

Witness Name: Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA)

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UNITED KINGDOM COVID-19 INQUIRY

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND STATISTICS AND RESEARCH
AGENCY**

(NISRA)

I, Philip Wales, will say as follows: -

1. I am a senior Civil Servant, appointed to the joint position of Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and Registrar General for Northern Ireland. My appointment to NISRA commenced on 27th February 2023 and followed the retirement of the previous post-holder, Ms Siobhan Carey, Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. The material provided relates to the period 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022 as stipulated and, as such, pre-dates my appointment. In view of this I suggest that it would be appropriate and prudent that I can be accompanied by key remaining officials at any subsequent evidence session that may be required.

Part A: Official Statistics in Northern Ireland

Introduction and Background on NISRA Structure

2. NISRA, which incorporates the General Register Office, is an Executive Agency within the Department of Finance and was established on 1 April 1996. NISRA's headquarters is located at Colby House, Stranmillis Road, Belfast.
3. NISRA is the principal source of Official Statistics and social research on Northern Ireland. These statistics and research not only inform public policy but also academic and private sector research, and contribute to wider societal debate. NISRA provide services to a wide range of Government Departments and Non-Departmental Public Bodies to assist the policy development process and the delivery of their business objectives.
4. A publicly available Agency Framework Document, which is subject to review after 5 years, is available on the NISRA website. It sets out the relationships between the Agency, its parent Department of Finance and the Minister for Finance along with their respective responsibilities and lines of accountability. The Framework Document also sets out the duties of the Chief Executive regarding official statistics and details relationships with (i) statisticians outposted to Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments/ Non-Departmental Public Bodies and (ii) the rest of the United Kingdom statistical system.
5. As previously agreed with the Inquiry Team, this statement is based on work that was undertaken by NISRA statisticians and administrative staff embedded within the Department of Finance (hereafter referred to as NISRA DOF) relating to the production of economic statistics.
6. Statisticians who are outposted to other Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments/ Non-Departmental Public Bodies are managed within and by the Departments/ Non-Departmental Public Bodies to which they are outposted. Their programmes of work, functions, and priorities etc. are stipulated and performance managed by the Departments/ Non-Departmental Public Bodies concerned, not by the NISRA Chief Executive. Such Departments/ Non-Departmental Public Bodies will have determined their respective responses to the pandemic and how to deploy their statistical resources in that work. A Concordat details the nature of the relationship and respective responsibilities between NISRA DOF and those Departments/ Non-Departmental Public Bodies utilising NISRA statisticians.
7. By way of example, some of NISRA's statisticians are outposted to the Department for the Economy. Their work and day-to-day priorities throughout the pandemic will have been governed, directed and managed by senior officials in Department for the Economy, including the Permanent Secretary. As with all outposted staff, Department for the Economy statistical

staff can avail of support from within NISRA DOF on professional matters (such as the Code of Practice for Statistics/ Accredited Official Statistics) and personnel matters (such as the filling of vacancies). As with all NISRA statisticians, Department for the Economy statisticians can also access NISRA DOF delivered services such as, for example, the NISRA Technology Lab through a generic application process.

8. As highlighted above, the Chief Executive in NISRA is also the Registrar General for Northern Ireland. During the period in question (between 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022), the position was held by Siobhan Carey, CBE (now retired) who was supported by a senior management team from within NISRA DOF. In addition to the Chief Executive & Registrar General, NISRA DOF's Senior Management Team comprised of three Grade 5 (Senior Civil Service) Statistician Directors, the head of the General Register Office (the Deputy Registrar General) and head of NISRA's Business Support and Development Branch (both Grade 6 positions). NISRA DOF's Senior Management Team typically meets on a monthly basis. The main responsibilities of the group include providing updates and advice to the Chief Executive & Registrar General on operational matters, developing Agency policy, business planning, financial and risk management, and other corporate responsibilities.
9. In terms of the Grade 5 Statistician Directors, and from a NISRA DOF perspective, during the time in question Doctor David Marshall (currently on a career break) was the Director of Census and Population Statistics, with responsibility for the planning and conduct of the 2021 Census, which was held on 21st March 2021. Doctor Tracy Power (now retired) was Director of Analysis, with responsibility for a number of NISRA DOF Branches (including Vital Statistics and Administrative Research & Support Branch, Statistical Support Branch and Dissemination Branch) and providing professional oversight (as required) to outposted statisticians. Brian Green was the Director of Sources, with responsibility for the planning and conduct of NISRA's Social Survey and statutory Business Survey operations – with the latter underpinning NISRA DOF's production and reporting of NI Economic Statistics via a unit within NISRA DOF known as Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch.
10. The Chief Executive & Registrar General is also supported by NISRA's Agency Board, which comprises of NISRA DOF's Senior Management Team plus representatives from all Senior Principal Statistician led Departmental business areas. The Agency Board considers issues relating to personnel/ resourcing, the Code of Practice for Statistics, National Statistics, policy development and provides updates from the various departments represented.
11. Within NISRA DOF, personnel in NISRA's Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch were central in the provision of key economic statistics in Northern Ireland immediately prior to the

pandemic and throughout the period in question. The branch was responsible for the administration of statutory business surveys within NI, including providing support to the Office for National Statistics in the administration of their respective surveys in NI. Economic and Labour Market Statistics was responsible for collecting, analysing and reporting the key findings from information collected from local businesses. In addition, the branch also produced labour market statistics based on analysis of household survey data from the monthly Labour Force Survey, which was administered by NISRA DOF's Central Survey Unit.

12. Immediately prior to the pandemic the Director of Sources (Brian Green) had responsibility for Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch within NISRA DOF alongside responsibility for the planning and conduct of NISRA's Social Surveys. Economic and Labour Market Statistics was headed up on temporary promotion by a Senior Principal Statistician (Grade 6) who was supported by 4 Principal Statisticians (Grade 7) and a Principal Economist (Grade 7).
13. The Office for National Statistics are responsible for collecting, analysing and disseminating statistics about the United Kingdom's economy, society and population. Consequently, a wide range of their economic, business and labour market statistics have regional components that relate to Northern Ireland and compliment those produced by NISRA.
14. Between Autumn 2021 and Autumn 2022 the economic and labour market statistics Senior Principal Statistician temporary promotion role was rotated. This resulted in one of the four Principal Statisticians stepping up into this role, with the person who had been performing the role returning to their substantive Grade 7 post within Economic and Labour Market Statistics.
15. As mentioned above, I was appointed to the joint position of Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and Registrar General for Northern Ireland on the 27th February 2023. This followed the retirement of the previous post-holder (Ms Siobhan Carey Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) who retired in December 2022. In the intervening period Brian Green (Director of Sources) fulfilled the role of NISRA Chief Executive Officer on temporary promotion. The Deputy Registrar General fulfilled the role of Registrar General on temporary promotion over the same period.
16. Following an external recruitment competition to fill Senior Principal Statistician (Grade 6) posts, which were approved by the outgoing NISRA Chief Executive Officer, an additional Grade 6 post was introduced to Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch in January 2023. The two Grade 6 areas of responsibility are "Head of Labour Market Statistics, Business Survey Modernisation, Data Collection & Compliance" and "Head of Business Survey Economic Analysis & Tourism Statistics". The two Grade 6s are in turn supported by five Principal Statisticians (Grade 7s).

17. Brian Green took partial retirement at the start of April 2023 (dropping to 3 days/ 22.2 hours per week). On taking partial retirement Brian's portfolio of responsibilities was appropriately re-shaped to focus solely on the Economic, Labour Market and Tourism Statistics within Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch.

Part B: The Role of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency ('NISRA') in Producing Economic Statistics in Peacetime

18. NISRA Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch's objective is "To measure and provide insight into the performance of the NI Economy, Tourism Industry and Labour Market."

The Branch's overarching aims are to:

- produce official statistics in line with the Code of Practice to monitor and provide insight into the performance of the NI economy, the tourism industry and labour market; and
- provide an effective statistical and research service to assist NISRA in achieving its corporate objectives.

The Branch's primary activities are:

- Data collection from businesses including the **administration of 9 statutory business surveys and 5 voluntary tourism surveys.**
- Production of official Economic, Tourism and Labour Market statistics – through **analysis of the survey data collected and secondary analysis.**
- Production and dissemination of insightful statistical bulletins along with associated outputs/ data tables, Ministerial Submissions and Press releases incorporating value added analysis and commentary.

In total, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch release over **100 such publications per annum.** In addition, the branch releases detailed microdata to facilitate academic and economy related research through approved statutory and accredited processes (for example Ministerial Directions in accordance with the Statistics of Trade and Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 1988 and through the Economic and Social Research Council funded Administrative Data Research initiative – a joint venture involving NISRA, Queen's University and Ulster University).

