

Witness Name: Aileen Campbell

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: AC

Dated: 15 November 2023

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

---

### WITNESS STATEMENT OF AILEEN CAMPBELL

---

**In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 request, reference M2A/AC/01, dated 16 June 2023 in connection with Module 2A, I, Aileen Campbell will say as follows: -**

1. I am Aileen Campbell of Personal Data I am currently the CEO of Scottish Women's Football and have been since August 2021. Prior to that I was an MSP in the Scottish Parliament serving the South of Scotland region between 2007-2011 and then Clydesdale between 2011 and 2021. Between 2011 and 2021 I served in various roles in the Scottish Government. The positions were as follows: Minister for Local Government and Planning (May 2011-Dec 2011); Minister for Children and Young People (Dec 2011-May 2016); Minister for Public Health and Sport (May 2016-June 2018); and finally Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (June 2018-May 2021).
  
2. I have prepared this statement by myself by reference to records and material provided to me by the Scottish Government. I have also received some assistance from the Scottish Government Covid Inquiry Information Governance Division.
  
3. Unless stated otherwise, the facts stated in this witness statement are within my own knowledge and are true. Where they are not within my own knowledge, they are derived from sources to which I refer and are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

4. References to exhibits in this statement are in the form [AC/number-**INQ000000**].
5. The inquiry asks that the statement is prepared in narrative form, and I will endeavour to do this whilst ensuring that the details required are included and clear.
6. My statement will only be applicable up until May 2021 when I chose not to seek re-election and stepped down from the Scottish Government (SG).
7. From the outset, however, I wish to state that being part of the Scottish Government and serving in the Cabinet during Covid-19 was incredibly tough in all senses, though nothing as to what many individuals went through. The gravity of the decisions we made and the demands and the burden they placed on the Scottish public, especially the most vulnerable, were never lost.
8. This statement therefore will set out as best it can the involvement I had with relevant areas of decision making, the considerations that were taken, and comments on the effectiveness and where areas could improve.

## **EARLY STAGES**

9. Cabinet was updated about Covid-19 early in 2020, following the Chinese alert to the WHO in December 2019, [AC/001-**INQ000214398**]. The potential consequences facing Scotland of a global pandemic were obviously potentially very grave, especially given the concurrent risks facing the country posed by Brexit. As the early weeks and months of 2020 progressed, the severity of the situation became even clearer with previously unfathomable decisions needing to be made, including those that would intrude over the threshold of people's private lives.
10. Following the first case of Covid-19 in Scotland in early March 2020, actions escalated and were agreed by Cabinet of which I was part including the cancellation of mass events of 500 or more and the beginning of the FM's daily briefings. At no point, however, do I recall making any direct decisions regarding the Nike conference which was a corporate event, and I don't recall discussion around the Six Nations matches.

11. With the severity of the pandemic increasing and the country on an emergency footing, government activity escalated.
12. My portfolio, Communities and Local Government, felt like it grew in importance as the pandemic developed. In its broadest sense, I was responsible for the areas of life that make our communities vibrant and great places to be and also responsible for trying to remedy some of our communities' worst problems, poverty and inequality.
13. I had responsibility for:
14. The relationship with local government – this was done primarily through engagement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and meant ensuring local government was properly and appropriately engaged with and that that sphere of governance in Scotland was respected. Local Government is a critical partner to the SG and were crucial during emergency responses across the country.
15. Faith and religion – ensuring religious and faith groups were engaged with and supported. Given places of worship had restrictions placed on them during the pandemic, it was essential that these relationships were nurtured.
16. The third sector and social enterprises- primarily, this was to drive government policy in terms of strategically supporting the third sector and social enterprises During Covid-19 the third sector and social enterprise sector were nimble and adaptable and able to respond to individual and community needs. That was why policy in this area was critical to the Covid-19 response.
17. Housing strategy – this included developing long-term housing strategy (Housing to 2040) (Kevin Stewart, Minister for Housing and Planning, had lead responsibility for housing and homelessness policy). This related to Covid-19, because the CLG portfolio was responsible for dealing with and supporting those who were homeless. During Covid-19 being homeless, especially street homeless, posed a risk most significantly to the individual themselves, and to the spread of the virus more generally. As the prevailing message to the public was to 'stay at home' SG needed to ensure everyone had somewhere safe to protect themselves in.

