

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF BORIS JOHNSON

March 2020

political point-scoring, and to maximise UK cohesion. I thought regular meetings chaired by Michael Gove would be a good solution.

187. I did chair some of the Four Nation COBRs, but I was content to let Michael lead. There are two good reasons for this (apart from the workload), one of principle and one practical.
188. It is optically wrong, in the first place, for the UK Prime Minister to hold regular meetings with other DA First Ministers, as though the UK were a kind of mini EU of four nations and we were meeting as a 'council' in a federal structure. That is not, in my view, how devolution is meant to work.
189. More importantly I am afraid I was conscious that I tended to be a particular target of nationalist ire. Rather than provoking the SNP I wanted to mollify and gain consent. I believed Michael would do a good job.
190. In his role as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster ('CDL'), Michael Gove had been working closely with the DAs in the run up to Brexit. He had – I felt – developed a strong and effective working relationship with the DAs and I felt that he was very good at getting things done. Recognising the shared challenge presented by the pandemic, in order to support coordination between the DAs and the UK Government, Michael continued this liaison role and held regular meetings and calls with the First Ministers. I believe that these calls took place roughly weekly and included reviewing the data supported by the Dashboard and to considering the UK-wide response. Meetings such as these also took place in advance of significant announcements. These regular calls with the DAs were in addition to the regular calls between the four UK CMOs.
191. It is fair to say that it was not always easy – and I reflect on this more above – because, of course, the interests of the DAs did not always align with England's or the UK's interests. That is an inevitable part of a devolved system. Furthermore, sometimes decisions were urgent and needed to be made extremely quickly which could present a challenge: either we would need to convene COBR, invite the DAs to a Cabinet meeting or a UK Government Subcommittee meeting (at which their role was not always completely clear) or we would need to take a decision ourselves and then bring the DAs onboard. None of this was ideal.