult times.

### ***Documents***

44. I have provided all emails, informal communications, diary and notebook entries relating to the management of the pandemic to the Inquiry. I do not hold any further material relevant to Module 9.

### **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:** 10 September 2025