

Witness Name: Alex Chisholm

Statement No.: First

Exhibits: N/A

Dated: 31 January 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ALEX CHISHOLM

I, Alex Chisholm, will say as follows: -

1. SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Author

- 1.1 I am a Senior Civil Servant and serve as the Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office. I have held these positions since April 2020.
- 1.2 As the Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office, I am the head of the department, responsible for the overall leadership and governance of the Cabinet Office (including Number 10 Downing Street). I am also the department's Principal Accounting Officer, responsible for the stewardship of resources and ensuring the Cabinet Office and its arm's length bodies operate effectively and to a high standard of probity. As the Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service, I lead the cross-Whitehall 'Efficiency Programme', working with ministers and permanent secretaries across government to put in place reforms to improve the efficiency of government and the services it provides to taxpayers and citizens, and to improve the effectiveness and capability of the Civil Service.
- 1.3 Prior to my current role, I held the following positions in the Civil Service:

- 1.3.1 Permanent Secretary at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (from September 2016 to April 2020);
 - 1.3.2 Permanent Secretary at the Department for Energy and Climate Change (for part of 2016); and
 - 1.3.3 Chief Executive of the Competition and Markets Authority (from 2013 to 2016).
- 1.4 I joined the Cabinet Office shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic had begun and, therefore, had no involvement in pandemic planning. I was not directly responsible for the Government's COVID-19 response but I was involved in: reallocating resources within the Cabinet Office to teams who were directly involved in the response; maintaining departmental performance during remote working periods; initiating and implementing lessons learned activities; Parliamentary interactions notably through the Public Accounts Committee evidence sessions on COVID-related matters; COVID-related litigation; and COVID-related operational workforce issues across the Civil Service.

Information about this Witness Statement

- 1.5 This witness statement has been drafted with the assistance of the Government Legal Department and Pinsent Masons LLP. Due to the size of the Cabinet Office and the diversity of its operations, it is not possible for one individual to comment from personal experience on each of the issues identified in the Rule 9 Request for Module 1. This witness statement, therefore, is focused solely on describing the key roles and responsibilities of the Cabinet Office. This is an area which I, as Permanent Secretary, can speak to. The remaining, more detailed, issues identified in the Rule 9 Request for Module 1 are dealt with in a separate witness statement that is provided by my colleague, Roger Hargreaves, who is the Director of the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms Unit (COBR Unit), a directorate within the Cabinet Office. For this reason, it is intended that this corporate statement and Mr. Hargreaves' corporate statement are read in conjunction.

The Cabinet Office's Approach to the Inquiry

- 1.6 This corporate statement is the first occasion on which the Cabinet Office, in its role as a Core Participant, has provided evidence to the Inquiry.

- 1.7 I, on behalf of the Cabinet Office, wish to take this opportunity to express our deepest condolences to all those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and to all the families who lost loved ones.

- 1.8 The impact of the pandemic will undoubtedly be felt for years to come, and the Cabinet Office wishes to ensure that a thorough investigation is conducted into the matters noted in the terms of reference, to ensure lessons can be taken to inform our preparedness for the future. The Cabinet Office welcomes the opportunity to assist the Inquiry and will continue to provide the Inquiry with any assistance it may require, in discharging its terms of reference. The Cabinet Office will also continue to work closely and collaboratively with the Inquiry.

