

Witness Name: Martin Reynolds
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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF
MARTIN REYNOLDS**

I, MARTIN REYNOLDS, formerly Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister in No.10 Downing Street, London ("No.10"), will say as follows.

Introduction

1. I joined the civil service in the late 1990s, after working as a lawyer at a City law firm. I began my civil service career at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ("the FCO"¹), initially as a desk officer working on the Falkland Islands before holding postings in Singapore, London and Brussels and as the Deputy High Commissioner in Pretoria. Between December 2014 and January 2018 I was Principal Private Secretary ("PPS") to the Foreign Secretary, initially Philip Hammond from December 2014 and then, from July 2016, Boris Johnson. In January 2018 I left the role in order to start Arabic language training, becoming HM Ambassador to Libya, based in Tunis, in April 2018.
2. I returned to London at Boris Johnson's request upon his appointment as Prime Minister in July 2019. From that point I worked in No.10 before my appointment as PPS to the Prime Minister in October that year. I remained Boris Johnson's PPS until c. mid-February 2022. I was succeeded by Peter Wilson.
3. I remain a civil servant and am presently tendering for suitable positions in the FCDO.

¹ As it then was. In September 2020 the FCO merged with the Department for International Development to create the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office ("FCDO").

4. I make this statement in response to the Inquiry's request for evidence dated 12 December 2022. In accordance with the Inquiry's request, I have attempted to focus on what I perceive to be the key events relating to core political and administrative decision-making in the period from 1 January 2020 to 24 February 2022, as known to me.

5. As I understand the Inquiry is aware, it has not been possible to provide me with my full mailbox from the relevant period. I have been informed by the Cabinet Office that due to the fact that the mailboxes of No.10 are deleted and their emails are extracted and incorporated into the overall archive of No.10 material, it is not possible for my former mailbox to be recovered from the archive as a single repository of potentially relevant emails. I was therefore provided, on 8 February 2023, with a laptop pre-loaded with emails I had sent from my No.10 account, which I was permitted to take away to work on in my own time. I manually reviewed these emails, tagging those which might be helpful for the construction of my statement. Those emails were then uploaded to Relativity so that key emails could be reviewed by my legal team and exhibited to my statement. I understand that further emails were sourced using searches of the email repositories of my Cabinet Office colleagues on Relativity and made available to me. These searches were conducted on the basis of my recollection of key events or by following the cues within my emails. In the limited time between the documents being made available to me and finalising this statement I have focused my review of my sent items on what I recall as being the key periods. I have therefore had to rely, to a greater extent than I would have liked, on my independent recollections of events which took place during an extremely busy and stressful period and on documents provided to me by lawyers. That being said, it is also the case that given the nature of my role, much of the work I did over this period would not in any event had been conducted over emails. In this statement I have done my utmost to set out what I remember of the important events, focusing on the areas with which I think I am well placed to assist the Inquiry. I have provided the legal team assisting me with the WhatsApp groups I was a member of during the Relevant Period which were set up for or used to discuss issues relating to the response to the Covid-19 ("Covid") pandemic. I have not myself re-reviewed these messages at the time of preparing this statement.

6. The Covid crisis was an immensely difficult period for the entire country. It had a dramatic impact on each and every one of us, our families and friends. Those of us working in No.10 were involved in life-changing decisions and working up contingency plans for the worst possible situations. All of us were deeply conscious of the importance of our work and the need to do our absolute best for the country. I am proud of the unbelievable

commitment shown by the No.10 team during this period, particularly by the more junior staff and those working in support functions who kept the centre of government operating. I recognise that is not the perception which has gained hold, largely as a result of some of the conduct in No.10 and the Cabinet Office during this period. I deeply regret this. I also hope that by being frank about the challenges we faced we can do better in the next pandemic, whenever that comes.

No.10 Downing Street, Private Office and the PPS role

7. As the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary and Director General of Downing Street, I was the head of the Private Office in No.10 and responsible for the overall management of No.10 as a corporate body. My line manager was the Cabinet Secretary, initially Sir Mark (now Lord) Sedwill and then Simon Case. I sat in the "Outer Office", outside the Prime Minister's office alongside Dominic Cummings, Sir Edward (now Lord) Lister, my deputy Stuart Glassborow and a number of other key political and support staff.
8. No.10 has an unusual hybrid structure bringing together officials from the civil service and political appointees, known as "special advisers" or "SpAds". During my time as PPS there were around 35 special advisers in Downing Street, far more than elsewhere in Whitehall. Dominic Cummings ("Dom") was often the dominant voice in the policy discussions, including on Covid. Sir Edward Lister ("Ed") tended to cover issues Dom was less focused on but provided a different perspective in the discussions of Covid and more generally given his background in local government and business.
9. My role was largely to ensure that the Prime Minister was receiving the day-to-day support he needed across his entire policy agenda. Unlike the other Private Secretaries, I did not have a core policy portfolio but focused more on troubleshooting, ensuring that the relevant Private Secretaries were picking up their issues and resolving difficulties within and between No.10 and the Cabinet Office. I was also the primary link between No.10 and the Royal Household. Given my background in FCDO, I tended to get more involved with advice on the international side of the agenda.
10. I was present for a significant proportion of the formal meetings that the Prime Minister was involved in, both for continuity purposes and to support and coordinate the private secretaries. I tracked what was going on across all the issues the Prime Minister was dealing with and tried to ensure that anything required by way of further information or action was taken forward by the right people.

