Witness Name: Lee Cain
Statement No.:
Dated: July 25, 2023

**UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF LEE CAIN**

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I, Lee Cain, will say as follows: -

**Introduction**

1. I make this statement in response to the Rule 9 request dated 14 December 2022 to address matters of relevance to the UK's core political and administrative decision-making in relation to Covid-19 between early January 2020 and February 2022.

2. In July 2019 I joined the Prime Minister's Office at Number 10 Downing Street ('**No. 10**') as the Director of Communications and worked in that role until my resignation in November 2020. Accordingly, I was in post for the first eleven months of the Relevant Period.

3. As Downing Street's Director of Communications, I was one of the Prime Minister's most senior advisers and was responsible for political communications across the Government. My role also involved managing the Government's special advisors (media) and working closely with the Executive Director for Communications, head of Government Communications Service (GCS).

4. Prior to taking this position, I had been an adviser to Boris Johnson during his time as Foreign Secretary (13 July 2016 to 9 July 2018) and held a senior position on his successful campaign to become the Leader of the Conservative Party in July 2019. I had previously been a Special Advisor to Prime Minister Theresa May and Special Adviser to the Environment Secretary. I was also the Head of Broadcast on the Vote Leave campaign and was employed as a journalist on national and regional newspapers.

5. What I have attempted to outline in this statement are the areas of my responsibility and experience - focusing on the political and communication challenges the Government faced during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lessons which can be learned from the positive and negative findings.

**Background on the Government Communications**

6. Before discussing the events at the beginning of Covid-19, I will provide a brief outline of how communication in the Government works - including the role of the Director of Communications in relation to the Government Communication System (GCS). This will be key to understanding some of the early challenges faced in the pandemic and why this required urgent change during the crisis. This is not intended to focus on individuals (everyone involved, including myself, made mistakes but worked to the best of their capabilities in difficult circumstances) but on structures which can and should be improved to deal with future crises.

7. The Government Communication Service (GCS) is an operation of staggering scale – overseeing cross-government advertising, marketing and media operations with a budget in excess of £500m. It comprises about 8,000 professional communicators spread across 25 departments and arms-length bodies (ALBs) and it oversaw 162 campaigns in the 2020/21 financial year.

8. GCS has one purpose: communicating the ideas and actions of the Government to the public. But, despite the skills of individuals, the system as a whole failed to cope with the speed and scale of the challenges posed by Covid. Despite many outstandingly talented civil servants, the GCS struggled to provide the support needed due to its overwhelming size, unclear command and control structures, and inability to understand and implement modern communication methods.

9. Despite the rapid advancement of 24/7 rolling news and the transformative effect social media has had on society, prior to Covid-19 the UK government ran a predominantly analogue system in a digital age. Even now, important digital skills are still in short supply and broadcasting experience is extremely limited – with the emphasis still disproportionately aimed at print outlets.

10. For decades, the primary focus of the government has been media management & 'spinning' – the daily news cycle, controlling the narrative and responding to (usually negative) stories. This means the Prime Minister's morning meeting has long been dominated by a review of the daily newspapers and how to respond to them. Governments – of all political persuasions – can quickly feel more like a media rebuttal service as they allow themselves to be shaped by events rather than shaping them with sensible policy development and focused messaging.

11. Yet despite the continued focus on the daily press agenda, proactive media relations skills have atrophied over recent years. The day-to-day news management has been surrendered to special advisers, who are often less well-versed in policy than permanent civil servants and are limited to two or three per department, unlike departmental press office operations whose staffing numbers can reach into the hundreds. It is not uncommon to meet national newspaper journalists who have not had a single call from a government press officer in a year or more – and most press officers no longer see engagement with the media as a core part of their role.

12. During my time as Downing Street's Director of Communications the Government faced two of the most significant challenges since 1945 in finalising the UK's departure from the European Union and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Communicating the decisions the Government was taking, and what these meant for the public, was central to both challenges - but on both, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, it fell drastically short of the standards required.

13. While there is much for the government to be proud of during this period – such as the success of the 'Stay Home' campaign – the strains of the system became clear as the Government came under increasing pressure. The first Covid public information campaign was poor, the 'hub' system (a team of comms professionals based in the Cabinet Office to assist in the crisis) was a failure due to inexperienced staff and unclear lines of responsibility, policy development was inconsistent and leaking endemic. This resulted in the public receiving mixed messages at a critical time, damaging the government's covid response. I will discuss all of these issues in more depth later in this statement.

14. This statement makes no critique of communication professionals individually. In my time as a special adviser at the Department of Food and Rural Affairs, the Foreign Office and Downing Street, I was fortunate to work alongside many press officers

whose talent and dedication was unquestionable and should be lauded. Those who worked in No.10 during the height of the pandemic are some of the most dedicated public servants I've had the pleasure to work alongside. I remain incredibly grateful for their expertise and support during such a challenging period. The system at the time, however, failed those individuals.

15. The purpose of this section of my statement is to outline the changes the government communication network urgently needs to deal with the modern challenges it faces. This applies to improving how the Government communicates with the public generally, while also reviewing the changes needed to manage a challenge the scale of a pandemic in future.

**Initial Awareness of Covid-19 and the Government's early response**

16. There was awareness of the Covid-19 virus early in January 2020 as government monitored developments in Wuhan, however it was only one of many issues discussed inside Downing Street and it was a low priority at this time due to the uncertain nature of the threat combined with reassurance from the Cabinet Office and Department for Health that 'pandemic planning' was robust if required.

17. Over the course of January, and even into February, there were a number of other issues which held greater prominence in No10 and around the Cabinet table. These included the U.K Government's exit from the European Union, security issues on 5G/Huawei, an upcoming reshuffle of the Cabinet, the decision to proceed with the HS2 project, preparations for the budget, the response to widespread flooding across parts of England and security challenges in Iran.

18. While Covid was monitored in Downing Street in January 2020 it was not considered as the most pressing issue among those outlined, or even in the top five. Officials at DHSC were confident of the strength of the UK's pandemic preparations and the general view was at this stage that Covid should be led from the department and not the centre. This was reinforced by the Prime Minister, who stressed the importance of not overreacting in our response (something he said often resulted in greater damage than the initial threat), likening Covid-19 to past viruses, such as the Swine Flu pandemic in 2009.

19. In late January, the Prime Minister's de facto Chief of Staff Dominic Cummings began to raise the issue of pandemic planning, speaking with the No10 private office and the Health Secretary. He was assured about the Government's preparations.

20. On January 24th the first Cobra meeting was held and chaired by the Health Secretary Matt Hancock (the Prime Minister had decided not to attend, this reflects the importance of the virus in the Government at this time). Following the meeting it was announced the risk to the public was 'low'.

