

**Advice NI Response to Request for a Witness Statement and Documents for the Covid-19 Inquiry (Module 9: Economic Interventions)**

**M9/R9R/ADVNI**

**Bob Stronge, Chief Executive, Advice NI**

**30<sup>th</sup> April 2025**

**I, Bob Stronge, will say as follows:**

**Part A: Introduction to Advice NI**

1. As Chief Executive, I lead Advice NI, a membership organisation and service provider that exists to provide leadership, representation, support and services for the Independent Advice Network and people in Northern Ireland. We support 66 members across NI, providing advice on benefits, debt, housing, employment and consumer related issues.
2. Advice NI also delivers a range of advice services to the public via a Freephone helpline which includes Debt & Money, Benefits & Welfare Reform, Tax Credits & HMRC products/services, EU Settlement Scheme and Business Debt. See [www.adviceni.net](http://www.adviceni.net) for more on the work of the independent advice network.
3. See Exhibits BS/02 [INQ000613187], BS/06 [INQ000613191], BS/07 [INQ000613192], BS/08 [INQ000613193], BS/12 [INQ000613197], BS/19 [INQ000613204], BS/21 [INQ000613206] and BS/22 [INQ000613207] for more on the work of Advice NI and the independent advice network during the pandemic.
4. Our latest annual report highlights that almost 275,000 enquiries were dealt with by the network, with 79% of the work of the network relating to social security enquiries (amounting to over 217,000 enquiries) in other words targeting low income

households whether in work or out of work. The network generated over £107m in previously unclaimed income for clients in this period and assisted 3,395 clients in managing over £44m of debt.

## **Part B: Advice NI During the Pandemic**

5. In the immediate run-up to March 2020, the usual variety of opportunities and demands presented themselves to Advice NI: there was the challenge of a move to new premises; ongoing strategic social policy engagement particularly on the issue of the local welfare mitigations 'cliffedge'; and day-to-day policy work and training heavily weighted towards social security and money/debt issues and Universal Credit problems in particular.
6. It must be said that in addition to the services provided by the independent advice network in relation to the pandemic, this business-as-usual work continued, albeit to a lesser extent, throughout the pandemic.
7. There was optimism as politicians in Northern Ireland returned to power-sharing in January 2020 and formed a new Executive, with a new Minister (Minister Deirdre Hargey) taking on the role of Minister for Communities and reaffirming her commitment to helping the most vulnerable:  
  
"In the absence of the various Welfare Reform policies coming to an end we need to protect those most in need and the poorest across our society. These mitigations, and the associated support provided by the advice sector, have proven that they have done that."
8. And then everything changed with the UK Government announcement of lockdown on 23rd March 2020.
9. From Day 1, Advice NI shifted our entire focus to assist the general effort in supporting people through the pandemic, see Exhibit BS/01 [INQ000613186] for evidence from the Minister verifying this. Whilst the Exhibits to this statement outline some of the steps taken – this is only a snapshot of the herculean efforts made across the entire staff team, working in partnership with the wider Community & Voluntary Sector, the Department for Communities and the Department for Health

and other Departments, Health Trusts, Local Councils, private sector organisations and many others.

10. It must be said that in Advice NI's experience every organisation, every staff member engaged fully and went above and beyond in the goal of supporting people, in particular vulnerable people, through the crisis.

11. In March 2020, Advice NI was tasked with establishing the Covid Helpline to assist those in vulnerable groups to access information, advice and support in relation to Covid-19. The Helpline went live on the 27<sup>th</sup> March, but of course this does not tell the whole story (see Exhibits BS/03 [INQ000613188] , BS/04 [INQ000613189], BS/05 [INQ000613190]):

- Staff needed to be supported through the uncertainties of what Covid meant for them, both in terms of work but just as importantly in terms of their personal lives;
- Staff needed to be supported to work from home, with all that involved including the required policies and procedures, support and supervision, IT hardware (necessary to deliver telephony services via our cloud-based systems), training on both the systems and the subject matter, information briefings and updates, scripts, case management support in terms of data input and reporting;