2. SECTION 2 - CABINET OFFICE: OVERVIEW OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

General Roles and Responsibilities

- 2.1 The Cabinet Office is a ministerial department of His Majesty's Government, responsible for supporting the Prime Minister and the cabinet and the functioning of government more widely. The Cabinet Office works with 25 agencies and public bodies, including the Crown Commercial Service and the Government Property Agency. In particular, the Cabinet Office:
- 2.1.1 supports collective government decision making through cabinet and the committee system, brokering decisions between departments and helping to ensure the effective development and coordination of policy decisions;
 - 2.1.2 promotes efficiency and reform across government through innovation, better procurement and project management, and by transforming the delivery of services;
 - 2.1.3 is responsible for monitoring and driving the delivery of priorities by other departments, centrally overseeing implementation and holding departments to account;
 - 2.1.4 acts as the corporate headquarters for the government as a whole, in partnership with HM Treasury;
 - 2.1.5 leads on political and constitutional reform.
- 2.2 Alongside the principal responsibilities outlined above, the Cabinet Office houses teams that look at cross-cutting policy issues that affect the whole of government or do not sit neatly within a department. Between 2009-2020, the Cabinet Office's additional responsibilities included: UK Governance, which included acting as the lead government department for intergovernmental relations between the government and the devolved administrations; coordination of cross-government borders work and policy through the Border and Protocol Delivery Group; ownership of the strategic framework for arm's length bodies; Government Equalities; and the Geospatial Commission. Furthermore, the Cabinet Office held responsibility for a range of conduct and policy issues relating to the Ministerial, Civil Service and Special Adviser Codes, and for providing advice to all government departments on

standards and ethics issues. There have also been a number of inquiries sponsored by the department including the Infected Blood Inquiry.

- 2.3 The general organisational structure of the Cabinet Office can be demonstrated at Annex A, which provides organisational charts between 2010 to 2019. In terms of the Cabinet Office's internal governance structures, these comprise of several senior official and ministerial boards covering various areas, including collective, strategic and operational leadership of the department, corporate decision-making, and audit and assurance.
- 2.4 The majority of the Cabinet Office's staff and functions report through me, as the Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary, to the Cabinet Office Minister responsible for the work of the department.

The Cabinet Secretariat

- 2.5 The teams supporting the functions described at paragraph 2.1.1 above comprise a unit within the Cabinet Office called the Cabinet Secretariat. The role of the Cabinet Secretariat is to support the cabinet committee system and the collective agreement of policy between departments across government. The Cabinet Secretariat's teams report to the Cabinet Secretary, who has overall responsibility for supporting the effective functioning of collective decision-making. The persons who held the post of Cabinet Secretary during the period covered by the scope of Module 1 (i.e., 11 June 2009 to 21 January 2020) (the "**Relevant Period**") were: Gus O'Donnell (2005 - 2011); Jeremy Heywood (2012 - 2018); Mark Sedwill (2018 - 2020); and Simon Case (2020 - present).
- 2.6 The UK's system of government is underpinned by collective responsibility: the principal that, once agreed, decisions taken by the cabinet and its committees are binding on all members of the government. There is no hard and fast rule on which issues require collective agreement, but in general, policy issues should be considered by the cabinet or its committees if they are significant, or if they engage the interests of more than one department.
- 2.7 The committee structure supports the principle of collective responsibility by ensuring that policy proposals receive thorough consideration without an issue having to be referred to the whole cabinet. Cabinet committee decisions have the same authority as decisions of the cabinet. Cabinet committees are usually established to consider a particular area of government business, such as home or

economic affairs, or national security. The Prime Minister decides - with the advice of the Cabinet Secretary - the overall structure of the system, including the chair, membership and the terms of reference of each cabinet committee. The Prime Minister may also establish sub-committees to consider specific issues. Officials' committees can be established to support cabinet committees by preparing discussions and testing issues in advance. They are chaired by the relevant part of the Cabinet Secretariat.