21. The Prime Minister did not attend the next four COBRA meetings, instead focusing his time on the issues outlined in point 12. He also took a two-week holiday. These comments should not be read as a critique of the Prime Minister but a reflection of the perceived importance of Covid-19 from those inside Downing Street at this critical time. Collectively, we failed to anticipate the scale and speed of the oncoming pandemic and lost crucial weeks when we could have been improving our resilience and preparedness.

22. On January 30 the World Health Organisation declared a global public health emergency as Covid-19 spread from China to 20 other countries. The following day I was contacted by a senior adviser to the Health Secretary, who informed me that the first domestic confirmed case of covid had been found (with the threat level rising from 'low' to 'moderate'). He reiterated our preparedness in some areas to cope with the virus, which had been strengthened due to the government's No Deal preparations (the stockpiling of medical supplies) but also issued warnings of many areas where the UK Government was not equipped to deal with the threats faced - such as supply chain challenges. The Government itself was far from being on 'war footing', with much of the focus still on the UK's exit from the European Union.

23. By late February 2020, the Covid-19 response became the dominant theme in Government; I had begun chairing an x-Whitehall meeting for communications while Mr Cummings was chairing a Downing Street senior team morning meeting focused solely on Covid-19. By March nearly all Government meetings were related to Covid-19. This rapid shift in focus reflected the heightened concerns surrounding the impact the virus was likely to have in the U.K as we witnessed scenes in other Covid stricken cities (such as Lombardy), which were a few weeks ahead of the U.K.

24. The failings of all members of the Government for their lack of urgency in response to the threat and overconfidence in a pandemic preparation plan are plain to see, even more so with the benefit of hindsight. We failed in our preparations and many lessons can and should be learned from this failure to ensure better outcomes for future public health challenges. However, it is important to also stress that in the early weeks and months of the pandemic the Government faced a threat greater than any since 1940 - the sheer scale of the challenge and speed in which new information presented itself and decisions impacting millions of people had to be made was overwhelming.

**Initial strategy - 'flattening the curve' / herd immunity**

25. At the start of March 2020, the Government adopted a strategy of 'flattening the curve' / 'herd immunity'. The medical evidence at the time suggested that if the reproduction rate ('the R number') was kept low enough, the spread of the virus would be drawn out, resulting in a singular but much wider/elongated peak to ensure there was not too much pressure on our health system at one time. This would result in 'herd immunity' for the population.

26. It should be stated that this was not considered an ideal policy for the Government to hold - but it was felt that a widespread Covid-19 infection could not realistically be stopped so government planning needed to focus on how it could be managed and mitigated. The herd immunity strategy was seen as the 'best worst option'.

27. In the early Covid-19 planning meetings two potential options were outlined. The first was (as stated in point 25) herd immunity in a single controlled wave over the spring and summer months - this was seen as preferable to the alternative, which would be a suppression strategy.

28. Scientific opinion at this time was that the public would only be able to take the restrictions needed to suppress the virus for a short period of time (approximately 12 weeks) and when those restrictions were lifted it would result in a second peak during the winter months, a time when the NHS would traditionally be under significant strain.

29. Critical to flattening the curve / herd immunity was the need for the R rate to be kept below the NHS 'capacity' level, so as not to overwhelm the healthcare system. We

had witnessed the collapse of the healthcare system in Lombardy, and everyone's overriding objective was to ensure that this did not happen to the NHS. The initial aim instead was to achieve a controlled nationwide herd immunity, whereby the virus would have circulated within the population to such an extent that large numbers of society would have built up an immunity from a previous infection of it, which would in turn reduce the prospect of infection of those without immunity (CSA suggested that approximately 60 percent of the population would need to have been infected with Covid-19 for herd immunity to apply but suggested it could need to be as high as 70 percent).

30. On 2 March 2020, the PM chaired his first COBR meeting on Covid-19. Following on from this, on 3 March 2020, the strategy of flattening the curve was announced by the Government during a press conference held by the Prime Minister, who was joined by the CMO and CSA. At this press conference the PM announced the Covid Action Plan - a swiftly prepared document published to provide some context to the options we had and the thinking behind our covid response. The action plan set out the four stages (contain, delay, research, mitigate) of what our response would be and was a useful communication tool in the early stages of the pandemic. However, many in government - including senior officials and politicians - repeatedly referred to the action plan as the actual government plan to manage the pandemic. This was surprising, as the document had little detail and was clearly only useful as a communications device. The fact that many senior figures kept referring to the document as 'the plan' shows that in reality the government had no plan to deal with a pandemic.

31. On 9 March 2020, a COBR meeting took place, chaired by the Health Secretary, at which a detailed briefing on the virus was given by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA). In addition, a press conference was held by the Prime Minister alongside the CMO and CSA. During the press conference, the Prime Minister made it clear that the containment phase would not work alone, and that actions were being taken to delay the virus to reduce the pressure on the NHS. During the Q&A session at the end, the CMO explained that interventions (i.e., restrictions on public gatherings) would be necessary in due course.

32. On 12 March 2020, a further COBR meeting took place, chaired by the Prime Minister, and another press conference was held by the Prime Minister (again

alongside the CMO and CSA). During the press conference, the Prime Minister announced that the country would be moving to Phase 2 of the 'Coronavirus Action Plan' – delaying the spread of the virus – and announced that from the following day anyone with coronavirus systems would have to stay at home for 7 days, with those over 70 or with serious medical conditions to be advised against going on cruises and schools to be advised against international trips. These were some of the restrictions implemented to flatten the curve.

**Amended strategy – nationwide lockdown**

33. On the evening of Friday 13 March 2020 at around 6pm, I attended a meeting with Ben Warner and Dominic Cummings to discuss the current Covid strategy. It was revealed that our Plan A was failing and new modelling overseen by Marc and Ben Warner showed that unless the Government urgently changed course the NHS would be overwhelmed with Covid cases within weeks - resulting in the collapse of our health care system.

34. The new modelling provided three scenarios for the consequences on the NHS depending on the level of intervention by the Government.

    A. The first scenario was the Government taking no action to suppress the virus, allowing the virus to move unrestricted through society. This would lead to tens-of-thousands of avoidable deaths and disastrous outcomes for our healthcare system. This option was never seriously considered.
    B. The second scenario was if the Government continued on its current trajectory and pursued its flatten the curve strategy - introducing restrictions in an attempt to keep the R rate at a level that was below the NHS capacity. The new modelling showed that our initial data on the doubling rate of the virus had been grossly underestimated and if we did not introduce significantly harder measures this policy would also lead to tens-of-thousands of avoidable deaths and the collapse of our healthcare system in weeks.
    C. The third scenario was to introduce a full national lockdown. The key difference between the 'flatten the curve' approach and lockdown was that the former aimed just to lower the R number with social distancing restriction to keep it below NHS capacity, whereas the latter intended to stop nearly all social mixing and halt the virus entirely. Halting all social mixing would also

stop the virus from spreading, providing critical time to dramatically ramping up NHS capacity, source and purchase more PPE, ventilators and medical supplies, while also allowing more time for treatments (at this stage a vaccine was not considered realistic in 2020 and maybe not even 2021).

