

Witness name: Helen MacNamara
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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HELEN MACNAMARA

I, Helen MacNamara, will say as follows.

INTRODUCTION

1. I am making this statement in the hope that it will assist the Inquiry. I am giving as full and frank account as I can of the period during which I was closely involved in the Government's response to the pandemic. I do so because it is the least that those of us who worked in the heart of government at that time owe everyone who was affected. I am sorry for all those who suffered and are suffering as a result of the pandemic and the government response to it. I hope to assist the Inquiry in reaching conclusions that will make the performance of government better should a future crisis of this scale occur in the United Kingdom. I also hope that there are wider lessons learned from how our government operates that are of more immediate benefit. In my view it would be a waste to only use this moment to learn about future pandemic readiness.

2. In the main I have avoided making observations from hindsight about what the impact would have been on the spread of the disease or other consequences had we pursued a different course of action. I do not feel qualified to comment on that, not least as it is still so early days and none of us can be confident about some of the less visible and mid- and long-term effects of decisions that were made. In responding to the Inquiry, I have described things that were specific to the circumstances where I was heavily involved and about which there should be as fulsome and accurate a record as possible and also tried to illustrate the issues with the operation of government during 2020/21 that were influenced by culture and systems, some of which remain. As set out in my statement, there were some decisions that were clearly wrong at the time and in retrospect, some fundamental gaps in what a modern government should have at its disposal, some individuals who did not rise to the occasion, and many who did. The pressure amplified everything – and brought out the best and the worst. My view is that the culture that was created in the centre of government drove the process of decision making and so the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ deserves examination.
3. This is my recollection to the best of my ability based on the documents that I have had access to and which took far too long to be made available. 11 months after asking I was finally granted access to my diary so I could actually see who was in a particular meeting. Despite the best efforts of the more recently established Public Inquiry Response Unit (and I am grateful to that team for all of their help), I do not have access to all of the papers I had at the time, I do not have access to my work phone from the time (the Cabinet Office deleted the account and all its data), and despite spending hundreds of hours preparing this statement I have only been able to put together what I know is an imperfect picture. I am still looking through a glass darkly. It is also worth saying that in keeping with the seniority, character and nature of my job at the time I only really got involved with things that were going wrong, and mostly behind the scenes, so my narrative is also skewed by that. There was a massive amount of brilliant work done, by people who stepped up and worked incredibly hard. I am sorry that in my telling of this story that will not come across sufficiently. I hope that the Inquiry with a more rounded perspective is able to see that there were hundreds of civil servants working in No 10 and the Cabinet Office and thousands beyond the centre of government who gave their all when it was very difficult and should be proud of their contribution.
4. I have divided the substantive content of this statement into the following sections:
 - Introduction (paragraphs 1 – 7): My background and an overview of my role

- Section 1 (paragraphs 8 - 69): Preparedness and initial response, encompassing:
 - i. The reasons why in January 2020 the Government was not in a good state to be able to respond to the Covid-19 crisis; and
 - ii. Key events between January and March.
- Section 2 (paragraphs 80 - 165): March – August 2020 focusing on key events, the structural and cultural issues in central government as they manifested over that period, changes we sought to make and the exam crisis.
- Section 3 (paragraphs 166 - 186): Winter 2020/2021.
- Section 4 (para 187 - 198): Concluding observations.

My background

5. I joined the Civil Service in 2002 after working in the private sector and, until my departure in 2021, had worked in a variety of different roles across several government departments. These included:
 - From 2002 until 2013, various positions in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (“DCMS”) including as Tessa Jowell’s Principal Private Secretary;
 - From 2013 to September 2016, as the Director of the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (“EDS”) in the Cabinet Office, including six months on promotion as the Director General;
 - From September 2016 until May 2018, as the Director General for Housing and Planning in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (“MHCLG”); and

- In June 2018 I re-joined the Cabinet Office and initially held the role of Director General of Propriety and Ethics. When the late Lord Heywood left the Cabinet Office in July 2018 my role was expanded in support of Mark Sedwill as Cabinet Secretary to include responsibility for advising on the operation of government and then the minuting of Cabinet from September of that year. In January 2019 this role was formalised as Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet and I was then promoted to Permanent Secretary grade in April 2020. When Mark Sedwill left his position in September 2020 he was replaced by Simon Case and I remained as Mr Case's Deputy Cabinet Secretary until I left the Civil Service in February 2021.

Overview of my role

6. My evidence to the Inquiry primarily concerns my role from January 2020 – February 2021, although at times I draw on my experience of working in different jobs within government.
7. I had some areas of distinct responsibility, but the responsibilities of the Deputy Secretary role varied throughout my time in the position reflecting: i) the different requirements of Mark Sedwill and Simon Case, ii) what was going on at the time, iii) what I was asked to do by the Prime Minister and/or their team, Cabinet Ministers or Permanent Secretaries in departments, and iv) my own judgement on where I was most needed. The key aspects of my role insofar as relevant to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference will be addressed through this statement but by way of a high level overview I was responsible for:
 - Running the operation of Cabinet government, with responsibility for the operative Cabinet secretariat who coordinated the agendas and papers and wrote the minutes for Cabinet and its committees (described as the "central secretariat");
 - Attending and minuting Cabinet meetings and supporting the Prime Minister on the business of the Cabinet;
 - Managing the Cabinet Secretariat (either coordinating or managing the business of committees and from May 2020 line manager for the Director Generals);
 - Advising on Cabinet decision making and the business and process of Cabinet government and Ministerial appointments and reshuffles;

- Advising on the machinery of government and any changes to departmental structures or operating models;
- Management responsibility for the independent offices, including the Civil Service Commission; the Commission for Public Appointments, ACOBA, House of Lords Appointment Commission;
- Policy on public appointments and the Cabinet Office's responsibilities with regard to public bodies policy (establishing any new public bodies and controls);
- Supporting and advising the Prime Minister on policy, process, Special Advisers, Civil Service and Ministerial Codes, and propriety and ethics issues;
- The Honours Secretariat, the Privy Council Office and historic records.

SECTION ONE: PREPAREDNESS AND INITIAL RESPONSE

8. In January 2020 the Government was not in a good state to be able to respond to the Covid-19 crisis thanks to a combination of systemic weaknesses and political circumstance. This was true of the Cabinet Office, the operating pattern for the government and Mr Johnson's Downing Street. I will attempt in this section to explain why this was the case.

The Cabinet Secretariats in 2020

9. First, the centre of Government in the Cabinet Office had been significantly altered by managing the process of exiting the European Union. The more normal processes and divisions of responsibility across Whitehall had been bent out of shape. Running the negotiations and readying the country for such a monumental change naturally consumed the time and attention of the Prime Minister and senior officials and advisers in the centre. In the period from 2016 onward normal domestic policy in Whitehall got much less attention from the Cabinet Office secretariats and No 10 than had been the case prior. I had noticed this as Director General responsible for Housing in MHCLG 2016-18 as – unusually for this policy area – we had been mainly untroubled by attention from either No 10 or the Cabinet Office. It was clear when I re-joined the Cabinet Office in June 2018 that the balance of power between the teams working for the Cabinet Secretary was different from when I left at the end of 2015. In particular the nature and dynamics of the Cabinet Secretariats had changed. The Cabinet Office EU Secretariat team (formed in 2016) were dominant, whereas it would

previously have been the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (EDS), and the EU secretariat team were working in an unusual style for a secretariat that spanned across domestic as well as international policy.

10. There is a separate essay to write about the history of the Cabinet Secretariats and how they function in practice. For these purposes, the key point to understand is that the Cabinet Secretariats have two fairly distinct modes of operation: supporting the Prime Minister personally on their leadership of an issue or coordinating departments to facilitate collective agreement. It has tended to be the case that the secretariats supporting the Prime Minister in their personal leadership of international, European or security issues (their role as a world leader) have been led by civil servants who advise the Prime Minister directly as well as coordinating as necessary with the relevant departments. Whereas the domestic secretariat commonly supports the Prime Minister in his or her role as Chair of the Cabinet and so – in the main – the job of the officials is to broker collective agreement to policy rather than directly advise in their own voice. Of course, the divide is not quite as binary as this; it is important also to make sure the Foreign Secretary and their department are in agreement on a stance to an international issue and the domestic secretariat often drives the Prime Minister's view across Whitehall rather than taking a neutral position. But the general point remains.

11. By 2018 the role of the EU secretariat team had become firstly to advise the Prime Minister on policy and strategy for the negotiations, and secondly coordinating Whitehall views as needed. On both aspects of their role, lines were further blurred by the sometimes uneasy co-existence of a department (DEXEU) that at least nominally had a large part of this role and was operating out of the same building. DEXEU's role was to coordinate Whitehall interests to feed into the negotiations and prepare for implementation – some of the coordination job that would normally have been done by EDS (although the size and scale of the task was outwith the capabilities of the team as it was in 2016). I am not seeking to relitigate whether the structures for dealing with the implementation of the vote to leave the EU were right. There are good arguments as to why this unusual arrangement - i.e. a small, very centralised command and control structure – was judged necessary for something as significant as negotiating the Brexit deal, particularly when the Cabinet was somewhat divided, confidentiality so important in negotiations and the leaking of confidential information prevalent. Equally the task of understanding and coordinating Whitehall interests was so significant that it was necessary to build a much more significant team (in DEXEU).

There were various iterations of these structures from 2016-18 so this is a truncated history.

12. The key point is that the arrangement was unusual in terms of the normal operation of Cabinet government under Jeremy Heywood as Cabinet Secretary. It created some issues with Ministerial accountability and collective responsibility, as it brought ever more issues into the centre and disempowered or disregarded line departments. On EU Exit there were a number of times where the Departmental officials responsible for advising on a policy and Ministers accountable for it might not be included in the decision making, be able to contribute to or see the advice that went to the Prime Minister or be in the room for the decision. Similarly, the commonplace use of “reading rooms” before Cabinet instead of circulating documents, meant that Ministers would only see the final text shortly before being asked to sign it off without advice from their departmental officials. Collective responsibility and the normal operation of the Cabinet secretariats usually mitigates against being able to commission, write and sing the theme tune. But this way of working on EU Exit set a new normal for everything else that was hard to reverse – the Cabinet Office is more clay than elastic; it does not spring back into shape.

13. This pattern of operation had significant implications for the response to Covid-19 as some of the culture and ways of working directly translated into the way both the Cabinet Office/No 10 and Departments responded to the crisis, not least because many of the officials who had been working on EU Exit in the teams that remained in the Cabinet Office post the abolition of DEXEU and in other government departments moved onto the Covid response. Overall, my observation is that by the time of the Covid-19 response, Whitehall had become accustomed to patterns of working that were not helpful – both in terms of too much control in the centre (or illusion of control) at the expense of perspectives and considerations of other departments, and in departments being disempowered, and those officials and Ministers being accustomed to sitting back.

14. One of the further consequences of this was that the Cabinet Secretariat had fallen out of the habit of facilitating debate between departments and encouraging the airing of fresh or different perspectives as part of problem solving. When I ran the domestic secretariat our role was often to hear the dissenting arguments from departments

arguing the interests of their sector (governing is complicated and what works for one group often disadvantages another) in order to try to create compromise; or as necessary to press ahead with a particular course but mindful of the arguments against and trying to minimise downsides. This sort of debate is forced by the structures of Cabinet where departments have the chance to disagree. This was particularly true of the operation of the Cabinet Secretariat during the Coalition but was also common previously e.g. in my experience of the role the Cabinet Office played during the process of bidding for and managing the London Olympics pre-2010. Operating without the check and balance generated by this kind of debate fails to get the best from the departments the tax-payer funds and risks a kind of group think in the centre. In my view this is antithetical to good decision making in general (again, governing is complicated) but was especially so for something as complex (ethically, economically, scientifically, operationally) as how to respond to Covid.

15. Second, in January 2020 the Cabinet Secretariats were in the process of being reorganised, and there were new staff in key leadership roles. Once he was appointed as Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill had wanted to re-draw the way that the Cabinet Secretariats operated. He started making these changes in early 2019. Rather than distinct secretariats for National Security, International and European policy, and Domestic and Economic he wanted one combined team that would be able to look at and advise on issues in the round following the Fusion Doctrine he had established as National Security Adviser¹. His first change had been to the Director General (“DG”)/Permanent Secretary roles within his immediate team in late 2018, when I had taken on the formal responsibility for the running of Cabinet government (minutes, briefs, committees) and for running a much smaller professional secretariat focussing on the efficient running of the machine². The other secretariat DGs in his reporting line led on individual policy areas with some overlaps; the idea was that the DGs both led the coordination of Whitehall policy on each area and also directly advised the Prime Minister, including on domestic policy. The next stage was to re-organise the teams reporting to the DGs, break down boundaries at working level and re-build the domestic coordination function that had been somewhat hollowed out. Mark Sedwill had also appointed some new people. In January 2020, of the six roles at DG only I had the same role for more than a year – there were two DGs (Jonathan Black and

¹ See page 10 of the National Security Capability Review, March 2018 [INQ000303284].