18. Asylum policy – this meant overall policy responsibility for asylum seekers and refugees. Again, those that were seeking asylum were identified as a vulnerable group and so required support via the third sector groups the SG worked with given that asylum policy is largely reserved.
19. Poverty – the portfolio had lead responsibility for developing policies and actions to reduce poverty, particularly child poverty, and ensuring dignity and respect shaped approaches. This is particularly important given Covid-19 exacerbated inequality and there was a need to support the most vulnerable in our society.
20. I never had any direct input into issues regarding the discharge of patients into care homes or around health and social care policies. Where my portfolio did have an interface with this was through my involvement as lead minister responsible for the relationship with Local Government. Local Government are major employers of this workforce and so there was a slight involvement in terms of liasing with COSLA or unions.
21. As restrictions on people's lives ratcheted up and advice was to avoid all non-essential contact, my portfolio emerged as being crucial in terms of keeping folk safe and fed. It would become crucial to help support the huge community endeavour that would become critical to steering the country through the pandemic and in harnessing the community and wider societal assets to deliver food and support where it was required.
22. For instance, this included working with food suppliers, such as Brakes, Food Standard Scotland and local government to ensure that the logistics of getting food to those that were most vulnerable could be delivered. Meetings would be convened to troubleshoot and consider how to overcome barriers, new areas to focus on, or different approaches.
23. On 18th March 2020 I made a statement to the Scottish Parliament, [AC/002-INQ000250236] setting out £350m package of resources had been allocated to support the crucial work that would happen across the length and breadth of the country. Shortly thereafter, a national lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020.

24. In that speech which I made in the parliament, I recognised the need for collaborative work and said: *“Today, on behalf of the Scottish Government, I will announce significant resources. However, let me be clear that, unless we work with local partners, the impact of our investment will not be felt by those who need it most, so my message today is that, if we can help our partners to help the people of Scotland, we will. Our partners should tell me their solutions or ideas to help those most in need, then we can work together to provide at pace the support that is required to do that.”*
25. This indicates very clearly that we always sought to be outward looking in our engagement and to recognise that Government did not possess all the answers in how to respond to local need during a pandemic.
26. The £350m was allocated at that point in the following way: £50m of Barnett consequentials were given directly to local government; £45m was allocated to the Scottish Welfare Fund, doubling the budget available to them at that time; £50m was allocated for increased demand for Social Security benefits and increased costs of council tax reduction scheme; £70m was allocated to support households (isolation and food security etc); £50m was used to establish a Wellbeing fund for third sector partners; £40m was used to establish a Communities Fund to support local community effort; £20m was used to set up a Third Sector Resilience Fund to support the impact of the pandemic on third sector organisations; and £25m was earmarked for flexibility to enable responses to other emerging challenges
27. This division of these resources was decided by me in collaboration with officials, SpAds and the Social Security portfolio, including the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security. It sought to ensure that it delivered meaningful impact by supporting community endeavour, recognizing local government's' critical role, and empowering the vital third sector.
28. There was a real need to ensure that money got to where it needed to go and as quickly as it could. There was also a recognition that the Government would need to work alongside third sector and community groups in order to have the best reach. That said, I was also clear that there needed to be some way to track spending and to have some

light-touch administrative rules around spending in order that money didn't get tied up in bureaucracy, but to also ensure we sensibly marshalled the use of public funds in a fair way. I asked my officials to use the Scottish Government's online digital planning tool to ensure we could use that technology to give a dashboard of where money had gone, through what funds and why. It was useful in terms of public accountability and in being able to respond to parliamentary scrutiny.

29. We also set out and enacted the appropriate legislative actions required to ensure tenants were protected from eviction, [AC/003-INQ000250237]. This was driven by the recognition that the message to 'stay at home and stay safe' was predicated on having a safe and secure home. Not everyone had that luxury and rightly this was raised with us by housing organisations and groups, and across the parliament. Legislation was therefore drafted to help protect tenants within the parameters of the Scottish Parliament. The Bill for this Act of the Scottish Parliament was passed by the Parliament on 1st April 2020 and received Royal Assent on 6th April 2020 Part 2 and schedule 1 of the Coronavirus Act protected renters by extending the notice period to end a tenancy and through the application of more conditions to the process.
30. Those early moments at the point of lockdown meant that normality and usual practices were put to the side. The Government had to turn on its axis and proceed in a way that it was unaccustomed to. However, as we learned and adapted, we also had to trust. We had to trust our partners and we had to trust our communities. In many respects, that was liberating - providing resources to organisations rooted in their place and trusting them to deal with and respond to the challenges confronting them. As a government minister, this was something I had always advocated for – community empowerment. There was no doubt in my mind that across government, the seriousness of what we confronted was recognized, understood and responded to as best as possible and within the parameters of the SG's devolved responsibilities. The deployment of such significant resources to areas in my portfolio at such speed, I believe, demonstrates the step change that Government recognised it needed to enact. Again, and this was peppered through Ministerial statements and the regular FM briefings, the SG recognized that not every decision would be correct, and mistakes could be made but that they were guided by seeking to do the right thing.