It was agreed that there needed to be an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister in the next 24 hours and that we would advise the Government needed to change course and introduce a national lockdown as a matter of urgency.

35. On Saturday 14 March 2020, a small meeting took place in the Prime Minister's office and was attended by the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings and members of the No10 private office and myself. It was at this meeting that the three scenarios were put before the Prime Minister via a white board session led by Dominic Cummings. The collective agreement in the room was that a full lockdown was the only strategy which could suppress the spread of Covid-19, save the NHS from collapse, and ultimately buy the Government more time, and that 'flattening the curve' could only really work as an interim measure until full lockdown could be achieved. At these meetings, the discussion revolved around reducing social interaction. We knew that this was key to slowing transmission of the virus. It was only a matter of when, how hard, and how long the lockdown had to be.

36. The following day there was a larger meeting in the Cabinet Room, which included CMO, CSA, the Cabinet Secretary, Ben and Mark Warner and the cast list from the previous day. Mr Cummings and CSA said it was vital we accelerated the implementation of all measures and made the case that the Government needed to shift strategy from herd immunity to suppression. The room was in broad agreement. The CMO had advised that people would find it difficult to stay in lockdown for longer than twelve weeks and that lockdown should only be in place as long as was necessary to ensure maximum public compliance. We were all very aware of the drawbacks - they were highlighted daily by the CMO in our morning Covid-19 meetings. They weighed heavily on everyone involved, but we believed a shift to suppression was necessary to save as many lives as possible.

37. Over the next few weeks the herd immunity strategy was totally abandoned in favour of suppression. During this time the government introduced an increasing number of interventions to slow the spread of the virus while preparations were made to introduce lockdown. These included:

a. On Monday 16 March 2020, after a COBR meeting that day (two days after the decision to lockdown had been made), the Prime Minister announced during a press conference that people with symptoms should stay at home for 14 days, everyone should stop non-essential contact with others and stop all unnecessary travel, people should work from home where they could and pubs, clubs, theatres and other social venues should be avoided (Exhibit LC/01 INQ000146579 & LC/02 INQ000146591 )

b. On 18 March 2020, the Prime Minister announced that with effect from 20 March 2020, schools would be closed for all children, except for those children of key workers.

c. On 20 March 2020, the Prime Minister announced that cafes, pubs, bars and restaurants, nightclubs, theatres, cinemas, gyms and leisure centres were to not open the following day.

38. On 23 March 2020, the Prime Minister gave a statement advising the public that they must stay at home, and only leave home for very limited purposes. The Prime Minister also announced that all shops selling non-essential goods and other premises would close. The announcement was provided via an address to the nation - this direct messaging was a key part of our communications strategy, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

39. The first full lockdown came into force on 26 March 2020, approximately two weeks after the Government first decided that this would be the ultimate strategy.

40. The implementation of the policy was delayed as an attempt was made to shift the full government machine from the plan A of 'herd immunity' to the new plan of full lockdown. The wheels of government do not move quickly and there was the requirement of engaging the Cabinet and ensuring they agreed with the new strategy and also to get the legislation agreed in the House of Commons. The departments also had to undertake a rapid change of gear - and despite the potential of a lockdown, very little had been done in terms of planning for such an outcome. For example, on Thursday 19th March there was no shielding plan of any kind.

41. When a shielding plan was developed it presented a different set of communication challenges due those who were required to shield being on average older and more isolated than the general population. While we provided shielding messaging on paid and earned media channels (for example, televised press conferences, briefings to newspapers and advertising on all formats) we also knew it was important to micro-target our messages to these specific audiences. We used postal mail and text messages to contact at risk individuals directly while also working with GPs to help identify and communicate who may need to shield.

42. Another challenge was that the Prime Minister would occasionally oscillate between lockdown and other potential policy options (a recurring theme during the critical decision points of Covid and, to some degree, understandable given the gravity of the decisions). The Prime Minister worried about the impact on the economy and questioned the modelling and demographics of the fatalities around Covid.

43. The system works at its best when there is clear direction from No10 and the Prime Minister, and these moments of indecision significantly impacted the pace and clarity of decision making across government. With foresight and hindsight, it is undeniable that the Government took too long to move into a national lockdown but that the right decision was eventually taken.

**The Prime Minister's hospitalisation**

44. From the beginning of April 2020 the Prime Minister began showing symptoms of covid infection (a persistent cough and increased difficulty breathing) and had to be isolated from the rest of the team inside Downing Street. Despite being unwell, he was determined to continue leading the government's response to the pandemic - setting up an office in the Chancellor's study in No11 Downing Street (with the Chancellor working from the Treasury during this period).

45. However, as the days progressed and his situation worsened it became clear that the Prime Minister would need hospital treatment. He was admitted to hospital on Sunday April 5. He called me earlier that evening to inform me of his intention to go to hospital and stress that he wanted the Deputy Prime Minister, Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP, to deputise in his absence. He was supported by the covid quad of ministers including the Chancellor, CDL and the Health Secretary.

46. Once the virus had penetrated Downing Street, several high-ranking officials and advisers (including myself, Dominic Cummings, Lord Lister and the Cabinet Secretary) contracted the virus almost simultaneously - leading to a vacuum of leadership. I had been able to work from home during my self isolation period but many others were not due to more severe infections. My recovery was quicker than some of the senior members of Downing Street and coincided with the news that the Prime Minister's condition had considerably worsened and he was now uncertain if he would survive.

47. At the end of my isolation period, I attended a meeting in the Cabinet's Secretary's office (also in attendance were the Head of Propriety & Ethics, the PM's Official Spokesman and the Principal Private Secretary) where we discussed the next steps and constitutional challenges. There was no clear plan in place for how the Government would respond if the Prime Minister died and who would be in charge. Morale inside the building was also incredibly low, with members of the team in shock at the PM's condition and struggling to manage due to the combination of increasing workload and a reduction in the size of the team due to sickness.

48. With my deep understanding of the PM's views and wishes, the Deputy Prime Minister instructed me to take on a greater role in Downing Street during this time - taking on many of the responsibilities of the 'Chief of Staff' in the absence of Mr Cummings and Lord Lister. There would be a regular morning meeting with the Deputy PM, No10 adviser Cleo Watson and myself in the PM's office to discuss the issues that day and potential next steps before the Deputy PM chaired the morning covid meeting. During this period all Downing Street submissions were cleared by myself before being sent to the Deputy PM for a decision.