12. In terms of delivering the Covid-19 Community Helpline, it is almost impossible to compartmentalise the demand neatly into 'economic challenges faced by members of the public' as invariably the demand placed on the Helpline related to how Covid-19 impacted on all aspects of peoples' lives (see Exhibits BS/10 [INQ000613195], BS/11 [INQ000613196]). The Helpline reports evidence this quite well, with very few single-issue calls: more often calls covering a wide range of issues, each as important as the other to the caller, covering for example:

- Crisis interventions (food, heating, prescriptions, medicine, vaccination);
- Employment (furlough, pay & entitlements, redundancy, self-employed issues);
- Sign-posting & accessing services;
- Emotional well-being;
- Covid-19 (shielding, test, track, trace, isolate, symptoms, rules, issues re the App);
- Local and national schemes (food boxes, supermarket delivery slots, energy support);
- Social security benefit issues (in particular relating to Universal Credit);

13. The usual nature of the relationship between Advice NI with the NI Executive is via our lead Department (the Department from which we receive our core funding) – the Department for Communities.
14. Given the majority of enquiries to the independent advice network are social security related and social security being a devolved matter also rests within the Department for Communities, then there is strong engagement with Communities both on an operational level in terms of assisting clients with social security queries and also on a more strategic policy level regarding more medium to long term issues.
15. The absence of an Assembly and an Executive from time to time has seen strong engagement develop with Senior Management within the Department and as evidenced during the pandemic through the engagement with the Emergency Leadership group established by the Department.
16. Strong direct engagement with the Minister and the Communities Committee recommenced after the re-establishment of the NI Executive in January 2020. Engagement also continued with all political parties both prior to and after January 2020 (see Exhibits BS/09 [INQ000613194], BS/14 [INQ000613199]).
17. It must be said that the work of Advice NI goes beyond the Department for Communities, so for example there is strong engagement with The Executive Office, Justice, Health, Economy, Education and others on issues that would have a direct bearing on the clients that need our support.
18. We have set out as best we can the nature of our work during the pandemic in the Exhibits.
19. Our key focus was on service delivery, on supporting the people who most needed our services, including those advised to shield, their carers, people struggling to cope with accessing and buying food, medicine, heating their homes and generally having access to the services, support and income necessary for their well-being during the pandemic (see Exhibits BS/13 [INQ000613198], BS/15 [INQ000613200], BS/17 [INQ000613202], BS/20 [INQ000613205], BS/27 [INQ000613212], BS/28 [INQ000613213], BS/29 [INQ000613214]).

20. In terms of our input related to the economic or indeed any response to the pandemic, this was in the form of 'real time' contributions at the frequent meetings with the senior officials within the Department for Communities, in the form of contributions to the Emergency Leadership Group convened by the Department for Communities and in the form of direct contributions at meetings with the Minister.
21. In the midst of the fear and panic caused by the pandemic, the focus of Advice NI was to 'play the ball where it lay', in other words to focus on ensuring that people were aware of, understood, and able to access the support that was made available. So for example you will see in the Exhibits some examples of messaging and media activity not directed at the Department for Communities or the NI Executive but aimed at those people for whom the schemes were put in place to support (see Exhibits BS/14 [INQ000613199], BS/15 [INQ000613200], BS/17 [INQ000613202], BS/18 [INQ000613203]):
- "Advice NI urge people advised to 'shield' due to the pandemic to take action now to avoid missing out (July 2020)"*
22. Where we did engage at a more strategic level was where major support schemes were due to end and so people would be negatively affected, so for example regarding the end of furlough, the end of the £20 uplift within Universal Credit and the reinstatement of the 'Minimum Income Floor' for self-employed claimants. Invariably these were decided, delivered and terminated at a UK level (see Exhibits BS13 [INQ000613198], BS/17 [INQ000613202]).
23. It is fair to say that Advice NI was not consulted by either the Northern Ireland Executive or indeed the UK Government on the design of key economic interventions – whether local for example in relation to localised business schemes or national schemes.
24. Our key focus was on service delivery, in a way we were recipients of schemes that were decided by others and when people were confused or when things went wrong we were left to try to make sense of the economic interventions on behalf of the people who availed of our services via the Helpline.
25. It is fair to say that there was some engagement after roll-out whenever problems arose (whether to do with access issues or delays) but it is fair to say that this was by no means consistent.