² See: Letter from Cabinet Secretary to Heads of Department 4.6.19 [INQ000285973], Cabinet Secretariat – Olympic Rings diagram [INQ000285974] and Governance slide [INQ000285975]

Mark Sweeney) who had only been in role for a few months and one vacancy. Materially, to the Covid response this was the Deputy National Security Adviser who led on Civil Contingencies³.

16. Finally, mistrust within Government and between politicians and civil servants had reached a peak through the Brexit process, with significant impact on the atmosphere of decision-making and trust, and with practical effects in this early period and for later in the crisis as relationships worsened. None of the above should be taken as commentary on the decision to leave the EU. These are not natural consequences of the referendum but a description of the impact of the Whitehall and Westminster response to Brexit on the operational environment of the Cabinet Office and for the Civil Service. A further corrosive habit was the increase in the leaking of government information by both Ministers and officials. Good government depends on being able to debate in private and on being able to trust that private conversations are not made public for immediate political advantage.

Political circumstances

17. In several important ways, January 2020 was the start of the Johnson administration even though he had been Prime Minister since July 2019. From the day he took office, Mr Johnson's No 10 had been monomaniacal about implementing the Brexit referendum result. Almost as a point of principle we were told that everything else could wait: significant structural change; the revolution in how government would work; big spending decisions; a different Cabinet; how No 10 should operate; all of that was to be dealt with after Brexit was settled. It was this single-minded purpose and energy that broke the deadlock that summer. But one of the consequences was that some of the risks associated with the immediate period following the appointment of a new Prime Minister - such as people's hesitancy in the security of their position, unwillingness to rock the boat and wanting to please the bosses - emerged more starkly at this point in early 2020 when it looked as if he would be Prime Minister for a long period.
18. In my role as Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet after the Election result I had been working with the team in No 10 to prepare for a decade of Johnson government. At the time this was a reasonable assumption given the size of the majority the

³ The previous incumbent, Madeleine Alessandri, had been appointed as Permanent Secretary for the Northern Ireland Office in January 2020.

Conservatives had won in December 2019. Unusually, the Prime Minister had not used his victory at the Election to make significant Ministerial changes but instead wanted to wait until the UK had formally left the EU and DEXEU could be abolished. This was in part so that the question of what roles to give the DEXEU Ministerial team and who would lead implementation of the Brexit deal could be resolved at the same time. In addition to the normal re-shuffle questions of which Minister would go where, there were more structural decisions about the operation of government on the table. These included but were not limited to:

- What to do about the role of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (“CDL”): both in terms of the best role for Michael Gove and how Mr Johnson wanted to use the Cabinet Office;
- Whether to implement radical change of departmental structures (i.e. machinery of government changes). We had been working up proposals since the Election had been called the previous autumn in anticipation both of the return of Mr Johnson and a potential change of government;
- How to structure decision-making in a way that would suit the Prime Minister (e.g. Cabinet Committees); including how Mr Johnson would want his No 10 to operate in business as usual configuration;
- How to implement some of the changes to accountability that flowed from the Cabinet Secretary’s plans to alter the Whitehall wiring and introduce outcome-budgeting and cross cutting responsibilities.

19. The 2019 manifesto had been fairly high-level and both the political advisers and permanent officials working directly for the Prime Minister thought we needed more of a discussion together to clarify the Prime Minister’s ambition and put some shape around the programme for his government beyond EU Exit. We had not been able to have these discussions prior to this point. Further, it had been a long time since there had been a government with a healthy majority. This, coupled with our understanding that the Prime Minister wanted to embark on some serious structural change – including for example re-balancing the economy away from London and the South East – alongside implementing the Brexit deal meant that we were keen to get into the detail of how to achieve these big changes and help Whitehall to shift into a different mode of working. There was an away day at Chequers on 10 January 2020 to go through some of these possible radical changes and the overall mission⁴. The discussion at the away day was good but not conclusive – identifying a clear and bold

⁴ Away Day 10th January 2020 Agenda and Attendees [INQ000285976].

programme for government was very much unfinished work. The reshuffle was on 13 February 2020. In the end, the Prime Minister decided not to make many radical changes in his Ministerial team or to the machinery of government at that point.

20. The character and operating style of Mr Johnson and his senior team created instability and exacerbated some of the pre-existing structural and cultural issues and tensions. Some of this was deliberate, creating and using uncertainty and disruption to drive change. Mr Johnson had said explicitly on a number of occasions that he thought that organisational conflict was a pre-requisite to get the best from people and keep them sharp. He wanted the people who worked for him to be jostling for position – he often said that the competitiveness would make them better (he also said - with reference to the removal of Permanent Secretaries - that teams performed better once you sacked the head. I disputed this at the time). The uncertainty caused by the reshuffle when Ministers were concerned about losing their jobs or trying to impress to get a better one also impacted on how people were behaving in January and February 2020⁵. For the Civil Service, plans for significant machinery of government change, the row between the Home Office Permanent Secretary Philip Rutnam and Home Secretary Priti Patel and active hostility to the Civil Service in various briefings and messages apparently from Dominic Cummings contributed to a wide-spread feeling of instability. This context is relevant because there was a significant amount of uncertainty in the background during January and February 2020 both for key people across Whitehall (Ministerial and official) and for the Cabinet Office.

21. An additional complication for the Cabinet Office was that it was never clear how Mr Johnson wanted to work with the CDL. Messages were often confused at this time⁶. I worked in the Cabinet Secretariat for 6 years altogether between 2013-2021, effectively for four different administrations. It was a different place from the coalition to Mr Cameron's majority and then for Mrs May and Mr Johnson. It will be different again now. In some models the CDL is a senior Minister who the Prime Minister trusts to implement their wishes across government – sometimes referred to as the “de facto Deputy Prime Minister”, for example Damian Green/David Lidington for Mrs May or

⁵ See e.g. email exchange with Mark Sedwill 31.1.20 [INQ000285977].

⁶ By way of example, see email exchange with Martin Reynolds 5.3.20 concerning crossed wires between the CDL and PM concerning CDL's role in relation to the investigation into the conduct of the Home Secretary at [INQ000285988].

the oversight role that Oliver Letwin played for David Cameron (first as Minister for Government policy in the coalition and then as CDL after 2015).

22. In July 2019 I had been given clear instructions by the Prime Minister and his team that following the de-facto Deputy Prime Minister model was not the intention behind appointing Mr Gove into the Cabinet Office and that my teams and I should be clear that our Ministerial accountability flowed through the Prime Minister only. Following his appointment in July 2019, Mr Gove played a very significant role in driving the plans for a no-deal exit and ran the XO Cabinet Committee responsible for preparing for the operational consequences of leaving the EU. In practice this involved him ranging across most of government policy. As a senior and experienced Minister he had more of an understanding of how to operate government than the Prime Minister (and the No 10 political team, who were mainly new to central government), so in practice he exercised considerable power. At times this was a cause of disquiet inside No 10. After the reshuffle it remained unclear how the two would work together and for those of us accountable to the Prime Minister how we were supposed to be working with Mr Gove was often opaque; and Mr Gove and his team were often pushing at an ill-defined boundary⁷. The history between the two men is a matter of record, and the political relationships between their Special Advisers were not straightforward or always easy to read. This uncertainty did not help with the confusion over who was doing what in response to Covid-19 particularly in the first few months when different people in the Cabinet Office had different working relationships with either Mr Gove or Mr Johnson. Or both. Or neither.

23. In summary, then, when Covid arose as a concern in January 2020 the UK Government was already on the back foot from another once-in-a-generation event. Key parts of the system were either subject to change or might have been and were awaiting clarification. Many Ministers, senior civil servants and special advisers were uncertain in their role. There was no clear 'business as usual' pattern of working with Mr Johnson. The Cabinet Office and Whitehall had developed some unhealthy habits in terms of ways of working, and it was a low trust environment in terms of relationships between the Civil Service and the Prime Minister and his political team. Some of this lack of trust is normal around an Election which is why it is a heightened period of risk for all kinds of decision making in Government. In February 2020, following the reshuffle, we had one week of normal government before the crisis took

⁷ See e.g. email exchange with CDL PPS 14.4.20 [INQ000286045].

over and then overwhelmed us. All of these factors are relevant to understanding both the difficulties in gripping the response to the virus early on, and some of the issues with the response over the course of 2020.

Over-confidence, including in “the plans”, and loose grip

24. During January and February my understanding of how the Government was responding to the threat and then the reality of Covid-19 came from the Cabinet Secretary’s regular meetings of his DG team on a Monday morning, writing the brief for and minuting meetings of the Cabinet, and attending briefings with the Opposition on Privy Council terms. This was in keeping with my role at the time. Although the brief for the weekly Cabinet meetings and the minute were in the name of the Cabinet Secretary, it was normal for me to manage this on his behalf. The brief is the note given to the Prime Minister to have in front of them in the meeting – it includes stage management for who is expected to speak on each agenda item and gives the Prime Minister points to make in introduction and conclusion. For Prime Ministers May and Cameron the writing of the brief was an important vehicle to bring Civil Service and political advice in the centre to a point of agreement (I had written the brief for both). It is one of the small mechanistic ways in which the Cabinet machinery is made to function and the opportunity for the Cabinet Secretariat to make sure the Prime Minister has a factually accurate and full picture in front of them on the issues of the day. It was often where debates between the different teams serving the Prime Minister were (politely) worked through. In practice in this case the tone of the Cabinet briefs on the Coronavirus, and in particular the injections of caution I made about the uncertainty of the picture, did not register with Mr Johnson – he rarely referred to the brief. In those early Cabinet meetings in particular Mr Johnson was very confident that the UK would sail through and we should all be careful of over-correcting in advance of something that was unlikely to have a huge impact and for which – in any case – we were well prepared⁸.

25. In January and early February Covid-19 was being seen from a Cabinet Office/No 10 perspective through the lens of international policy and coordination was handled through the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (“CCS”) as part of the national security apparatus (Cabinet Secretary meeting on 3 February “Economic and Global

⁸ See e.g. Brief for Cabinet 31.1.20 [INQ000056142] and Cabinet Minutes 31.1.20 [INQ000056125] Brief for Cabinet 6.2.20 [INQ000056127] and Cabinet Minutes 6.2.20 [INQ000056137].

Implications of Covid 19"). This framing is important to understand because some of the decisions that followed had roots in this beginning. In my experience in government *where* a problem is first identified and managed creates a lasting effect on *how* an issue is handled. As an example, if school sport policy is driven by DCMS it is likely to focus more on competitive and team sport; if it originates in DHSC it will have a bias towards physical activity; and if is managed by Department for Education ("DfE") it will be more about the opportunities for improving educational outcomes. If anything this separation in perspective is even stronger in the siloed structures of the Cabinet Secretariat – so when I ran the Eurozone contingency work from EDS I would prioritise the need to protect British tourists on holiday and UK pensioners and have much more regard for this than any knock on consequences for relationships in Europe; whereas if the European secretariat had led they would have been more concerned about managing any risks with our relationships and probably been happier to take greater risks with our readiness. They are different lenses. This explains, at least in part, why the Cabinet Secretary at this point wanted to bring the secretariat together into one team and in particular integrate international, domestic, economic and security perspectives so that choices could be made in the round. However these changes had not been fully implemented at this point and domestic policy civil servants in the secretariat were hardly involved at all in January/February in the work on Covid-19.

26. During February I became increasingly concerned about the confidence of the tone of any discussion about the virus. There was a disconnect between the nervousness I felt and experienced in my personal life and community at home coupled with what I was reading about what was happening in other countries when contrasted with the confidence expressed by others when I was at work. This disconnect was particularly strong in the Prime Minister's morning meetings. From March the Health Secretary, the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Health and the Chief Medical Officer were – unusually – attending most of the morning meetings to give the Prime Minister daily updates. Unhelpfully, Katharine Hammond who ran the CCS was not included – through no fault of her own – until mid-March. Given the CCS's role at that point in relation to supporting DHSC in coordinating the response to the virus it would have been helpful to have her there to ensure that the CCS was sighted on the scientific and health advice the Prime Minister was receiving and to be able to input about what the CCS were doing.