31. In the face of great challenge and adversity one of the most positive memories is the response of our communities and the way they rolled up their sleeves and got stuck in. Providing the space for them, our third sector partners and local government, to look after and look out for their communities by providing money and resource was important and a lesson that should be heeded by all governments. Disempowered communities lose resilience, and we asked the Scottish public to dig deep into their resilience reserves. If anything similar happens again in the future, then it is at our peril if we let communities down through their disempowerment.
32. The same can also be said of the huge effort made by third sector partners to disregard professional boundaries, be fleet of foot and deliver crucial services to those most in need. Of particular note was the ability of housing and homeless third sector colleagues to tackle street homelessness by supporting individuals into safer dwellings. The speed that this happened was remarkable and a symbol of how necessary the third sector is to respond to challenge.
33. The significant direction of resources to the community, third sector and local activity came through a recognition across government of the need to approach Covid-19 through the lens of the four harms. Those were Covid-19 harms, general health harms, societal impact and economic impact. While the overarching and main driver of activity across government was guided by the Covid-19 harm and general health harm pillars, the longer restrictions lasted there was greater need to ensure actions didn't cause more harm elsewhere.
34. Balancing all those harms and weighing up decisions against a backdrop of this framework meant that across government, there was a need to improve coordination and to work across portfolios and artificial demarcation lines. Government activity also needed to be guided by the wider engagement of groups and partners with valuable insight and knowledge.

## **GROUPS, COMMITTEES AND ENGAGEMENT**

35. As part of the process of ensuring that key stakeholders were engaged with and kept informed, I was involved in a number of groups and my Ministerial diary at the time will

demonstrate the chronology and rhythm of these engagements, [AC/004-INQ000250238].

36. I already had regular bi-monthly meetings with the president of COSLA and so the rhythm of those meetings intensified. These meetings had no decision-making powers per se but were used to feedback to the respective spheres of governance about decisions and challenges.
37. Meetings were also held weekly with the CEO of COSLA, Sally Loudon and the Chief Executive of Aberdeenshire Council and at that time, President of SOLACE, Jim Savege. These engagements provided nimble and dynamic conversations to check that activity across Scotland was happening as it should across local government and to feed back to Scottish Government where challenges or issues arose.
38. I held regular meetings with faith leaders when the impact of lockdown meant that the way faith was practiced needed to change. These meetings were designed to hear feedback or potential challenges about ongoing restrictions, understand the variety of different perspectives across the faith groups and to update on likely SG approaches in response to the pandemic.
39. I engaged regularly with our delivery partners that supported the community-led effort to ensure we had real time feedback and had the ability to be nimble if resources needed to be distributed or diverted in a different way.
40. Intra government meetings were also kick started and became crucial as working from home became more prevalent. My role being to feedback on areas related to my portfolio and, as with other Ministers, SpAds and civil servants, trouble shoot and horizon scan about potential issues facing us in the future.
41. Working across government and beyond portfolios, is always a challenge but coupling that with working from home and tackling concurrent and significant risks, heightened that problem. However, with the SG approach to addressing the four harms of Covid-19, cross portfolio groups became essential, and the Depute First Minister (John Swinney) was crucial in helping to steer that approach.

42. The Communities and Public Services Ministerial Group which I attended and was chaired by John Swinney offered space and time to think critically about areas of work we needed to do, gaps that needed to be plugged, outline concerns, think creatively, and remain task focused. It was the group of ministers and civil servants that were focused on ensuring the social harms of Covid-19 were never lost sight of. It was a way of working that I valued and meant that ministers could collaborate on areas (for instance, food resilience) that didn't fit neatly into one portfolio.

