

Witness Name: Rt Hon Oliver Dowden
MP
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits:
Dated: 18/04/23

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF OLIVER DOWDEN MP

I, Oliver Dowden, will say as follows: -

Introduction

1. I make this statement in response to a Rule 9 request dated 23 January 2023 to address matters of relevance to the Cabinet Office's role in pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience in the years running up to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. At the outset, I would like to express my sincere condolences and sympathy to all those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. I have been assisted in drafting this statement by the Government Legal Department and Pinsent Masons LLP. To prepare this statement, I have been given access to a number of documents from my time in the Cabinet Office. I would be happy to clarify any aspects of this statement if that would assist the Inquiry.

Political and Governmental Background and introduction to my role

4. On 8 May 2015 I was elected to the House of Commons as the Conservative MP for Hertsmere, a seat I have held ever since. On 9 January 2018, I was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office (Minister for Implementation). I served in this role for 18 months. On 24 July 2019, I was promoted to become Minister for the Cabinet Office and HM Paymaster General, positions which I held until 13 February 2020. I served in this role for just under seven months.

5. As Minister for Implementation, my responsibilities included: efficiency and controls; cyber and resilience; Single Departmental Plans; the Infrastructure and Projects Authority; Civil Service HR; the Government Digital Service; Government property; Government Commercial and Crown Commercial Services; Shared Services; the Government Security Group; public appointments; and the Behavioural Insights Team in the Cabinet Office. The most relevant parts of my brief to Module One are resilience and commercial contracts.
6. As Minister for the Cabinet Office and HM Paymaster General, my responsibilities included: oversight of Cabinet Office policies other than Brexit-related policies; supporting the PM on implementation and delivery of non-Brexit government policy; oversight of constitutional affairs and efforts to maintain the integrity of the union and defend democracy; oversight of cross-government efficiency, transformation, and resilience; oversight of cross-government work on veterans issues; and oversight of the Cabinet Office Equalities Hub. The Parliamentary Secretary at the time also had responsibility for cyber and resilience; and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was responsible for EU Exit preparations - which included preparing for concurrent risks. The most relevant part of my brief to Module One is resilience.

Cabinet Office planning and preparedness

7. The Cabinet Office is responsible for the central co-ordination of cross-cutting issues, risks, and policies. When I was appointed as a Cabinet Office Minister it was home to the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (now known as the COBR Unit). The Civil Contingencies Secretariat was introduced to me as the unit responsible for preparing for, responding to, and learning lessons from major emergencies that cut across multiple parts of Government and the public sector. Individual departments were, and are, responsible for their own specific risks and policies - with support from the Cabinet Office as necessary.
8. During my time in the Cabinet Office, I received regular updates on our cross-government preparedness for a range of potential risks, including health risks such as an influenza pandemic. The Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat briefed me shortly after I was appointed as Minister for Implementation on the range of programmes and issues that this team managed. I requested a specific briefing on preparation for an influenza pandemic, which was considered a top national risk in the National Risk Assessment. As a result of this ranking, I was briefed that there

was a major programme of work underway to improve readiness across government for an influenza pandemic. I also received specific briefings on other top risks, such as flooding.

9. Throughout my time as a Minister in the Cabinet Office, I took relevant decisions to ensure that our preparedness for various risks was up to date. For example, I received advice and took decisions related to planning for a significant increase in mortality in the event of an influenza pandemic; establishing a moral and ethical advisory group in relation to an influenza pandemic; and contracts related to public health preparedness, including for an influenza pandemic. I also signed-off a core set of National Resilience Standards for Local Resilience Forums to support the wider public sector in preparing for a range of risks, including an influenza pandemic.
10. In both my Ministerial roles at the Cabinet Office, I received regular updates from the Civil Contingencies Secretariat on general preparedness and updates on specific risks as they emerged. I was confident that issues were escalated to Ministers when key decisions were needed.
11. During this period, I was generally assured that the Government was reasonably and sufficiently prepared for an influenza pandemic given the level of risk that had been assigned to it. To my recollection, at no point was the specific risk of a novel coronavirus pandemic raised as one that required particular attention. Of course had we been alerted to a specific significant risk in relation to a novel coronavirus or had the benefit of hindsight that such an event was going to occur, we would have taken a different approach. I am therefore broadly content that the Government took reasonable and proportionate steps commensurate with the perceived risks at the time and the requirement on every Government to effectively allocate scarce resources.
12. It is worth noting that our preparations for an influenza pandemic did involve planning assumptions that shared many similarities with other potential pandemics – including a novel coronavirus – and was an appropriate approximation for this broad type of public health risk. The Government could not plan for every possible eventuality across the entire spectrum of possible risks facing the United Kingdom, and it is right that we prepared for a wide range of baseline scenarios that we could adjust for specific risks as they may emerge. With the information that we had at the time, I

believe that the Government made rational decisions about the prioritisation of resources allocated to deal with different issues and risks.

13. I am also broadly confident that steps the Government took during my time as the Minister for Implementation and then as the Minister for the Cabinet Office to improve preparedness for an influenza pandemic aided our ability to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UK Government's Resilience Framework, published 19 December 2022

14. I was appointed as Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport on 13 February 2020, and therefore left my role in the Cabinet Office. As a result of this, I did not have central oversight of the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how this response was managed between the healthcare system and the wider government. As I have set out above, I am broadly confident that during my time in the Cabinet Office we made sensible decisions about how to prepare for risks.
15. After I was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in October 2022, one of my first briefings was with the senior officials responsible for resilience within the Cabinet Office. In the two month period prior to the publication of the UK Government Resilience Framework, I discussed this approach in detail with officials and reviewed several submissions on this subject. The Resilience Framework has set out our strategy for improving systems across government, including the importance of taking a whole of government and whole of society approach to planning and preparing for different risks.
16. This whole of society approach is, in part, a reflection of how we had to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and takes into account our learning from that experience. It also reflects a stance we are taking across many other key sectors. For example, our cyber security strategy and many elements of the integrated review refresh are characterised by the same approach of bringing together Government strategies with the wider public sector and businesses.
17. It remains an important principle of emergency planning and preparedness that lead departments take primary responsibility for risks within their sectors. The Department for Health and Social Care continues to lead planning for health-related risks, with support and scrutiny from the Cabinet Office as well as other departments and

organisations as required. The processes for providing this support and scrutiny have been strengthened since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, including by some of the steps set out in the Resilience Framework – such as establishing a new UK Resilience Academy to ensure that we provide world-class training to key officials and appointing a new Head of Resilience to guide best practice across government.

18. Improving general resilience across Government is a key part of my current role as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and I am continuously taking steps to strengthen our resilience. As I have set out above, I have published the Resilience Framework. In addition, I have announced the launch of the UK's Emergency Alerts capability; worked to establish a new sub-committee of the National Security Council to focus on resilience issues, which I chair; and chaired the inaugural meeting of a new UK Resilience Forum. I am confident that these steps will continue to build the Government's resilience capabilities.

Statement of Truth

19. I believe that the facts stated in this 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: 18/04/23