26. We firmly believe that engagement at the design stage would have been helpful and would only have strengthened design by having the opportunity to feed in our expertise in terms of the issues we regularly see – if we take Universal Credit as a practical example we could have fed in our experiences and insight in terms of digital accessibility, identity verification, the fact that this may not be suitable for everyone, the need for access to appropriate operational and strategic staff to resolve operational and strategic issues. Client journey maps and process maps are a routine part of most Government scheme provision in 'normal' times but it is notable that often potential applicants and indeed support organisations were left to 'make the best of it' when things went wrong or did not go smoothly.
27. It would certainly have been helpful to have been part of a Coordination Group or a Strategic Liaison Group in terms of scheme design, which would have been beneficial in the long run as queries and cases could then have been more effectively resolved.
28. In terms of key economic interventions, the Helpline did deal with queries from some businesses in relation to how to access the support and for a smaller number there was support required in terms of progress chasing applications and challenging decisions.
29. In terms of implementation, it is fair to say that Advice NI was not consulted by either the Northern Ireland Executive or indeed the UK Government on the implementation of key economic interventions – whether local for example in relation to localised business schemes or national schemes.
30. This again would have been helpful to enable the Helpline to be prepped and ready for the regular spike in demand whenever any announcements took place or whenever any schemes were launched.
31. Key lessons learned should be around ensuring a lead-in period that enables key stakeholders and service providers the opportunity to be prepped and ready; awareness of communications plans associated with announcements and scheme launches to enable service providers to be fore-warned and fore-armed to be able to translate Government-speak into language that people can understand and act upon.

32. In terms of our input related to the economic or indeed any response to the pandemic, this was in the form of 'real time' contributions at the frequent meetings with the senior officials within the Department for Communities, in the form of contributions to the Emergency Leadership Group convened by the Department for Communities and in the form of direct contributions at meetings with the Minister.
33. It is fair to say that multiple access channels to appropriate staff and decision makers would have resolved many queries on a more effective, more timely basis – something which would no doubt have eased pressure on scheme administration.
34. It is fair to say that where there was consultation and engagement, it was generally whenever schemes had already been designed and launched; with the focus being on resolving problems and issues (in other words making it work) as opposed to getting into re-design or amending or withdrawing certain interventions (see Exhibit BS/24 [INQ000613209]).
35. With some interventions we were able to feed back to Government (usually at hastily convened meetings online) what we were seeing in terms of the problems people were experiencing. On some occasions we were provided with contact information for senior staff, where we could bring specific cases and get them resolved.
36. However the approach was very much 'behind the curve' and this approach was by no means consistent across all the interventions that were put in place.
37. By way of background regarding the relationship with local government, the Department for Communities funds and supports regional advice services for example those provided by Advice NI. This funding is delivered through the Department's Regional Infrastructure Support Programme. Funding for frontline local advice services is delivered through the joint Department / local Council Community Support Programme. Therefore there is a strong relationship between local Advice NI members and their local Council and by extension there is a strong relationship between Advice NI and the eleven local Councils.
38. This already established relationship proved vital in ensuring a swift local response to the pandemic. Councils established local Support Hubs and local advice services played a key role along with other local partners in delivering services to local people in need.

39. A referral pathway, with key named contacts, was established between the Helpline and the local Support Hubs for people who needed support with issues such as:

- Food
- Medicine
- Fuel
- Social Contact

40. For completeness, it is necessary to point out that for those people who were advised to shield themselves, there was a similar pathway established within Support Hubs that were set up within the six local Health and Social Care Trusts (see Exhibit BS/14 [INQ000613199]).