11. Covid became such a dominant feature of No.10's work for periods that I was inevitably present for many of the key Covid meetings and discussions. This was particularly true during the first half of 2020, before the appointment of a Permanent Secretary – Covid. However, other Private Secretaries (particularly Imran Shafi and my deputy Stuart Glassborow, who line managed Imran – see paragraph 17 below) were much more involved in the substance of the Covid decision-making process because it impacted their respective policy remits, and therefore are better placed to comment on the detail of decisions – in particular from mid 2020 onwards when my involvement reduced (following the appointment of Simon Case as the Permanent Secretary in No.10 and the establishment of the Covid Taskforce) . Generally speaking, I did not see it as my role to advise the Prime Minister on the substantive Covid decisions themselves; we had genuine world experts advising on the technical side and numerous Cabinet Ministers, political advisors focusing on the political side and communications staff and advisors on the media side. One of the things I felt was really striking during the pandemic was how, in the end, the Prime Minister was often the only person in a position to balance the health, economic and other dimensions of decisions. When the Prime Minister did seek my views, which he sometimes would when he was confronted with a difficult choice, I did not feel it was my job to make the decision harder for him by pushing my own views. I would try to assist by walking him through the issues and testing whether he was really comfortable with the decision.

No.10 Downing Street

12. No.10 Downing Street is physically three buildings on one side of Downing Street – Numbers 10, 11 and 12 Downing Street. It has its own security perimeter. There is a link door between No.10 and the Cabinet Office, use of which requires a security pass. The office accommodation is cramped given the number of staff working in the building (250-350 people).

13. The Prime Minister and his core team (including Private Office, business team and key political staff) sit in rooms close together in No.10. There are a number of offices at the front of the building which largely accommodate the Policy Unit and operational support teams (which also occupy part of the basement running between the three buildings, where there is a cafeteria). The Communications Team sits mainly in No.12, in a large, open plan area.

14. The Prime Minister has a flat in No.12 (entered via No.11) and the Chancellor lived in the flat in No.10. The Chancellor and a small number of his team have a suite of offices in No.11. This is where the Prime Minister worked when he was ill, when we shut the ground floor corridor between Numbers 10 and 12.

Private Office

15. The Private Office is the heart of the Prime Minister's daily working operation. It is underpinned by "PM Post" (which stands for "Prime Minister's Private Office Support Team") which provides a range of 24-hour administrative support services to the Prime Minister and Private Office (including when at Chequers and travelling) and a correspondence team.

16. The Private Secretaries are mainly relatively junior staff with specific thematic responsibilities (linked to the departments whose relationship with No.10 they are responsible for). They usually have relevant experience in their thematic responsibilities and have worked in one of the departments for which they are responsible.

17. During the Covid period, the roles in Private Office were structured broadly as follows:

- i) Imran Shafi: Private Secretary – Public Services (covering the Health, Education and DCMS portfolios). Imran Shafi was in this role throughout 2020. I provided additional support for him by bringing in two members of the Policy Unit who focused on Health and Education. They both stayed in the Private Office until roughly the end of 2020.
- ii) Private Secretary - Business, Transport and Local Government (covering the BEIS, MHCLG and DfT portfolios), supported by an Assistant Private Secretary.
- iii) Private Secretary – Justice, Home Affairs including domestic Counter Terrorism (covering the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Police and Security Service portfolios).
- iv) Private Secretary – Foreign Affairs (covering the FCO, Secret Intelligence Service and DFID portfolios) as well as subsequently Northern Ireland. At the very outset of Covid, the Assistant Private Secretary in this team played an important role when the system's engagement with Covid was essentially as an international issue.

- v) The Prime Minister's Military Adviser covering MoD, GCHQ and conflict related issues and was also part of the Foreign Affairs team.
18. My deputy, Stuart Glassborow, was seconded from the Treasury and responsible for the relationship with HMT. He line-managed the domestic Private Secretaries and was heavily involved in many of their work strands given that the Treasury's interests cut across almost everything. This was particularly true during Covid.
19. There were a number of other Assistant Private Secretaries working alongside those mentioned above, plus a diary secretary and other support staff, bringing the total in Private Office, excluding PM Post, to about 20 people. During the most pressured periods, all of the Private Secretaries ended up taking on issues which were not strictly speaking in their area of responsibility, normally for a short period, to relieve pressure on others or because staff were ill. There was also a rota to ensure that some staff worked from home at any time (to mitigate the risk of the whole team falling ill at once).
20. The Private Secretaries play an important coordinating and process role at the heart of government, supporting the Prime Minister in his day-to-day working life. In practice, and by way of a very general overview, this means:
- i) Managing the paper-based decision-making process, via the Red Box – the Private Office oversees, with the support of PM Post, the flow of papers to the Prime Minister and each Private Secretary would track decisions in his/her areas.
 - ii) Managing meetings with the Prime Minister – this would normally involve agreeing the agenda, choreography, attendees, materials and possible outcomes; pre-briefing the Prime Minister (probably alongside staff from the Cabinet Office, Policy Unit and Communications Team, as to which see further paragraph 22 below); and sitting next to the Prime Minister in the meeting, prompting him to raise certain points, taking the record and disseminating the outcome.
 - iii) Speaking on behalf of the Prime Minister – communicating his decisions, tasking officials to produce what he has asked for and giving informal steers as to what he is likely to want.