27. I regularly deputised for the Cabinet Secretary at the morning meeting and on some days – e.g. when the Cabinet met or when I had something in particular to raise – I would attend in addition to the Cabinet Secretary. Working for Mrs May it was important to be there as she used the meeting to shape key decisions for the day and beyond. For Mr Johnson I had found it was often more useful to catch him or his team on a particular issue on an ad hoc basis during the day or to meet in a smaller group with his more senior advisers. During this period the atmosphere and discussion in the morning meetings I attended was confident and macho. This in itself was not a new thing, but it seemed even more so than usual: we were going to be world-beating at conquering Covid-19 as well as everything else.
28. It is unusual for people outside Downing Street to be invited into the morning meeting and it has a mythological status that can make for some unusual behaviours when people are finally inside the room. It's in a small room packed with people and the pace of discussion is usually pretty rapid – you are sitting with the Prime Minister, his closest advisers and sometimes his or her most trusted Minister(s) discussing the most significant issues of the day and the thrill of being part of it can sometimes lead to people playing up to the situation. In my experience crossing that threshold makes people more rather than less confident of their opinions even with a Prime Minister who is not operating as much of a court. Mr Johnson's morning meetings were usually pretty performative and robust.
29. I remember on one particular day – it would have been early March – going into the meeting on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary as he was away. It was the day on which there was a question about whether the Prime Minister should shake hands with people on a visit to the hospital and there was a jokey discussion about alternative greetings to handshakes. The Prime Minister felt – not unreasonably – that it was a bit ridiculous for him to suggest alternative greetings. But the jovial tone, the view that in implementing containment measures and suspending work and schooling⁹, the Italians were overreacting, and the breezy confidence that we would do better than others had jarred with me. I remember saying that I thought that all people wanted to know was what was the right thing to do – and that was not clear. I mentioned the reasonable questions people were asking on my children's school WhatsApp groups and what I believed to be a widespread desire to do the right thing – not just to protect themselves but their communities. I was confident that, if asked, most people would

⁹ See the article "The Italian Response to the COVID-19 Crisis: Lessons Learned and Future Direction in Social Development" [INQ000303288]

actively want to do the right thing (and not need to be told to). In response Chris Whitty said he agreed and there was a quick flurry of people including the Health Secretary agreeing that it was reasonable to be worried and that of course people wanted to do the right thing. Shortly after, the conversation went back to the assertion that we were so well prepared and that we should not panic. I left that room even more concerned that we were in the wrong place tonally, feeling I had been patronised for raising the point and I was particularly bothered by the supreme confidence I had heard¹⁰.

30. On 3rd March the Government published DHSC's Coronavirus: Action Plan¹¹ and the Health Secretary talked to the paper at Cabinet. In retrospect this is an extraordinary document, given that so many of the assertions about how well prepared we were would turn out to be wrong only weeks later¹². But it goes some way to explaining the general level of confidence that there were plans in place and we were well prepared. At that stage I had no idea that we did not in fact have plans for what was coming and much of what was in the document had not been adequately tested or just was not true for the circumstances we were in.

31. Since that time I have asked myself repeatedly why I assumed that there were appropriate plans in place. The planning for a pandemic and/or the operational response was not my responsibility. But I was there working at the centre of government, and I did have experience of contingency planning and crisis management at scale and I could have asked harder questions earlier. I wish that I had because it might have bought us more time to prepare. I only really started to see the full scale of the problem in early March when I began to ask for "the plans" so I could dove-tail the advice on managing decision making structures only to eventually be told that no one had anything that was recognisable as a plan encompassing the sorts of measures that would need to be implemented as the pandemic worsened and we ran out of time to either "delay" or "mitigate". Even if such plans did exist somewhere (I do not know to this day) they were not visible or being used by decision makers at the time. When people talked about plans being ready I had expected there to be something similar to the documentation that I had for the Eurozone crisis response – a set of central operations and policy documents and corresponding plans

¹⁰ See e.g. email exchange with Mark Sweeney 2.3.2020 [INQ000285980].

¹¹ Coronavirus: Action Plan 3.3.2020 [INQ000056154].

¹² See e.g. paragraph 4.50 on personal protective equipment from the Coronavirus: action plan 3.3.20 [INQ000182380].

in departments¹³. I thought that there were plans for how No 10 and the CO would operate. I was wrong to assume this.

32. Having thought about it since that time, this is why I think I made the assumption that there would be adequate plans in place for responding to the virus:

- i) The risk of pandemic flu had been at the top of the risk register for so long that I thought it was the one thing we must have been prepared for. What I had not appreciated is that even if we were prepared for pandemic flu, that was not the same as being prepared for a pandemic of another virus, and that the plans as they were did not cover the whole of government or the life-changing impacts that a virulent pandemic might have. This seems extraordinary to me even now - both that we did not have plans, and that I made an assumption that the plans would be all encompassing, given my experience of contingency planning was that plans often did not include enough consideration of the ongoing impact on individual people or communities (either directly or indirectly affected). It can be pretty paralyzing to factor in the true externalities of government decision making.
- ii) One of the most experienced Permanent Secretaries in Whitehall – Chris Wormald – was in charge of the plans. He had also run the domestic Cabinet Secretariat and I assumed that therefore the planning would have encompassed a whole of government response. This is not intended as a criticism of him, (the reverse in that his experience and skill created a possibly unfair assumption) but an explanation from my perspective as to why I was not as sceptical as I might have been at an earlier stage. I think I would have pressed or questioned earlier had it been a less experienced person or someone who had not had significant experience across domestic policy. I remember the Cabinet Secretary expressing his confidence in similar terms. I did not interrogate this assumption sufficiently and I misunderstood what the DHSC considered they were responsible for. This was one of the significant issues in the early days – the assumption in the Cabinet Office was that DHSC and departments as necessary would be getting on with their tasks as set out in the plan and not that there were significant gaps¹⁴.

¹³ See documents provide for Eurozone contingency planning exercise on 13.3.15 [INQ000285966], [INQ000285967], [INQ000285967], [INQ000285969], [INQ000285970], [INQ000285971], [INQ000285972].

¹⁴ See email exchange with Katharine Hammond 14.3.20 [INQ000286005].

- iii) I had prior experience of previously running crisis response and contingency preparations and thought that similar arrangements would be in place. In the Greek Eurozone crises in 2015 I was the Senior Responsible Owner (“SRO”) for Eurozone Contingency Planning working for the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Cabinet Secretary. The original planning and contingency work had been done in 2013, and in 2014 my job was to go back to those plans, assemble the cross-government team (including the Bank of England and the Embassy in Athens) work out what needed to be changed and updated, develop any new plans as necessary and get ready to act. I took for granted that the kind of plans we had for that situation were the same kind of thing that was ready for other crises: especially as the team in CCS had worked alongside my team in EDS. The threat of a collapse in the Euro (which did not happen) was, in terms of departmental responsibilities, a parallel situation to a pandemic and DHSC. A lead department that owned a significant risk - in this case HM Treasury - identified that in a crisis they would have to focus solely on their own risk and responsibility (the turmoil in financial markets that would ensue should Greece have had to leave the Euro) and that there would be wider consequences for the UK and these consequences did not belong to HMT alone to resolve. So in 2012 they asked the Cabinet Office to help coordinate a cross-Whitehall effort and the then DG – Melanie Dawes – put together a thorough and resilient contingency operation that I was able to pick up and adapt for 2014/15.
- iv) I had – mistakenly – thought that the painstaking work led by Tessa Jowell after the 7/7 bombings and terrorist attacks earlier in that decade had made a lasting cultural shift across all crisis response in giving more thought to people and families. I think this was true in a narrow sense for terrorist attacks, although the Manchester terrorist attack showed that some lessons had to be learned all over again. I had seen evidence of the CCS thinking about the human impacts of flooding in 2014/15. Had the government valued and maintained expertise in humanitarian assistance it would have been very useful to help shape the response to Covid with more compassion and understanding. Thinking about how people will be impacted and planning to minimise harm is a professional skill that is chronically undervalued in the machinery of government. Bureaucracies are by their nature inhuman: the purpose is to regulate and organise into the mechanical in order to operate at scale. They need to be continuously imbued with humanity from leaders and through a culture that

proactively invites humanity and compassion and care and recognises people as individuals.

- v) I had worked for Oliver Letwin when he was the Minister for Government Policy and the CDL in the Cabinet Office. My teams in EDS had supported him in some work going through the national risk register, evaluating the planning and refreshing policy assumptions. As an illustration I remember spending a significant amount of time going through in detail the plans for dealing with a reduction in electricity supply¹⁵. I took too much comfort from thinking that Mr Letwin – with his incredible attention to detail, extraordinary grasp of many facets of government policy, practical focus on real world impacts of government decision making and his persistent devotion to high standards – had assured the plans for pandemic flu. I only discovered much later that this was not the case (for reasons I am not clear on but which no doubt the Inquiry will establish).

- vi) The government had very recently been through the experience of needing to have in place a full-scale operational response to a critical and then acute crisis had the UK left the EU without a deal. I remember that when we first exercised No-Deal planning in early 2019 it had been clear that there were significant gaps and, in the end, as a result of a pretty disastrous planning exercise a whole new joint operation between CCS and the domestic secretariat was set up to be able to manage the multiple issues that would have arisen to do with e.g. the supply of key materials. This was brilliantly led by Katherine Hammond and NR in support of the CDL. It was both a reason for my false confidence that if CCS had been involved in the plans then they must be OK and also – in retrospect – a reason why I should not have been: we had such recent experience of a small team of people in a department who were not used to running government designing systems that, when tested, were not adequate. I think I misunderstood the extent of CCS's role in pandemic flu planning and the testing that had been done previously.

¹⁵ See e.g. email 5.9.14 re Capacity Outlook [INQ000285965].

vii) The Cabinet was told time and time again by the Health Secretary that we had plans in place¹⁶. At the time I thought that his confidence was on the basis that he had seen the plans and assured himself. I do not remember anyone expressing any doubt or hesitancy that there might be a problem with the plans not being sufficient. The first person I remember doing so was Mark Sweeney, one of the DGs in the Cabinet Office who was responsible for coordinating domestic policy and who took the lead with Jonathan Black in the initial stages of the Covid response. In working through the pandemic legislation he had established that there had not been any thinking done beyond the Department of Health about how “non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs)” would work in practice¹⁷.

33. The other question I asked myself was why I had not spoken up sooner when I had doubts. I think I was too respectful of the boundaries into the National Security Secretariat and others already in the lead in DHSC and the Cabinet Office and probably too worried about the harmful impact of new people crashing around asking questions when a team is trying to deal with a live problem. After this experience I did not hesitate in the same way again, including the following winter.

34. By way of example, I had previously drilled into the plans for the Accession Council¹⁸ and improved them, but in the Autumn of 2020, I triggered a total overhaul of those plans and widened this out to look at the wider preparations for the demise of the Crown and to push through a series of changes including clearer accountability and actionable plans involving the actual people who would make decisions and the need to appoint a Permanent Secretary with clear accountability for the whole.

35. In the end – in almost every case – plans are not quite right when it comes to the moment. But having a solid foundation as I did in the Eurozone, and then having the time and space and authority to get everyone around turning old plans into new plans and making those better than what went before is invaluable. Not least because

¹⁶ See e.g. Minutes of Cabinet 6.2.20 [INQ000056137] “*the central point to make was that the Government had a plan to deal with this illness, and this was guided by the science. Cross-government working was essential. The reasonable worst case scenario would see almost every government department affected by coronavirus*”; Minutes of Cabinet 14.2.20 [INQ000056138] “*The balance struck in public communications was right and public confidence in the handling of the situation had gone up over the previous three weeks. The message was clear: the Government had a plan, informed by science*”.

¹⁷ See email exchange with Mark Sweeney 2.3.2020 [INQ000285980] in which he identified that the policy response to the virus may be a gap. See further paragraph 62 below.

¹⁸ Convened on the death of the Sovereign to formally proclaim the new King or Queen.

everyone understands their role so when the pressure comes it is easier to manage and individuals understand what they are supposed to be doing. This is what the country should get from the permanent Civil Service – people repeatedly picking up and building on what the taxpayer has previously paid for and making it better for the next time. For this to happen senior officials have to have the time and the space and be incentivised to do this kind of planning and lessons learned, and there needs to be excellent records and a culture of honesty and sharing experience. If everything goes well this kind of contingency preparation is resource intensive work that only may be needed at some point in the future, long-beyond the life-cycle of most Ministers and senior officials. More likely than not it will never be needed in its exact form. But even then it's not wasted work: the experience of making and refreshing the plans will carry over, and the exercise itself can bring clarity of thought that is applicable to other work in big and small ways. For example time and again on the London 2012 Olympics we made improvements to the programme as it was being implemented that came from discussions about future risk, after the experience of the Eurozone contingency preparations we made some changes to the structure of briefings for Cabinet Committees on the basis that what was good for a crisis was also better for day to day.

Narrowed Perspective

36. I remember conversations in late January/early February where those of us working together in No 10/Cabinet Office at one step removed from the handing of the response expressed doubt about the argument that we should “follow the science”¹⁹. It is to say the least unfortunate that the Cabinet Office did not retain my work mobile phone or the data from it, so I have no record of the exchanges I recall with some colleagues over this. The concern about “following the science” was not because we did not have faith in the particular scientists. I thought at the time and even more so now that the country was extraordinarily fortunate to have Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance in their respective roles. Both are deeply expert, easy to work with and had seemingly infinite capacity to cope with the pressures they were put under. They are remarkable people.

¹⁹ I have located emails in which I express this view in March and April but recall conversations about my reservations when the Prime Minister first adopted this language. See: email exchange with Mark Sweeney 2.3.2020 [INQ000285980]; Email exchange with Mark Sedwill and Cabinet Office DGs 23.4.20 [INQ000286055]; Email exchange with Ed Lidington and John Owen 9.3.20 [INQ000285992].