49. During a very challenging time, Mr Raab excelled deputising for the Prime Minister, providing steady leadership during a turbulent time. The other members of the 'quad' of ministers overseeing covid regulations also deserve praise for their conduct during this period.

**Communication challenges in Covid response (January - April 2020)**

**GCS & the structures of government**

50. This section will begin with an overview of the challenges the GCS faced during the pandemic, the areas where it fell short of the required standard and the changes made to fix those shortcomings. In subsequent sections I will outline these in more depth.

51. The public see (and hear) the Government as one single entity. However, by necessity the Government has to do many different things at the same time. Alongside the 'business as usual' of informing the public about, for example, new apprenticeship schemes or the recruitment of servicemen and women, the central role of effective government communications is to ensure that 'the things the Government is doing' can be logically corralled under a small number of themes that together create a coherent narrative.

52. This drives public confidence in the Government's direction and actions. Unfortunately, over many years we've seen that government – under whichever leadership – rarely has a unifying message. Departments treat the public like different 'stakeholders' that need to be spoken to in different ways. But no normal person sees the Department of Health differently from, say, the Department for Transport. It's just simply the Government.

53. The importance of a single government voice was brought home by the early challenges Covid provided. In the earliest months, with so many new rules, and so much guidance required for hundreds of possible scenarios, the need for clarity was paramount. It necessitated the rapid introduction of a centralised communications machine to provide the Cabinet Office and No.10 with vastly greater resources. It also saw the implementation of a clear and co-ordinated approach to paid campaigns, with all messaging and creative execution being required to reflect one central, whole-of-government narrative. This centralised function had to be led by temporary external appointments as the government machine did not have the resources, skills or experience (particularly on strategic communications, message development and digital communications) to manage the pandemic.

54. This centralised communications function should not be confused with the creation of a Cabinet Office 'hub', launched at the beginning of the pandemic. This is a regularly rehashed procedure in Whitehall and is a purely bureaucratic exercise to provide the perception of 'grip', but in reality performed poorly due to an opaque remit, weak leadership structure and inexperienced or poorly skilled team. It duplicated the

Covid-related work of the No.10 press office and ultimately became a further layer of unnecessary bureaucracy.

55. The centralised model I implemented took a different approach. It worked in tandem with the senior communications team inside No.10 and spoke with the authority of the prime minister, ensuring policy and communications were joined up at every level – bringing together qualitative and quantitative research (run by people with real campaign experience), media handlers and digital feedback to help inform policy and develop the right messaging.

56. While various different messages or information about specific programmes of support were disseminated by individual departments throughout the crisis, as much as possible they all reflected the messaging and branding of the central Government message throughout – with national public health campaigns devised and launched in weeks when they would usually take months if not years.

57. But without the impetus provided by the pandemic, too often government communication has become trapped in the age-old Whitehall problem of fragmented departments (and this is certainly what we encountered at the beginning of the pandemic). Interdepartmental communication is often poor, with insight and data sharing limited and often relaying conflicting messages. There are dozens of campaigns on different aspects of a policy when there should be just one. Secretaries of State and civil service leaders guard and prize their own fiefdoms – focusing on the media spoils of a policy announcement rather than asking how, collectively, something could be communicated more cohesively.

58. This also creates problems in staffing. Departments are significantly over staffed, especially in areas like strategic communications or internal comms, with poor performance routinely accepted. This means talented government communicators – of which there are many – are poorly paid and often less influential than policy colleagues. The work burden is nearly always placed on the shoulders of the press office – they're the first in, the last out, and often in the direct firing line of ministers and senior civil servants. This was prevalent during the pandemic - despite the hundreds of media personnel, only a small proportion had the skills and expertise to produce the outputs needed to meet the challenges we faced.

59. There have been unnecessary and unhelpful departmental turf wars as officials understandably try to game the system to retain the best staff. Given the rigidity of departmental pay scales, the only way that good staff receive a pay rise is to be promoted, usually moving to another department or non-media role. I found this particularly apparent during Covid-19 when trying to move high-performing members of staff from one department to another where demand and need was significantly greater. Those fiefdoms held on to talent, viewing their own department's needs as more important than the Government's.

60. A centralised single-employer model, which I began implementing before I left government (and which has thankfully been maintained, unlike some of the other changes I had tried to introduce), that values the collective endeavour above the current siloed mentality, will be one way of encouraging behaviour change and allow the Government to communicate with one voice.

**Systematic challenges**

61. The pandemic highlighted that good communications can save lives and good communication practitioners should be as respected as their policy counterparts inside Whitehall - yet this is rarely the case.

62. In part this is because many (even supposedly expert) observers struggle to distinguish between communications and policy issues, believing negative headlines reflect poor media management rather than problems with policy development inside government.

63. Many column inches are filled with tales of all-powerful communications gurus 'spinning' machiavellian narratives to the media - but the reality in the early months of the pandemic was communications experts were left exasperated as poor policy development damaged the government's credibility at crucial moments as the public were looking for clear leadership and guidance.

64. Even the best communications strategies cannot repair poor policy. The best way to ensure good policy survives first contact with the media and public is to have respected communication experts involved from inception - and while the government did allow communications to take a great role as the pandemic developed, it was only after it had made a significant number of unforced errors.

65. An example of how poor policy led to confused communications came during an early discussion on the need to introduce interventions which would reduce social interactions. A group of senior political and civil servant participants including the Prime Minister, CMO, CSA, Downing Street special advisers, treasury officials, and officials from the Department of Health gathered in the Cabinet Room to discuss what more could be done to reduce transmission of the virus. Pubs and clubs were identified as sectors where the Government should take a harder stance; they were spaces people used solely with the intention of meeting with others, and medical officials were keen for them to be closed entirely. Treasury officials were concerned this would require the government to provide bail-outs for business impacted, leading to a compromise position where the government would tell people not to attend these venues but fall short of mandating they should be closed.

66. The communicators in the room (myself and the PM's Official Spokesman) argued that rather than being a sensible compromise, this policy would result in the 'worst of all worlds' with businesses blaming the Government for a loss of revenue and demanding financial support, while the general public and the media would find the policy to be confusing and offer more questions than answers. The policy lasted less than 24 hours before the Government had to u-turn and close the sector entirely.

67. This was not just a political problem - the civil service does not put communications staff at the same level as those in policy roles. There are no director generals in communications and have not been since 2012, meaning the most experienced and ambitious communicators change disciplines or leave government altogether. In contrast, the Cabinet Office alone is home to 35 director generals across other disciplines. This all results in the weight of influence being directed to policy officials, meaning communications professionals are not involved in discussions early enough, resulting in more mistakes.

**Skills deficit**

68. During Covid it quickly became apparent that government communications had forgotten how to carry out its primary functions – engaging with the media and communicating with the public (Despite these falling standards, the headcount has ballooned to more than 8,000 communicators within the GCS).