Other teams in No.10

21. In addition to the Private Office, there are other important teams in the building which are worth highlighting:

- a. The Policy Unit, led by Dr Munira Mirza, Director of Policy, and a senior civil servant, Patrick Curry. The Unit was made up of about 30 staff, split roughly 50:50 between civil servants and SpAds. In general terms, this Unit provides expert policy and political advice on the Prime Minister's priority policy issues. The team would sometimes provide its own policy advice (particularly in areas of significant expertise) and at other times feed into or shape the advice provided by Cabinet Office or others. The Policy Unit included a small team working on health issues. This team expanded significantly over the Covid period.
- b. The Communications Team of about 60 staff, including a number of SpAds. This was part of the Government Communications Service, managed by Alex Aitken (Director General – Communications in the Cabinet Office) who had a desk in No.12 and oversaw the communications budget. It included a team running the daily press conferences which took place for an extended period in the dining room of No.10. I shared line management responsibility for the PM's Official Spokesperson with Alex. The Communications Team was overseen in practice by the Director of Communications. This was initially Lee Cain, then James Slack and subsequently Jack Doyle. I was not personally heavily involved in the management of the Communications Team.
- c. Operational teams. No.10 retains a number of its own operations teams which provide dedicated support to the Prime Minister and No.10 staff (front of house, security, IT, facilities management etc). This is largely for reasons of operational effectiveness and security. These teams were central to the Covid response in the building, enabling the operation to adapt quickly to change – including recruiting and managing large numbers of new staff, managing the numerous office reorganisations, setting up new IT systems and installing screens for zoom across the building etc. The No.10 Switchboard is a critical cross-government resource, providing telephony services to No.10 and a number of ministers.

No.10 Downing Street and Cabinet Office

22. The Cabinet Office has a symbiotic relationship with No.10. In addition to a range of centralised whole of government functions (for example on procurement and Human

Resources), the Cabinet Office is overseen by the Cabinet Secretary and manages the centre's policy and delivery relationship with line departments and provides the policy advice underpinning much of No.10's work. This includes: producing cross-government approved advice; synthesising advice where there are interdepartmental differences of opinion and/or brokering compromises in interdepartmental disputes; ensuring that the advice commissioned by or for No.10 is high quality; and contributing to (and indeed often leading) policy meetings in No.10.

23. The Cabinet Office manages the collective decision-making processes for government (Cabinet, Cabinet committees, including COBRs, and write rounds), provides the secretariat support for those meetings and tracks the implementation of collective decisions. It also contains the Civil Contingencies Secretariat which is responsible for preparations for and managing civil crises (including pandemic preparedness), and is part of the National Security Secretariat, reporting to the National Security Advisor (who at that point was Mark Sedwill in his double hatted role).

The First Phase of Covid (January – April 2020)

24. For the reasons above, others are better placed than me to provide a detailed account of what happened when during the First Phase of Covid and to explain the strategy adopted and decisions taken during this first phase of Covid. However, I hope that my somewhat more impressionistic account will be helpful to the Inquiry.

Awareness of the Virus

25. Brexit had dominated the period from when Boris Johnson became Prime Minister in July 2019 through to the election in December that year. After the election, the Government had a large majority and a 5-year term. The focus in early 2020 was on establishing the forward policy agenda (with an Away-Day at Chequers on 10 January), a Cabinet Reshuffle (which then took place on 11 February), passing the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 for the Brexit deadline of 31 January 2020, closing the Department for Exiting the European Union and some big policy decisions, particularly on High-Speed Rail 2 and 5G.
26. My recollection is that the first reports about a novel Coronavirus in Wuhan came to my attention in mid- to late-January. At that stage, the focus was on the situation in China and in particular the extraction of UK nationals from Wuhan and the Hubei Province. The

Prime Minister indicated that he would be willing to speak to his Chinese counterpart if it would help the FCDO's work (see [MR/1: INQ000136731]²). I have had access to some of my emails and can see that on 23 January 2020 I received an email from the Assistant Private Secretary on the Foreign Affairs team within the Private Office. Within the email I was made aware of two positive tests for Covid involving British nationals who were now admitted to the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital. As a result, I was asked to consult the Prime Minister about convening a COBR to discuss the virus³. I did so that afternoon, and my email back shows that the Prime Minister agreed with that course [MR/2: INQ000136729], [MR/3: INQ000136730]⁴. The Health Secretary chaired a COBR meeting the following day.

27. From reviewing the documents made available to me, I can see that from 29 January 2020 there were reasonably regular updates to the Prime Minister about the situation, either in person or in writing (see for example [MR/4: INQ000136732]⁵, [MR/5: INQ000136734] and [MR/6: INQ000136735]⁶, [MR/7: INQ000136737]⁷, [MR/8: INQ000136726]⁸, [MR/9: INQ000136738] and [MR/10: INQ000136739]⁹, [MR/11: INQ000136740]¹⁰, [MR/12: INQ000136742] and [MR/13: INQ000136743]¹¹).

28. I was copied in on the Civil Contingencies Secretariat updates on 2, 3 and 4 February 2022 which provide an overview of the information that was coming into No.10 at this time (see for example [MR/14: INQ000136733]¹²). I believe that Imran Shafi and/or the Foreign Affairs Assistant Private Secretary (mentioned above) attended the various cross-government meetings taking place at that time, including the regular COBR, SAGE and officials' meetings. I believe that Ed Lister was also present for some of these meetings. On 14 February 2020 Coronavirus was an agenda item at Cabinet, and an update was provided by Sir Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer ("CMO") (MR/15: [INQ000136741]¹³).

² Email Martin Reynolds to Private Office and No.10 colleagues 30.1.20

³COBR meetings were organised by the Cabinet Office but I would brief the Prime Minister about requests for COBR meetings if they came through to me, and agenda items for COBR meetings he was chairing.