2.8 The Cabinet Secretariat's precise configuration has changed over time, but in general, and during the Relevant Period, it has included two teams with remits in relation to agreement across different areas of policy:

2.8.1 the **Economic and Domestic Secretariat ("EDS")**, which has responsibility for supporting collective agreement across domestic and economic policy. The EDS does not have policy responsibilities of its own, but convenes meetings between Whitehall departments to resolve disagreements and agree actions, and sometimes to co-ordinate policy advice to the Prime Minister on specific issues. For the majority of the Relevant Period, the EDS also had responsibility for organising cabinet and advising other parts of the Cabinet Secretariat on the operation of collective agreement. From 2019 to 2021, however, this was the responsibility of a dedicated team, the Central Secretariat, which reported to the Director General for Propriety and Ethics and (later) Deputy Cabinet Secretary. Central Secretariat became part of EDS in June 2021 with the abolition of the post of Deputy Cabinet Secretary; and

2.8.2 the **National Security Secretariat ("NSS")**, which has responsibility for co-ordination and collective agreement of national security and foreign policy issues. The NSS is responsible for:

- (a) providing policy advice and support to the National Security Council (a ministerial forum for strategic discussion of national security issues);
- (b) coordinating and developing foreign and defence policy across government;
- (c) coordinating policy, ethical and legal issues across the intelligence community;

- (d) developing effective protective security policies and capabilities for government;
- (e) improving the UK's resilience to respond to and recover from emergencies, and maintaining facilities for the effective co-ordination of government response to crises; and
- (f) providing strategic leadership for cyber security in the UK, in line with the National Cyber Security Strategy.

2.9 The heads of both the EDS and the NSS report directly to the Cabinet Secretary.

The Joint Intelligence Organisation and the Joint Intelligence Committee

- 2.10 The **Joint Intelligence Organisation (“JIO”)** sits within the Cabinet Office and leads on intelligence assessment and development of the UK intelligence community's analytical capability, supporting the work of the **Joint Intelligence Committee (“JIC”)** and **National Security Council (“NSC”)**. JIO consists of two parts: (i) the Assessments Staff; and (ii) the **Professional Head of Intelligence Assessment (“PHIA”)** and Capability team.
- 2.11 The PHIA team develops and defines the professional standards for intelligence assessment across the UK, representing a community of 1,500 intelligence analysts across government. The Assessments Staff produce all-source intelligence assessments that support the Prime Minister, the NSC and senior policy makers to deliver HMG's national security and priorities. 'All-source intelligence assessments' mean that analysts use a wide range of sources to inform their assessments, from open source (including media, academia and think-tanks), diplomatic reporting, information from UK and foreign government departments, and intelligence. Whilst the JIO informs policy making, it is an assessment body that explicitly has no role in policy decision-making. The JIO is normally focused on traditional national security risks. However, in January 2020 the JIO's attention began to focus on COVID-19 and engaged in a volume of work to understand its implication for the UK's national security.
- 2.12 The Permanent Secretary-level Head of the JIO is Sir Simon Gass. He is also the Chair of the JIC which is the meeting forum where senior representatives from across government come together to review and endorse assessments on national security

issues, usually written by the JIO. By drawing on the experience and knowledge of its attendees the JIC aims to give Ministers and senior officials agreed assessments which are as insightful and accurate as possible. The JIC does not formulate policy; instead it discusses and approves assessments to inform policy-making.

Cross-Government Functions

- 2.13 There are a number of cross-government functions that are based within the Cabinet Office that support the responsibilities described at paragraph 2.1.2 above. By 2020, there were ten cross-cutting functions based in the Cabinet Office: 'Commercial', 'Communications'; 'Counter-Fraud'; 'Human Resources'; 'Grants Management'; 'Debt Management'; 'Digital and Data'; 'Property'; 'Project Delivery'; and 'Security', which have their central offices in the Cabinet Office. The 'Analysis', 'Legal', 'Finance' and 'Internal Audit' functions are housed in the UK Statistics Authority, the Government Legal Department (responsible to the Attorney General) and HM Treasury respectively.
- 2.14 These cross-government functions support departments and civil servants across government to be professional, capable and efficient, delivering strong value for money for taxpayers, mitigating and managing risks to operations, and ultimately helping departments deliver what ministers want.
- 2.15 Each function is led by a Head of Function, with extensive, often external, expertise and experience. The functions set and assure cross-government strategies and standards, develop capability across government and provide expert advice to drive greater value and confidence in delivery.
- 2.16 When the Coalition Government was formed in 2010, steps were taken to negotiate reductions in the cost of the government contracts with its major suppliers on behalf of government departments, and to impose spend controls on property, IT contracts, and advertising and marketing. Teams responsible for driving this work were placed in the Cabinet Office - a precursor to the more formal 'functional model' we have today.
- 2.17 The cross-government functions were mostly established in the 5 years after 2011, with the Government Digital Service coming first and the Government Commercial Function & Government Communications Service being set up in 2014. They form a