These cover the following areas:

Labour market	Business Activity	Economy	Tourism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Claimant count unemployment •Labour Force Survey economic activity (e.g. employment, unemployment and economic inactivity) •Quarterly Employee jobs •Hours and Earnings •Redundancies •Annual Employment •Vacancies •PAYE employment and earnings •Good jobs and work quality •Digital Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •NI Annual Business Survey •Exports & Imports •Inter Departmental Business Register •Business births and deaths •Research & Development •Productivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Index of Production •Index of Services •Retail Sales Index •Quarterly Construction Enquiry •Composite Economic Index •Regional Accounts •Economic Accounts •Trade Statistics •EU Exit analyses •Port Statistics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Hotel Occupancy •Small Service Accommodation Occupancy •Self Catering Occupancy •Visitor Attraction Survey •External Visitors to NI •Domestic Overnights in NI •Air passenger Statistics •Overall value and volume of tourism to NI •Tourism Satellite Accounts

A key aspect of the work of the Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch is providing Northern Ireland datasets to the Office for National Statistics to facilitate the production of United Kingdom-wide datasets as discussed further below.

19. The United Kingdom Statistics Authority (an independent body at arm's length from government), including the Office for Statistics Regulation and the Office for National Statistics, have close working relationships with NISRA. The Office for National Statistics is the largest statistical producer in the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom's Statistical Institute. NISRA works closely with the Office for National Statistics across our work around economic, labour market and social surveys. Office for National Statistics the regulatory arm of the United Kingdom Statistics Authority and has an important influence on NISRA's work particularly around ensuring data quality and trustworthiness. The United Kingdom Statistics Authority has a statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics that 'serve the public good'.

20. The relationship between the Office for National Statistics and NISRA (and the statistical institutes for Wales and Scotland) is managed by the Inter Administration Committee. The Inter Administration Committee works in the context of the Concordat on Statistics between the

United Kingdom Statistics Authority and the devolved administrations. It outlines the way in which the four territories (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) work together and cooperate on statistical matters. The group meets quarterly with Northern Ireland being represented by the NISRA Chief Executive Officer.

21. Historically, NISRA has worked very closely with the other National Statistical Institutes throughout the United Kingdom and, in particular, with the Office for National Statistics. Relationships have been built up over many years and are well established. This is important from a harmonisation, coherence, efficiency, sharing of experience (for example technical and methodological) and sharing of systems and infrastructure perspective. It is also important as certain statistics are devolved to Northern Ireland and, as such, the information provided by NISRA is crucial to the production of United Kingdom statistics.
22. From a NISRA DOF perspective, examples of topics which we work closely with Office for National Statistics on include: the 2021 Census, production of population estimates & projections, production of statistics on vital events (for example births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships etc.) and the production of economic, tourism and labour market statistics.
23. From an economic statistics perspective, NISRA provides Office for National Statistics with Northern Ireland datasets sourced from the surveys/ sources highlighted below, which are combined with the Great Britain equivalent sources to facilitate the production of United Kingdom wide datasets and analyses:
 - Business Register Inquiry (Value Added Tax and Pay As You Earn Proving).
 - Annual Business Inquiry.
 - Research & Development.
 - Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.
 - Business Register and Employment Survey.
 - Labour Force Survey.
 - Quarterly employee jobs; and
 - Tourism Statistics

Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch staff represent NISRA on a range of cross-Government working groups established by the Office for National Statistics to inform the production and development of statistical outputs covering a wide range of economic statistics such as the labour market, economic output, business statistics, trade and

tourism. Close working relationships exist between NISRA Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch and relevant Office for National Statistics counterparts.

24. Very often, economic statistics are produced on the basis of common definitions and to harmonised timescales, with releases going out at the same time on the same day. For instance, NISRA's Labour Market estimates of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity are published simultaneously with Office for National Statistics' statistics which cover Great Britain and the United Kingdom as a whole.
25. There is a particularly close relationship between NISRA and Office for National Statistics focused on the production of Labour Market Statistics. NISRA's Central Survey Unit is responsible for the administration and data collection of the Labour Force Survey in Northern Ireland. NISRA DOF collect and process the data and then send datafiles to Office for National Statistics who processed the Northern Ireland data alongside Great Britain data. This processed data is then provided to Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch to facilitate the production of established key labour market indicators such as employment, unemployment and economic inactivity.
26. Relevant to the pandemic and hence this inquiry, certain statistics/ information relating to NI were produced by organisations other than NISRA. By way of example, this includes information produced by the Office for National Statistics from: (i) the new voluntary Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey (now called the Business Insights and Conditions Survey), which was specifically developed and maintained to capture and report the experiences of businesses throughout the pandemic and (ii) the Office for National Statistics / Oxford University led United Kingdom COVID-19 Infection Study. Both of these are referred to later in the witness statement. Office for National Statistics also produced a variety of economy related 'faster indicators' throughout the pandemic and will be best placed to advise on what, if any, of their analyses covered NI.
27. These working arrangements and relationships were beneficial to NISRA in its response to the challenges presented by the pandemic. This was particularly the case from an economy of scale and avoiding duplication perspective, helping to optimise both resources and public expenditure across wider United Kingdom statistical system.
28. NISRA is the principal source of information on the population, economy and society in Northern Ireland, and provides much of the statistics, analysis and data which is used to help the design, implementation and evaluation of policy in central government in Northern Ireland.

29. In the context of economic statistics, all statistical bulletins produced by Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch are routinely circulated to key economic policy leads in Department for the Economy, the Permanent Secretary in Department of Finance, the Permanent Secretary in in Department for the Economy, the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy.
30. The branch also provides data to inform Programme for Government targets. For example, the most recent NI Programme for Government Wellbeing Framework relies on 7 indicators produced by Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch as outlined below.



31. This requires the provision of data to the Programme for Government Wellbeing Framework team when new data is available for each of these indicators. Prior to a metric being included in the Programme for Government Wellbeing Framework there are meetings between the statisticians responsible for producing the data and a Technical Assessment Panel made up of representatives from the Executive Office and other relevant policy leads from other Departments. The proposed metrics are discussed, which includes discussion around the strengths and limitations of the statistics, frequency they are available, etcetera. This process ensures that the Executive Office understand the statistics that they will be reporting upon. Once metrics are agreed, the producing statisticians will agree to provide the Executive Office team with updates to the data at agreed intervals.
32. In addition to these proactive actions, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch routinely respond to written assembly questions from Members of the Legislative Assembly concerning those NI economy related topics that it collects and analyses data for.

33. NISRA's relationship with Her Majesty's Treasury is primarily focused on the supply and receipt of datasets.
34. In the past Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch have provided NI data to Her Majesty's Treasury colleagues to support their work via data access agreements. By way of example, Her Majesty's Treasury have been provided access to Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings data to produce microeconomic analysis and research to inform labour market policy and assessment.
35. Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch also receive datasets from Her Majesty's Treasury relating to public sector expenditure. This is provided by Her Majesty's Treasury as an extract from their Online System for Central Accounting and Reporting and is used in the production of Supply-Use Tables for NI. These provide a picture of the flows of products and services in the economy for a single year. They show the composition of uses and resources across institutional sectors and the inter-dependence of industries in order to reconcile the production, income and expenditure approaches to the measurement of Gross Domestic Product.
36. While NISRA DOF and, more specifically, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch do not have any significant relationship with the Office for Budget Responsibility nor the Bank of England, established working relationships are in place with colleagues in a range of other central and devolved government departments as outlined below:

Within NI

- **Department for Economy** - Close working relationships with statisticians, economists and key policy leads within the Department for the Economy. This entails providing data and advice to support their work around the economy and the tourism industry, peer review of reports, engagement to understand needs and future work priorities.
 - An important internal initiative was NISRA'S development (during the period in question) of the Database for Trade and Economic Research, which comprises the linkage of all key NI quarterly and annual survey data sets dating back to 2014. This new and innovative longitudinal asset was developed in conjunction with statisticians in the Department for the Economy Analytical Services Unit who used it to inform their policy response to the pandemic. Their work and utilisation of the Database for Trade and Economic Research included assessing the potential impact of business closures in certain sectors along with informing decisions around the development of various business support grant schemes that were deployed. The work and associated benefits were presented to the

United Kingdom Devolved Economic Statistics Co-ordination Group in February 2022 (see below).

- **Department for Communities** - Close working relationships with statisticians within the Department for Communities. This entails providing data and advice to support their work regarding the NI labour market, as well as engagement to understand their information needs and future work priorities.
- **Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs** – provision of data to support the production of Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs annual reports regarding the Size and Performance of the NI food and drinks processing sectors.