37. My concern was that the then Prime Minister was repeatedly emphasising that we were “following the science”. In my observation at that time this was true – he and other Ministers did not question what they were advised. I could see it was a highly effective and reassuring public communications line or mantra. But I was puzzled as to how “the science” could be so confident about outcomes, for example how people would behave in response to government interventions given we had absolutely no modern experience of a health crisis on this scale. I did not think it was at all predictable how people would respond and did not think that there could possibly be robust enough behavioural science to be so confident that – for example – people would only stay at home for a short period so action should be delayed for as long as possible. I knew enough from my own previous academic study of the behaviour of crowds and the response of different communities to, for example, the plague in the medieval period or the urban outbreaks of disease in the 19th century that people are far from predictable and not always motivated by the “rational” thing. It was not clear what “science” we were referring to – the best understanding of the virus itself? The best epidemiological assessment of how it would spread and evolve? Behavioural science about how people would respond? Or a scientific basis for evaluating the impact (and short-term impact or long-term impact) of doing x over the impact of doing y? I remember raising these questions at the time in general discussions either in No 10 or the Cabinet Office. I cannot now recollect the response – although I do not think anyone disputed that they were reasonable questions to ask.
38. I was also concerned that within Westminster and Whitehall where there were lots of people who felt underconfident about their own abilities to understand science (whether they admitted this or not) so it was likely that the same level of scrutiny was not being applied as would have been the case if assertions were made on other fields of expertise: it would have been laughable to propose following “the economics”.
39. I was further concerned thinking from the perspective of principles around good decision making by government – I felt there was a risk of appearing to delegate responsibility for huge decisions on the health of the population to a small group of scientists and medics. I did not think this was fair or right in terms of democracy. My view – then and now – was that the decision-making apparatus as it stood and was being used and relied on – was not sufficient for the problem we would face: we could not wait for “science” to decide the answer. This is particularly true of the role that SAGE played. It is not that their advice was wrong – I have no reason to believe that – but that they were not constituted to carry the weight of decisions that were being

attributed to them. They were the right people to make the best estimate of how particular interventions would impact on the spread of the disease. The questions about how to respond to Covid-19 were – in my mind – huge political, ethical, moral, social and economic questions that went to the heart of the kind of country we were or wanted to be, alongside a whole set of relentlessly practical operational issues like supply of food and medical equipment. There would be hard choices and they should be made by elected Ministers.

Moving up the gears

40. Looking back it is clear that the Cabinet Office moved up the gears more slowly than the pace of the crisis. Government is a juggernaut (it has a unique scale of staff and processes, even compared to other 'big' organisations). The Cabinet Office since 2010 has become a juggernaut in and of itself, too. This was one of the legitimate issues raised by Dominic Cummings – he wanted a quicker and more effective nerve centre. Broadly speaking there were three gears in relation to responding to Covid-19:

1. COBR / DHSC-led observing the virus spread in China and then into Europe and cranking through the pre-existing pandemic flu plans in isolation from the rest of the Cabinet Office and Whitehall.
2. "CO+": the monumental effort put in by Mark Sweeney, Jonathan Black, NR NR Simon Ridley and their teams from early March to rise to the challenge of stemming the spread of the virus and sort out the immediate practical impacts of locking down the country.
3. Whole system response. There was no plan or set up for this third gear but it was effectively what was needed and what in the end we created in the Covid Taskforce that ran from end the of May, overseen by Covid-O and Covid-S. The Taskforce was more of a super-charged unit in the centre than a full cross government effort. This was in large part because that set up better suited Mr Johnson's working style and replicated some of the successful EU Exit patterns, rather than it necessarily being the perfect answer for effective Cabinet governance. In practice it is important to recognise that the Civil Service must adapt to the government as it is and that the optimum model is what works for the Prime Minister of the day, not a Platonian ideal of government in theory.

41. One of the challenges was recognising the need to shift up into another gear; and then getting a machine with momentum in one mode to actually manage to do that. We were too slow to move at every point. In early March it felt like the crisis accelerated exponentially and the system was always operating in too low a gear. In that first shift from COBR to CO+ there was no time to plan and prepare for the non-existent third gear: all of the focus was on sprinting to catch up with where we should have been. This was made harder in that it was also important to not look like this was the case given the importance of maintaining public confidence. Looking back I think it might have been better to share more widely within Whitehall how bad it looked to us. Other senior leaders may have been better placed to help more, although I never wanted to undermine the Cabinet Secretary.
42. In the first two weeks of March 2020 a lot of time in the centre was being consumed by business as usual. This looks odd in retrospect. For example, I was dealing with the fallout from Philip Rutnam's resignation, the investigations into the Home Secretary's conduct, working on proposals for civil service reform, the plan to move the House of Lords to York, the creation of "One HMG" overseas (as an alternative to MOG change). Alex Chisholm was about to start as the departmental Permanent Secretary and a significant piece of work for the CDL on Cabinet Office reform was commissioned on Saturday 6th. There was no attempt to run at anything other than hot on other work²⁰.

Decision making structures

43. One of the things we should have done earlier is move away from the COBR decision making structure. Mr Johnson had never warmed to COBR – it did not suit his working style to come through to the basement of the Cabinet Office, away from his study and his political team. Unusually in my experience of Prime Ministers, he clearly felt it was not his territory. As the Covid-19 situation became more immediate it was not working and definitely would not work as the crisis worsened. It was not the right set-up for the Prime Minister to be able to ask the right questions and have frank and full discussions²¹. CCS were immovable about the devolved administrations' inclusion in COBR, because to exclude them would have damaged the agreed protocols for operating across the UK within the devolution settlements. This made COBR a less

²⁰ See e.g. email from PPS to CDL re. Commission from CDL on CO structures and priorities 7.3.20 INQ000285991].

²¹ See email Sequencing of COBR & Cabinet 6 April 2020 [INQ000286028].

trusting and effective forum given the political relations between the Prime Minister and the First Minister of Scotland in particular.

44. Politics aside, COBR was not going to be the right mechanism to run a response of the scale and duration that would be needed. In my experience COBR and the CCS work well for an immediate response to a crisis or for short term crises, such as flooding or responding to a terrorist attack – when there is a need for very drilled “action this day” coordination and response. There are, though, events and crises for which this is not the right mechanism, and the operating model can get in the way of good decision making. My experience of the response to the Grenfell fire had been that the COBR set up was less effective in managing a problem over a longer period of time. After the fire, alongside the urgent and essential work to look after those whose lives had been decimated and manage what was happening in Kensington and Chelsea there was an urgent concern that thousands of buildings might have similar cladding and possibly other construction issues. When counting numbers of buildings to be surveyed and tests to be conducted the CCS framework is helpful (when we met yesterday the number last was X it is now Y, lets take action Z to make it Y+50). If it cannot be counted or judged in hours/days then COBR and CCS is unlikely to be the best mechanism. Once the numbers are no longer the focus and the problems not immediately fixable by directing another part of the public sector to do something the “action this day” approach can drive to prioritise the wrong things when you are trying to deal with something that evolves over time or has consequences beyond those that have already been identified.
45. Further, the over-focus on these countable things can give false confidence to those in the room that a situation is being adequately handled when some problems cannot be seen in the day or the week. The CCS data dashboard and the CRIP were hard-wired into the Covid response for a long time and, although useful in the short term eventually, this did skew decision making in my view. For example, the long-term impact of a generation of young people being deprived of schooling and peer-group contact for an extended period of time were hard to bring in as a balancing argument because the harm was not immediately quantifiable, or amenable to being reduced into a data set and presented in a diagram. Similarly, less visible impacts suffer in this format. I remember it being far too difficult to get people to pay attention to domestic violence and lockdown – and the No 10 Private Secretary (Hannah Young) having to push back against the assertion that it was not an urgent problem because it was “not showing up in the data”. It is only because of her relentless pushing of the issue that

there was eventually a summit on “hidden harms”. This is precisely the kind of thing where with even weeks more to plan and a wider set of people involved it may have been possible to avert some of the harm.

46. By early March it was clear to many of us that the way we were organising ourselves in No 10 and the Cabinet Office to support the Prime Minister in responding to a growing crisis had to change. The Prime Minister was going to want to take more of a direct lead rather than leave it to the Health Secretary. I had a few discussions with Stuart Glassborow (who led on domestic policy and the organisation of No 10 in the Prime Minister’s Private Office) and Dom Cummings and the Private Office put more structure into the morning meetings. I was developing proposals for what we might need in terms of Cabinet Committee machinery and worked with the Cabinet Secretary’s Private Office to try to plot out where we needed to be and create more grip²². I had heard from a number of Cabinet Ministers that they felt unsighted and would welcome more discussion than show and tell at Cabinet meetings. Mark Sweeney had been asked to look at the draft legislation and was concerned that the issues that were being raised through that process were much broader than had been considered within the COBR structure and would need more input from a wider group of departmental Ministers. I went back to my previous experience of working in crisis situations to try to distil and share what I had learned²³.

47. From what I recall our collective concerns included the wrong people being in the room and so the Prime Minister was not being given sufficiently expert policy advice²⁴; concerns about an over-mighty No 10 operating without Ministers²⁵, and the sense that too many groups of people were whirring around having similar conversations – duplicating efforts and creating confused lines – rather than fitting into a defined (and grippy) structure²⁶. It felt it was becoming chaotic – the perceived lack of grip from DHSC and the Cabinet Office up until then had led to No 10 firing off on all cylinders with multiple and overlapping commissions. I wanted to assert the space for the Cabinet Secretary to advise and impose order and control. We were aiming to make sure that it was possible for the Government to take the huge number of decisions

²² Email thread re decision making structures 11.3.20 [INQ000285996] and attachment ‘Covid-19 HMG long term response’ [INQ000285997].

²³ See e.g. Email to John Owen re Grenfell Lessons 9.3.20 [INQ000285992].

²⁴ See e.g. Email from Dominic Cummings 11.3.20 [INQ000285995].

²⁵ See e.g. Email from Mark Sedwill 11.3.20 [INQ000285994].

²⁶ See e.g. Email re. morning meeting attendees 11.3.20 [INQ000285994], Email exchange with Dominic Cummings 13.3.20 [INQ000174673].

that would need to be made in as orderly a way as possible, involving Ministers who were accountable so as to get the best impact from the overall government machine. This was probably an overly-idealised ambition.

48. The summary of our conclusions on how to manage the Covid-19 long term response - as reflected in the Note for the Prime Minister of 13th March²⁷ and the note drawn up by the Cabinet Secretary's Private Office²⁸ - highlights our expectation at that point that this was a long term, all systems, crisis which required resilient and sustainable structures; and set out our view that what people needed from Government, at a time when they were very frightened, was to know that the Government was working for them in a competent, compassionate and calm manner. The advice for the Prime Minister built on the discussions I had had with Cabinet Office colleagues and followed getting 'buy in' from the key people in No 10 to change the decision-making structures on the evening of 12th March and morning of 13th March²⁹. The email chains show the debates we had about how many committees might be needed and in particular what to do about holding DHSC to account. This was drafted to come from Mark Sedwill but in the end we put it in from myself and Mark Sweeney as a joint note – particularly to ensure that Mark Sweeney's role was understood. The note speaks for itself but in effect is the genesis of the MIG structure that was in place from mid-March until the end of May 2020. The only further point I would add is that one of the things in my mind was that we should try to bring Ministers and departments into decision making. I had the Butler report in the back of my mind and was conscious of the criticism of the Cabinet Office in crisis mode and so was trying to share the burden and get the most from Ministers and senior officials outside of the centre.

49. Although we saw some of the same problems, there was a clear difference of approach between the Prime Minister's most senior political adviser and me on these issues both at the time and looking back at the papers. There was an understandable tension between my desire to open out and include more departments and more Ministers – a greater number of elected decision makers and the full press from senior civil servants in departments in order to magnify the efforts and Dominic Cummings' desire to keep the meetings small and focussed and not to include what he saw as inexperienced people who would slow and frustrate the approach. In general he found

²⁷ Note to Prime Minister "Covid-19: Next Phase" 13.3.20 [INQ000087166] and email to Box [INQ000226852].

²⁸ Email 11.3.20 [INQ000285996] and attachment 'Covid-19 HMG long term response' [INQ000285997].

²⁹ Email re meeting rhythms 12.3.20 [INQ000285998]; Email re structures for next phase of Covid-19 Response [INQ000286002].

Cabinet government an impediment to decision making whereas I thought it was the basis for decision making. We regularly disagreed on this. One of his criticisms was that my constant pressing for Ministers to take decisions was the desire for the appearance of democratic decision making rather than actually wanting the input from the actual Ministers (“Potemkin government”).