framework for collaboration across organisational boundaries, and they support efficient and effective delivery of public services.

Cabinet Office Responsibilities in Relation to Emergency Preparedness

2.18 I will now turn to the specific roles and functions of the Cabinet Office in relation to emergency preparedness. Further detail is contained in the corporate statement of Mr. Hargreaves, referenced at paragraph 1.5 above.

2.19 As set out above, a longstanding role of the Cabinet Office is to co-ordinate the security of the realm, maintain the integrity of the union, support collective government decision making, and ensure the delivery of the Prime Minister's priorities in the area of emergency preparedness and response. The Cabinet Office is therefore responsible for coordinating the government's preparations for, and response to, major civil emergencies, working closely with the relevant lead government departments, devolved administrations and local responders as appropriate. Specifically, the Cabinet Office has responsibility for:

2.19.1 ensuring effective arrangements exist to maintain collective UK level decision making in an emergency;

2.19.2 identifying risks to the security and stability of the United Kingdom;

2.19.3 formulating the policy and guidance framework within which various agencies (for example, fire, ambulance, and local authorities etc) work together to deliver emergency response in England and on reserved matters elsewhere in the United Kingdom;

2.19.4 supporting lead government departments in preparing for and responding to emergencies; and

2.19.5 coordinating the central government response, as necessary, in the event of a major emergency.

2.20 In the area of civil emergency preparedness and response, responsibility within the Cabinet Office for carrying out these functions during this period largely fell to the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (a unit within the NSS). The structure of the Cabinet Office has now changed, as I will describe below. What follows in this witness statement, however, is a description of the position as it existed during the Relevant Period.

The Civil Contingencies Secretariat

- 2.21 The **Civil Contingencies Secretariat (“CCS”)** was founded in 2001 following a number of major challenges faced by the government at the start of the millennium, such as fuel protests, widespread flooding and the spread of foot and mouth disease. In light of these events, it was concluded there should be a dedicated capability in the centre of government - the CCS - that would manage both the government’s preparedness and its response to such major, nationwide events in the future.
- 2.22 The role of the CCS has evolved since its establishment, but primary functions since 2001 have included:
- 2.22.1 working closely with government departments, devolved administrations and local responders to ensure that plans and capabilities were in place to manage all kinds of emergencies. This generally took the form of generic capability building to address many shared risks supported by specific planning where necessary and proportionate for certain risks;
 - 2.22.2 horizon-scanning for immediate upcoming risks (i.e., working with government departments to determine and manage risks that were likely to occur within the next 6 months);
 - 2.22.3 longer-term risk assessment (i.e., working with government departments to determine and manage risks that could occur within the next five years) as set out in the National Security Risk Assessment and the National Risk Register to support capability development through the development of planning assumptions and to guide planning effort - both of these documents are described in detail in Mr. Hargreaves’ corporate statement;
 - 2.22.4 working with international partners such as NATO, the UN and formerly the EU, to support disaster risk reduction and develop cross-border mutual aid arrangements;
 - 2.22.5 managing the Emergency Planning College in North Yorkshire, providing training and support to resilience professionals across the UK and internationally;
 - 2.22.6 coordination of central government civil crisis management arrangements, including the development and maintenance of crisis management

doctrine, an oversight of high-level exercising, and running the national crisis management system (i.e., COBR, which is dealt with in Mr. Hargreaves' corporate statement); and