United Kingdom wide

- **Devolved Economic Statistics Co-ordination Group** – membership includes Office for National Statistics, Welsh Government, Scottish Government and NISRA. The purpose of the group is, inter alia, to provide formal and informal discussions on Office for National Statistics' strategic plans for Economic Statistics including wider use of administrative sources; facilitate discussion of harmonisation of methods or approaches at the country and regional level and/or United Kingdom level; discuss, emerging Office for National Statistics transformation challenges; and central co-ordination of Office for National Statistics / Government Statistical Service / devolved initiatives.
- **Department for Business and Trade - Trade strategy data working group** – monthly meeting to discuss trade data developments. Membership includes Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Department for Transport, Her Majesty's Treasury, Office for National Statistics, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Welsh Government and Scottish Government.
- **Office for the Internal Market** – Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch provides advice and data to inform their work around producing Annual Reports on the Operation of the United Kingdom Internal Market.
- **Office for National Statistics** – extremely close working relationships with many teams across the Office for National Statistics on a range of subject matters including but not limited to: labour market statistics, business statistics, annual and quarterly business surveys, trade statistics, economic accounts, the Integrated Data Service, Tourism statistics and modernisation and transformation developments.

37. Against the above background, during the period in question, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch personnel participated in, and contributed to, a number of important United Kingdom working/ user groups in the economic statistics space, which were managed and chaired by Office for National Statistics.

Making proactive decisions about what economic statistics to produce

38. The portfolio of well-established economy related data that Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch collects and analyses, including how it is reported, has evolved over a number of years in line with developments across the rest of the United Kingdom and in response to needs as articulated by key users. The majority of our economic statistics are routinely produced against well understood long standing user needs. However, when we make a change to provide something new, we first identify a user need for such developments and then seek funding to resource the work required to produce them. When ceasing a publication, or making a change to reduce the content of an output, the Code of Practice requires that we do that in tandem with users.
39. Some of the economic statistics NISRA produces are designed to support United Kingdom level outputs. In terms of the Office for National Statistics' obligation to produce United Kingdom economic statistics, NISRA has a service level agreement with the Office for National Statistics for the provision of data to inform the production of United Kingdom wide datasets/ statistics. Some of these information needs are met through the NI statutory business surveys that Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch administer directly whereas others are met via the United Kingdom wide surveys that NI businesses are invited by the Office for National Statistics to participate in. The content of these surveys has evolved over time and has historically been agreed at official level via relevant United Kingdom level working/ steering groups that Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch personnel are involved in.
40. Over and above these developments, NISRA regularly engages with users of our statistics through established user groups, cross-government working groups and regular liaison with Departmental policy leads. For example, the Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch Senior Management Team have regular meetings with senior leads in the Department for the Economy to ensure that their information needs and priorities are being met and that any emerging requirements are being actively considered. By way of example of NISRA DOFs responsiveness to user needs, such engagement identified a Department for the Economy need for robust data on "Good jobs", which NISRA DOF has moved to address through the NI Labour Force Survey. In addition, Department for the Economy commissioned NISRA DOF to

develop a dedicated Tourism Satellite Account for NI, which quantifies the contribution of the Tourism Industry to the NI Economy – this was released in March 2024. At the time of writing, Department for the Economy are currently in the process of commissioning NISRA DOF to develop a suite of NI specific productivity measures. NISRA DOF worked collaboratively with policy leads in Department for the Economy to develop a successful funding application for this new work.

41. NISRA DOF's responsive approach can be further evidenced through the work that Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch undertook in response to EU Exit and the associated analytical needs of users to inform the development of the NI Protocol and Windsor Framework. Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch's work in this area involved detailed engagement with a number of influential organisations including: Office for National Statistics; Department for Exiting the EU, Her Majesty's Treasury; and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. NISRA DOF's work in this space was commended by the Head of the Civil Service at that time (Sir David Sterling KCB).
42. Related to this, in 2017 Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch responded to the need for more data on trade between NI and Ireland by undertaking a survey of Northern Ireland businesses who trade with Ireland. The objective was to provide more detailed information on the frequency and value of cross border movements of goods and the extent of cross border supply chain linkages to inform EU Exit discussions.
43. More recently, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch has worked to produce more granular and more timely trade data to meet the needs of users, as identified in an Office for Statistics Regulation assessment report regarding NI trade statistics, which identified that users would value more-timely trade statistics published by NISRA. As part of the work to address the Office for Statistics Regulation requirement Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch developed a new dashboard presenting monthly trade in goods data published by Eurostat.
44. During 2023 NISRA DOF undertook an output orientated consultation in relation to proposed changes to our statistical outputs and activities, many of which covered our economic statistics. This was a proactive response from NISRA DOF in order to address significant budget cuts, which provided users with the opportunity to provide their feedback on the proposals and shape our response going forward. This exercise was commended by the Office for Statistics Regulation as being a great example of best practice in terms of user engagement.

45. In summary, decisions around what economic statistics to produce have evolved over a number of years in line with developments across the rest of the United Kingdom and indeed further afield. The well-established “business as usual” programme of work is supplemented by bespoke projects that are very much dependent on emerging policy and information requirements. The delivery of such projects is contingent on the availability of resources (both monetary and personnel) to undertake the additional work required to address emerging priorities that arise through NISRA DOF’s ongoing user and stakeholder engagement activities.

Making decisions about how to respond to requests from others for the production of statistics

46. Against the background outlined above and recognising that the Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch suite of regular economy related outputs may not fulfil all user needs, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch provide an ad hoc query service. Such requests are regularly received from departments, academics, researchers and the private sector and are considered on a case-by-case basis by the relevant teams. The requests will be serviced within timescales depending on the capacity and other commitments of the teams, with customer responses dependent on the data requested satisfying statistical disclosure control requirements. In accordance with the legislation, no disclosive data can be provided to individuals for public sharing.
47. In terms of NISRA sharing data with other Government Departments, the NISRA business surveys are conducted on a statutory basis under the Statistics of Trade and Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, which creates a legal obligation on businesses/organisations to make a return. Article 7 of the Order allows for microdata to be shared with other Government Departments for ‘the purpose of the exercise of its functions’. Applications are considered by the Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch leadership team and, if approved, named individuals (all of whom are required to sign confidentiality agreements) are granted time bound access to the relevant de-identified data for their proposed research.
48. A list of the data access agreements (known internally as Directions) engaged in during the period in question is presented in Annex A. For each of these agreements, statisticians in NISRA Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch will have created a bespoke datafile of the variables in question and for the specified timeframe which is then shared through a secure mechanism with the government departments in question.

Provision of data

49. In our context, the data we hold is the raw material required to inform research and analysis, which ultimately enables the provision of insight. Provision of data therefore relates to the making available of data that NISRA has collected, validated, cleansed, and processed to produce NI or lower-level estimates of the subject variables in question. For example, as mentioned previously, NISRA DOF shares data with various Office for National Statistics teams for the development and inclusion of statistics in their United Kingdom estimates and can also make data available to other government departments to facilitate relevant research and analysis. We can also provide more aggregated and non-disclosive data in response to information requests. Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch has invested significant resources over recent years to make as much of its collected and processed data available and accessible, at granular levels, via the NISRA data portal. This allows users to make bespoke tables and charts to garner the data they need for their research or analyses.

Provision of insight and analysis

50. Insight is derived from analysing and interpreting data to transform it into meaningful information along with pertinent inferences. This can be done for example by aggregating/disaggregating data for subject matters into various characteristics and categories such as industries or geographies, comparing with equivalent metrics from other jurisdictions and bringing in other contextual information to support analysis, provide a benchmark and facilitate further understanding.
51. Within our publications we analyse the raw data collected and processed by Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch to produce independent insights on the performance of the NI economy, economic output, businesses, tourism and the labour market. These insights are published via our wide range of publications.
52. Responsibility for the inferences that secondary users (e.g. Departments) draw from the data and information that Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch collect, analyse and disseminate rests with them. For example, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch provide information to senior officials in the Department for the Economy, with policy responsibility for the Economy. Responsibility for outlining how such information was utilised to shape Department for the Economy's policy response to the pandemic during the period in question rests with Department for the Economy.

Part C: Economic Statistics During the Pandemic

53. How our statistics were used to inform the response of the Northern Ireland Executive and the United Kingdom Government is a matter for the relevant policy leads in those organisations to answer. However, we have set out a high-level overview of the performance of the economy over the period in question below to provide an understanding of the type of information NISRA produced to help users understand the key trends in economic data between 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022.

Nature and severity of the economic shock caused by the pandemic

54. The NI Composite Economic Index is produced by Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch and is broadly equivalent to the output measure of Gross Domestic Product produced by the Office for National Statistics. It is used to provide a measure of the performance of the NI economy on a quarterly basis.
55. The Labour Force Survey collects data on the labour market in Northern Ireland monthly, contributing to NI and United Kingdom economic activity stats. The Labour Market Report published by NISRA provides a monthly overview of key NI labour market statistics [PW/01 – **INQ000212407**], including data from the Labour Force Survey, our Quarterly Employment Survey, claimant count, redundancies, and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs Pay As You Earn.
56. The following paragraphs provide an overview of key trends in economic and labour market data over the period 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022. Annex B presents a number of charts relating to the performance of the NI Composite Economic Index and key labour market statistics during the period in question.