50. In the course of preparing for the Inquiry I have gone back through my records from the time in so far as I can. I think in early March I was focussed on trying to fix the problems I could see rather than illuminating them for others so I was hesitant about giving Dominic Cummings further ammunition about inadequacies in the Cabinet Office or DHSC or other problems. It was very challenging throughout to get people to focus on what we could do at that time to make things better rather than critiquing other people or commentating on how bad it was that we were in the situation. My strong view at the time was that although it was useful to continue to learn lessons about what we were doing (and I repeatedly and deliberately made the space to do so) it was less helpful to try to re-draw the whole of the operating model or create a state of permanent revolution or blame everyone else. At the same time, I absolutely agreed that the crisis had showed up a lot of structural problems that needed fixing. There were things to change and reorganise but reorganising during an emergency comes at disproportionate cost and should be done precisely and sparingly not rushed and often.

51. Separate to Cabinet Committee structures I had been working with the Cabinet Secretary’s office on how to bring in the wider team both in the Cabinet Office and – more importantly – the rest of Whitehall. We met as a group on the Thursday 5th March to talk about the response overall and NPIs. There was a good discussion at the meeting and the wider collective of Cabinet Office DGs then swung into action. This was shortly followed by more grip and focus on public sector readiness set out in the Cabinet Secretary’s email to official ‘Heads of Departments’ the following day³⁰.

Further warning signs

52. On Monday 2nd March, I attended the Prime Minister’s morning meeting for the Cabinet Secretary and the Opposition briefing on Covid with Chris Wormald, Chris

³⁰ See: [Letter from Mark Sedwill to Heads of Department ‘Covid-19 – Public Sector Preparedness’ \[INQ000182335\]](#) and email from Mark Sedwill to heads of departments [INQ000285990].

Whitty and Patrick Vallance. I emailed Imran Shafi (in the Prime Minister's Private Office) with feedback from the briefing³¹. I think it was at this meeting that I first heard the explanation that there was no need to restrict football matches because they happened outdoors and so the risks of transmission would be minimal. This played in my mind. As the Shadow Health Secretary pointed out in the meeting, attending football matches often involves being on crowded public transport, being together in the pub and in close contact with other fans in areas of the stadium like turnstiles and concourses. It bothered me that the policy line was far from the reality as it suggested that the discussions had not involved enough people with broader or real-life perspectives. It was partly this that triggered my email to Mark Sweeney at the end of the day to ask who from his team was attending the COBR meetings³².

53. At the beginning and throughout the briefings with the Opposition fulfilled an important function. They did what they said on the tin: the point of the briefings was to explain the government position so that the Opposition did not unwittingly criticise the Government's stance or create confusion in the population. This is what we (and they) were trying to achieve³³. But beyond that I found them very helpful to the development of policy. The shadow secretaries of state would identify where lines were not clear or raise issues giving us an early warning that something needed fixing. For example it was out of the Opposition briefing on 9th March that I made sure MHCLG were thinking about rough sleeping and including Baroness Casey. This is not a point about party politics, but that elected politicians (in my experience) are much more likely to offer wider perspectives and can spot from a long way off when what they are being told does not make sense when translated into real life.

54. Tuesday 3rd March probably marks the beginning of the CO+ phase³⁴. Most of the rest of Cabinet Office were not thinking of the possible serious and long-term consequences of where we were. It is striking looking back (and to be fair very human) that the response to start off with from people who had not been involved in the discussions was small scale and domestic, and about the office environment rather than the huge implications for the country and the demands it would make on all of their day jobs. Among the leadership of the department there was a failure to

³¹ Email to Imran Shafi on Briefing with LOTO 2.3.20 [INQ000285979].

³² Email exchange with Mark Sweeney 2.3.2020 [INQ000285980]. See also Mark Sweeney's email to his director team sent to me on 5.3.20 about the need to ensure the crisis machinery - i.e. COBR / CCR - did not run away with policy making [INQ000285989].

³³ See email to [NR] and [NR] 2.3.20 [INQ000285981].

³⁴ Email from Deputy PPS to Cabinet Secretary to Cabinet Office DGs [INQ000285982].

appreciate that the Cabinet Office would not be spectators but authors of how the country would cope. So while the Cabinet (and more significantly the public) were again assured that we were extremely well prepared; inside the secretariat part of the Cabinet Office we were becoming increasingly concerned about whether we would be able to cope with what might come. We were beginning to move at different speeds. This would intensify over the next fortnight.

55. Dominic Cummings and Lee Cain were rightly concerned about the capability and skills we had available on communications, particularly digital / social media expertise and testing of messaging given the centrality of communications to a public health crisis³⁵. Lee Cain and I discussed and having spoken to the Chief Executive of the Civil Service I provided a paper on options.

56. Further concerns were raised by Lee Cain on the communications effort, including further indications that DHSC were overwhelmed (or appeared to be)³⁶. DHSC was not able (or, perhaps, not willing) to provide anyone into the Cabinet Office to support the team led by Mark Sweeney to look at public sector preparedness, develop the policy on the NPIs or support on the Cabinet Office coordination effort. This was troubling because it meant that the Cabinet Office was operating without health expertise or good linkages. Although there were warning signs that there was a problem from the work on the legislation that Mark Sweeney had been doing, we were largely still operating under the impression that plans existed and they needed refreshing for the particular circumstances, including adapting to the way Mr Johnson ran his Government (as would be normal for any Prime Minister), rather than there not being plans for a crisis of this magnitude. We also – mistakenly – did not appreciate that DHSC had focussed and were focussing on DHSC and the impacts on the acute health system, rather than the wider and long-term health of the public. I do not think we fully understood this until too late to do anything to really remedy it.

57. I thought at the time that the use of the terminology “non-pharmaceutical interventions” was very unhelpful. I think this even more in light of what followed. How something is thought about matters, and one of the problems of using acronyms in government is that it allows decision makers to duck, or not engage at a human level with, what they are actually talking about. ‘Non-pharmaceutical interventions’ is a case in point.

³⁵ Email from Dominic Cummings re. need to improve communications leadership 4.3.20 [INQ000285984].

³⁶ Email to Mark Sweeney re conversation with Lee Cain 9.3.20 [INQ000285993].

Framing everything that was not drugs and medicine as “non-pharmaceutical” was reductive of what those measures actually meant. It also revealed the hierarchy embedded in the planning and approach: there was DHSC and NHS business first and then a bucket for everything else, defined by what it was not rather than describing what it was – locking people in their homes and depriving people of contact with each other and profoundly impacting on the economy.

Herd Immunity

58. At this time there were – in the morning meetings or Mark Sedwill’s DG meetings – discussions about herd immunity. The orthodox view presented by the scientists and senior DHSC officials and then rehearsed by the Prime Minister and No 10/CO officials was that the virus would spread through the population infecting as many people as it could until it reached a peak. It would start to recede when a sufficient number of people were immune post-infection and so the virus had no new people to infect. The discussion was about what could be done to “squash the sombrero” – and make the peak smaller. The Prime Minister was very focussed on the problems that would be created if people were too scared when they did not need to be (also reflected in the Cabinet minutes³⁷). I have no definite recollection of him saying that he would be happy to be injected with the virus to reassure people, though it was the sort of dramatic gesture he might have made. Talking about “herd immunity” instead of population immunity felt uncomfortable at the time – it was another part of the dehumanising/macho approach. I had not appreciated this was an approach that was being advocated until the briefing with the Opposition on the morning of 13 March when the Deputy CMO did not dispute this point being put to her.

59. In March 2020 our working assumption was that getting immunity was a once-and-done event, at least for the foreseeable future. There was no discussion I remember about the risk of being re-infected or that the virus might mutate so rapidly. Or that there may be longer term consequences such as long Covid. I remember the mindset for those of us who were working together at the centre was that it would be better to get Covid and get it over with so we could get back to work. We did not deliberately

³⁷ See e.g. Minutes of Cabinet Meeting 31.1.20 - “*the tone of the Government should be reassurance, given the low mortality rate. People should not panic*” [INQ000285978]; Minutes of Cabinet Meeting 6.2.20 – “*the Prime Minister said that confidence was also contagious and it was important that the Government remain measured in its response...often the significant economic damage of a crisis came from political overreaction rather than the crisis itself*” [INQ000056137]

set out to get infected, but neither were we overly concerned about the prospect. In the event, many of us fell ill in March and April. There has been some reporting of the Cabinet Secretary recommending “chicken pox parties”. I do not recall him saying this as a course to advocate, but that he expected people might have “chicken pox parties” in rather the same vein, particularly if the health impact on children was so mild and it would mean that families could “get Covid over” and e.g. see others without risking grandparent’s health. When I was off work with Covid (last two weeks of March 2020) I thought that having immunity was a passport and that once I was recovered I (and others in a similar position) might be able to volunteer to help in places where risk of transmission was a significant problem – e.g. at the hospital or my local care home. In the context of the government response I thought we might consider whether it would be possible to, for example, identify an immune workforce who could then safely be available to support vulnerable people. There is nothing inherently wrong in debating and discussing these things – it’s the sort of open discussion about a whole range of things that might happen that should result in good outcomes and better policy.

13-16 March

60. Dominic Cummings has given a public account of events of the evening of Friday 13th March 2020, in which he stated that I walked into the Prime Minister’s study – where I found him (Dominic Cummings), Stuart Glassborow, Imran Shafi and Ben Warner – and told them (words to the effect of):

“I have just been talking to the official Mark Sweeney, who is in charge of co-ordinating with the Department for Health. He said ‘I have been told for years that there is a whole plan for this. There is no plan. We are in huge trouble.’ I have come through here to the Prime Minister’s office to tell you all that I think we are absolutely fucked. I think this country is heading for a disaster. I think we are going to kill thousands of people. As soon as I have been told this, I have come through to see you. It seems from the conversation you are having that that is correct.”

to which he stated his reply was:

“I think you are right. I think it is a disaster. I am going to speak to the Prime Minister about it tomorrow. We are trying to sketch out here what plan B is.”

61. That is essentially accurate, although my concerns had been growing for a while by this point. My reason for going into No 10 on the evening of Friday 13th March and having that conversation was that by that point I was clear about the scale of the problem we had. It was no longer a question of simply improving the way decisions

were made and adapting the Cabinet Office machinery. As explained below in more detail, I had come to appreciate over the course of that Friday that on the substance of what needed to be done we were far behind the curve and needed to drastically switch up gears or thousands of people would die needlessly and the UK would suffer wider damage that could have been avoided. I had heard (I do not know from whom) that the SAGE meeting that afternoon had concluded that case numbers were rising faster than thought. Even so I felt that there still was not sufficient urgency. I had become alarmed that morning by the briefing I had chaired with the Opposition parties where I discovered that the health team were not pushing back as much as I had thought they would at the suggestion we were going for herd immunity as a policy³⁸. The Opposition politicians had raised a lot of questions that there were not good answers for³⁹:

- A. Particular concern on "herd immunity" and whether achieving this was now the Government's strategic policy objective at an accepted cost of lives lost
- B. The messaging on social distancing is particularly unclear: people don't know what they are supposed to do - are they supposed to stay away from vulnerable people now?
- C. Don't understand the point about fatigue in terms of waiting to make certain interventions at a later date: surely individuals who are concerned about their loved ones will continue to do the right thing?
- D. HMG has leaned too heavily on behavioural modelling and whether this relied too much on rational action and took sufficient account of what the public were seeing on their TV screens each night.
- E. Unclear why the Government isn't taking action on major events in line with other countries: particularly as attendance at a football match for example doesn't just involve standing in the fresh air in a stadium but travelling on crowded trains and going to the pub before and after. The Government is losing public confidence and surrendering leadership by leaving Premier League etc to make decisions on major sporting events.
- F. That the different approaches being taken internationally (particularly in Ireland and Europe) were compromising public confidence in our approach. In Ireland this is accentuated by the impact on NI where some communities were taking advice from two different Governments."

62. Mark Sweeney and his team had been painstakingly going through the policy on NPIs and had kept identifying significant gaps in thinking, such as it was not clear what

³⁸ There was a striking strong denial that herd immunity had ever been a policy in the Road Map that was subsequently published in early May. I remember raising concerns about whether this was true at the time.

³⁹ Email to No 10, Cabinet Office and DHSC senior leaders 13.3.20 - Meeting with Opposition parties-read out [INQ000286000] and attached Readout [INQ000286001].

household isolation meant in practice and how many days anyone had to stay at home and whether isolation periods for individuals would run concurrently or sequentially. He and I discussed throughout the day and he talked me through what he was concerned about. The most pressing concerns were what would happen to the vulnerable and how they would be looked after if everyone had to stay home. I did not feel good about going through to No 10 with such a stark message, in particular because I had not been able to talk it through with the Cabinet Secretary. But I thought we would be aligned as this was an evolution (albeit rapid) of conversations we had been having and felt I had no choice given we had to use all the hours we had to try to remedy the situation we were in. I was working very closely with the Cabinet Secretary's Private Office who were keeping him up to date. At that point I thought that violently over-preparing would have been better than continuing to under-react. I would have been very pleased to have discovered I was overreacting.