41. This provides yet another example of the strong partnership working that was quickly established across the independent advice network, with the wider Community & Voluntary Sector, the Department for Communities and the Department for Health and other Departments, Health Trusts, Local Councils, private sector organisations and many others.

42. In terms of research on the economic impact of the pandemic, Advice NI conducted a key piece of research (Feb – May 2021) regarding the impact of Covid-19 on volunteering within the independent advice network (see Exhibit BS/23 [INQ000613208]).

43. Volunteers play a vital role in how the Independent Advice Network delivers its services. Covid-19 affected volunteering activities right across the board and the Independent Advice Sector was no exception. Usual face to face activities were suspended. Some members were able to use the opportunity to adapt and engage their volunteers remotely or in different ways through various other programmes however, this wasn't an option or as easy for others.

44. In February 2021 a short online survey was developed for Members and this work was quickly completed by May 2021.

45. By examining the collated feedback, the following recommendations were made:

General/ongoing support

Recommendation: Advice NI continues to provide ongoing volunteering support to Members across the network.

Action: Advice NI Volunteer Coordinator continues to act as point of contact for information and support, where appropriate, across the network.

Action: Advice NI Volunteer Coordinator to alert members to relevant and useful information including funding opportunities through Advice NI communication channels.

Action: Advice NI to refresh the Volunteering Communications strategy.

Action: Members to contact the Volunteer Coordinator if other needs become apparent as we navigate a way out of Covid19.

#### Promoting Members Volunteering opportunities

Recommendation: Advice NI to continue to promote Member organisations volunteering opportunities.

Action: Member organisations to liaise with the Advice NI Volunteer Coordinator who will share their volunteer opportunities via appropriate Advice NI communication channels.

#### Recruiting new Volunteers

Recommendation: Advice NI to support Members, if they require, in recruiting new volunteers ongoing/when the time comes.

Action: Advice NI to offer support in developing role descriptions and promotion of roles through our social media platforms and also with signposting prospective volunteers to those roles.

#### Recognition

Recommendation: Advice NI recognition of volunteering.

Action: Advice NI will mark Volunteers Week 2021 virtually and encourage Members to engage as a method of volunteer recognition and thanks.

#### Training

Recommendation: Advice NI to continue to promote training (including Digi training) across the Network.

Action: Managers to keep alert to training opportunities shared via Advice Links and highlight these training courses with volunteers and encourage them to attend if appropriate.

Action: Volunteer Coordinator to flag courses to Managers as opportunities for volunteers.

Action: Volunteer Coordinator to continue to flag the Make It Click basic Digi course titles with Members.

Supporting the return of Volunteers

Recommendation: Advice NI to support Members in helping their volunteers return to their volunteering roles and activities.

Action: Advice NI Volunteer Coordinator to liaise with Managers to identify practical support needs in relation to the return of volunteers.

### **Part C: Inequalities and Vulnerable Groups**

46. Advice NI was tasked with establishing the Covid Helpline to assist those in vulnerable groups to access information, advice and support in relation to Covid-19, including support schemes (see Exhibits BS/02 [INQ000613187], BS/06 [INQ000613191]). This work included supporting vulnerable people with initiatives that originated from the NI Executive and initiatives that originated from Westminster including:

- Guidance provided in relation to the latest Covid-19 rules and restrictions;
- Assisting people to cope and adhere to rules and restrictions associated with multiple lockdowns;
- Emergency food box scheme: Made 9,221 referrals to local Councils and Health Trusts for emergency food parcels and medicine;
- Supporting people to avail of priority delivery slots for those who had been advised to shield by their GPs and Health Trusts;
- Emergency fuel scheme: Supported 14,227 people to receive emergency fuel payments through the Department for Communities 'Warm, Well, Connected' scheme;
- Designed and distributed an independent advice network Covid-19 leaflet in 30 languages which was downloaded 1,896 times;
- Supported vulnerable people to avail of various external support services including: food, fuel, medicine, health, emotional support, social contact;