69. Each department has an army of communication professionals overseeing the press office, internal comms, strategic communications, digital, campaigns and even events – but during the pandemic we were forced to recruit people to lead in these areas as the talent pool available did not have the skilled required.

70. Despite media operations with headcounts well into the hundreds, many departments are unable to conduct the most basic functions. Building constructive relationships with journalists, rebutting inaccurate stories and, in many cases, answering inquiries with anything other than an irrelevant agreed 'line to take' that fails to address the question. These are all critical requirements that go unfulfilled.

71. Too much time is spent writing a multitude of press releases – which some departmental officials regard as 'the last word' on a policy issue. They usually receive little or no coverage, and the scattergun approach leaves key government priorities ignored or forgotten. Meanwhile, broadcast and digital expertise remains almost non-existent in many parts of Whitehall, with the focus remaining solely on the print medium, despite the dramatic changes in how the public digests news. For example, the centre had no data-visualisation capability in the early days of the pandemic. Put starkly, there was nobody with the ability to create slides for the daily press conference – and even when a system was designed people struggled with the skills required, and slides were often sent only moments before press conferences were due to begin.

72. This is not the fault of the individual press officers. The failures reflect the culture that has been created over the past decade, which has allowed basic modern news skills to become an afterthought.

73. The focus has moved away from the traditional tasks of a high-functioning press operation to an ever-greater focus on 'strategic communications' and 'campaign teams'. These are vital weapons in the modern communication arsenal but in Whitehall neither are conducted efficiently or effectively. Ironically, they tend to behave in a deeply non-strategic way: often with no serious metrics to measure success, and no reviews of whether campaigns are working.

74. The vast majority of Whitehall employees working in these fields do not have an adequate understanding of strategic communications or campaigns. An example of this was the poor first iteration of the covid campaign (discussed in section 92).

**TV Press Conference & Address to the Nation**

75. When Boris Johnson came to power in July 2019, we tried to make progress – with a greater focus on fresh digital content communicating directly with the public. However, none of this was sufficient to significantly change how the government collectively thought about communication; the traditional methods (engaging solely via the lobby) were too entrenched.

76. The pandemic forced change. The public demand for the latest information was at unprecedented levels, which was met with the launch of regularly televised press briefings.

77. Televised press conferences were an essential component when it came to communicating with the public. In times of emergency, people want leadership – they want reassurance, they want to know action is being taken and the televised press conferences allowed us to provide this directly to the public.

78. The popularity and impact of the press conferences should not be understanded. At their peak the daily press conferences regularly drew audiences of 10 million while the PM's address to the nation in March 2020 attracted 27 million viewers. Although undoubtedly heightened by a unique situation, the press conferences showed there is an appetite from the public to hear directly from its leaders about the challenges it is facing and how it is solving them. This is why it was decided the televised press briefings should continue post-covid (something the Government decided to move away from after my departure).

79. The format allowed the Government to communicate directly to the public about the decisions that were dramatically impacting their lives using data and charts to bring the information to life. It also provided a trusted face to the crisis. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser became trusted visitors into the living rooms of millions, talking about the important task of providing scientific and medical background to the decision making of the government, explaining the trade-offs of these decisions and outlining the roadmap for the months ahead.

80. The importance of the CSA and CMO to the UK Government's media response was highly significant. They were more trusted than politicians because they were not

political, becoming doctors to the nation at a time of national crisis. Both individuals would have preferred to remain 'behind the scenes' than suffer the inevitable perils of an increased public profile. Their ability to connect with the public and clearly communicate these challenging issues, especially during the early months of the pandemic was a critical factor to the understanding of the Government's covid measures.

81. The format also allowed the government to rebut false and misleading information. The pace of modern media means news cycles happen more rapidly than ever before and factually incorrect stories quickly gain traction. Left unchallenged, these can lead the public to accept them as facts. The TV broadcasts allowed the Government to tackle disinformation head-on and dismiss false narratives in front of a mass audience before they can gain traction.

82. The addresses to the nation (the pre-recorded statements made by the Prime Minister that went out on national television) was another critical tool - signalling to the public when we were announcing something of even greater significance. This ensured heightened audiences, with close to 30 million people tuning in to hear the Government's advice, and a greater likelihood of increasing compliance and saving lives.

83. There is always a tension between No. 10 – particularly the communications arm – and the media, because they have conflicting aims and incentives, but the relationship during the pandemic was mostly very positive.

84. All the main broadcasters worked well with the government, providing necessary challenges while also keeping the public informed. The excellent working relationships we developed meant public health messages were delivered in the most effective way.

85. I have considered whether I believe that press conferences such as these should be used in future emergency situations here in the UK, and my view is that transparency and open, accountable, policies must be valued and protected. This must, however, be balanced with the fact that senior Ministers need time to do the 'day-job'. They shouldn't be spending huge chunks of their day preparing for, and being engaged in, press conferences. That said, in times of crisis there is a need for the politicians to

communicate with the public and the televised press conferences worked well and should be used in future (if not on televised media, then digital media).

**Moving from an analogue to a digital system**

86. When I first entered No.10, I was amazed to find the basic model of public communication had not evolved in any significant way in decades – an extraordinary feat when we consider advancements in social media and smartphones. In short, GCS has been running an analogue system in a digital age.

87. There was a heavy reliance on external agency expertise to devise and develop digital products. Valuing digital expertise and placing it on par with traditional communications is long overdue.

88. Each government department has multiple channels within each social media platform, with some used regularly and some lying dormant. There is no overarching government-wide structure or strategy for the use of digital platforms and no standardised view of how success should be determined (for example, some departments judge success on content quantity while others on engagement).

89. At the beginning of the covid response there was no single platform for the 'UK Government'. Vital public health messages were distributed via a mixture of the Department of Health, Department of Transport or the Cabinet Office digital channels. While health news and information about travel disruption made user searches more intuitive, the Cabinet Office struggled as many people are unaware that it is even related to the government.

90. New government-wide digital assets had to be created on platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, SnapChat and YouTube for the launch of the 'Stay Home' campaign to ensure people understood the messaging was directly from the government.

91. This was a huge success, with content reaching more than 30 million people a month – and was critical in helping to saturate the market with life-saving messaging. Once developed, larger audiences allowed the Government to test messaging on digital platforms, fine-tuning them before putting them in the field or adopting wholesale from audience response. This was a fresh way of working for government campaigns

and was only possible thanks to the newly developed integration with digital experience and campaign teams.

92. However, these channels are still not developed and staffed adequately, resulting in key assets with the ability to communicate directly with millions of people languishing. In the corporate environment there would be an experienced, well-staffed and high-functioning team managing these but the government remains too rigidly focused on churning out press notices and has yet to prioritise its staffing appropriately for digital - focusing mainly on the print lobby.