63. When I went through to the Prime Minister's study it was clear that effectively Dominic and I had come to similar conclusions on either side of the link door (between No 10 and the Cabinet Office) about where we were. Further and more alarmingly, Ben Warner had determined that day that the data on the likely rate of infection that we had been working from had been too optimistic. We had a lengthy discussion about the likelihood that this crisis would not be one spike but it was likely to go in waves and what that would mean. The graph was going to follow the shape of a snake rather than a sombrero. It was the first time I properly understood that we could be dealing with Covid for a very long time. I think it was Ben Warner that explained that we might reach full crisis point of the NHS being overwhelmed within a couple of weeks and when that happened people who did not have Covid-19 would also die. We agreed we needed action now to protect the NHS. I thought that although this was undoubtedly the most immediate task and a good public communications message, we needed to think even more broadly. If the Government was unable to protect people from something that we had told them we were prepared for, wider confidence in the State could also be fatally undermined and that too would cause significant harm. I felt that one of the problems of the previous few weeks – and one of the reasons why it felt decisions were being deferred - was the absence of a broader framework for taking decisions in and balancing these huge risks⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ See my email to DGs and others with an attempt frame overall objectives for Covid-19 decision making for discussion 15.3.20 and Katharine Hammond's response [INQ000286010]. I suggested: Overall objective: trust and confidence in Government.

64. That Friday evening I spoke to Mark Sweeney on the phone to report back on the conversation I had with Dominic Cummings and we agreed that we needed to use the weekend to get us on a different footing. On the Saturday morning I went in early to brief the Prime Minister with Dominic Cummings and Ben Warner and the Private Office⁴¹ before the Ministerial meeting and then worked through the day to get the right structures up and running to manage the next phase as well as setting Departments off on key tasks⁴². I had a number of conversations with Whitehall Permanent Secretaries to take their temperature and commission specific urgent work. They agreed that there would need to be a significant shift up the gears and that it would take Ministers a day or so to get there⁴³. I remember feeling relieved that we did not need to argue in the abstract any more about whether the time was right or it was necessary to get into a different way of working. After that meeting I sat down with Emma Payne in the Cabinet Office and we assembled the list of everything we needed to do and allocated tasks. She and Mary Jones did an excellent job of getting the machinery up and running and to line everything up for a significant meeting with the Prime Minister and Ministers the following day where they would be in a position to take decisions on household isolation and other significant steps⁴⁴.

65. In preparation for that there was a scratchy meeting that Mark Sweeney chaired where it was clear the DHSC view was to wait until the latest possible moment to tell people they had to stay at home whereas – based on the previous 24 hours – the Cabinet Office view was to follow the CMO’s advice and lock down in 10 days at the latest and earlier if possible with every day helping to stem the tide⁴⁵. Chris Wormald was right

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- (i) NHS can look after the people it needs to
 - (ii) People are not dying as a result of lockdown measures or other action from HMG
 - (iii) Fairness: everyone is in it together
 - (iv) The country is able to recover quickly (jobs; families)

⁴¹ Readout of PM meeting 14.3.20 [INQ000136751].

⁴² See e.g. email from Emma Payne (Director in the Europe and Trade Cabinet Secretariat) and my response 14.3.20 [INQ000286007]; Emails from Mary Jones (Deputy Director in the EDS) on coordination / secretariat functions [INQ000286009] and [INQ000286004]; Email from Emma Payne re meetings for next two days 14.3.20 [INQ000286006].

⁴³ See e.g. Email to Jonathan Slater (DfE) following call and requesting note from DfE on implications of school closures (including exams and remote schooling) and potential actions by DfE 14.3.20 [INQ000286008]; Note from DfE on impact of school closures and actions 15.3.20 [INQ000286012]; Emails with Jeremy Pocklington (MHCLG) following call re London Covid-19 exercise planning [INQ000286011].

⁴⁴ Email from Mary Jones 13.3.20 Committees and Underpinning Structures [INQ000285999].

⁴⁵ Cabinet Office has not been able to locate a record of this meeting in my mailbox or the mailboxes of other witnesses at the time of preparing this statement. It is possible there is no formal record as it was a pre-meet for the Prime Minister’s strategy meeting.

that we were not ready to do this and there was a mountain of work to do and serious issues to consider (bear in mind that at this stage we did not know how people would be fed) but from our perspective in the Cabinet Office we were more confident that there was no choice so we would have to be ready and that we could move at breakneck speed and mobilise the rest of government. This was the right judgement in my view so we could buy some time to understand the virus and work out a proper strategy. It felt like applying the emergency brake. We did not doubt the scale and severity of the test: but we backed ourselves to be able to do it.

66. Over the three days between the evening of Friday 13th March and Monday 16th March we set up a new coordination cell and “grippy” structure working across the Cabinet Office & No 10. The objective was to do whatever we could to avert or minimise the immediate crisis and buy some breathing space to work out what to do and build the right infrastructure⁴⁶. We injected significant pace to lay the groundwork for the decisions that were coming. Including:

- set up a rhythm of meetings and coordination that would hold for the next period and allow the government to take the decision to lock down⁴⁷;
- created a new governance structure to cope with the anticipated volume of decision making and tie in accountable Ministers⁴⁸;
- set up an exercise for London that would help to practice crisis response and provide lessons for elsewhere⁴⁹;
- developed new protocols for how Cabinet and the business of government would continue in changed circumstance⁵⁰;
- provided Ministers with clear choices about the decisions they were making including defining key groups in society who would be particularly affected by restrictions and might need special care and attention;
- crystallised important decisions such as getting the respective advisers to settle on a view about number of days people had to isolate for following exposure to the virus and the operation of household isolation.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Email to Mark Sweeney, Jonathan Black and others on Next set of work / thinking to allocate re programme of work I wanted to get ahead on. The non-exhaustive list was national mood, treatment of the dead, education and community support 16.3.20 [INQ000308294].

⁴⁷ Email from Mary Jones 13.3.20 [INQ000285999].

⁴⁸ See e.g. Note from Cabinet Secretary to PM containing advice on next stage 13.3.20 [INQ000087166]; Letter from Mark Sedwill to heads of department setting out new Ministerial Implementation Groups 16.3.20 [INQ000087163].

⁴⁹ Email chain concerning the London Covid-19 exercise 16.3.20 [INQ000286013].

⁵⁰ See e.g. Email concerning Operation of Government in light of new Covid messaging 16.3.20 [INQ000308295].

67. The Cabinet Secretariat and people in No 10 did swing into action. Undoubtedly mistakes were made and lots could have been done better. Given the rate at which the virus was spreading it was right to drive for locking down as soon as possible and doing what we could in the time to catch up. At the time I think there was no choice other than to do what we did – even if it had been a few days sooner from what I understand the difference would have been marginal in terms of the spread of the disease. The harder question to think about is how much less damage would have been done had we had more time to think through knock on consequences and properly prepare. But from the point we realised the scale and the potential impact we did what we could, and I will be ever grateful for those people who ran towards the crisis and tried to help, often to their own cost both then and now. In the overall context it is even more remarkable that we managed to get so much done in such a short time. During this first period there was a supreme effort from lots of people in the secretariats and No 10, alongside others who were parachuted into the help to create and maintain a sticking plaster answer to compensate for a lack of proper planning and a fragile and sometimes dysfunctional system of working between (and within) No 10 and the Cabinet Office and the rest of Whitehall.

68. On Sunday I did not go into the office as I had a cough and thought I should follow the guidance and stay away from work. By Monday morning it was clear that I was not very well. We kept our children off school and I sent a last few emails tying up some loose ends before logging off⁵¹. My husband and I and our children came down with Covid. I returned to work on April 2nd 2020.

69. It has been an extraordinary experience to look back at this timeline and discover it was only 11 days between the publication of the Action Plan and then the meeting with the Prime Minister and Ministers on Saturday 14th March and then only 9 days later when the first lockdown began. I have seen research that shows how the events of this period distorted the perception of time for many people⁵². For those of us who were at work during this time it is not because the days were so similar, I think it was that so much was happening at lightning speed. I do not ask for anyone's sympathy: working as a public servant in the centre of government – whether as a civil servant

⁵¹ Email re Operation of Government 16.3.20 [INQ000286015]; Emails exchanges my private secretary 16.3.20 [INQ000286014] and Next set of work / thinking to allocate 16.3.20 [INQ000308294].

⁵² See e.g. Article by Daria A. Pawlak and Arash Sahraie *Lost time: Perception of events timeline affected by the COVID pandemic* May 31 2023 [INQ000303283].

or Minister or political adviser – is a privilege. And we – particularly those of us in senior positions – have to be accountable for our part in what happened. But I think it is very difficult to make judgements on the wisdom of particular decisions without an understanding of the context of what it felt like to be in No 10 at that time. This is what I have tried to set out here. It is impossible to forget the sense of impending doom I felt in March because, contrary to the expectations that had been set (by the Government!), we were not well prepared or ready. Even so, the Government continued to function, even when the Prime Minister was gravely ill and no one doubted that it would. Some credit should be given for that given we were so far off the boil and from the inside at times it felt very precarious. However bad it was, had the public been also aware at the time how difficult and fractious it was within No 10 and the Cabinet Office I think that would have caused more harm.

SECTION TWO: MARCH – JULY 2020 KEY EVENTS, STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Perceptions on return to work

70. I went back into the office on Thursday April 2nd 2020. During my illness I had been mainly undisturbed by work and largely kept away from the news so was out of the loop with what had been happening in the Cabinet Office and No 10. I was fortunate that my direct reports (the Directors who ran the Honours and Appointments system, the Central Secretariat, Propriety and Ethics, and Public Bodies and the Deputy Directors who ran the independent functions) were effective leaders. The teams were in good shape and had managed the transition to working from home well, so they required comparatively little of my time on return. Apart from a few pressing issues to resolve I could leave them to it and focus on supporting the Cabinet Secretary and No 10/Cabinet Office on the main effort. I had a conversation with Mark Sedwill and he asked that I first get my head around where we were and then provide him with challenge and fresh input/thinking as well as supporting across the piece as usual. Throughout this period I relied heavily on the Cabinet Secretary's Private Office who supported us both (and who I also managed).

71. There was a huge amount of activity going on. I was astonished at how much had been done and changed. The Cabinet Office and No 10 were in still in emergency full press mode, understandably given that the Government had effectively shut down huge swathes of the economy and society in a matter of weeks. It was clear how much strain everyone who had been involved in the response had been under. In

terms of the substance of the response I could see that the next challenge was to shift out of the immediate “crisis response” phase. The pandemic was still being handled as an emergency health problem, including in the structures of the daily meetings. Particularly having been at home, it felt very much like an everything problem⁵³. Over that weekend the Cabinet Secretary was proposing to minute the Prime Minister with his view on what next and we debated what that should say⁵⁴. My response to him encapsulates my thinking at the time. I was catching up with the economic impacts and I remember this being the most sobering point – how far the pandemic might scar the economy for some time to come and all of the consequences that would mean for people and jobs. Poverty also costs lives. Mark Sedwill was also very straightforward about his view on historic structural underinvestment in e.g. critical care beds. I think it had surprised us (collectively) to understand the comparisons with other countries and that provision in the UK lagged other countries. As I recall the conversations at the time we were collectively somewhat idealistic and probably also simplistic about the NHS. I do not remember anyone working in the centre or who was part of the conversations who had a detailed understanding of the way the NHS operated. This is not unusual or unique to that time. Social policy and the “operational” management of the state is always under-represented in the centre of power whereas HM Treasury, foreign policy and national security are over-represented in line with what is normally the focus for a Prime Minister.

72. It was a fragile time. It felt like everyone was getting or recovering from Covid and the relief at knowing we could get back to work and not be infected or infect anyone was intense. Matt Hancock returned to work on the same day I did. I remember standing outside the Cabinet Room with him before a meeting. No 10 was eerily empty at that point. I was pleased to see him recovered and we talked about our respective experiences of the Covid and our families (like most of us his family had also had Covid after we had contracted it at work). I remember trying to reassure him that he did not need to be in the office, especially not in No 10, and saying that it must be very hard – as Health Secretary he could not have imagined the enormity of the decisions he would be involved in when he was appointed. Given it was a long way from the day job I wanted to know if there was more help or support he needed. He reassured me that he was “loving” the responsibility – and to demonstrate this took

⁵³ Email to Mark Sweeney 5.4.20 in response to his note 'random data list' [INQ000286019].

⁵⁴ Mark Sedwill's draft note to PM 5.4.20 'Covid-19':Turning the Tide' [INQ000286020]; Email exchange with John Owen discussing note [INQ000286025], Response to Mark Sedwill 5.4.20 [INQ000286024].

up a batsman's stance outside the Cabinet room and said "they bowl them at me, I knock them away".