43. I also attended the economy ministers meeting due to my portfolio interests in housing, town centres and social enterprise and to feedback from local government. This was also a crucial group to ensure that economic activity could bounce back, and the right supports were there to ensure that post Covid-19, a functioning economy was in place and able to recover. My role was to represent my portfolio interest with regards the economic side of the SG response eg Housing, social enterprise, and town centres. It also proved useful as I was on both of these main SG groups and provided a useful link across both policy areas (social policy and economic policy).

44. I attended the regular Government resilience meetings, SGORR, which brought together external players including the police, fire service, health service, Food Standards Scotland and other relevant individuals. My role here was to feedback on intel from relevant areas from my portfolio, contribute to discussions, and to take forward appropriate actions decided by at the group.

45. These meetings provided an opportunity to apply a steely focus on critical risks and to intertwine approaches from risks identified from other areas – again, food was a good example. Covid-19 and food purchasing patterns changed and shifted with pressure felt across retail and suppliers. Brexit compounded fears given that import and export rules hadn't at that point been agreed.

46. I also attended several UK led meetings that were designed to consider issues that impacted upon the four nations and also to share good practice, suggestions and to ensure that there was a degree of synergy across the islands. The main being the 'Food

and other essential supplies to the vulnerable Ministerial taskforce'. It often was more a meeting where the UKG could determine their approach with the devolved nations feeding in. On the issue of food security is where I would identify a divergence of approach. The Scottish Government's approach to tackling poverty included getting money into directly into folks' pockets. Therefore, the SG was less averse to providing financial payments direct to families to ensure food security and ensure agency and autonomy. This approach was less desirable to the UKG ministers, but that is not to say that UKG ministers and their civil servants didn't recognise this issue, more that ways to tackle it differed.

47. I regularly worked closely with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security, Shirley Anne Somerville and her junior minister. We shared a Special Advisor and so it also made sense for us to collaborate where possible through our regular 'huddle' catch up on the phone. This ensured that shared areas of our work (tackling poverty, directing payments etc) were coordinated. We would often make decisions collaboratively given the strong interactions between our areas of responsibility. We relied largely upon online meetings and phone calls to engage, and I recall that while we did use WhatsApp to engage with each other and across our portfolios, given that we were in less frequent direct contact, that this was largely around things like checking availability, setting up more formal calls and retaining contact on a more supportive and less formal basis.
48. The purpose of most of those groups identified above was to stay connected and coordinated. My portfolio groups were designed to also get useful insight and information to feed back into government decision making, such as when escalations or de-escalations of restrictions occurred. Our work at this time and given its severity, could not afford for a government approach that did not outwardly engage.

#### **AS THE PANDEMIC PROGRESSED**

49. Throughout the summer of 2020 the Scottish Government sought to find ways to avoid taking a blanket approach to restrictions and find a structured way to enable nuance. The information made available to the public around prevalence rates, and Covid-19 trends was enhanced which helped demonstrate openly to the public why decisions were being made and to anticipate whether localized restrictions would be turned up or

down depending on prevalence of the virus. I had most input into local restrictions and how SG would determine the appropriate level of restriction for a local authority and would offer advice to Cabinet Colleagues on feedback from local government when we would be making our considerations.

50. As lead minister for local government, it was my responsibility to liaise and communicate with local authorities about why decisions on restrictions were being made and how that would be handled. These engagements were also designed to hear from councils about their anxieties and concerns and to feed that into cabinet where ultimately, the decision would be taken on the level of restrictions. These meetings always involved a senior clinical advisor to provide medical and scientific analysis to support decision making.
51. Data and information to support decision making included details on prevalence, and trajectory of prevalence. This was interspersed with consideration of local dynamics and geography (such as access to hospitals). Data was used to drive decisions as best as it could because the decisions needed to be underpinned by something tangible and to be defensible and understood by the public.
52. These meetings were not public facing but communication between the relevant authorities and SG needed to be coordinated in order that when public updates were made, messages were clear and understood. These would be reinforced at the FM's daily briefing. I did not take part in any of those daily briefings.
53. Island communities required particular attention due to the very low levels of Covid-19 but with economic reliance across the mainland. These more specific meetings occurred more frequently due to the special requirements of these often fragile communities.
54. Where possible, my engagement (and other ministers who supported this) tried to ensure that there was a dialogue and a sense that decisions were not being done to a local authority, but instead that they had some voice in the process. That had varying degrees of success given that essentially, ultimate decisions on lock downs and their levels were made by the cabinet. My approach was to always be cordial, open, honest

and act with integrity and to keep relationships positive even if the message wasn't welcomed.