2020

57. The period January 2020 to 28 June 2022 relates to Quarter 1 2020 and Quarter 2 2022. The Quarter 1 2020 NI Composite Economic Index publication covered the period 1st January to 31st March 2020 (Quarter 1 2020), as such it was the first NI Composite Economic Index release to cover the COVID-19 shock to the economy, including the introduction of lockdown on the 23rd March 2020.

58. The results for the NI Composite Economic Index for Quarter 1 2020 show that economic output in Northern Ireland decreased in real terms by 2.8% over the quarter and 3.2% over the year to Quarter 1 2020. Annualised average growth (average of the four quarters to Quarter 1 2020 compared with the previous four quarters) equated to -0.4%. These decreases in economic growth were driven by the decreases in all the private sector components of the economy.
59. During Quarter 1 2020 NI experienced the largest declines in growth over the quarter, year and rolling annual average compared to the other selected Gross Domestic Product measures for Scotland, the United Kingdom and Ireland. The general trend particularly with the annualised rate of growth was indicating that the NI economy was slowing before Quarter 1 2020.
60. In terms of the key labour market indicators, there was no statistically significant change across the employment rate, unemployment rate, economic activity rate or the Self Employed to March – May 2020, or Employee Jobs to March 2020.
61. Following the introduction of lockdown in NI in March 2020 NI economic performance was impacted by periods of lockdown restrictions in response to COVID-19. In particular, the NI Composite Economic Index (and Private Sector Component Index) fell to a series low in Quarter 2 2020, with the NI Composite Economic Index decreasing 14.7% over the quarter then increasing 19.3% over the next quarter (Quarter 3 2020) as restrictions eased, resulting in a pronounced 'V' in economic output.
62. In October 2020 NISRA published a special focus paper relating to NI redundancies, which were considered a leading indicator of official unemployment measures. The paper, which focussed on the period March-August 2020, included information on redundancies that were proposed and those that were actually confirmed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared with typical trends prior to that. It is important to note that not all proposed redundancies are confirmed or come to fruition. The paper highlighted that from 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020, 9,160 redundancies were proposed, the highest annual number of proposed collective redundancies on record. Chart 1 in Annex B provides an overview of the proposed and confirmed redundancies between March 2020 and August 2020.
63. Chart 1 shows the lag between proposed redundancies and the confirmation of the redundancies. Of note are the proposed redundancies in June and July, which was the highest consecutive monthly total of proposed redundancies on record at over 4,400. This translated into confirmed redundancies which started to increase following a period of relatively low numbers between March and June. At 820, the number of confirmed redundancies in August was the second highest monthly total in the previous five years.

64. By the end of 2020 there were a total of 5,010 confirmed redundancies in Northern Ireland over the course of the year. Meanwhile economic output in the year to December 2020 decreased by 2.8% in real terms compared to the same period in the previous year.

2021

65. Following the initial shock the pandemic, the Northern Ireland economy stabilised somewhat overall during 2021. By the end of 2021 economic activity, as measured by the NI Composite Economic Index, increased by 1.2% in real terms over the quarter to Quarter 4 2021. Economic output in the year to December 2021 increased by 4.9% in real terms compared to 2020. In Quarter 4 2021, NI Economic Output reached a 13-year high, returning to levels of economic output last exceeded in Quarter 2 2008.
66. In terms of the labour market, the number of employees receiving pay through Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs Pay As You Earn in NI in December 2021 was 773,400, an increase of 5.0% over the year. This was the highest on record and the sixth consecutive month that employee numbers had been above pre-COVID levels. The seasonally adjusted experimental claimant count showed that in December 2021, there was a decrease of 27.0% (15,700) over the year to 42,600 and there were 2,840 confirmed redundancies during 2021.

2022 - Quarter 2 2022

67. By June 2022 Economic Output had increased compared to the pre-pandemic period. Quarter 2 2022 output was 4.6% above levels recorded in Quarter 4 2019 i.e. just before the onset of the pandemic. The labour market also demonstrated positive trends during this period as discussed further below.
68. In Quarter 1 2022, Economic Output as measured by the NI Composite Economic Index reached an almost a 15-year high (i.e. 59 quarters). The quarterly decline in the NI Composite Economic Index between Quarter 1 2022 and Quarter 2 2022 meant that at that point the NI Composite Economic Index was just 0.2% below the maximum value recorded in Quarter 2 2007.
69. Results for the NI Composite Economic Index for Quarter 2 2022 (relating to the period April to June 2022) show that economic output in Northern Ireland increased by 2.4% in real terms over the year to Quarter 2 2022. Economic activity in NI was 4.6% above pre-pandemic levels seen in Quarter 2 2019 (triennial change i.e. Quarter 2 2022 vs. Quarter 2 2019 to illustrate to

users the impact compared to the same quarter pre pandemic). When output for the most recent four quarters are compared to the previous four quarters (annualised change), NI output had increased by 5.1%.

70. Chart 2 in Annex B shows the performance the NI Composite Economic Index from Quarter 1 2006 to Quarter 2 2022. By June 2022 (Quarter 2 2022) the NI Composite Economic Index and Private Sector Component Indices recovered from their respective series lows in Quarter 2 2020, reaching an almost 15-year high in Quarter 1 2022, however whilst these indices had fallen back marginally in Quarter 2 2022 they broadly remained at the 15-year high point.

71. In terms of the labour market, the NI Labour Market reports published in July and August 2022 provide details on the key trends in the NI labour market as at June 2022. Salient points include:

- The number of employees receiving pay through Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs Pay As You Earn in NI in June 2022 was 775,400, an increase of 2.8% over the year. This was the highest on record and the tenth consecutive monthly increase.
- In June 2022, the seasonally adjusted number of people on the claimant count was 36,100 (3.8% of the workforce), which was an increase of 0.1% from the previous month's revised figure. The June claimant count remained higher than the pre-pandemic count in March 2020 (by 21%).
- The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate (the proportion of economically active people aged 16 and over who were unemployed) for the period April-June 2022 was estimated from the Labour Force Survey at 2.7%. This was a decrease of 1.6pps over the year which was statistically significant.
- The proportion of people aged 16 to 64 in work (the employment rate) decreased by 0.9pps over the quarter (to June 2022) but increased by 1.0pps over the year to 69.7%. The total number of weekly hours worked in NI (27.8 million) increased by 4.9% over the year.
- The economic inactivity rate (the proportion of people aged 16 to 64 who were not working and not seeking or available to work) increased by 0.8pps over the quarter and by 0.2pps over the year to 28.3%.
- Chart 3 in Annex B provides an overview of the employment rate as of June 2022. The impact of the pandemic can be seen from the start of 2020 with the sharp

decline in the employment rate which continued until 2021 before positive trends resulted in growth up to Quarter 1 2022 (Jan-Mar).

72. Officials have advised that no explicit requests were made to NISRA DOF by the United Kingdom government or devolved administrations in respect of the collection of specific data or production of specific statistics during the period in question.
73. During April 2020, NISRA DOF did however engage with the Office for National Statistics team responsible for developing the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey in order to ensure that the sample for NI was robust and representative of the NI business population. This engagement resulted in Office for National Statistics boosting the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey survey for NI from an original c.300 businesses to include an additional 1,000 businesses. NISRA used our local knowledge and information to develop a sample for Office for National Statistics to use for the NI component of the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey that was more representative and had a greater industrial coverage as the original sample was primarily dominated by businesses in the manufacturing sector. Further information is presented in paragraphs 82-85 below.
74. Given the scale of the economic shock, NISRA made considerable efforts to ensure the reliability of our statistics and went to the length of including detailed new sources/ indicators/ contextual material from external data producers where it was available and would add value for our users. For example, the economic commentary included in the quarterly Northern Ireland Composite Economic Index, which provides a quarterly measure of economic activity in NI, was tailored to include contextual information deemed relevant to the performance of the NI economy. This required NISRA statisticians to source data and analysis produced by external data producers and to bring them together with a view to making them more visible and accessible to users. This included providing detail on:
 - a. **Impact on mobility** - analysing traffic flow data to show how lockdowns and associated restrictions impacted cross border travel between NI and Ireland; activity at NI airports; and the Department of Health Covid-19 Mobility Report.
 - b. **Consumer spending** – reporting on the consumer confidence index published by Danske Bank; and car registrations as reported by The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders.
 - c. **Government Support measures** implemented in response to support businesses – reporting on uptake within NI from the Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme; the NI High Street 'Spend Local' prepaid card scheme; and NI

Government grant schemes and business top up payments.