Prisons

73. On my first day back one of the senior No 10 Private Secretaries came to find me. She had become very concerned about what was happening in prisons and wanted to discuss her plan to resolve the situation. I have gone into the detail I can here about the conversation we had with the Prime Minister but should be clear that I do not have access to the full records or exchanges at the time.
74. In retrospect many of the systemic problems that caused substantial issues in managing the response were visible in this moment: i) the sucking into No 10 of too much of the decision making by the political machine and this compounding a narrowed perspective, ii) a general lack of knowledge or understanding of how large parts of the state operate, iii) an over-ideological (in my view) approach to individual decisions, iv) an absence of the accountable people in departments being involved or sufficiently involving themselves in decision making, v) Cabinet government not serving its usual purpose, vi) the unreasonable pressure on the No 10 private office and vii) an absence of humanity.
75. I had not been in prior discussions and cannot comment on those, but essentially at this point two weeks into the lockdown a decision still had not been taken about releasing prisoners from non-Covid secure prison accommodation. So both prisoners and prison officers were at an unacceptable level of risk and would continue to be until the Prime Minister had personally agreed that some could be released. There had been discussions in the Public Services MIG and written advice to the Prime Minister from both the CDL (in his capacity of chair of the MIG) and the Policy Unit. The No 10 Private Secretary had been chairing daily meetings with PHE and MOJ to try to broker an answer that would work. My understanding was that the Prime Minister was reluctant to take this decision. In practice there was not much of a choice and that may have been part of the problem. It would have been reasonable to seek collective agreement to something as potentially controversial and to agree handling and communications with No 10, but the decision to release prisoners was effectively a legal necessity and should have been for the Justice Secretary. It was obviously not a decision anyone was taking enthusiastically (the Health Secretary had taken

care to distance himself) but that was not unusual in itself: Ministers across the piece were being asked to decide between a series of unpalatable choices.

76. I agreed to join the Private Secretary in a call with the Prime Minister who was ill and isolating in the Downing Street flat. This took place from the Prime Minister's study with me and the Private Secretary and the Head of the Policy Unit in the room. During the call we dissuaded the Prime Minister and the Head of the Policy Unit from a series of unworkable suggestions – including that someone in No 10 or MOJ had to be involved in signing off every proposed release and be accountable in some way for any subsequent crime a released prisoner committed, or that there was a lesser need to protect convicted criminals from the potential threat of infection within prison. I remember finding myself explaining that if we – the state – were effectively knowingly keeping prisoners at risk of serious illness or even death that would require a different kind of legal sentence for their crimes. In order to try to get a decision the Private Secretary had repeatedly made the point to the political team that a mass outbreak of Covid in prisons was not just a problem for prisoners and prisons but also risked overwhelming the NHS as they would end up in taking up beds in hospitals. The discussion and the advice were concerned with the politics of prisoner release and the communications narrative; in the advice before us there was little on the practicalities such as the risk to families of returning offenders (both from Covid and potential domestic violence) which we added in⁵⁵.

77. That it had come down to a Private Secretary forcing the issue showed signs of problems in the governance not working effectively or fast enough to actually take decisions. And perhaps was also a sign of others leaning back - as it happened she was (and is) a brilliant and highly capable official and this was not the only time during that period that she stepped up and forced an issue, but technically she was operating at a relatively junior Senior Civil Service grade and it should not have been left to her⁵⁶. The point of establishing the Cabinet Committees had been that this kind of decision would be taken within that structure but in practice Private Secretaries were being left to do a significant amount of the actual fixing and in particular having to force decision points. They were the last line of defence in taking decisions properly⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ See Submission to the Prime Minister on 'Covid-19 Strategy for Prisons' [INQ000286016].

⁵⁶ See email from the Private Secretary of 2.4.20 providing the "PM's Prison Steer" [INQ000286017].

⁵⁷ This is underestimated in general as a skill and a function of the administrative civil service in general and in the centre. Every other incentive is to put off hard decisions. One of the duties of a functioning administration is to not enable elected politicians to be forever moving difficult things off into the future.

Prime Minister's illness and hospitalisation

78. As explained above when I returned to the office the Prime Minister was isolating in the Downing Street flat and was clearly unwell. He was coughing on Zoom calls and looked ill on screen. He was clearly short of breath. There were very few people in the building at that time and I remember talking to Martin Reynolds and Cleo Watson (who – except for the Press Office and a minimal Private Office presence – were some of the only people in the office) who were both concerned that the Prime Minister was alone in the flat and getting worse rather than better. We were concerned for him and about his health and the health of his now wife and their then unborn baby (Mrs Johnson was isolating in a separate location) and of the wider consequences if he was unable to work. Martin Reynolds had ensured that the Prime Minister had access to appropriate medical advice.
79. To the best of my recollection it was either on the Friday or Saturday that Martin Reynolds and I briefly discussed what might happen in theory if the Prime Minister got more ill. I had explained that there was not a formal delegation of powers or the equivalent of the 25th Amendment in the US in our constitution but that it was not necessary given the system of Cabinet government, whereby most powers are distributed or held by “the Secretary of State” rather than the Prime Minister in person. Given that resilient national security arrangements were always in place, it would technically be possible to manage for a period without the actual Prime Minister taking decisions, effectively in an extension of the way the Private Office had been minimising the workload to give the Prime Minister more of a rest that previous week. Prime Ministers had been ill before albeit not in such grave wider circumstances. A short absence should be relatively simple to manage in practice – all that was needed was someone to “deputise where necessary”. I thought that it would be important to be clear about what this meant both internally within Government and for the outside world – the deputisation was only “as necessary”, not a delegation of powers across the board. The Prime Minister would remain the Prime Minister and most of the decisions that were purely constitutionally for the Prime Minister and for him alone (such as recommendations to HMQ on appointments of Ministers) could be postponed⁵⁸. In the British system the Prime Minister is both all-powerful and has relatively little direct power. In practice it is more soft power and influence – e.g.

⁵⁸ See email to Martin Reynolds of 10.4.20 [INQ000286032].

through control over Ministerial appointments, chairing Cabinet and the power exerted through the No 10 and Cabinet machinery rather than direct levers and decision making.

80. We knew that by far the more significant impact of Mr Johnson's absence would be psychological – both for the operation of government where (even more so than other Prime Ministers I worked for) Mr Johnson's style was absolutely as the sun around which everything else orbited – and for the country as a whole where his absence could be destabilising. The bigger questions if he was very sick were: i) for how long it was going to be possible to sustain public confidence (given confidence was so vital to the ability to manage the impact of the disease); ii) for how long would the Cabinet hold together; and related to that iii) for how long would it be possible to govern without an effective Prime Minister given the scale of decisions that would be needed in the coming weeks?
81. Over the weekend of 4/5 April the Prime Minister's health worsened and on Sunday 5th the advice was that he should be admitted into hospital. Subsequently there has been speculation that this was somehow a stunt or special treatment. This is nonsense. The NHS would not have participated in something of that nature, in any case and particularly not when under such pressure. It is also a misjudgement of the character of Mr Johnson. I believe – then and now – that he absolutely did not want to be away from the office. The Cabinet Secretary also had Covid at this point and so was also not in the office. Martin Reynolds kept myself and the Cabinet Secretary's Principal Private Secretary updated and between us we also ensured the Cabinet Secretary, and the Palace were aware at every stage. Lee Cain was the Prime Minister's primary senior Political Adviser at this point. Dominic Cummings was also out of the office and also out of contact. My understanding is that it was Lee Cain who had the conversation with the Prime Minister on Sunday about the First Secretary "deputising as necessary" while the Prime Minister was in hospital. The reality of how ill the Prime Minister had become had been kept relatively confidential. We thought that his move to hospital would be something of a shock, although we were relieved that he would be getting the medical support he needed. We agreed the appropriate lines and messaging both internally and externally for Sunday evening. I started working through various contingencies and commissioning relevant work and thinking from the Constitution Group, Propriety and Ethics and the Central Secretariat⁵⁹ and then

⁵⁹ For example, on the precedent for an alternative Minister to chair Cabinet.

on Monday morning Martin and I met with James Slack (No 10 Director of Communications) to go through the lines for that morning's lobby.

“Taking his box”

82. At this stage, my primary concern was with keeping everyone steady and calm and getting through this new aspect to the crisis with the least harm possible. I knew that we would get lots of questions about what the exact arrangements would be while the Prime Minister was clearly too unwell to work at his normal rate. On that Monday morning we knew the fundamentals but were not ready to answer all of the follow up questions that would be asked. We needed a few hours to make sure everyone was lined up behind the answers so there would be no risk of any disagreement or disquiet, and - in so far as it would be possible - make sure the Prime Minister would be content. For that morning's lobby lines I felt it was important to err on the side of caution. In terms of the many damaging things that could happen I was certain that the priority was to maintain the appearance of calm and reassuring governance and government⁶⁰.
83. My caution was that although there are always robust and practiced arrangements in place that are resilient to individual absence, it is still dangerous to national security in the broader sense to allow an illusion of uncertainty about who is in power. This could be exploited by bad actors. I was also concerned about the potential impact on the financial markets as well as wider national confidence if it looked as if there was any sliver of ambiguity about who was in charge. We did not want people to panic. Perception of grip and confidence matters anyway and particularly did in those first fragile weeks of the pandemic.
84. It was made slightly more difficult to confirm all the answers quickly with so many people out of the office, and also because we knew that as soon as we widened out the conversation, we risked someone briefing the media even accidentally. This was another moment where real harm could be done if work in progress was briefed out rather than complete answers. This was true so many times during the response to the pandemic but it was particularly high risk at this point and unfortunately we could hardly ever trust that information would be kept confidential.

⁶⁰See e.g. later email exchange with James Slack and Lee Cain regarding what to say and do about Prime Minister's convalescence including re importance of perception 11.4.20 [INQ000286035].

85. At lobby that morning the lines that were used were that the Prime Minister remained in charge of the government, was receiving updates in hospital and was continuing to receive a box⁶¹. This was technically accurate but right on the edge of what was comfortable. It was a lot to ask of James Slack in particular. Both he and Lee Cain were very clear at the time about the damage that would be caused if the official spokesperson said something untrue, and in my experience of working with James he would not have done it. It is fair to say that the lines used allowed for a more positive impression of the Prime Minister's health at that point. The Prime Minister was conscious, and it was possible to contact him and for him to make decisions but he was very ill. In practice in terms of "taking a box" the Prime Minister had not in fact been working at his normal rate for a few days. In terms of balancing the national interest I would do the same again to buy the space of a few hours to be able to answer any questions fully and create confidence rather than risk insecurity. I was well aware that at some point the full reality of the situation we had been in would be known and we would be held to account and this was part of my calculation at the time. I knew that there would be some criticism of not having been wholly open at that stage, but in the scheme of things and only for a few hours I felt it was the right call.

86. Although there was not a ready-made plan for this precise situation I was confident on the fundamentals. In summer 2018, when Mark Sedwill had been appointed as acting Cabinet Secretary after Lord Heywood's medical retirement, Mark and I had gone through a list of things we wanted to be clear on so we would be prepared for various (unlikely) eventualities. In 2018 we were both new in post and new to working together. One of the things on the list was what would happen in the case of the incapacity or death in office of the Prime Minister. I had been involved in some similarly unusual constitutional scenario planning for Jeremy Heywood in my previous role in the Cabinet Office particularly around uncertain election outcomes. I had this groundwork and thinking to draw on, alongside work that the Constitution Group had done previously and considerable expertise in the team that included the Directors of the Cabinet Secretariat, Constitution Group and Propriety and Ethics and the PPS to the Cabinet Secretary who had also worked on the Constitution.

⁶¹ See news story from 6 April 2020 regarding Mr Johnson's health [INQ000303285].

87. We were collectively clear on the most important principles such as i) there could only be one Prime Minister in office at any one time; ii) there is no provision for a “caretaker”; iii) the Prime Minister can only be appointed by the Monarch; iv) the vast majority of decisions could be taken by other Secretaries of State under the principle of Cabinet collective governance. Any arrangement would have to be within the constitutional norms we were familiar with. I was also conscious that expertise in this area is niche and the majority of people working in government would not be as familiar with these principles so it was just as important to communicate and explain clearly internally as it was externally to maintain confidence. Even with the Prime Minister in hospital there was no reason to miss a beat in the work on the response. Government could and must continue.
88. Over Sunday and Monday I reminded myself of the historic precedent and tested thinking with the key people above as well as commissioning a Q&A that helped us to thrash through the more difficult questions. The task was to write down clearly the right “in principle” framework to start off that everyone could understand and refer back to as necessary and to then make decisions on individual issues as they arose on a case-by-case basis. This is standard practice for the Cabinet Office in potentially complicated constitutional scenarios. I felt that in so far as was possible it was important to stay focussed on the problems of that day and responding to the national emergency rather than letting everyone run away with what might happen to the Prime Minister. We needed to project calm reassurance and that we would cope with whatever. My memory of this time is that I did a lot of trying to take the temperature down.
89. We got news on the Monday afternoon that the Prime Minister’s condition had worsened, and he may be moving to ICU later in the early afternoon (the protection officers had reccied the route and this was how we first found out). Martin Reynolds and I were clear that the Cabinet Secretary needed to be back in the building – he would be a reassuring presence for everyone and particular for Cabinet Ministers to see him back at his desk. When he got to the office, we had a short meeting before briefing the First Secretary of State (from this point onwards we referred to him as FSS to recognise the change in role and authority). I had put together a short document covering the key points we needed to agree⁶². From the Civil Service point of view we were conscious of making sure that there was sufficient political cover for

⁶² See my document ‘How we manage while PM is ill’ [INQ000308394].

the proposed arrangements. This too was tricky, given that the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings and Eddie Lister were not around and it would have been inappropriate to ask another Secretary of State to decide what powers the First Secretary should exercise. This is another reason why we stuck close to precedent and took as minimal an approach as possible. Lee Cain was able to give us confidence about what the Prime Minister was likely to prefer.

