

Witness Name: Philip Rycroft

Statement No.: First

Exhibits: 2

Dated: 10 May 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF PHILIP RYCROFT

I, Philip Rycroft, will say as follows: -

1. I am asked to address the cross-government co-operation structures for risk identification, monitoring, planning and preparedness drawing on my experience as Second Permanent Secretary and Head of the UK Governance Group in the Cabinet Office and as Second Permanent Secretary and later Permanent Secretary of the Department for Exiting the European Union ("DEXEU").
2. I base this statement on my own experience of the functions and operation of government. Within the limited time I have been afforded, it has not been possible for me to undertake a review of the emails and documents from my time in the roles above. It is unlikely that I would have any documents of relevance to the Inquiry. However, I would be happy to clarify or expand upon any aspects of the statement or to consider any specific documents if that would assist.

My background and experience

3. Between June 2015 and March 2019, I was Second Permanent Secretary and head of the UK Governance Group in the Cabinet Office. In March 2017, I was also appointed Second Permanent Secretary at DEXEU and in October 2017 I became Permanent Secretary at DEXEU.

4. I have previously held the following roles in government: Director General in the Deputy Prime Minister's Office (2012-15); Director General (Innovation and Enterprise) and Chief Executive of the Better Regulation Executive in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2009-11); Director General (Education) in the Scottish Government (2007-09); and Head of the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department in the Scottish Executive (2006).

The role of a Permanent Secretary

5. The Permanent Secretary is the most senior civil servant in a department. Permanent Secretaries typically report to the Cabinet Secretary for the purposes of civil service line management and are responsible to the Secretary of State for the running of their department. During my time as Permanent Secretary of DEXEU, I reported to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood. Whilst I was Second Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office, I reported to the Cabinet Secretary. As Second Permanent Secretary of DEXEU, I also reported to the Permanent Secretary, Olly Robbins. See the organogram at **[PR/1 INQ000146668]**.
6. Typically, the Permanent Secretary is the principal advisor to the Secretary of State, an accounting officer for the proper management and expenditure of funds allocated to the department, and is responsible for setting the department's strategy, leading the departmental team, acting as a representative of the department to external stakeholders, and communicating with other departments on cross-government issues. Most Permanent Secretaries also take on wider cross-civil service corporate roles at the request of the Cabinet Secretary. The precise role of the Permanent Secretary will depend on the department that they lead. However, the Cabinet Manual sets out the key responsibilities that apply to all Permanent Secretaries - see below:

The most senior civil servant in a department is the Permanent Secretary. Each Permanent Secretary supports the government minister who heads the department and who is accountable to Parliament for the department's actions and performance. In a limited number of departments there may be more than one

Permanent Secretary, or a deputy or second Permanent Secretary to deal with issues of operational or national significance, such as national security. Permanent Secretaries are responsible to the Cabinet Secretary or the Head of the Civil Service for the effective day-to-day management of the relevant department, or the particular issues for which they are responsible. The Permanent Secretary is normally the accounting officer for their department, with a personal responsibility to report directly to Parliament for the management and organisation of the department. [PR/2 - INQ000182315]

7. The Permanent Secretary acts as a key advisor to the Secretary of State, engaging in continual, open conversations about policy issues and other matters affecting the department. It is a relationship built on mutual trust and understanding. My role would involve many one-to-one meetings with the Secretary of State for private discussion of relevant issues, in addition to attending many other meetings with the Secretary of State, both within the department, elsewhere in government and externally.
8. The role of Permanent Secretary is distinct from that of other senior civil servants within a UK Government department by virtue of being the most senior role, with responsibility for leading the department and managing its business. The Permanent Secretary manages the collective effort of the departmental team, and that is what distinguishes the role of the Permanent Secretary from that of other senior civil servants.

My roles

9. It is important to note that, within the broad framework set out above, the role of every Permanent Secretary will differ depending on the nature and challenges of the department they lead. DEXEU was not a typical department; it was set up in 2016 as a short-life department with a specific role to support the government in the delivery of the outcome of the EU referendum of 2016, namely exit from the European Union. My team and I were responsible for supporting ministers in all aspects of managing Brexit, other than the negotiations themselves. Accordingly, we dealt with the necessary Brexit legislation, with the impact on relations with the

devolved governments, the impact on business, the consequences for international agreements and with the planning for all of the multitude of impacts that Brexit would have on national life, including in a 'no deal' scenario.

10. In my role as Permanent Secretary of DEXEU, I was responsible for advising the Secretary of State on all dimensions of the department's work and for the delivery of his policy instructions. The Secretary of State, along with other Ministers in the department, was intimately involved in the process of planning for Brexit. Ministers in other departments took responsibility for their elements of the plan. The whole was coordinated at Ministerial level through a Cabinet Committee chaired by the Prime Minister which, towards the end of my time in the civil service, was meeting on a weekly basis. The Cabinet Committee was supported in turn by an official committee, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, to test and challenge the plans being presented to Ministers.