⁴ Email chain between Martin Reynolds and [Name Redacted] 23.1.20

⁵ Emails Martin Reynolds to Private Office and No.10 colleagues between 30.1.20 and 31.01.20

⁶ PM Post 3.2.20 and Box Return update from 30.1.20

⁷ Box return 4.2.20

⁸ Prime Minister's diary 4.2.20 re. DHSC Departmental Performance Meeting

⁹ PM Post 8.2.20 and PM Engagements 10.2.20 including Coronavirus update

¹⁰ Imran Shafi email 8.2.20 Coronavirus update for PM

¹¹ Coronavirus update for PM Box Return 14.2.20

¹² CCS Updates 2.2.20, 3.2.2020 and .2.20

¹³ Agenda for Cabinet meeting 14.2.20

Prime Minister's Involvement

29. The Prime Minister's engagement with Covid increased towards the end of February. In reviewing my emails from this period, I have noted an email from Imran Shafi to Sir Patrick Vallance (the Chief Scientific Advisor hereafter "CSA") and Katherine Hammond on 24 February 2020, in which Imran states "*At some point soon I'd like to start exposing the PM to the potential decisions he might have to take in short order on this – at the moment it's been fairly abstract with him I think*" [MR/16: INQ000136744]¹⁴. On 25 February 2020 the Prime Minister met with the Health Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the CMO, the CSA and others for an update on Coronavirus and discussions at that meeting included preparing for the worst-case scenario [MR/17: INQ000136745]¹⁵. There was an update on Coronavirus at Cabinet (see [MR/18: INQ000136746]¹⁶).
30. The Prime Minister received a further update on 27 February and said he was "*keen to step up activity*" on Coronavirus, both in terms of what was being done and how that was being communicated to the public [MR/19: INQ000136747]¹⁷. On 28 February 2020 an information paper written by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in consultation with the CMO, the CSA and Matt Hancock was issued to the Cabinet Office and No.10 setting out in overview terms the UK Strategy in response to the virus (see [MR/20: INQ000136749]¹⁸ and [MR/21: INQ000136750]¹⁹). The Prime Minister first chaired a COBR meeting about Coronavirus on 1 March 2020.
31. These documents reflect my recollection that it was in late February when it was becoming more obvious that the threat posed by Covid-19 could have significant implications in the UK. The number of cases and deaths outside China was still relatively low at that stage (15 cases in the UK; 46 deaths outside China out of a total of 2,761 of which none was in the UK) [MR/22: INQ000136748]²⁰. However, I believe it was around this time that the situation in Northern Italy was seriously escalating and DHSC published the Government's preparedness plan, alongside plans for emergency legislation and a new handwashing campaign.

¹⁴ Email from Imran Shafi 24.2.20

¹⁵ Email chain CCS and No.10 containing readout of PM meeting on Coronavirus 25.2.20

¹⁶ Email re Cabinet Update 25.2.20

¹⁷ Emails with Private Secretaries and No.10 re Coronavirus 27.2.20

¹⁸ PM's Information Note entitled Covid-19: the UK's preparedness 28.2.20

¹⁹ Emails from Imran Shafi on 28.2.20 reporting conclusions of meeting with PM, CSO, CSA, SSHSC and FSS

²⁰ Email from Assistant Private Secretary on the Foreign Affairs to Martin Reynolds and others 27.2.20

Initial Strategy Response

32. The initial Covid strategy proposed by Chris Whitty and others was (as I recall) a strategy based on a single wave: to mitigate the effects of the pandemic by imposing a lockdown at the appropriate time and thereby reduce the curve of infections to a level which was manageable for the NHS. However, it later became clear that there would need to be more than one wave – in simple terms because a single wave would have overwhelmed the NHS, whereas a sequence of smaller waves should keep the demand for beds within the tolerance that the NHS could manage. The focus in early March was on ensuring availability of the number of ventilators and critical care beds identified by the experts as being required, and to ensure that a lockdown was implemented at the right time to ensure that the infection curve did not overreach the limit of the NHS's ability to cope. Shortly thereafter, PPE became a major focus of attention.
33. My understanding is that the general tenor of the advice the Prime Minister was receiving in early March was that a lockdown could only be imposed effectively for a certain period of time because compliance would be an issue and so it needed to be implemented at the appropriate time (i.e., not too early and not too late) (see e.g. [MR/23: INQ000136751]²¹). However, my recollection is that the Government ended up moving more quickly to implement the first lockdown than originally anticipated. I believe this shift was prompted, at least in part, by Helen MacNamara and Dominic Cummings who were concerned at the data (following, I believe, alternative modelling produced by Ben Warner) and who convened an official level discussion in the Prime Minister's office on the evening of Friday 13 March 2020 to work it through (this was 10 days before the first national lockdown was announced). I cannot recall the detail of this meeting and believe I was only there for part of the discussion.
34. Similarly, I cannot now remember exactly what the discussions were about herd immunity. It certainly came up, but I do not recall it as ever having been an explicit policy objective or tool. For example, there was no question, to my knowledge, of a policy of actively encouraging the spread of the disease among lower risk groups (e.g., children). As I have said, the initial strategy was to keep the scale of the pandemic within the capacity constraints of the NHS. However, implicit in this approach was that resistance would need to increase in the population because people had developed immunity, greater

²¹ Email from Imran Shafi with a readout from the PM's Coronavirus meeting 14.3.20

sunshine/summer would slow the spread or some other factor would achieve this (e.g., a vaccine or other medical solution was identified).