- Advice and support in relation to the latest social security benefit services and adjustments available to those impacted by Covid-19, in particular regarding Universal Credit;
- Supporting people who had lost income due to being unable to work during lockdown, in particular the self employed;
- Guidance in relation to the end of furlough and redundancy rights and entitlements;
- Coping with the removal of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit;
- Assisting with queries in relation to the £100 High Street Voucher (Spend Local) scheme (for example the digital application process, card didn't arrive, difficulties using the card);
- Assisting with queries regarding the £600 Energy Bill Support Scheme: In Northern Ireland, the government combined the £400 Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS) and the £200 Alternative Fuels Payment (AFP) into a single, one-off payment of £600, made to every household with a domestic electricity supply, regardless of their income. Issues regarding delays, entitlement queries for example from people in private rented accommodation, encashment difficulties, problems with identity verification);
- Assisting with queries regarding the Cost of Living Payments – even though the payments were made automatically to those in receipt of certain means tested benefits, there were queries from people not currently on those benefits and from others in the middle of challenging entitlement decisions;

47. Supporting vulnerable people was a key focus for us, supporting the people who most needed our services, including those advised to shield, their carers, people struggling to cope with accessing and buying food, medicine, heating their homes and generally having access to the services, support and income necessary for their well-being during the pandemic.

48. In terms of our input related to the economic or indeed any response to the pandemic, this was in the form of 'real time' contributions at the frequent meetings with the senior officials within the Department for Communities, in the form of contributions to the Emergency Leadership Group convened by the Department for Communities and in the form of direct contributions at meetings with the Minister.

49. Advice NI also produced weekly reports on the demand and types of issues presenting to the Helpline, over the year 20/21 this amounted to:

- 43% of enquiries from shielding clients;
- 57% of enquiries from non-shielding clients;
- 63% of enquiries were in relation to crisis interventions (for example food, heating, medicine);
- 8% of enquiries were in relation to 'Test, Trace, Isolate, Protect';
- 3% of enquiries were in relation to social security issues;

50. In relation to Universal Credit and other benefits, this is a complex question in that parallel with the pandemic and the knock-on implications in relation to social security benefits and Universal Credit in particular, we were preparing to deal with 'Move to Universal Credit' and ensuring that people would be adequately supported through that process.

51. By way of background, it may be helpful to note that there were a range of measures and easements put in place by the Department for Communities in relation to the administration of social security benefits directly due to the pandemic, for example easements in relation to the need to present at the local Jobs & Benefits Office as a condition of Universal Credit entitlement, and easements regarding the Minimum Income Floor affecting self-employed claimants (during the Covid-19 pandemic self-employed people were able to claim and get paid Universal Credit as this assumed level of earnings – the Minimum Income Floor – was not taken into account in the calculations).

52. Advice NI produced it's first Social Policy Briefing Paper in June 2022 aimed flagging the likely issues and impacts regarding 'Move to UC, but of course the issues identified tally across in terms of the concerns.

53. To summarise, the Briefing Paper flagged a number of issues including:

- The need for 'legacy' benefit claimants to be extremely cautious about choosing to move to Universal Credit before managed migration commences;
- While some people may be entitled to more money under UC than they would have received in the 'legacy' benefits system, others will be entitled to less;

- People who move from 'legacy' benefits to Universal Credit by natural migration and find themselves worse off will not be able to return to their 'legacy' benefits and will simply be expected to cope with the loss;
- People who wait until they are called forward for 'managed migration' will automatically avail of 'Transitional Protection' and therefore should not be worse off, at least in the early stages of their claim;
- The digital-first process, the monthly Assessment Period, the 5-week wait, the importance timing the application correctly to avoid issues such as 2 monthly wage packets being received in the same Assessment Period;
- Universal Credit has a harsher sanctions regime;
- Arrears and indebtedness may be inevitable due to the minimum 5-week wait for the first UC payment;
- Any mistakes, including 'Official Errors' made by the Department, leading to an overpayment of Universal Credit are recoverable from the claimant. However, it is important to note that in exceptional circumstances the Department has the discretion to waive recovery of all or part of an overpayment, as well as to reduce the rate at which the overpayment is repaid. Much more needs to be done to restore confidence in the overpayment recovery system by ensuring everyone affected by overpayments are made aware of the existence of waivers and how to seek one.