**Stay Home Campaign**

93. The government's campaign budget for the 20/21 financial year, in excess of £600m, was spent on more than 160 campaigns, designed to inform the public and/or encourage a behavioural change. It believed itself to be 'world leading' in this field and well equipped to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

94. The most critical component for success for government communications at this time was to encourage high levels of public compliance to Covid regulations. However this was not without challenges with the policy, especially in the early weeks and months, with an ever changing picture due to incomplete data and the relentless pace in which it had to be taken. It was also, correctly, under sustained scrutiny by MPs and the media who would highlight any and all inconsistencies, meaning clear and consistent messaging with the public was incredibly difficult. However the greatest challenge in the early stages of the pandemic was a lack of expertise in strategic communications.

95. In February 2020 senior officials from DHSC met with senior members of the Downing Street team (including myself) to discuss a public health campaign designed to reduce the transmission of Covid-19. Within this meeting it was decided that DHSC officials would lead in the development of this public health campaign due to the significant resources it possessed, which included more than 100 communications employees and a health-focused strategic communications unit in the department.

96. Yet DHSC's initial covid public health campaign - entitled 'Protect Yourself & Others' - underwhelmed due to a lack of clarity, crowded art work, lengthy text and no real

common thread to pull messages together. Due to the time pressures involved, we had no other option than to move forward with this campaign while the No10 team began to develop a fresh one.

97. In mitigation, it is important to note that the DHSC team was under incredibly tight time constraints and high pressure to deliver but the government must do better when lives are at stake. It was also clearly a mistake for myself (and others in No10 with campaign experience) not to take a greater role in the development of this public health campaign - at the time we were attempting to use the resources in a way that allowed the best possible outcomes but on this occasion it was the wrong decision. The Cabinet Office also had some incredibly skilled strategic communications professionals who were not being utilised at this stage as it was held by the department, getting those people more involved and working clearly with No10 dramatically improved the quality of our campaigns.

98. In early March a small group of political advisers gathered in my office to discuss a new covid campaign. The Government had decided on the lockdown policy and needed a fresh campaign that could deliver a powerful call to action that would increase public compliance. Myself and Ben Guerin (a partner at the digital creative agency Topham Guerin, who had overseen the digital operation in the 2019 General Election) alighted on the 'Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives'.

99. The campaign - amplified on all government earned, paid and digital media - was called 'one of the most successful campaigns in modern political history' by the Daily Telegraph and was seen and clearly understood by 94 percent of the general public according to polling by Redfield & Wilton Strategies. It was impactful because it provided the public with a clear action to take - allowing them to move from a passive position to an empowered position in the fight against Covid-19, resulting in a substantial reduction in social interactions. It was built on our core mantra for strategic communication: Prioritisation - Simplification - Repetition.

100. Inside the government the new campaign was also a driver of internal change. Ben Guerin oversaw this campaign alongside Conrad Bird (Director of Campaigns & Marketing in the Cabinet Office) instead of it being run from DHSC. This simple centralised command and control structure ensured coordination and maximum amplification across all government channels.

101. Before ending this section, it is important to focus on why the 'Protect Yourselves & Others' campaign failed. Despite vast budgets and headcount, department teams have little experience in mass scale message development and campaign roll-outs - in fact most of the campaigns produced in Whitehall are unnecessary.

102. In truth, only a small proportion of 160 campaigns are a necessity (such as on fire safety) but this would number in the low twenties; instead, most are 'legacy campaigns' of a one-time minister who has long moved departments but a specialist team overseeing the policy remains in place. This is compounded by the incoming minister starting their own campaign for their personal pet projects.

103. At the time of the pandemic, the strategic communication function was not centrally coordinated, and there was no strategic vision to define success and often there was very little monitoring of campaign cut through. Campaign assets are not routinely shared in advance so the opportunity to amplify critical messaging is missed and departmental digital assets are poorly followed. This results in millions of pounds of public money being squandered annually.

104. The pandemic changed this. What worked particularly well during this period was when we moved all covid campaigns out of departments and made GCS the central command and control structure for the development, execution and monitoring of all the government's communications – most notably multi-platform paid campaigns and digital content and with senior No10 operators embedded and empowered to make decisions to reduce delays.

105. It served to rectify flaws. For example, at the beginning of the lockdown there were no standalone HMG digital assets. These had to be created or repurposed in order for the Government to speak with one voice for digital advertising and public health messaging during the pandemic. Centrally managed campaigns benefited from economies of scale and extra eyes reviewing performance – including a central view of creative, media performance, insight for fast feedback loops and sharing of best practice across campaigns. Most government campaigns failed to get access to this.

106. A good starting point in improving government paid campaigns and advertising would simply be to reduce the number of campaigns – dramatically – and to establish a system where pitches for new campaigns are made to the campaign head in the

new-look GCS. This position would act as a quality control function, closing down campaigns that were no longer needed and ensuring new campaigns were robustly challenged with data and costs for their aims.

**Public Opinion Research**

107. The pandemic forced a change in how the Government dealt with Research & Insight (R&I). It is crucial these lessons are not lost. Opinion research was a critical component in understanding public sentiment, assessing the impact of our decisions, measuring public confidence and using it to shape our messaging in earned and paid for content to heighten compliance to regulations. In short, public opinion research informs us of what to say, how to say it and who to say it to in order to achieve our objectives.

108. Quantitative and qualitative research (polling and focus groups) also provided politicians with a measurement of the impact of their decisions and how the public are reacting. We studied the research daily in the morning covid meeting and it provided a moving picture of the current public sentiment and trends over time. This research was not used in the crafting of policy, instead it was used as a critical communications and navigational aid, an important counterweight to the 'Westminster bubble' perception of events, which can often skew prioritisation and focus within governmental decision making.

109. This may sound straightforward, but to many political professionals the opinions of the media are hard to resist. They've spent a career taking every pundit proclamation seriously, so it is a difficult pattern to shift. The senior team within Downing Street at this time had a substantial experience of successfully communicating with the public by using public opinion research as an important counterweight to the media's view. This deep understanding of our real audience allowed us to remain focused on our priorities, instead of regularly changing tactics to react to pundits' concerns on any particular day.

110. This isn't to say that the media or political narrative can't be the correct view, but often it could run counter to the genuine public perception/reaction - leading to poor policy outcomes. In politics, decision makers can feel removed from the public and will use coverage in the newspapers, television, radio and social media to provide wider context into the public mood - often with negative effects. It is critical that within

a public health crisis you are communicating with those whom you genuinely need to follow guidance if you are to deliver behavioural change - the public.

111. Initially there was insufficient strategic leadership inside the Cabinet Office to cope with a crisis on the scale of the pandemic. Several important departments had little experience in commissioning their own R&I work and did not share findings when it came in, often after serious delays. This resulted in wasted public money, resources and information that could be critical to our covid response.