- d. **A timeline of NI Lockdown measures** in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic.
75. Further, a special Labour Market topic report focusing on redundancies in Northern Ireland was published in October 2020. This detailed both proposed and actual redundancies by local businesses since the start of the pandemic, providing comparable information pre-pandemic. A dedicated “Covid-19 related analysis web page” was also created within the Labour Market section of the NISRA website. This provided users with links to relevant analysis undertaken by NISRA, Office for National Statistics and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.
76. From October 2020 onwards, experimental data from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Custom’s Real Time Information Pay As You Earn system was added to the monthly Labour Market Report. This source, which provides timely measures of the number of pay-rolled employees and employee earnings in NI and the United Kingdom, was secured through the United Kingdom Devolved Economic Statistics Coordination Group. Furloughed employees paid through Pay As You Earn were included in these statistics.
77. New questions were added to the Labour Force Survey in 2020 and 2021 in response to the pandemic on topics including:
- o Occupation details.
 - o Sickness absence.
 - o Home Workers.
 - o Reasons why respondents were away from work or worked fewer hours in the reference week.
 - o Reasons why respondents worked more hours than usual in the reference week.
 - o Reasons why respondents were paid less than usual in the reference week.
 - o Second jobs.
 - o Additional work.
 - o Redundancy.
 - o Starting work; and
 - o Universal Credit.
78. A Labour Market newsletter was published in June 2021 and June 2022 detailing changes NISRA DOF had made to how we collect, statistically process, publish and interpret our

statistics. For example, NISRA suspended all face-to-face household interviews on 20th March 2020 and from April 2020 all Labour Force Survey interviews were conducted by telephone. To try and maintain an appropriate sample size for analysis and to make it as easy as possible to take part, NISRA made changes to the number of households invited to respond as well as changes to communication materials and processes. The newsletter also detailed that those furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or receiving a grant through the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme are included in the Labour Force Survey estimates of employment and not within the Labour Force Survey unemployment estimates.

79. In March 2020, it was unclear if furlough statistics for NI would be published via any other source, therefore NISRA made the decision to add the following furlough question to the Quarterly Employment Survey from June 2020.

- *“If your business has availed of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough), please record the number of employees working for the business named on the front of the questionnaire who were furloughed on 1 June 2020.”*

This question remained on the Quarterly Employment Survey throughout the period of the furlough scheme. In addition, the following question was added from Quarter 3 (September) 2020.

- *“Has the named business availed of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough) since its introduction in April 2020.”*

80. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Quarterly Employment Survey collected this new data on furloughed jobs. These were used to quality assure the employee jobs statistics produced during the pandemic. A report on the furlough information collected through the Quarterly Employment Survey was published in June 2022. The report compared the estimates obtained from both sources (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and NISRA Quarterly Employment Survey) and presents findings on the reasons behind differences.

81. Decisions on what to include in our outputs were based on available information at the time and what was deemed to be pertinent to help users to understand the performance of the NI economy. Decisions were made by the Principal Statistician responsible for the outputs, alongside the Senior Principal Statistician and Director of Economic Statistics.

82. NISRA's view is that data from a greater or more diverse range of sources could not have been obtained at the time.

Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey

83. NISRA Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch worked collaboratively with the Office for National Statistics and the other National Statistics Institutes in Scotland and Wales to develop the voluntary Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey (now called the Business Insights and Conditions Survey) to ensure that it was more robust and reflective of the NI economy. This survey, which the Office for National Statistics led and administered for the whole of the United Kingdom, was established to capture and report the experiences of businesses throughout the pandemic. Office for National Statistics worked closely with policy & analytical leads across government and the devolved administrations to identify new questions and priority information needs, endeavouring to accommodate specific requests that arose.
84. The analyses that the Office for National Statistics undertook covered all territories of the United Kingdom and the resulting information was part of their 'faster indicators' series. Their outputs from the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey commenced in April 2020 and continued on a fortnightly basis throughout the pandemic. By way of example, the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey included questions and analyses on topics such as furlough, working from home, regular testing of the workforce and safety measures that businesses had put in place. The Office for National Statistics will be able to provide further information on the various publications that they released and their associated audiences.
85. Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch involvement resulted in the initial NI sample of around 300 businesses being boosted by an additional 1,000 businesses. The initial sample was heavily dominated by manufacturing businesses and the boost resulted in it (and the associated analyses) being more representative of all key business sectors (with the exception of human health which was excluded in an attempt to reduce burden during the period in question).
86. As part of this United Kingdom collaboration, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch staff participated in a Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey working group, which typically met on a fortnightly basis. This was key to ensuring that questions remained relevant and reflected changing information/policy needs. Throughout, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch ensured that policy leads from the Department for the Economy were updated on developments, represented on the group and given direct access to the analysis undertaken by the Office for National Statistics. As part of this engagement, colleagues in Department for the Economy were able to secure questions being added to the survey relating to access to skills.

NISRA DOF's NI Coronavirus (Covid-19) Opinion Survey

87. NISRA's Central Survey Unit took the lead in implementing the end-to-end operations associated with a new and specifically tailored NISRA Coronavirus (Covid-19) Opinion Survey in NI. In addition, it contributed to the work of the United Kingdom Wide Covid-19 Infection Study.
88. The NISRA Coronavirus (Covid-19) Opinion Survey was introduced in April 2020, with the aim of establishing what societal impact the pandemic was having on peoples' lives. This mirrored a similar survey (Opinions and Lifestyle Survey), which was being conducted by the Office for National Statistics in Great Britain. The survey gave an insight into how personal, home and work lives changed and the impact that COVID-19 and the public health response had on individuals and communities. The results from the survey attracted coverage in the media and were disseminated across Government to enable policy leads to deploy and respond as they considered appropriate. At a Ministerial level, the results were copied to the Ministers of Finance and of Health.
89. The survey was large-scale from the outset with a minimum of 1,000 addresses sampled each week. This increased to 2,000 per week from August 2020 to March 2021, which in NI terms was unprecedented in terms of scale. From April 2021 the sample was scaled back to 1,200 per week for the rest of the fieldwork, which ended in March 2022.
90. Because of lockdown measures and in line with arrangements in Great Britain, the survey had to be conducted in telephone mode. Since NISRA does not hold any telephone contact details for sampled addresses, the survey relied on letters being sent to sampled addresses and recipients contacting the Agency directly to participate in the survey. With the aim of boosting response and providing information that would be optimal to inform the Government response to the societal aspects of pandemic, a £20 financial incentive was offered to all those who completed an interview. This was consistent with other Government Surveys operating in telephone mode in both NI and Great Britain. One adult, aged 16 or over, from each address was randomly selected to take part.

Questionnaire

91. In NI, the survey questionnaire changed every 4 weeks to reflect emerging areas of interest, with NI Departments utilising weekly questionnaire updates from Office for National Statistics to shape their thinking/ priority information needs.

92. The main questionnaire themes included the following:

- Access to medical care.
- Alcohol Consumption.
- Concerns about Coronavirus.
- Effect of Coronavirus on your life (work, education, family, finances, etc.).
- Any diagnosis/symptoms of Coronavirus.
- Long Covid.
- Covid vaccine.
- Self-isolation.
- Contact with other people during Coronavirus pandemic.
- StopCOVIDNI App; and
- Wearing of Face Masks.

93. At the NI Departmental level, the key customers of the Opinion Survey data/ results were the Departments of/for Finance, Health, Communities and Education. Other users include Tourism NI and the Department for Economy, who asked questions about the High Street Spend Local Scheme in Autumn 2021.

Results

94. The first set of results from the NISRA Coronavirus (COVID-19) Opinion Survey, which reported on the first four weeks of data collection (Phase 1), were published by NISRA on 10th July 2020.

95. Across the 21 phases (i.e. 4 weekly periods) of the survey the response rate varied, ranging from a high of 25.4% in Phase 1 to a low of 16.2% in Phase 19. A total of ten statistical bulletins were produced by NISRA, with the last being made available on 12th May 2022. These insightful, high-quality bulletins, which outlined the social impact that the pandemic was having on everyday life in NI, consisted of key findings, visualizations, and data tables – with the latter being accessible as both excel and csv files. Further detail on the bulletins is provided in **Annex C**, which highlights the time period that the report findings relate to, the topics covered/ added/ removed throughout the various phases and the publication date.

Supporting technical reports provided further information on weighting, sampling error, significant differences between estimates, as well as the strengths and limitations of the survey. All published reports, associated data and the questionnaires used at each phase of the survey were made publicly available via the NISRA website. Infographics were also used to disseminate information through the NISRA Facebook and Twitter platforms, at the time of publication.

96. In total, approximately 22,000 people in Northern Ireland participated in the survey. Their identities were safeguarded at all times and protected through appropriate disclosure control methods, with all published figures providing appropriate weighted estimates. Trend analyses were included as appropriate.
97. Preannounced reports were released at 2-to-3-month intervals at 9.30am on a Thursday. This ensured consistency and impartiality in the release of the information and gave users sufficient time to understand and respond to information during normal working hours. It was agreed that Department of Health and Public Health Agency officials would lead on any media interviews that may arise from the various releases which, at Ministerial level, were copied to the Ministers of Finance and of Health.
98. Office for National Statistics conducted a similar survey, 'Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain' and the findings can be found on the Office for National Statistics website. While the results of the Office for National Statistics survey are not directly comparable with those published by NISRA due to differences in the design of some questions, the mode/ time periods for data collection and the weighting methodology applied, they nonetheless afforded the opportunity to view the main findings from the Northern Ireland survey in a wider context.