35. At a very early stage in the pandemic, although I cannot now say precisely when, the Prime Minister decided to focus enormous energy on vaccines and various other medical solutions. My recollection is that the expert advice was pretty cautious on vaccines, making clear that they were not going to be a solution in the short (and possibly medium) term and at that stage in the pandemic were an outside chance. However, the Prime Minister determined that we should do all we could to maximise the chances of success and deliver a vaccine as quickly as possible. There was work at this early stage around identifying manufacturing facilities, resource and contract negotiations with Oxford University and commercial partners. In early May 2020 the vaccines task force overseen by Dame Kate Bingham was set up ([MR/24: INQ000136757]²²).

Working in No.10 during Covid

36. As the pandemic took hold, the building became, essentially, a crisis hub, with staff working very long hours, being a base for convening groups from across Whitehall and then updating the Prime Minister and senior staff regularly. The rhythm of the working day inevitably changed over the course of the Covid period. My recollection is a "typical" day meant I arrived in the office between 7.30 and 8 am. There was an 8.15 meeting of the No.10 and Cabinet Office, chaired by Mark Sweeney or another Cabinet Office Director General. The Prime Minister would come down to his office between 8.45 and 9 am. There would be a morning meeting at 9.15. The Prime Minister would be updated on the latest data and media coverage, developments on priority issues and the priorities for the day ahead (including the key messages and speakers for any press conference later in the day). This could often last an hour or so with substantive discussions of specific challenges. If there were non-Covid related issues to discuss, this would normally take place in a smaller group of the relevant staff before the Covid meeting. There would often be a wash-up session with officials later in the early evening so that any outstanding issues could be dealt with overnight. I and the other Private Secretaries were regularly in the office until 10 pm and working weekends (although this was often from home) (see e.g. [MR/25: INQ000136764]²³).

²² Email from Cabinet Secretary's Office concerning Taskforce Appointment letters 10.5.20

²³ Martin Reynolds Calendar (although as a note of caution, my diary would shift a lot to react to what was going on that day, so my calendar may not always be accurate)

37. We introduced a range of measures to manage the Covid-19 risk in No.10. This included: ensuring anyone non-essential and vulnerable worked from home; reducing the staff in the building to the core personnel (with rotas for teams to provide resilience); introducing measures to promote cleanliness and manage the spread of the disease and testing. We had to balance the need to reduce risk with the need for operational effectiveness.
38. Whilst we embraced technology at an early stage and held remote meetings where it was practical to do so, a lot of our work was, of necessity, done in person. That was unavoidable given the need for discussions on an ad hoc basis with many different points of contact within the building and in the Cabinet Office, and given that there was a constant need for us to react quickly to new developments and challenges as they emerged. It was simply quicker, more efficient and more effective to communicate with colleagues verbally. There was therefore an irreducible minimum of staff we needed in the building to manage the crisis and support the Prime Minister. At its lowest point there were about 30 staff in the building, but more “normally” during Covid it would have been between 60-100 depending on the operational requirements of a given day.
39. I also did all that I could to maintain morale and protect staff both in No.10 and elsewhere. In a normal crisis working environment you would plan to rotate staff in and out of the crisis centre so as to maintain energy levels and morale. This was very difficult in No.10 where personal credibility and relationships were important and it would have been almost impossible for staff who were completely new to step in. I did try to ensure that staff had time off, but the volume, intensity and pressure of the work was undoubtedly a problem and impacted on behaviours and performance. As with all workplaces over this period, a number of the core staff were ill, which of course placed greater pressure on those that remained. The Government was taking decisions which had fundamental impacts on the whole country, both in the immediate term and long term. Staff were also inevitably worried about the safety of their family and friends and in many cases the risks associated with coming to work during this period.

The Prime Minister’s illness

40. During this first phase of the pandemic, around the end of March 2020, the Prime Minister contracted Covid-19. Initially, upon testing positive on or around 26/27 March 2020, he isolated in his flat and continued working from the office in No 11 Downing Street, which was closed off. During this initial phase of the illness, we arranged for him to conduct meetings virtually while in isolation. I and the team at No.10 had very little contact with him

during this stage. We would leave papers and IT equipment outside the door of the corridor into No 11, and he would then collect them to prepare and hold the meetings.

41. When his condition worsened on or around 5 April 2020, he was admitted to St Thomas's Hospital for treatment. Whilst in St Thomas's he was then admitted into intensive care where he spent three nights in total. As was well publicised at the time in the media, he was seriously ill and very close to being put on a ventilator from which it would have taken months to recover. Thankfully this - or worse - never happened and I believe it was around 12 April 2020 that he was discharged from hospital. That said, the Prime Minister still took a long time to recover fully, and as part of that recovery worked remotely from Chequers for a prolonged period whilst convalescing.
42. I liaised with the Prime Minister while he was ill, including arranging the original Covid test, managing his isolation in his flat and the Chancellor's Office in No.11 and ensuring he was able to continue chairing meetings and making decisions while isolating. As his symptoms got worse, he was less and less able to engage for any length of time. I was the primary official link with his doctor and, once he was in hospital, with the hospital's senior management. I kept the majority of the details about his illness to myself, Ms Symonds (who was at that stage the Prime Minister's fiancée and heavily pregnant and also briefed by the hospital), Dominic Raab and a few others.
43. Of course, it was also a massive task keeping the centre of government functioning during this period – by which I am referring to all concerned with No.10 from Cabinet to administrative staff. At the early stages of his illness the Prime Minister was able to carry on leading the government. However, as his condition deteriorated this became more difficult. Immediately before he was admitted to hospital and for the first couple of days of his hospital stay, we were conscious that there could be a potential constitutional crisis in terms of leadership of the country, including who would step in and what basis. While these issues were being considered, I worked with my colleagues in No.10 and Cabinet to ensure that we were continuing to work as normally as possible, issuing taskings and steers to Cabinet Office and Whitehall. It was appreciated that it was in the national interest to convey a sense that, whatever was happening behind the scenes, Downing Street was still on top of the crisis.
44. For about 3 weeks during the period the Prime Minister was most ill and after his discharge from hospital, Dominic Raab, the then Deputy Prime Minister, stepped in and led the Covid response, including chairing Cabinet and carrying out most of the functions of the Prime Minister. We provided support to him as if he were the Prime Minister. Inevitably, this put