112. Given the emergency situation all 'opinion research' was brought under the direction of the Cabinet Office rather than any individual departments and new external leadership (with political campaign experience) was brought in-house and tasked with scaling a team able to assess public mood and actions, and to test marketing materials.

113. This centralised model saw departments 'pitch' into the centre and requests were reviewed before research bids were commissioned. This meant that each bid was relevant to the task at hand, provided value for money and wasn't a duplication of other bids.

114. Centralising R&I should be a key part of any reorganisation of the whole of government communications. It will ensure that all communications and campaigns reflect the overarching narrative, providing a central vision and a level of control over any proposed policy-related research that may go otherwise unnoticed.

**Coming out of lockdown**

115. As we moved out of the first lockdown conflicts began to appear internally on the covid strategy being pursued. The CMO stated at the outset of lockdown that people would struggle to maintain this extreme level of social isolation and that 12 weeks would be the likely threshold, so as the R rate reduced to more manageable levels in early May there was broad agreement that measures should be eased to alleviate the pressure on society.

116. However, some advisers, officials and ministers urged a slower, cautious approach to unlocking while others encouraged policies that were as close to pre-pandemic lifestyles as quickly as possible. The result was often an incoherent

and oscillating policy agenda, which made presenting clear communications challenging.

117. During this period the Government faced a number of reputational challenges to its handling of the pandemic as it moved, in my opinion, too quickly out of lockdown and attempted to present to the public that the worst was over. This was despite the evidence overwhelmingly suggesting that a second lockdown would be inevitable in the winter months.

118. At this time the Prime Minister was becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of lockdowns on the economy and the political impact it was having on the right wing of the Conservative Party and the coverage of the right-leaning media. For example, on May 8th 2020 the Daily Telegraph - a newspaper that had been robustly anti-lockdown - printed its front page on a favourable interview with the Leader of the Opposition. The Prime Minister called me that evening and expressed significant concern, stating our policies were causing us to lose the backing of generally supportive elements of the media and he felt they may well be right (a position that conflicted with all the evidence available).

119. At this same time we were also continuing our programme of extensive research to assess the impact of our policies on the public and help shape our messaging for maximum impact. The qualitative and quantitative research on public sentiment at this time showed the public was extremely nervous about ending covid restrictions - generally the opposite position held by large sections of the media and many within the Conservative Party.

120. I believed that if we were to keep public confidence high (as it had been during lockdown) we would need to move slowly and clearly communicate our plan for the months ahead. Any over confidence that we had 'defeated' covid or would be 'returning to normal' would be treated, at best, sceptically and, with the likelihood of a second lockdown in the winter, I felt it could significantly erode public trust in the government if we moved too quickly.

121. The conflict between trying to appease different audiences frequently resulted in muddled policy development and poor reception for our policies when they were announced. The key communication challenges during this time were:

a. **Back to Work**: During the summer months of 2020, the Prime Minister was strongly in favour of encouraging the public to move back to working in the office. The overwhelming view from Ministers and advisers was that this was the wrong policy for this time. We faced a nervous public, no vaccine and a likely second wave of covid in the winter months - so the conversations at this time were focused on the areas of society we should unlock while being able to keep the R rate to a manageable level. It was felt by the majority of the advisory team that it would be a waste of the 'covid budget' for the Government to insist on people returning to work in situations where they were able to work from home - something which the business community itself agreed. This position was leaked to The Daily Telegraph on June 7 2020, causing significant difficulty as the government struggled to agree a position. The most troubling element of the push towards this policy was the message it was sending out to the public - indicating that covid was over and that people could go back to living the life they had before the pandemic. This was strongly at odds with the scientific and medical advice being given at this time, which was urging caution due to the likely second wave, lack of a vaccine and greater challenges faced by the NHS in the winter months.

b. **Eat Out To Help Out:** During this stage of the pandemic the Treasury was also being encouraged by the Prime Minister to look at ways to boost the economy. The Chancellor stated his concerns in a number of meetings about the economic impact and how long the country could sustain lockdown and severe covid measures without a vaccine. This was a reasonable position and one expected from the Treasury. However, much like the back to work policy, the Eat Out To Help Out scheme sent the wrong message to the country at a time when we were also trying to urge caution and keep social interaction limited and the virus under control.

c. **Free School Meals**: Another policy that came to the fore was the provision of free school meals to children from low-income families during the summer and Christmas holidays which had been advocated by Marcus Rashford. I remember asking in the Cabinet Room of 20 people, how many people had received free school meals. Nobody had - resulting in a policy and political blind spot. This was a huge blunder. The PM (to some degree understandably) said we needed to draw a line in the sand on public spending commitments, but this was clearly not the place to draw that line - something the PM was told by his senior team.

d. **Household Bubbles:** I had pushed for the 'bubbles' policy which allowed, among others, children to move between different households. It was to remedy a policy gap that no one had thought about, they had considered the 'traditional' family, but no one had thought about families where the parents of a child were no longer together and lived separately. One of the challenges you face when you work on policy is the dynamic of the room, which in this case was white and middle aged. They were doing their best, but without diversity, some policy decisions slipped through the cracks.

122. A phased re-opening commenced on 1 June 2020 with the phased re-opening of schools, approximately ten weeks after we entered lockdown, until all restrictions were finally lifted on 14 August 2020, approximately twenty weeks after we entered lockdown. However just weeks later (22 September 2020) we were forced to bring in new restrictions as the virus again began to peak.

**Second National Lockdown**

123. What I consider to be the arguable delay in instituting the first lockdown was, to a large degree, understandable given the novel and unprecedented nature of the challenge. However, in my view, the delays in implementing a second lockdown and inability to learn the lessons of spring 2020 was a significant error, and one that should have been avoided.

124. By September 2020, SAGE, CMO, CSA and the vast majority of No. 10 advisors were aware that rising covid rates (which had risen faster than hoped due to the speed of the unlocking over the summer months) meant we would need to implement new restrictions if we were to once again ensure the virus did not spiral out of control - resulting in avoid deaths and the collapse of our healthcare system as we headed into the winter months.

125. The term 'lockdown' had become political, with elements of the Tory backbenches and the media becoming vocal in their opposition to the policy and even questioning whether it achieved its objectives. This had a profound impact on the Prime Minister, who was instinctively (and understandably) against restricting people's liberties and was now the focus of a robust campaign from within his own base.

126. On the week of September 15th, the CMO and the CSA began raising concerns on the R rate and suggested we may need to take action to halt the spread of covid.

At this time the Prime Minister had been very vocal in encouraging people to go back to work (a position many advisers, including myself, felt was the wrong position, needlessly spending our 'covid budget' on social interactions that were far from necessary at that time) so was opposed to bringing back restrictions.