55. As winter approached, it was clear that some of the easing of restrictions could not continue as Covid-19 prevalence increased and winter preparedness measures needed to kick in.
56. The decision to intensify restrictions again and over Christmas was difficult but necessary. It was a decision taken by Cabinet and as a Cabinet Secretary, I was engaged and involved in those decisions, providing perspective from my portfolio. Again, decisions were based on the ability to balance up the four harms but with the need to be cognizant of the real and pressing harm of spikes in Covid-19 and the subsequent challenge that posed to NHS capacity.
57. Those decisions to raise or lower levels of restriction and the dynamic discussions that had to happen with local government continued right up until I left government.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

58. I have sought to provide a sense of how the Scottish Government tried to balance decision making through the four-harm lenses and the various groups that were created to try to ensure that decisions were taken in collaboration across government and holistically.
59. Obviously, efforts worked better in some areas than others. At the start of the pandemic, the government technology to help support home working was clunky and relied upon mostly phone calls. As time went on this improved, as it did for everyone across the country.
60. There were also a number of areas that saw great progress in a short space of time. Street homelessness was largely eliminated at speed, it demonstrated what could be done with resource and with trust. Organisations worked creatively and there was a palpable sense from all quarters of wishing to capture what worked well and to reemerge

from the pandemic stronger, more resilient and to embed the positive changes that had occurred.

61. As a result, Shirley Anne Somerville and I created the Social Renewal Advisory Board (SRAB) as a way to bring key individuals together, discuss and work out what worked well during the pandemic and how we move forward from the pandemic with a drive to create long term positive and sustainable change.
62. The SRAB work concluded with a published a report on [January 2021] entitled, "If not now, when?", [AC/005- INQ000182792]. It should still be considered as it remains relevant today.
63. I also asked for a review of the government's town centre action plan in order to try and retain the switch to more localized purchasing patterns as a way to see local economies survive and thrive. Professor Leigh Sparks conducted this review, and it was published on 3rd February 2021 entitled, "A New Future for Scotland's Town Centres.", [AC/006- INQ000250240].
64. I mention these groups and work because it shows that whilst trying to tackle and support the country through the pandemic we also sought to learn in real time and work out how we learn from Covid-19 and the social harms and how we become stronger and recover with fairness at the heart.

## **ADDITIONAL SIGNIFICANT ISSUES**

65. As already stated, my portfolio was broad and also included policies around asylum. In this area there was particular challenge in that the asylum policy was largely the domain of the UK Government. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 2020 a Sudanese asylum seeker was shot by police following multiple people being injured in a knife attack. I spoke with the UKG Minister, Chris Philp on the 29<sup>th</sup> June following the incident. There had always been a divergent approach to asylum between the UK and Scottish Governments and Covid-19 heightened that difference. For instance, the SG suggested that giving asylum seekers housed in the hotels more agency through having some budget so that they could purchase their own food etc could help with the ability to cope through restrictions. This

was not agreed to by the UKG. The SG also, along with COSLA, requested that the UKG provided more resource to local authorities, particularly Glasgow, to enable adequate support to asylum seekers as one of the UK's largest dispersal sites. Letters of correspondence at that time will demonstrate the discussions that went on between government, [AC/007-INQ000250241].

66. The vulnerabilities in the asylum system that often could leave people in limbo as to their status and without agency caused significant concern during the pandemic and was raised several times by the Scottish Government along with COSLA from the local government perspective. The gaps in policy arguably remain and are still not resolved.

## **CONCLUSION**

67. Covid-19 was a desperately difficult time with lifechanging consequences for everyone. While the response to a pandemic necessitated a scientific response, the resilience and the strength of our communities and other government partners was inspiring.
68. The Scottish Government sought to do what it could how it could and to respond as timeously and as effectively as possible with the powers of devolution. There would be undoubtedly mistakes along the way, but that was always acknowledged and accepted by everyone.

## **Statement of Truth**

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

**Personal Data**

**Signed:**

**Dated:** 15 November 2023