additional pressure on the whole Private Office team. Lee Cain covered as Chief of Staff during this period since Dominic Cummings was out of the office for about 3 weeks with Covid. From my perspective, Dominic Raab did a very good job in very difficult circumstances. He has a different working style from the Prime Minister, which took a short while for my team and me to get used to, but overall, I consider that we all worked remarkably well together in far from ideal circumstances.

45. As the Prime Minister started to recover, I worked to keep him updated while also supporting Dominic Raab in his role until the Prime Minister officially resumed his position. The Prime Minister then returned to No.10 from around 26 April 2020 (see [MR/25: INQ000136764]²⁴).

46. In my view, the response to the Prime Minister's illness was as smooth as possible. As I have noted, there was no precedent for this and we had to decide how to proceed as calmly, quickly and efficiently as possible. At the time, the Prime Minister became ill many of the really important Covid decisions had been taken. I think the Government therefore focused on making only those decisions that needed to be made at the time, in the belief that major decisions, primarily the route out of lockdown, could be made by the Prime Minister when he resumed his role.

Organisational Challenges

Initial Structures – March-May 2020

47. In the first stage of Covid, from the middle of March, the Cabinet Office had scaled up its operation dramatically, with a large number of Director Generals taking on Covid-related roles. This was probably inevitable given the range of programmes which needed to be coordinated from the centre. I have worked on numerous crises, and it always takes time for structures and teams to settle down.

48. However, the scaling up for Covid was far greater than I had experienced before, partly reflecting the fact that Covid impacted on almost every aspect of government. The structures which had been created and the number of senior leaders involved generated a lot of additional work and meant that there was often a lack of clarity as to who was responsible and accountable for what. The complex arrangement of meetings and parallel, but sometimes competing, structures meant that different parts of the Cabinet Office and

²⁴ Martin Reynolds Calendar pp. 30-31

No.10 would often generate divergent taskings with different deadlines, making it difficult for the Whitehall departments to deliver what was actually needed.

49. The situation was exacerbated by a lack of confidence among the No.10 political team in the ability of the Cabinet Office to deliver. I believe this was particularly true of Dominic Cummings. Dom was critical of the civil service operation (except some parts of No.10), both in general, and specifically, during this Covid period. By the time of the Covid response there were growing tensions in Dom's relationship with Mark Sedwill, which remained the case until Mark's departure in September 2020.

50. I believe Dom's lack of confidence in the system was one of the reasons why he brought a number of people into No.10. Tom Shinner, who worked in Downing Street from March to July 2020 as the Prime Minister's Senior Adviser on Covid, was probably the most significant of these appointments. Tom was working at that point for a venture capital organisation but had previously worked with Dom at the Department for Education and been a Director in the Department for Exiting the European Union focusing on "no deal" planning.

Changes in May 2020

51. Publication of the first Road Map on 11 May was an important milestone in coming out of the first phase of Covid, even though it was another 6-8 weeks before we came out of lockdown. It was at this point that Mark Sedwill produced a personal note to the Prime Minister taking stock of what had happened and considered what we might do differently in future [MR/26: INQ000136756]²⁵. In this note, Mark highlighted a number of shortcomings, including:-

- DHSC was not structured or resourced to deal with a public health crisis of this magnitude ("It straddles the byzantine bureaucracy of the post Lansley NHS, the underpowered PHE and the fragmented public/private provision of social care");
- the fragmented social care system, which meant that thousands of vulnerable elderly people, through no fault of their own, were stuck in hospitals as the pandemic approached.

52. He also highlighted that in the first phase of Covid response "over three dozen programmes" had been established, distributed across several government departments.

²⁵ Mark Sedwill Note C19 Campaign: Next Phase 10.5.20

Some of these programmes were driven by individual “tsars” (by which I mean non-Ministerial leaders) who had been appointed during this initial period to lead on specific issues: Lord Deighton for ventilators and then PPE, Baroness Harding for Test and Trace and Dame Kate Bingham for vaccines. The tsars reported directly to the Prime Minister and were people he felt were credible and would deliver. While it is for others to analyse how well each of the taskforces delivered on their objectives, they undoubtedly added complexity and would not have been necessary had the existing plans and structures delivered what was needed.