11. Separately in my role as Second Permanent Secretary of Cabinet Office, my main role was to advise the Prime Minister and Cabinet Office Ministers on all aspects of the UK constitution and on devolved matters. I was also responsible to the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales for the running of their departments, the Scotland Office and Wales Office and the Office of the Advocate General for Scotland. That role covered many issues of constitutional and devolved consequence. Of relevance to the concerns of the Inquiry, one element of concern was to ensure that the Devolved Administrations were integrated into the UK government contingency planning machinery and, where relevant, directly drawn into the response to crisis events. For example, the role of my team would include ensuring that the Scottish and Welsh Governments were engaged and where applicable involved in COBR meetings where an incident occurred involving Scottish or Welsh interests or residents.

12. One of the corporate roles I held as Second Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office was as the official lead in coordinating the government's role in the so-called 'Bridges' plans, that is the plans for the events to mark a royal demise, in particular Forth Bridge (Duke of Edinburgh) and London Bridge (Queen Elizabeth II).

Identifying risk

13. At no point within my career was I responsible for planning for pandemic-type events or for other civil contingencies, other than in the context of Brexit. I did not sit on any of the committees that considered such events, nor was I directly involved in the exercises that the government undertook from time to time to test resilience. I was not involved in the risk analysis for such eventualities.
14. In relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, I therefore cannot comment on what structures, systems and processes differentiated between threats and hazards, or on any of the cross-UK Government initiatives, strategies, reviews, boards, committees or working groups intended to address the government's core EPRR capabilities and pandemic planning.
15. I was involved in risk identification and management to the extent that it related to issues dealt with by my departments and can only comment on those structures.
16. Every government department needs to maintain an awareness of the risks which may arise in relation to its business and to manage these on a day-to-day basis. Typically, the departments in which I worked maintained a risk register that was considered on a regular basis by the departmental executive team (the senior official leadership of the department) and the departmental board (which might be chaired by the Secretary of State and include departmental non-executive directors as well as senior officials). The focus of that risk management was on business which was within the direct ambit of departmental responsibilities, in other words those risks on which the department might have some influence. A department might also consider its resilience, and the resilience of its business, in the event of an external event over which it had no control, for example a terrorist attack that disrupted its business or extreme weather events, but the overall coordination of the response to such risks was the responsibility of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat ("CCS").
17. A central aspect of the work of DEXEU was to manage the risks of Brexit of which there were very many, particularly in the event of a 'no deal' scenario. The department put in place a comprehensive system of reporting and assessment of

all known risks on a prioritised basis, with weekly reporting to ensure that other departments stayed on track in the development and implementation of the plans for Brexit. A central hub was established where all relevant data could be accessed in real time and in which officials worked together to identify and resolve problems, particularly those that sat across departmental boundaries.

18. To assist in identifying the risks, DEXEU and other departments carried out extensive consultation processes with businesses and other interested parties about the possible impact of Brexit, which informed and shaped the risk-planning.

Cross-government risk planning

19. Risks identified and owned by one department might require action by other departments to mitigate that risk. That would involve the lead department, both ministers and officials, working with other departments to ensure that the requisite action was prioritised. For example, as lead on constitution issues in the Cabinet Office, it was part of my role to understand and assess the risk of the people of Scotland choosing to leave the United Kingdom and to ensure that departments across Whitehall took into account in the course of their activities in relation to Scotland the need to promote the benefits of Scotland remaining in the United Kingdom. This work was transacted inter alia through discussions with other departmental boards, through groups of relevant senior officials from other departments, through briefing of the collective of Permanent Secretaries (the so-called Wednesday Morning Colleagues meeting), and, at Ministerial level, through ad hoc Ministerial meetings or Cabinet Committees.
20. Similar activity and structures informed the work of DEXEU in managing Brexit-related risks, albeit on a very much larger scale, given the comprehensive range of risks that Brexit posed to the life of the nation. While DEXEU was responsible for coordination of the overall effort, the ownership of the vast majority of individual risks rested with other departments, who were responsible for the management and mitigation of those risks. Our work on Brexit also recognised that, in certain eventualities, in particular a 'no deal' Brexit, the mitigation of Brexit risks might fail, leading to outcomes that were a direct threat to security and life. That is why

Operation Yellowhammer was put in place, to plan for any such civil contingencies that might arise from the failure to mitigate the impact of Brexit, for example in respect of supply of goods and medicines into the UK.

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: _____ 10 May 2023 _____