127. On September 21st a meeting chaired by Dominic Cummings was held in the Cabinet room to discuss what would happen in the weeks and months ahead if the Government did not intervene. The meeting was data driven and used modelling to predict likely outcomes while also having input from CMO and CSA. To ensure balance and provide challenge the views of external experts were sought from individuals who had publicly stated the government should not bring in any further restrictions. The evidence at the meeting was overwhelming, with the data and overwhelming expert opinion being that if the Government did not take action in the form of a circuit breaker, covid would once again spread rampantly across the UK and leave no other option than a longer and more restrictive lockdown in the months ahead.

128. The PM remained unconvinced, believing it would be better to 'keep the beaches open' (a reference to the film Jaws) and not to close down the economy for a second time. The Downing Street team believed it would be better for the economy and for the health of the nation to implement a circuit breaker as this would mean spending less time in lockdown but the PM disagreed at this juncture and plans for a circuit break were shelved in favour of the localised tiering system.

129. The tiering system (whereby different parts of the country had different restrictions at different times) was a sensible approach for the Government to take but it did represent numerous communication challenges - with the issue quickly becoming overtly political with various stakeholders all using the media to make (mainly financial) demands and grandstand in the spotlight covid provided.

130. The involvement of the metropolitan mayors made the tier system incredibly political. This was particularly the case as we moved away from the initial stage of the virus where everybody worked together. People were looking to push through political agendas.

131. Two approaches became apparent as options to move forward: either national lockdown or further, more localised, lockdowns.

132. In Leicester, the data was clearly in favour of a localised lockdown. The view of the Government was that it was preferable for other areas to move forward and have some economic movement. We had discussions with the No. 10 team to discuss how the Government was going to communicate this from the top, but others would have been in communication with the local leaders.

133. In addition to local lockdowns in England, Wales implemented a 'circuit breaker' on the initiative of its Devolved Administration. Although these things are very political, I felt Wales had taken the correct decision by taking harder action. However, it was also politically advantageous – being seen to take more decisive action.

134. By late October covid rates continued to rise and were at risk of getting out of control, with data now showing how the strain would once again lead to the overwhelming demand on the NHS and thousands of avoidable deaths. Finally on October 31 the Prime Minister declared the need for a second lockdown, which lasted for four weeks.

135. The decision was finalised in a meeting in the Cabinet room with a small cast of Ministers, officials and political advisers. It is unfortunate that this decision was leaked to the media within an hour of it being decided, resulting in significant damage to the Government and criticism of its handling of the crisis. It was the most egregious example of leaking during the pandemic - enraging the Prime Minister and his team. There was a leak inquiry launched and an instruction given from the PM that whoever was caught would be immediately fired. However when the leak inquiry reported back to the Cabinet Secretary the name of the guilty departmental special adviser he was told by the PM to take no further action due to the relationship the individual had with his wife. The lack of any formal disciplinary action over this breach left many in Downing Street angry and bewildered and undoubted contributed to the difficulty we had of changing the Westminster leaking culture.

136. On November the 11th 2020 I officially resigned from my position as Director of Communications and left my role on November 13th.

**Lessons for Government Communications from Covid**

137. The ten points below form what I believe should be placed at the heart of a new Government Communication Service and take into account the lessons learned from the pandemic response. Much of what is listed below formed part of my change strategy for the GCS while I was director of communications and has been published by the Institute for Government. I do not know how many of these proposals have been, or are going to be, implemented by the Government but in my opinion these proposals would dramatically improve the current model.

a. A new centralised single-employer GCS - which would see communications staff employed by a centralised employer and not individual departments - should be established to ensure government communications are co-ordinated and speak with one clear message. This should be outlined in a strategic communications guide, which all government communicators are expected to follow. Departments should reinforce that message and amplify each other rather than cut across each other.

b. This new GCS should be headed up by several officials at director general level, giving communications professionals parity with their policy peers. It should be led by a chief operations officer and supported by director generals overseeing cross-Whitehall disciplines – Research & Insight (R&I), Marketing & Digital and Media Relations. For the first time it would provide departmental communications directors with a promotion route within their area of expertise.

c. GCS would carry out all Research & Insight for departments to ensure value for money and coordination of effort. It would still act as a clearing house for all government campaigns, but because it would be providing the R&I for those campaigns it would be able to shape – or reject – them much earlier on rather than have them presented by departments as a fait accompli.

d. There should be a significant reduction in staffing numbers across Whitehall, with press operations capped at 30–40 members. The bulk of the retained staff should be kept in an improved press office function. Staffing for strategic comms, internal communications and campaigns should all be scaled down, with those staff remaining able to point to proven success in delivering these disciplines. 'Strategic communication' titles are more prevalent than ever in Whitehall but few have the skillset capable of delivering real strategic communications, as shown in the Covid-19 response. Reducing the headcount, centralising the function and investing in serious training would reap huge benefits.

e. The balance of responsibilities between special advisers and senior media practitioners within departments needs to be reset. Each department's head of news should take on an additional role of a press/official spokesperson for the department (a model that already works effectively within No.10 and the Treasury). This would allow special advisers to focus more on political matters and allow departments to provide a better service for journalists.

f. Every department should have a dedicated broadcast team tasked with, and accountable for, achieving broadcast coverage. There should also be significant effort made to attract experienced broadcast professionals into GCS to increase this skill.

g. Directors of Communication and heads of news should regard adhering to the overall government message as a key responsibility. Getting enough of the right kind of media coverage should be seen as key in annual appraisals, not the current system that focuses solely on "management".

h. Government communications should continue to embrace new technology – producing and distributing government's own content and engaging directly with the public. However to offset the risks of decreasing transparency and accountability, the government should commit to hold regularly televised press briefings fronted by the prime minister or his press secretary. The Government should also conduct more in-depth long-form interviews with broadcasters, which have been dramatically reduced in favour of pooled clips (where one broadcaster asks a few snatched questions on behalf of all broadcasters). Accountability matters.

i. 'Digital first' is a mantra GCS has attempted to embrace but does not translate into practice. All of its members should be digitally literate as a core part of their daily function – with training to ensure they can caption video clips, use all social media platforms, and design eye-catching graphics. Communication professionals should be thinking about digital output (and broadcast visual opportunities) as standard, with greater consideration shown in the construction of media plans. The Government should develop a centralised best-practice plan for digital, with teams regularly monitored and reviewed with a central analytics unit. High-performing teams need to be identified with a view to standardise and replicate their success.

j. The Government needs to move away from the rigid focus on 'media management' and the longstanding obsession with the daily news cycle, instead giving greater weight to strategic communications. The government can achieve this by outlining clear policy priorities, developing an engaging narrative which is backed by focused messaging. It is this process that drives public confidence in the Government's direction and actions - letting them know elected officials are delivering for them.

**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.

**Signed**: Personal Data

**Dated**: 25/8/2023