53. Mark proposed that all these programmes should all be clustered into five main lines of operation (Covid resilient economy, smart lockdowns, vulnerability, vaccines/treatments and supply/capacity), each of which would be led by a Cabinet Minister.
54. The Prime Minister broadly agreed with Mark’s note highlighting inter alia what he described as the “*chronic optimism bias*” of DHSC and the fact that we had not had a proper plan in place to deal with the pandemic ([MR/27: INQ000136761]²⁶). Boris Johnson, Mark Sedwill and others are better placed to provide the underpinning for these judgements, but I broadly share this analysis from my experience of what occurred.
55. Although Mark Sedwill’s note focused on the wider Whitehall picture, it also noted that Helen MacNamara, Dominic Cummings and I were looking at how we could “streamline and strengthen” the centre. In fact, Helen and I had started work on a light touch review of our performance in No.10 and the Cabinet Office in late April/early May to ensure that we were better placed to deal with the next phase, recognising, as we both did, that there were problems with the way things were working.
56. Our review was also intended to create a mechanism for staff to express what they had been going through. By this stage, the relatively small number of staff who had worked in Downing Street and the Cabinet Office throughout the lockdown were exhausted. Relatively junior staff were shouldering enormous responsibility. The period when the PM was in hospital was extremely difficult for everyone, not just emotionally but also because of the operational challenges of supporting the interim leadership. More generally, we all knew we could have done better in responding to Covid. The public perception was that we had performed badly in the first phase (with one of the worst death rates in the world, as it appeared at that time) and this weighed heavily on staff.

²⁶ Email from Martin Reynolds to Mark Sedwill with PM’s response to MS Note dated 11.5.20

57. I refer the Inquiry to the correspondence with Helen and others about the proposals and the report Helen prepared based on the feedback we had received ([see e.g. [MR/28: INQ000136752]²⁷, [MR/29: INQ000136753]²⁸; [MR/30: INQ000136754]²⁹; and [MR/31: INQ000136755]³⁰). My recollection, supported by my review of the documents, was that initially Helen “authored” the report with a view to sending it to Mark Sedwill to feed into the work he was doing, but that later (as I address below) the note was reconfigured as an Advice Note to the Prime Minister, co-signed by Helen and me.

58. As well as identifying structural changes (which I cover in more detail at paragraph 62 below), a key theme of our review and the resulting report was the need to create more of a sense of team between the relevant parts of No.10 and the Cabinet Office; and thereby create greater coherence in what we were all doing. I believe the process of talking to staff was a large part of the value of this exercise (see e.g. [MR/32: INQ000136760]³¹). Helen and my review was also a good way to re-establish “normal” working practices which had been bent out of shape during the Covid crisis. This was not surprising given how long the crisis period had lasted and the fact that staff had had to take on different roles and responsibilities at various points because of illness. My recollection is that at one point all but one of the Cabinet Office Director Generals had Covid and many of those working most closely with the Prime Minister were also ill in or around late March/early April. Although it is not stated in terms in the note, both Helen and I, and many of those we spoke to, considered that there should be a Permanent Secretary leading on Covid. My recollection is that Mark Sedwill was not initially persuaded of the need for a Permanent Secretary leading on Covid, which might be why the note does not include this recommendation explicitly.

59. I briefed Dominic Cummings on the outcome of the review on or around the 13 May 2020, including my recommendation that Helen was probably the strongest candidate to be the Permanent Secretary – Covid. Helen herself was not pushing for this role, but she was one of the few senior figures in the Cabinet Office who had provided genuine leadership during the first phase and had a clear understanding of what needed to be done to sort things out.

60. I identified a slot on 14 May 2020 for me to run the Prime Minister through the findings of the review. The Prime Minister decided instead to use this slot for a one-to-one

²⁷ Emails from Helen MacNamara re “How we Govern” meeting 26.4.20

²⁸ Emails with Helen MacNamara re ‘Exam Questions’ to address 5.5.20

²⁹ Emails re first draft of report 8.5.20

³⁰ Draft report sent as attachment to email on 8.5.20

³¹ See for example Helen MacNamara email to Martin Reynolds 11.5.20

conversation with Mark Sedwill, where he told him that he had lost confidence in him. It was also decided by the Prime Minister that Simon Case (who had been on secondment from the Royal Household to the Cabinet Office for a month or so at that point) should be brought into No.10 / the Cabinet Office on a longer-term footing.

61. I was debriefed by Mark Sedwill after the meeting on 14 May. It is my recollection that I had a meeting on the afternoon of 15 May with the Prime Minister and Dom Cummings, during which we spoke on the phone to both Mark Sedwill and Simon Case (see [MR/33: INQ000136727]³²). I believe that we spoke to Simon Case on one of our mobile phones rather than calling him through the switchboard. I felt, and expressed, that stability in the Civil Service was essential at this point in the crisis and was concerned that causing Mark to leave at that time would negatively impact the Covid operation and the civil servants who already felt under fire, particularly where there was not an obvious successor at that point. It also gave the, unfair, impression that he was somehow responsible for all the issues with the initial response to the pandemic. At the time of the meeting, it was unclear precisely what role Simon was coming in to do. The upshot of the meeting was that it was agreed that Mark Sedwill would remain in place over the summer to manage the transition to a new Cabinet Secretary, and that Simon Case would become the Permanent Secretary in No.10 leading on the Covid response, although I believe that the precise parameters of Simon's role were tied down over the following days.