Coronavirus Infection Survey

99. The United Kingdom wide COVID-19 Infection Survey was set up in April 2020 and was used to gather (on a regular basis) both swab and blood tests from households across the United Kingdom who volunteered to take part. The survey, which was led by the Office for National Statistics along with Oxford University and other delivery partners (e.g. IQVIA who did the initial field work during the period in question) was groundbreaking in nature and the largest epidemiology study of its kind in the United Kingdom. The results from the survey provided vital weekly data on virus positivity levels across the United Kingdom, details on new variants, the characteristics of those who had the virus and their antibody levels and details of long Covid-19 prevalence. Throughout the pandemic, this was vital to shaping an understanding of the virus and informing the Government's policy decisions and response. Briefings based on

the results of the survey were a regular feature in the Government's daily televised address. Funding for the survey was centrally controlled and managed at the United Kingdom level.

100. The survey was initiated in England, with the other devolved nations being included at a later date – July 2020 in the case of NI. The survey design was regulated through various protocols, which were managed by Oxford University in conjunction with delivery partners. Funding for the survey in NI was determined on the basis of the Barnett formula, which had a direct influence on the number of NI participants who could be accommodated given the extensive field work and the gathering of swab and blood tests involved. The Department of Health and Public Health Agency were directly in the lead for NI on the analytical and reporting aspects (along with the Office for National Statistics) and for using the information to inform the NI policy response through the NI Executive. NISRA DOF were not involved in these aspects. It is important to note that Health and Social Services is devolved in NI and that the United Kingdom wide COVID-19 Infection Survey was a new and unprecedented initiative in terms of its scale, design and aims. It represented a significant logistical challenge that required the mobilisation of considerable field force resources, who would interact directly with the General Public in the prevailing circumstances. To Office for National Statistics credit it was stood up at real pace (initially in England) with coverage extending to the other territories of the United Kingdom as (i) resources permitted and (ii) country specific requirements/ timescales were agreed with the relevant leads (Department of Health and Public Health Agency in the case of NI). The later implementation in NI enabled initial logistical and operational 'teething problems' to be ironed out, albeit at the expense of delaying the delivery of the NI specific intelligence that the study provided.

101. NISRA's Central Survey Unit was however involved in two important aspects, namely, (i) providing the hosting infrastructure that the Office for National Statistics required for the registration phase of the operation (i.e. the system used to capture and secure volunteer details) and (ii) providing the sample of NI households to be approached to take part.

Hosting Infrastructure

102. In Great Britain it was decided that recruitment of participants to the COVID-19 Infection Survey would be via the large-scale online Labour Market Survey. The Office for National Statistics stood this up to serve as a contingency should participation in the regular Labour Force Survey (which during the pandemic was operating in telephone capture mode) fall to unacceptably low levels.

103. While Office for National Statistics had its own robust online data collection system, its priority purpose was for the 2021 Census operation, which NISRA would also utilise through the joint working and collaborative arrangements in place. It was crucial that its ongoing development, testing and live running during the 2021 Census operations was not hindered in any way.
104. Accordingly, it was agreed that NISRA would host the online Labour Market Survey. This required NISRA to expand its accredited Blaise 5 platform (i.e. the infrastructure that underpins NISRA's Social Survey operations). An additional 8 web servers were added to the existing compliment of 6, which was essential to provide the necessary resilience to cope with anticipated maximum volumes (i.e. approximately 100,000 online interviews with 4,000 concurrent users at any one time).
105. Importantly, in addition to asking the respondents about their labour market circumstances, the Labour Market Survey asked respondents if they would be prepared to participate in other surveys. The information that NISRA captured on those who indicated that they would, was sent to the Office for National Statistics COVID-19 Infection Survey team via an automated secure pipeline that NISRA developed. The relevant data was transmitted every 30 minutes to the Office for National Statistics who then extracted the necessary respondent contact information for COVID-19 Infection Survey purposes.
106. This collaboration in respect of NISRA DOF providing the underpinning infrastructure for the recruitment phase of the Infection Survey **for the whole of the United Kingdom** was critical to the success of the operation. It was stood up at an impressive pace and remained exceptionally stable and resilient throughout the entire operation. In keeping with best practice and in view of (i) the United Kingdom reliance on the system and (ii) the daily/ weekly decision making that it was helping to inform at the United Kingdom level, appropriate automated load monitoring and 'fall- over' arrangements were in place. In addition, NISRA DOF key personnel were on 'out-of-hours' standby to ensure continuity of service delivery and that everything ran smoothly.

Providing the sample of NI households to be approached to take part

107. In NI, NISRA's Central Survey Unit followed a similar approach to recruiting participants to take part in the COVID-19 Infection Survey. Instead of using the Labour Market Survey, which was being administered by the Office for National Statistics on behalf of the United Kingdom, NISRA utilised its own COVID-19 Opinion Survey, Continuous Household Survey, Safe Community Survey, Health Survey NI and Travel Survey NI for a period of time. Similar to the

above, respondents were asked at the end of the Opinion Survey if they would be prepared to take part in the COVID-19 Infection Survey. The details of those who said that they would were then sent across to the Office for National Statistics COVID-19 Infection Survey team on a weekly basis.

108. The COVID-19 Infection Survey recruitment process worked particularly well in NI due to the fact that the Opinion Survey interviews were being conducted over the telephone by NISRA's experienced team of survey interviewers. This had an added benefit in that a very high percentage of those who indicated that they would be prepared to take part in the COVID-19 Infection Survey actually went on to do so when approached by the COVID-19 Infection Survey field team (IQVIA). Strategically this was advantageous because the high participation rates considerably reduced the size of the samples that were required. Indeed, as a result of this and NI rapidly approaching its quota of COVID-19 Infection Survey participants, recruitment activities had to be scaled back from April 2021 onwards in keeping with the underlying protocol that was in place. During the period January 2020 – February 2022 15 versions of the protocol were implemented, with Version 1 applicable from the 20th April 2020 and Version 15 applicable from 9th February 2022. The protocols were under the management of the Chief Investigator Professor Ann Sarah Walker. Version 8.1 of the Protocol was applicable from 12th April 2021 with Version 9.1 introduced with effect from 9th May 2021.
109. From a NI perspective, Central Survey Unit's involvement in the COVID-19 Infection Survey was considered to be hugely successful. The approach that was adopted consistently delivered the highest weekly participation rates across the whole of the United Kingdom. Results from the survey that were produced by the Office for National Statistics and Department of Health NI can be found on their respective websites.
110. The extent to which the COVID-19 Infection Survey, Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey and Opinions and Lifestyle Survey were used to inform the economic response to the pandemic is a matter for Departments responsible for delivering the economic response to the pandemic to answer.
111. NISRA is not sighted on, or aware of, statistics on Long Covid being compiled and deployed for the purpose of assisting the Northern Ireland Executive or United Kingdom Government to understand the economic impact of Long Covid. Furthermore, NISRA is not aware of any such statistics being used to inform the economic response to the pandemic.

112. NISRA DOF do not undertake any forecasting or modelling to determine matters such as the long-term impact of the pandemic. We are not aware of any such statistics being produced and as such this question is not relevant to our remit.
113. NISRA were not involved in developing mechanisms to support the economic response to the pandemic. How our data were used to inform the economic response to the pandemic is a question for the Department for the Economy and other policy leads responsible for developing and administering such interventions.
114. Maintaining the integrity and delivery of NISRA DOF business as usual activities and responding to any emerging demands from the pandemic were key operational priorities. This section outlines how this played out in the Economic & Labour Market space, where the work is underpinned by well-established processes and methodologies which, by-and-large, prevailed throughout the pandemic. Examples are however provided of how our approach to data collection and the reporting of statistics (for example to assist businesses and add insight & value) had to be tailored during the pandemic, along with (i) details of important United Kingdom initiatives that were helpfully advanced on a collaborative basis and (ii) key avenues of engagement at the United Kingdom level.
115. The pandemic had a major impact on businesses, forcing many businesses to close and/or similarly work from home, which made the task of getting a response to NISRA DOF's statutory business surveys more difficult. Given the prevailing circumstances and difficulties that local businesses were already experiencing, NISRA suspended its non-compliance prosecution activity in respect of businesses who failed to make a return on a survey they had been invited to take part in. This aligned with the position adopted by the Office for National Statistics, who conduct business surveys for England, Scotland and Wales. NISRA also suspended the Inter Departmental Business Register (IDBR) Proving survey for 2 months from mid- March 2020. In addition, NISRA DOF (in conjunction with NI Direct) set up a dedicated helpline and telecoms facility that enabled staff to continue to provide direct support to businesses (as needed) while working from home. Gaining remote access to our Integrated Business Survey System, which was facilitated by our supplier in a responsive and timely manner, was key from an operational perspective and was secured in March 2020.
116. During the pandemic, response and coverage rates across all surveys dropped to varying degrees. These were however kept under review and remained at a level sufficient to support the statistical production of all outputs normally produced by NISRA DOF's Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch.