54. The Briefing Paper also urged people to consider the following if they felt they needed to claim Universal Credit:

How ready are you?

Have you considered whether you will be better off or worse off?

Always seek independent advice before deciding whether to move from 'legacy' benefits to Universal Credit.

Have you got a National Insurance number and proof of identity?

You may be able to prove your identity online or you may have to do this at your local Jobs & Benefits office. More information is available on National Insurance numbers, and how to obtain one, at nidirect.

Do you have an email address, and do you need help using the internet or a computer?

You will be expected to apply for Universal Credit, agree your UC Commitment and maintain your claim through your online account. This means you will need the skills to use the

internet, have access to a computer, and be able to afford the cost of accessing the internet. If you need help with developing your digital skills, get in touch as we may be able to assist.

Do you use a bank account to manage your money?

Before you claim Universal Credit, you will need to set up a bank or building society account to get your payment.

Do you have savings?

If you or your partner have £6,000 or less in savings, this won't affect your claim for Universal Credit. However, if you and/or your partner have £16,000 or more in savings, you won't be entitled to Universal Credit.

How often are you paid (from work, tax credits or other benefits)?

You will normally be paid Universal Credit twice a month, although you can request a monthly payment.

Do you pay rent, is your rent paid on your behalf, or do you have a mortgage?

Your Universal Credit payment may include a 'Housing Element' if you are renting a property. This will be paid directly to your landlord, although you will be able to opt out of direct payments, subject to certain conditions – for example, you are not in arrears. Unlike Housing Benefit, UC will not pay any money towards your rates, so if you are responsible for paying rates on your property you will need to apply separately for a Rate Rebate.

55. Specifically in terms of furlough, Advice NI urged the NI Executive and Westminster to ensure there was more clarity around when people who needed to, should claim Universal Credit when furlough ended. For example, if the claim was made and then subsequently there were further payments made, then this could impact on the first Universal Credit monthly Assessment Period and significantly reduce the amount of UC payable for that Assessment Period.

#### **Part D: Analysis and Reflections**

56. The most striking factor was how Government at Westminster felt the need to introduce furlough and the £20 uplift to Universal Credit in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We have always felt that income adequacy in respect of

Universal Credit was a significant flaw – a flaw that could of course be traced back to the numerous cuts and freezes associated with various budgets after 2010.

57. In our view it was a damning indictment of the level of income payable within Universal Credit; and equally Government obviously felt that, launching into a pandemic situation, that there could be a real risk of social unrest even social breakdown if tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people were forced to survive on Universal Credit levels that existed at the time.
58. Even though the £20 uplift was eventually removed, the damning indictment of income levels within Universal Credit came to the fore again with the need to introduce 'Cost of Living Payments' to supplement benefit levels, commencing in 2022.
59. It is interesting to reflect on the cost of 'Cost of Living Payments', the cost of furlough payments and the cost of the £20 uplift in Universal Credit and weigh that against the scenario where none of this would be required if the social security system was fit for purpose for everyone that needs to rely upon it.
60. Advice NI regrets the extent to which the social security system, particularly for working age people, has been eroded over time.
61. Many people might say that the Government's response to the pandemic in terms of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit, the furlough scheme and the range of other measures were a key strength of the response to the pandemic – our view is that these responses illustrate the extent to which the social security system has been eroded as a key pillar of the welfare state.
62. Just like the preparations for a pandemic appear to have been scaled back and minimised in the years prior to the pandemic – perhaps seen as a waste of money as opposed to the essential functioning of Government – so too the existence of a strong social security system is an essential function of Government.
63. A clear strength that emerged during the pandemic was the fact that 'we were all in it together' and in terms of service provision, there was a clear sense across all sectors that we all needed to work together for the common good. And we did (see Exhibits BS16 [INQ000613201], BS/25 [INQ000613210], BS/26 [INQ000613211]).