- 2.22.7 developing and overseeing the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which provides the framework for emergency preparedness.
- 2.23 The CCS's functions are described in more detail in Mr. Hargreaves' corporate statement.
- 2.24 The CCS's structures have changed over the years but have always allowed for flexibility to respond to live risks and crises.
- 2.25 Within the Cabinet Office, the CCS sat since 2010 as part of the NSS (as described at paragraph 2.8.2 above), which is headed by the National Security Adviser and which supports the National Security Council. It is worth briefly describing the latter two entities in greater detail, as below:
- 2.25.1 the **National Security Council ("NSC")** is the main forum for ministerial discussion of the government's objectives for national security and about how best to deliver them. A key purpose of the NSC is to ensure that ministers consider national security in the round and in a strategic way. The NSC's terms of reference are to consider matters relating to national security, foreign policy, defence, trade strategy, international relations, development, resilience and resource security; and
- 2.25.2 the **National Security Adviser ("NSA")** is the central co-ordinator and adviser to the Prime Minister and cabinet on security, intelligence, defence, and certain foreign policy matters. The persons who held the post of NSA from 2010, when the post was first created, and during the Relevant Period, were: Lord Peter Ricketts (2010 - 2012); Lord Nigel Kim Darroch (2012 - 2015), Sir Mark Lyall Grant (2015 - 2017), Lord Mark Sedwill (2017 - 2020) and David Quarrey (acting) (2020 - 2021). Sir NR is the current NSA. As the NSA, they were also, during that time, the head of the NSS, and the secretary to the NSC. Further, prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2018 to 2020, the NSA was also the Cabinet Secretary. Throughout the Relevant Period, the NSA has been supported by multiple **Deputy National Security Advisers ("DNSAs")**. The CCS has generally reported into the NSA via the relevant DNSA. DNSAs in this

period with 'resilience' in their portfolios included: Oliver Robbins (2010 - 2014); Paddy McGuinness (2014 - 2018); Richard Moore (2018); Madeleine Alessandri (2018 - 2020); and Beth Sizeland (2020 - 2022).

2.26 As a result of the risks faced by the UK becoming more complex, interconnected and demanding, the Cabinet Office made changes in July 2022 to support how the government responds to emergencies and to improve the long-term resilience of the UK. The CCS was split into two separate resilience functions:

2.26.1 the COBR Unit, which has remained in NSS and will continue to lead the government's response to acute emergencies - domestic and international, malicious and non-malicious. Further information in relation to COBR (which is the crisis management system that can be activated in the event of a crisis), its responsibilities and how it operates, is contained in Mr. Hargreaves' corporate statement; and

2.26.2 the Resilience Directorate, which has moved to the EDS and which will lead the government's efforts to bolster the UK's resilience. This unit is responsible for the government's work on national resilience, managing the resilience system, resilience frameworks and risk processes.

Key Personnel

2.27 To complement the information above in relation to the wider network of teams, bodies and organisations involved in emergency preparedness, Annex B identifies the key personnel and decision makers holding the following roles for the period 2009 – 2020, including:

2.27.1 ministers, such as the Prime Minister, Paymaster General and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; and

2.27.2 government officials, such as the Cabinet Secretary, Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office, Joint Intelligence Committee Chairman, Deputy National Security Adviser, and the CCS Director.

2.28 In respect of the CCS, the persons who held the post of Director during the Relevant Period were: Bruce Mann (2004 - 2009); Christina Scott (2009 – 2013); Campbell McCafferty (2013 – 2016); and Katharine Hammond (2016 – August 2020).

Developing Policy

2.29 The government committed in the Integrated Review in March 2021 to develop a comprehensive strategy on national resilience and has been working with stakeholders across the UK to develop this since issuing a call for evidence in July 2021. This has now been published and is addressed in detail in the witness statement of Roger Hargreaves. The government will continue to draw on learnings from the COVID-19 experience to inform this work.

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: _____ 31.01.2022 _____