117. Despite the logistical and operational challenges outlined above, all publications and associated data were released to plan and in accordance with our published release schedule. These included monthly, quarterly and annual releases, all of which continued to be copied to the appropriate Ministers (e.g. in the Department of Finance and Department for Economy) and key policy leads in line with normal arrangements. Further details on the various releases are detailed in **Annex D**. The relevant statistics were a key source for policy colleagues in the Department for Economy (for example) to use along with other relevant indicators to (i) monitor the impact of the pandemic on the economy and labour market and (ii) develop an evidence-based policy response – a matter for the relevant policy leads to comment further on.
118. In line with arrangements throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, our statutory business survey questionnaires and guidance were appropriately tailored (as necessary) to reflect the changing circumstances arising from the pandemic (e.g. the new concept of furloughed workers that emerged). By way of example, for the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2020 a letter and tailored guidance was issued to selected businesses to assist them in completing the survey [PW/01 - INQ000212407]. The letter, which was developed in liaison with the Office for National Statistics, was issued on the 22nd April 2020 alongside survey forms as facilitated by our service provider.

Labour Force Survey

119. To help prevent the spread of Coronavirus, and in line with the Government's 'Stay at Home Order' and arrangements in Great Britain, NISRA suspended all face-to-face household interviews on 18th March 2020 for a period of time, conducting all household survey interviews via telephone. To try and maintain an appropriate sample size for analysis and to make it as easy as possible to take part, NISRA made changes to the number of households invited to respond as well as changes to communication materials and processes. This fundamentally affected NISRA DOF's data collection operations on social surveys, which are the primary source for key indicators used across Government (including those integral to the Programme for Government).
120. Historically key Labour Market statistics (e.g. the unemployment rate, employment rate and economic inactivity rate) were provided through the Labour Force Survey using information collected from the general public via face-to-face household interviews. This was the case across the United Kingdom, with NISRA DOF's Central Survey Unit doing the Labour Force Survey data collection for NI and the Office for National Statistics doing it for Great Britain.

121. Across the United Kingdom, there was concern that the response rate to the Labour Force Survey could fall to unacceptably low levels in telephone only mode and that this could jeopardize the production of robust key labour market indicators.
122. In response to this concern, the Office for National Statistics moved to deploy an online Labour Market Survey in parallel to the Labour Force Survey as described above. The field work and data processing of the Labour Market Survey was managed entirely by the Office for National Statistics, Central Survey Unit provided the sample of NI addresses that should be invited to take part in the online Labour Market Survey to the Office for National Statistics.
123. As it happens, across the United Kingdom all key labour market indicators continued to be produced from the Labour Force Survey throughout the pandemic. The implementation of the online Labour Market Survey was however a prudent and necessary step during what was a period of considerable uncertainty. The Office for National Statistics developmental and operational work in this space has provided constructive and valuable insight in terms of moving social surveys online, which the National Statistics Institutes across the United Kingdom continue to collaborate on.

Tourism statistics

124. NISRA Tourism Statistics, which detail the value and volume of visitors to Northern Ireland, are compiled using the following four surveys, all of which were severely impacted by the pandemic when data collection activities ceased in March 2020 for the:
- NISRA Northern Ireland Passenger Survey.
 - NISRA Continuous Household Survey.
 - Failte Ireland (tourism body in the Republic of Ireland) Survey of Overseas Travellers; and
 - ROI Central Statistics Office Household Travel Survey.
125. The CSO's HTS is a paper survey, and, with the easing of travel restrictions, data collection activities resumed in August 2020. The Continuous Household Survey recommenced in May 2020, however the mode of data collection was by telephone, resulting in less information being collected on tourism related overnight stays - the full suite of overnight trips questions returned in April 2022. The passenger surveys were re-introduced at air and seaports as

restrictions and operators permitted (October 2021 onwards), with the key priority of keeping both NISRA's Survey Interviewers and travellers safe.

126. Another important aspect of NISRA DOF's Tourism statistics is the occupancy of hotels and small service accommodation, which routinely was collected on a monthly basis through postal and email returns. From March 2020 onwards (and reflecting the new working from home arrangements), collection switched to online only (initially via email) with data being provided for the periods that the establishments were permitted to operate.
127. In the absence of these regular tourism data feeds, work was undertaken to explore alternative data sources that might usefully provide some insight into how the sector was performing. By way of example, NISRA's COVID-19 Opinion Survey included questions on "leaving your house" for certain activities (such as visiting a visitor attraction) and "whether you took a holiday or planned to take a holiday". The Continuous Household Survey also included a question regarding the intention of the respondent to take a holiday over the next year. Importantly, this work also exploited a range of novel statistics from administrative sources (such as passenger numbers through airports – provided by the Civil Aviation Authority, and passenger numbers through seaports – provided by the Department for Transport in Great Britain). In addition, they included tourism related indicators (e.g. employee jobs, earnings, hours worked, type of business) derived from the Labour Force Survey and Business Register. The information was collated and presented in one source document that was signalled to key users and disseminated via the NISRA website.
128. This new information was particularly welcomed by key stakeholders (Tourism Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland and the Department for Economy) and commended by the Office of Statistics Regulation who highlighted this as good practice in communicating the impact of coronavirus. The tourism alternative data sources work has continued and is provided alongside the routine statistics.
129. The data we produced was as up to date as possible and not considered outdated, for example employment data we report on is **not** collected as part of the 2011 Census. NISRA produces monthly labour market statistics, collected via our monthly Labour Market Survey, in line with those published by Office for National Statistics for the United Kingdom as a whole. This information is considered to be timely.

Part D: Method and Relationships During the Pandemic

130. As discussed in paragraphs above, NISRA DOF included new information in its economic statistics bulletins when it became available and where it was deemed appropriate to do so. This data/information was typically sourced from external data producers such as the Office for National Statistics or Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and included within our analyses to provide more information and context around the performance of the NI economy and labour market. The goal was to facilitate greater visibility and accessibility of these external analyses for our users. Including these supplementary sources required NISRA statisticians to identify appropriate and relevant analyses, source the information/data and include it in our outputs. For example, including more contextual information on the performance of the NI economy within our quarterly NI Composite Economic Index publications, and including experimental data from Her Majesty's Revenue and Custom's Real Time Information Pay As You Earn system and analysis of new questions on furloughed employees in our monthly Labour Market Report and Quarterly Employment Survey.
131. These decisions were made proactively by NISRA.
132. The challenges that NISRA DOF faced in collecting data from businesses and how these were addressed are outlined above. In terms of analysis, arrangements were required to facilitate staff working from home, as was the case with all organisations during the period in question. This required gaining secure remote access to our systems to allow staff to undertake their work and analysis of data, and also included ensuring staff had the relevant hardware and software to facilitate this.
133. However, the methodologies employed and approaches to analysing our data remained consistent with the robust tried and tested approaches employed prior to the onset of the pandemic.
134. In terms of the production of economic statistics during the pandemic, NISRA DOF had no direct engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive. As mentioned previously all statistical bulletins produced by Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch during the pandemic were circulated to key economic policy leads in Department for the Economy, the Permanent Secretary in Department of Finance, the Permanent Secretary in Department for the Economy, the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy. As mentioned in paragraph 86, NISRA's close engagement with Department for the Economy officials ensured that they were represented on the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey working group which facilitated them being able to add new questions to the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey to support their information needs. These would have reflected the information needs and

interests of their Departmental lead officials at the time. Furthermore, NISRA economic and labour market statistics feature heavily in Department for the Economy outputs such as their quarterly economic commentaries and monthly economic update publications which will be shared with the Department for the Economy Minister via briefings. The information needs and interests of their Ministers will be reflected throughout the regular engagement NISRA has with Department for the Economy. The recent development around productivity statistics referred to in paragraph 40 is another good example of NISRA working with Department for the Economy to address specific information needs to address the Department for the Economy Minister's economic priorities.