64. It is regrettable – indeed it is a shame – that the sense of everyone being in it together has been lost, that everyone has retreated into their individual silos and lost that sense of freedom, passion, commitment that comes from doing something that is needed. A small example of this is the fact that data sharing and GDPR, once considered the last bastion to fall back on when seeking to find reasons not to do something, was weighed up in a more balanced, fair fashion against the need to get things done. This is not to say that data sharing and GDPR is not important – it truly is - but the pandemic showed us that with the will and commitment and the need to do something, then effective, robust solutions can be found.
65. Advice NI strongly believes that we shifted our entire focus to assist the general effort in supporting people through the pandemic. Whilst the Exhibits to this document outline some of the steps taken – this is only a snapshot of the herculean efforts made across the entire staff team, working in partnership with the wider Community & Voluntary Sector, the Department for Communities and the Department for Health and other Departments, Health Trusts, Local Councils, private sector organisations and many others.
66. It must be said that in Advice NI's experience every organisation, every staff member engaged fully and went above and beyond in the goal of supporting people, in particular vulnerable people, through the crisis.
67. In terms of the NI Executive, we believe that every Minister stepped up and played their part in helping people get through this crisis. Special mention must go to the Health Minister Robin Swann and the Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey for their steadfast commitment in ensuring that the health and well-being of everyone was important and demonstrably so. For this reason, Advice NI was clear in calling for the re-establishment of the Executive when it collapsed again in 2022 (see Exhibit BS/30 [INQ000613215]).
68. From Advice NI's perspective, we welcome the opportunity to have been able to contribute to the efforts to assist people during the pandemic. On reflection there are lessons to be learned:
- A crisis of this scale requires everyone to pull together, both within and between sectors; this was achieved to a very great extent. This required co-ordination, consistent

agreed messaging and information sharing. The Department for Communities officials played their part, together with all partners, in what was a huge co-ordination effort;

- Ideally a 'lead-in' period would be required to put in place systems for such a large response, for example in terms of the Helpline: resource planning, staffing, training, scripts, obtain and initialise telephony handsets, referral directories, secure referral arrangements and support pathways, data sharing agreements, case management systems, reporting systems. In the circumstances best efforts were made to put systems in place quickly to respond to the crisis, for example the Helpline was operational within a matter of days;
- All this at a time when staff were no longer in the office and being supported to work from home;
- Ideally better information in terms of likely demand (for example some degree of confusion initially around who got a shielding letter, the numbers of people shielding, distribution of the letters, expected demand on the Helpline);
- Ideally more consistent messaging in terms of the range of support available in order to combat inaccurate messaging on social media (for example some degree of confusion initially around access to the food box scheme; and announcements before pathways were in place). Also ideally more co-ordination and 'sight' of public messaging in order to scale up capacity on the Helpline as appropriate to respond to spikes in demand;

69. It must be said, overwhelmingly the sense is of a job well done; people protected at a time of crisis; strong partnership working between Departments, Trusts, Councils and the Community & Voluntary Sector.

70. A key challenge will be to ensure that the key lessons learned are not forgotten over time. For example, can we say hand on heart that we were ready to pick up the pieces when Storm Eowyn arrived on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2025.

71. Visible high level structures and processes should be established and reviewed regularly (at a national, regional and local level) to ensure that we are ready for the unexpected.

## **Declaration**

The contents of this statement are true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.

**Personal Data**

Bob Stronge

30<sup>th</sup> April 2025