62. As the issues raised by the work Helen and I had done had not really been discussed at the meeting on 14 May, she and I jointly updated the note she had sent Mark Sedwill on what we felt was required, the final version of which I understand was completed on 17 May 2020 ([MR/34: INQ000136763]³³). I cannot now recall whether I shared a copy of the note with the Prime Minister or if I simply talked him through it. The Advisory Note contained a number of recommendations under the following headings:

- a. What we identified as quick administrative fixes to some of the problems identified. In particular:
 - i) Setting out the respective roles of the key teams working on the Covid-19 response more clearly;

³² Prime Minister's Diary 15 May 2020

³³ C-19 Response End of Phase 1 Review. I am informed that the metadata for this document indicates it is dated 17 May 2020

- ii) Ensuring that commissions from No.10 were channelled through the Private Office rather than multiple teams;
 - iii) Greater discipline around meetings – fewer of them and better prepared; and
 - iv) Standing down the MIGs and using normal Cabinet governance where necessary, although we noted that the CDL should carry on having meetings if those were useful (in the event the CDL became the chair of the Covid-O meetings which replaced the MIGs)
- b. More fundamental structural changes in particular:
- i) Setting up a Prime Minister's Delivery Unit; and
 - ii) Creating a Covid-19 Unit in the Cabinet Office with strategic and analytical capability and leadership (i.e., although this is not expressly stated, led by a Permanent Secretary)
- c. Improvements to ways of working (these were really cultural issues).

63. As reflected in the Advice Note itself, by the time it was finalised many of the changes identified had been made or were in the process of being implemented; for example, the work on the Delivery Unit was had commenced (see e.g. [MR/35: INQ000136758]³⁴ and [MR/36: INQ000136762]³⁵), and work on the design of the Covid-19 unit, and the analysis arm of that was also underway (see e.g. [MR/37: INQ000136759])³⁶.

64. 20 May 2020 was Simon Case's first day in No.10 in his new role as Permanent Secretary on Covid and the day the promotion of Helen MacNamara to Deputy Cabinet Secretary and Second Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office was announced (this had been agreed some time previously).

65. Following Simon's appointment as Permanent Secretary - Covid, I scaled back my involvement on Covid, although I continued to track what was going on and was present at many meetings. I have not attempted in this statement to set out the many decisions that were taken from the summer of 2020 until February 2022 because I am not well placed to assist the Inquiry with those matters. I did not intervene again on decision making structures during this period, as from this time on it was really for Simon to decide what

³⁴ Email from Tom Shinner to Helen MacNamara and Martin Reynolds re Delivery Unit 10.5.20

³⁵ Emails with Helen MacNamara re progressing the Delivery Unit 13.5.20

³⁶ Email Martin Reynolds to Helen MacNamara re progress on Analysis Unit

organisational and other changes should be introduced, and later James Bowler when he took over the Covid Taskforce.

Remote Working

66. Whilst remote working was a way of managing the risks presented by the virus, my impression is that the shift to remote working in a crisis placed additional burdens on staff (both on those working from home and those who came into work). I believe that remote working made collaboration harder (particularly at that stage when few people had worked on a crisis remotely) and problems could have been spotted earlier and linkages identified. We tried to ensure that the voice of those who were working from home was properly included in the policy debates, given the risk of being downplayed, but I do not think we were wholly successful in that regard. There is a premium to being “in the room” in No.10. Likewise, as decisions were often taken so quickly, it is fair to say that those who were not in the office may simply not have been sighted on an issue before taskings were issued and decisions taken.

Leaking

67. Leaking of information was a long-term issue at the centre of government during this period. There was a constant stream of leaks which required investigation. This required resources being diverted from other areas and meant that there would be personal upheaval to a number of people who would have to have their phones and emails checked and be spoken to (see e.g. [MR/38: INQ000136728]³⁷). Leaks were particularly insidious in a crisis given the perception (which may well have been accurate) that policy debates were being briefed into the media to influence decision making.

68. Leaking seriously undermined the team dynamic and had a damaging impact on the culture in No.10 for much of the period of the pandemic response. It built in mistrust to the working relationships both within No.10 and with colleagues in other departments. It encouraged decisions to be taken in ever smaller, closer-knit forums, taking important issues out of open discussion and so was corrosive of high-quality collective decision making and cabinet government. The leak investigations themselves also caused upset and took up a lot of time (both mine and others’).

Concluding observations

³⁷ Email 16.1.20 re leak investigation

69. The first phase of Covid was immensely challenging. Covid cut across the entire government agenda, with numerous health-related work strands alongside complex decisions on non-health issues (financial rescue packages, repatriation of nationals etc). Many of the individual challenges confronting the government would have been considered a significant crisis in itself in normal times (cf major floods or a terrorist attack). Government was learning basic information about the virus for the first few months while having to take decisions on the basis of that imperfect knowledge and data. At the same time, we were trying to manage the risk of Covid for our staff, some of whom fell ill, and the shift to remote working in a way we had never done before.
70. Across government, departments were generally not configured or equipped to deal with these challenges. Whilst my own personal view is that broadly, on the big decisions, government ended up taking the right decisions at the right time, the whole experience of working through the pandemic raised real questions in my mind about capability and capacity across government (although, conversely, I was struck by the deep and relevant expertise of those in some of the key roles). However, others will be better placed to assist the Inquiry with these issues.
71. Others are also better placed to judge whether the plans for the pandemic were adequate. Again, the way major problems emerged and new roles and structures were created suggests to me that our plans were not as well developed as they could or should have been. Although plans never withstand contact with reality, I suspect that better planning would have made some of the decision-making easier.
72. A relatively small number of people in No.10, including the Private Secretaries, press officers and, crucially, the support staff, and the Cabinet Office helped to drive the first phase of the work in response to the crisis. I am, truthfully, immensely proud of the commitment these staff demonstrated who, within the context in which they had to work, did an extraordinary job.

Statement of Truth

73. 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.

Signed: ___Martin Reynolds_____

Dated: ___22 May 2023_____