135. NISRA did not work specifically with Her Majesty's Treasury on producing economic statistics during the pandemic. That said, we did maintain our close working relationships with key stakeholders covering a wide range of economic themes. NISRA Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch represent NI on a range of cross-Government working groups relating to the economy and labour market. Pre-pandemic, participation in these groups was largely on a virtual basis and this continued fairly seamlessly throughout the pandemic, albeit with some connectivity problems initially arising from the use of home broadband. From a continuity of service delivery perspective, the continuance of this engagement and collaboration was key to the successful delivery of our business-as-usual work. These groups included membership from the other National Statistics Institutes in Scotland and Wales, the Office for National Statistics, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Her Majesty's Treasury, Cabinet Office, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Department for the Economy, Department for Communities, The Executive Office, and others (**Annex E refers**).
136. As already discussed in paragraphs 73 and 83-86 NISRA worked effectively with counterparts in the Office for National Statistics in the development of the Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey and maintained our effective working relationships with various teams across the Office for National Statistics we provide data to for the production of United Kingdom wide statistics.
- 137.** As previously discussed in paragraphs 114-129 and 132 the main challenges faced related to establishing suitable working from home arrangements for staff, and receiving responses to our business surveys from businesses, and responses from households. These challenges were overcome effectively and despite lower response rates than the pre-pandemic period, our robust methodologies for statistical production allowed Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch to generate the data required to produce pre-planned outputs and to share the underpinning data/ statistics with Office for National Statistics counterparts for inclusion in United Kingdom estimates.

Part E: Lessons Learned and Reflections

138. Despite the logistical and operational challenges outlined above, the work of Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch continued to ensure that good quality data was collected, analysed and published in accordance with its published release schedule. This was commendable given the prevailing unprecedented circumstances and the additional work undertaken with no additional resources. Against this background, Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch has not undertaken or been party to any internal or external reviews/ lessons learned exercises of the nature outlined.
139. NISRA DOF did however assist an internal cross-departmental group on Covid Funding to develop and administer a survey to grant applicants as part of their grant evaluation work. In preparation for the survey, NISRA DOF collated data from all the relevant departments to create a unified dataset of all grant applicants and recipients. The survey of grant applicants, which was launched on 1 December 2022 and closed on 31 January 2023, was issued to a 75% sample of this unified dataset, amounting to 48,043 businesses and other organisations – yielding a response rate of 18%. The findings from the survey were compiled and presented in a Lessons Learned report provided by independent external consultations on 26th October 2023 [PW/02 – **INQ000212408**].
140. As previously mentioned in this response, despite fluctuating response rates to our business surveys, NISRA DOF was able to publish its key economic and labour market statistics as planned and make available information and insights on the performance of the NI economy throughout the pandemic.
141. The extent to which a greater amount of data of the same kind that was in fact available during the pandemic would enable the United Kingdom government to respond more effectively to any future pandemic is a matter for United Kingdom government departments who were leading the response to address.
142. The extent to which different sources of data to those which were available during the pandemic would enable the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland Executive to respond more effectively to any future pandemic is a matter for those organisations who were leading the response to address.
143. From a NISRA DOF perspective we would acknowledge that the economic, tourism and labour market outputs that we produce comprise of a mixture of short-term (i.e. monthly, quarterly) and long-term (i.e. annual) indicators. Securing access to timely intelligence from robust ‘faster indicators’ from relevant administrative data sources, for example, is something

that can be hugely advantageous in circumstances such as those that prevailed and should of course be welcomed and exploited - resources permitting.

144. The Inquiry may be interested to note that the Evaluation Executive Covid-19 Grant Funds report, referred to earlier [PW/02 – **INQ000212408**], recommended that data quality is improved across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, whether by internal development or external service provider support and Data Sharing Agreements should be reviewed and developed alongside legislation and the Emergency Response Plans, and retained, ready to be actioned. It outlined that processes should be reviewed to ensure that in emergency situations, data sharing for the purpose of funding schemes is allowed, provided the Data Sharing Agreements are signed and in place.
145. The report also noted that as separate legal entities, Northern Ireland Executive Departments also have to follow quite time-consuming procedures to share data to support the administration of grant schemes, including identifying legislative pathways and entering into data sharing agreements with one another. It also noted that the United Kingdom government was able to use the Digital Economy Act, and for England this allowed the sharing of data for economic purposes. This was not used in Northern Ireland, as the legislation has not commenced here. The report flagged a similar lesson learned regarding data quality, data access, and data sharing issues encountered by the Northern Ireland Executive Departments and the need for better data sharing amongst agencies.
146. As highlighted above, securing access to timely intelligence from robust 'faster indicators' from relevant administrative data sources, for example, is something that can be hugely advantageous in circumstances such as those that prevailed and should of course be welcomed and exploited - resources permitting.
147. One recognised key source of data relating to Northern Ireland that would facilitate the provision of additional valuable statistical insight on the labour market and economy of Northern Ireland and sub-regional geographies is the Northern Ireland Pay As You Earn and Frameworks dataset. This includes information about taxpayers from across the range of tax systems, including Pay As You Earn Real Time Information and Self Assessment. Access to information of this nature, in line with arrangements already in place for the Office for National Statistics, would enable NISRA to produce comparable/coherent data for Northern Ireland to that for Great Britain and allow the development of United Kingdom level statistics and analysis, in collaboration with Office for National Statistics and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

148. NISRA are actively engaging with Office for National Statistics and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to gain access to this valuable dataset and the work is progressing positively.
149. How greater or different use by the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland Executive of economic statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics or NISRA would enable the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland Executive to respond more effectively to any future pandemic is a matter for those organisations to respond on.
150. NISRA has proactively engaged with developments across the Northern Ireland Civil Service in relation to Civil Contingencies. Specifically, NISRA DOF has stood up statisticians to participate in Civil Contingencies training and are represented on a Data Liaison Officer Network initiated by The Executive Office to support their Civil Contingencies work.
151. Furthermore, a key component of the new NISRA Corporate Plan 2025-29 is to promote the use of automation, including widening our use of Reproducible Analytical Pipelines to produce outputs efficiently and to a consistently high standard.
152. Reproducible Analytical Pipelines are automated statistical and analytical processes, and where possible remove manual interventions. They cover processing of data from source to final outputs and incorporate elements of software engineering best practice to ensure that the pipelines are reproducible, auditable, efficient, and high quality.
153. They save time by automating the analysis process. Collaboration becomes smoother as team members can easily share, understand, and contribute to a standardised workflow. Reproducible pipelines are adaptable to changes in data, methodologies, new software, new output formats or team composition. They provide a future-proofing mechanism against evolving project requirements.
154. Introducing Reproducible Analytical Pipeline processes to make production more efficient enables our highly skilled people to spend less resource on production processes and to focus on value added activity. It also helps with staff coverage and mobility as it allows staff to move across teams easier if all are using same software, processes, etc.
155. The demand for analytical support to Northern Ireland Civil Service departments and agencies continues to grow at an exceptional rate. The COVID-19 pandemic particularly highlighted the criticality of data-driven decision making supported by timely, accurate data analysis and intuitive visualisations. The pandemic also required some staff to be mobilised quickly to support key work areas. Having a consistent approach and skills across the agency will allow staff to be mobilised much more effectively in the future should the need arise, for example in the event of another pandemic.

156. As such, NISRA has developed a Reproducible Analytical Pipeline Strategy and Reproducible Analytical Pipeline implementation plan to promote the implementation of Reproducible Analytical Pipelines across the Agency. The long-term goal is to 'implement Reproducible Analytical Pipelines for all our key statistical processes and key statistical outputs within 5 years'.
157. With regards to economic statistics, NISRA Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch has invested significant resources in developing Reproducible Analytical Pipelines for our suite of economic and labour market statistics outputs over the last 3 years. Whilst more work is to be completed, the majority of our statistical outputs now have streamlined Reproducible Analytical Pipeline processes in place. This development will provide NISRA Economic and Labour Market Statistics branch with more flexibility and resilience in future should staff be off sick, move posts or be mobilised to support new workstreams that may be required in the event of any future pandemic type of event.
158. The Coronavirus pandemic highlighted the importance of data and evidence to the policy making process. For instance, Information about the prevalence of the virus – collected in part by the infrastructure that NISRA maintains as set out above – provided important context for decisions about the timing and extent of the periods of lockdown. Information about the economic impact of the virus and the policy interventions was also sought by policy makers to understand the extent of the support required.
159. However, the pandemic also highlighted the barriers which exist to data sharing across departments in the NI context. As set out above, among the key blockers for the policy response were data quality and data access. Stronger data sharing between departments in the Northern Ireland Civil Service – and between United Kingdom Government institutions like Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Devolved Government – could support a more nimble response to a future pandemic.
160. The NISRA Corporate Plan 2025-2029 sets out a vision to modernise our data collection and linkage services to produce the highest quality information possible on the economy, population and society of Northern Ireland: embedding modern, low-cost and high quality data collection processes which promote interoperability between datasets to maximise the potential for analytical insights from linked data.
161. By adopting a more cross-cutting view of our data sources, by mobilising administrative data from across the public sector, and by reconsidering the extent and nature of data sharing in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, NISRA believes this vision could support the policy

response to a future pandemic. We hope that the Chair would consider a recommendation on stronger data sharing that would support this vision.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: 8 May 2025