IN THE MATTER OF THE INQUIRIES ACT 2005

THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

MODULE 2 – CORE UK DECISION MAKING AND POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE

GOVERNMENT OFFICE OF SCIENCE

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1. The Government Office of Science is glad to have the opportunity to assist the Inquiry by the provision of evidence in this Module. It wishes to start by expressing its sincere sympathy for the enduring loss suffered by those affected by the pandemic: those bereaved as a consequence of Covid-19, those who were separated from their loved ones and who were not reunited, and those that continue to live with the life-altering effects of long Covid.

GO-Science and the GCSA

2. The Government Office of Science (GO-Science) is an office of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. GO-Science is responsible for: giving scientific advice to the Prime Minister and when required Cabinet committees; improving the quality and use of scientific evidence and advice in government; providing scientific advice in the case of emergencies, through its secretariat role with the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE); helping the independent Council for Science and Technology to provide high level advice to the Prime Minister; supporting strategic long-term thinking in government through Futures and Foresight; and developing the Government Science and Engineering Profession. It works across all branches of science.

3. At the head of GO-Science is the Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) who reports to the Cabinet Secretary. During the period with which the Inquiry is concerned

the GCSA was Sir Patrick Vallance. The current GCSA is Dame Angela McLean. The GCSA is responsible for providing scientific advice to the Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet, advising the government on aspects of science for policy and improving the quality and use of scientific evidence and advice in government.

4. The evidence provided by GO-Science for the purposes of this Module consists of a large volume of documentary disclosure and witness statements from Sir Patrick, Dame Angela and Dr Stuart Wainwright OBE, the former Director of GO-Science, all of whom have been called to give oral evidence.

SAGE

5. In light of the scope of Module 2, the evidence provided to the Inquiry by GO-Science has focussed on the provision of scientific advice relating to the pandemic by SAGE. During government-wide emergencies, GO-Science convenes and provides secretariat support for SAGE. SAGE is, generally, chaired by the GCSA. During the pandemic it was co-chaired by Sir Patrick and the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Chris Whitty. SAGE is not a permanent, standing committee and it does not have "members". It exists only when it is activated by COBR in response to an emergency. Its role is to bring together experts relevant to that emergency to inform science advice in a way that is co-ordinated, comprehensive and comprehensible specifically to support COBR and Ministers' decision making.

6. To a very significant extent the scientific advice provided by SAGE to decision makers during the pandemic is already a matter of public record. At an early stage of the pandemic, GO-Science (led by Sir Patrick) established a practice of publishing the minutes of each SAGE meeting. The minutes of all SAGE meetings are now in the public domain, along with a very large volume of scientific papers considered during those meetings. All of this material is available on the gov.uk website. It is only the scientific advice provided to decision makers that has been disclosed, and subjected to public scrutiny, in this way.

7. Nonetheless it is hoped that the extensive evidence provided by GO-Science, including the very detailed witness statement of Sir Patrick, will assist the Inquiry in better

understanding how scientific advice was provided to decision makers during the pandemic and what use was made of that advice by those decision makers.

8. The need for scientific advice in relation to the pandemic was identified at an early stage. The GCSA activated an internal GO Science team to monitor the situation in Wuhan on 3 January 2020. Several scientific meetings took place during January. Subsequently, a precautionary SAGE was activated on the 22 January 2020 ahead of COBR to present a situation update of the virus internationally, and the scientific understanding of the virus. This was later referred to as SAGE 1, and was the first of 105 SAGE meetings over the course of the following 2 years.

9. The range of issues on which scientific advice was provided by SAGE during the pandemic was broad and the composition of SAGE changed from time to time in order to ensure that the requisite expertise was available. The structures of SAGE and its sub-groups also changed and developed as the pandemic progressed. In particular:

    (i) At SAGE 2 on 28 January 2020, SPI-M (the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling) and NERVTAG (the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group) – two pre-existing standing science advisory groups convened by DHSC – were re-deployed as sub-groups of SAGE in order to provide a single structure that compiled and disseminated relevant science advice. SPI-M became SPI-M-O (i.e., SPI-M "Operational").

    (ii) The behavioural science group, SPI-B, was reconvened as an advisory group, again as a sub-group of SAGE in February 2020.

    (iii) Other sub-groups were formed from time to time, sometimes for specific tasks and then disbanded (task and finish groups). Many of the groups would work together on tasks or provide input into one another's reports. For example, in relation to schools, members of existing groups came together to form a schools advisory group which also involved specialists from relevant disciplines.

10. The role of SAGE is to deliver a clear and accessible account of the current state of scientific understanding on the issue in question, including by communicating degrees of certainty and gaps in the evidence base. Its essential task is to capture, and to distil

into a useful form, the consensus view at that particular point – to do otherwise would not support COBR and its decision-making well. In the development of a pandemic caused by a new disease the scientific method will inevitably result in the development of scientific understanding. Science is self-correcting and evidence-based. Scientists welcome new evidence that challenges previous positions and leads them to change their views. This is the process by which science advances. The advance of scientific understanding of Covid-19 during the pandemic is well illustrated by the SAGE minutes.

11. The task of the GCSA and Chief Medical Officer (CMO), as co-chairs of SAGE, was to facilitate the identification of the consensus scientific view (including by ensuring the involvement of the appropriate experts and the collation of the relevant evidence) and then to communicate that view in a useful manner to Ministers, COBR and other Cabinet or Ministerial groups. The role of the scientists who formed SAGE and its sub-groups was to present research findings, analyse and discuss the findings of others, and collaborate in the task of distilling the correct state of scientific knowledge on the issue in question.

Other Sources of Scientific Advice

12. Although SAGE was plainly a very important source of scientific advice to central decision makers during the pandemic it was not the only source of such advice. Individual government departments had their own scientists, executive agencies, arm's-length bodies, public sector research establishments, and advisory committees. For example, the Department for Health and Social Care would call upon clinical and scientific expertise from public health bodies such as PHE, the NHS and clinicians as well as the CMO and deputy CMOs. The Royal Society established two bodies that provided pandemic advice, (DELVE – data evaluation and learning for viral epidemics, and RAMP – rapid assistance in modelling the pandemic), and other National Academies were commissioned to provide science advice throughout the pandemic. There were some scientists who chose to provide advice through interaction with the media and it is likely that decision-makers took account of this source of advice as well.

Concluding Observations

13. GO-Science is confident that this Module will be valuable in identifying ways in which decision making can be improved in a national emergency such as pandemic. Covid-19 was ruthless in exposing those systems and structures that were particularly challenged by an emergency of this complexity, speed and duration. In a pandemic the speed of implementation of the measures taken to protect the public has to be faster than the doubling time of the infective agent and clear lines of accountability and responsibility are vital. In some areas improvements were made as the pandemic response evolved and GO-Science anticipates that the Inquiry will identify others. GO-Science reiterates its commitment to assisting the Inquiry in whatever way it can in that important task.

14. GO-Science, and the GCSAs, wish to acknowledge and express their gratitude for the extraordinary efforts of the many scientists, academics, clinicians and officials who assisted SAGE and its sub-groups. The workload was formidable and the pressure intense. Many stepped forward voluntarily, and some at considerable cost to personal and family lives. They did so not for personal advancement or financial gain, but to help. Their work saved many lives and the country was fortunate to be able to call upon them.

26 September 2023