90. We wanted to inform the Cabinet about the Prime Minister's move to ICU just before any public statement (again mindful that such information would not hold) and so my team set up a Cabinet telephone briefing call. A short-notice briefing call was not that unusual as we had used a similar format before on both Covid and Brexit, so the fact of setting up the call did not set too many hares running. Very unusually the Cabinet Secretary was in the Chair and informed the Cabinet what was happening. It was a short call with the objective of providing some reassurance and being clear about the First Secretary's role of deputising where necessary⁶³. In the end – remarkably given the very small circle of people who knew – Steve Swinford of the Times tweeted that the Prime Minister was moving to ICU just before the Cabinet call, again demonstrating just how hard it was to keep any information secure.

91. Throughout this new dimension to the crisis the press office team were again at the forefront of the handling. I thought this was particularly hard on those in the press team who were close to him (although they never complained). There was a ghoulis tone to some of the questioning that seemed to forget that there was a person who was the Prime Minister in the middle of this. We tried to limit this kind of speculation as far as possible, my view was that indulging in extreme hypotheticals wouldn't help anyone⁶⁴. In general and for good reasons the government says very little in public about the process of decision making – not least to uphold Cabinet Collective responsibility. I did not want to depart from this general position in these trying circumstances and could not see the public good that would come from it. We took a similar minimalist approach to communication with the rest of the senior leadership of the Civil Service and the wider team in the Cabinet Office and No 10. It was obviously of extreme interest how the Prime Minister was faring day-to-day, but we tried to maintain his privacy about his health as much as possible.

⁶³ Draft note of Cabinet call 6.4.20 [INQ000286026].

⁶⁴ See e.g. email exchange with Martin Reynolds discussing limiting speculation and avoiding unnecessary destabilisation 6.4.20 [INQ000286027].

92. I appreciate that our circumspection may have contributed to critics being able to argue that he was not ever that ill, and Mr Johnson himself appeared to want to brush it off afterwards: he is a very resilient person. But it was an extremely serious moment and an anxious time for those of us who knew the reality from the hospital bulletins. We were worried: for him and his family especially his heavily pregnant fiancée; for what it would mean for how the government would continue to function and make the right decisions at a time when this was most needed; and for the grave impact that the Prime Minister being so seriously ill could have on the national mood. I was mindful of the personal impact on the people in Downing Street who had worked for Mr Johnson for a long time. We were also trying to preserve some of his and his family's privacy. The atmosphere in Downing St was very sombre indeed and the relief to all of us when he recovered was very real.
93. One of the challenges of working out what to do was that Mr Johnson did not have an obvious deputy. It is difficult in advance to ask a Prime Minister who should be their deputy in these sorts of circumstances especially when it might not be the person who the title or the Order of Precedence would suggest (trust is a mercurial substance in politics). This was not part of the process of inducting a new Prime Minister in 2019. After this episode, the recommendation was that the question of who should deputise should be put to the Prime Minister in the early days of their appointment and then re-asked annually to allow for possible changes. In the eventuality Mr Raab was an excellent choice. He was measured and thoughtful and did not seek to aggrandise himself. He took on a huge responsibility and, in my observation, managed the potential for politics extremely well. He imposed helpful order and control during his period in the Chair when some of the most important aspects of the strategy were worked through. In practice it was fortunate that the timing of the Prime Minister's illness was such that there were no major decisions to take on e.g. lessening restrictions during the period he was most sick and so there was little scope for conflict within the Cabinet. Most of the work that was needed was preparatory for decisions to come.
94. Despite the prior contingency work, in the event there was an unavoidable element of making it up as we went along. Such is the nature of the British constitution where there is so much discretion, precedent is really the only guide (which is only so much help in new circumstances) and the Prime Minister is both all-powerful and yet very little rests in only his or her hands. It may possibly have all been different had his government been more mature, but such is the nature of Mr Johnson's leadership

style that I think in any circumstance it would have been hard to conceive of his government operating without him for anything more than a short time. A further complication in this sort of situation if you are relying on precedent is that, as is always the case in these kinds of moments, there is comparatively little written down in the record as I have discovered in the course of preparing this statement. We were working as we went and talking to each other.

95. In retrospect I may have guarded the principle of the Prime Minister himself retaining all of his power and status too hard – for example to start off with I thought it was important that we did not have a Cabinet meeting without him⁶⁵. Once the Prime Minister's health worsened Mr Raab was right to say that he thought not having a meeting would be more of a problem – Cabinet Ministers would want to show to each other, the Prime Minister and the country that they were getting on with the job. And they did. The minimal approach that we took – where even in scenario B⁶⁶ there was to be no political direction in his absence other than on Covid-19 – would not have held for a significant period of time and it would have been much harder to manage had the Prime Minister been ill for longer. We would have had to adapt and knew this at the time. Future contingency plans should allow for a longer-term illness. For example, it would have been helpful if there was an agreed expectation that there was a limit to how long it was possible to maintain a holding pattern - although I do not envy those tasked with designing such a proposal or making it work in practice.
96. During that week while the Prime Minister was in hospital, we did further work on what we might need to do if the worst happened and the Prime Minister died (referred to as scenario C at the time), or what we might need to do should the Prime Minister be incapacitated for a seriously long period of time. I have no doubt that in the event of either we would have got through either scenario sensibly, but it would have been very challenging. Subsequently the Cabinet Secretary and I commissioned a range of confidential work including from the Treasury Solicitor and the Director General for the Constitution so that our successors might be in a slightly better position were this awful possibility to arise again.
97. I appreciate there is a limit to how helpful it is to continue to refer back to problems in planning, but one of the striking aspects of March – July 2020 was that almost

⁶⁵ Email to Mark Sedwill and Martin Reynolds about whether to go ahead with Cabinet 5.4.20 [INQ000286022].

⁶⁶ Scenario A was PM ill but able to communicate his wishes. Scenario B was PM unable to communicate his wishes. Scenario C was PM's death or prolonged incapacity.

everyone who held a senior role in No 10 was off sick at some point. Years before I remember this being raised this as a potential issue at a discussion in Wednesday Morning Colleagues about pandemic readiness (it was some time before Covid – probably 2018). My recollection was that the question was raised if any thought had been given to us as leaders being absent – I think this was in the context of observing the strain on individuals in responding to the Grenfell fire. The point made was that if a flu pandemic happened, we might be off sick, we might have caring responsibilities for parents and children and have to be at home. We might be bereaved and not be able to work. I do not know how this was then factored into planning if at all but it certainly did not feature in life in the Cabinet Office or No 10. We all just carried on.

98. I hope that any planning for pandemics or similar full spectrum crises in future takes account of this⁶⁷. It is not the same as the brutal arrangements for deputising and replacing people killed or incapacitated in a military situation. But the planning should cover the full impact of working when people are getting ill, worried about loved ones being ill, dealing with families, and being ill and recovering, all in an unpredictable way. At the time this was made more difficult by a circumspection about being transparent about who was in work and who was sick. Sequential and compound absences of the key people in No 10 and the Cabinet Office during these first six to eight weeks of the crisis response impacted on the feeling (and reality) of a somewhat chaotic environment. I do not doubt that there were similar issues across government but again it was not really talked about at the time, I think out of nervousness that if the wider public were aware that so many decision makers and senior civil servants were incapacitated (even briefly) this would impact on confidence. In reality, continuity of government felt illusionary.

Narrowed perspective II

99. From when I got back to the office other women who worked in either No 10 or the Cabinet Office sought me out to say how pleased they were to see “a woman” at the table again. I was surprised by this: although No 10 and the Cabinet Office at the time were – as usual – mainly led by men it had not been a matter for comment before⁶⁸. Pre-Covid I would not have characterised No 10 or the Cabinet Office as a particularly abnormally sexist environment in the context of Whitehall and Westminster (Whitehall

⁶⁷ See email to colleagues ‘PM ill health’ as to the need for better “break glass” plans in the event of Cabinet Ministers becoming incapacitated 11.4.20 [INQ000308297].

⁶⁸ See ‘Women at the Centre’ email draft exchange with John Owen 16.4.20 [INQ000286048].

and Westminster are endemically sexist environments). But what started as a murmur became a roar over the next couple of weeks. Not only were there numerous examples of women being ignored, excluded and not listened to or talked over it was also clear that the female perspective was being missed in advice and decision making.

100. As a general point I did not (and do not) take the view that some issues were “female” and some “male” especially as I did not want the voice of women to then be limited to only a subset of the issues. For example, over my years in the Cabinet Office I fought a long-running and largely unsuccessful campaign to not put “women” on the Cabinet agenda as a subject for discussion (once a year!) on the basis that it gave the impression that the rest of the agenda was for men. I do not accept that applying humanity or thinking about the impact on families or childcare, for example, is the domain of women.

101. But the reality was that the overwhelming majority of Ministers and advisers managing the response were men. This was particularly true at senior levels where the perception was that 90%+ of people who were able to speak in a meeting or make their voice heard were male⁶⁹. Women were being excluded from advising across the piece including on areas they normally led on or areas of operation they dominated⁷⁰ and that meant that Ministers were not getting the best and most expert input to decisions on all matters of policy. Women who had worked in No 10 and the Cabinet Office for some time reported feeling as if they had become invisible overnight⁷¹; decisions were being taken where the impact on women was either lost or ignored. Across the advice and discussions there was a striking absence of humanity or perspective about people or families or how people actually lived. The point is not that being compassionate is better (though it is) or that it is the preserve of women, but that policy advice was often impractical about the realities of how people actually live (e.g. that everyone would have a separate bathroom that an infected person could use).

⁶⁹ Email from Katherine Hammond 14.4.20 [INQ000286044].

⁷⁰ Email from No 10 Private Secretary (general domestic policy) 10.4.20 “*I am using my limited powers as private secretary to add four women ... to a cast list they otherwise would not be on for the 9.45 social care (social care! A sector run almost exclusively by women!) meeting on Monday. The first three lead the actual work in their departments – though typically just their Ministers and perm secs get invited (all male).... And Munira got forgotten from the last one.*” [INQ000286033].

⁷¹ See e.g. email from No 10 Private Secretary (general domestic policy) 13.4.20 noting that there was an issue even with men learning women’s names [INQ000286042].

102. Women working in No 10 and the Cabinet Office were experiencing very obvious sexist treatment. This was their experience, and it was impacting on their work as they were finding this distressing and frustrating on top of an already distressing and frustrating situation. The dominant culture was macho and heroic. Neither are the preserve of men (women can be macho and heroic too) but the culture was problematic because it meant debate and discussion was limited, junior people were talked over and it felt that everything was contaminated by ego. It was positively unhelpful when the country needed thoughtful and reflective decision making.

103. In terms of the policy response the exclusion of a female perspective led to significant negative consequences, including the lack of thought given to childcare in the context of school closures. There was a serious lack of thinking about domestic abuse and the vulnerable, about carers and informal networks for how people look after each other in families and communities⁷². There was not enough thinking about the impact on single parents of some of the restrictions⁷³. There was a disproportionate amount of attention given to more male pursuits in terms of the impact of restrictions and then the lessening of the same (football, hunting, shooting and fishing). There was a lack of guidance for women who might be pregnant or were pregnant and what those who were key workers should do (this was particularly significant in education and the NHS given the demographics of their workforces). The restrictions around birth and pregnancy care seemed unnecessarily restrictive and were comparatively slow to adapt. I never understood this. Although I appreciated the need to keep hospitals as secure as possible I am sure there would have been kinder ways of managing pregnancy and birth especially given the differential clinical outcomes for women and their babies who become stressed. Their loved ones could presumably be as trusted as anyone else to minimise risk. It might

⁷² See email to Kata Escott 24.4.20 re all the things that have happened because of a lack of gender diversity in decision makers and what we should do about it [INQ000308302]. The, non exhaustive, list of things I noted then were:

*“ - 2 week confusion about whether women could access abortion during the lockdown
- not making provision for victims of domestic abuse or to consider the impact that lockdown might have on DA. It is very difficult to draw any conclusion other than women have died as a result of this
- confused guidance about pregnancy and householders
- over concern about football games; not enough attention to families (dismissing the household matching idea)
- closing of fertility treatments; with no commitment to - e.g. adjust age criteria for IVF as a result
- is there gender disaggregation of health impacts? I suspect not. (if women really do die much less from this disease but die much more from late detection of breast cancer then???)
- I don't think anyone in this PPE supply chain conversation is doing anything about PPE not fitting (and therefore protecting) women who are either 75 or 77% of the health and care workforce”*

⁷³ Email chain with Ben Warner and Mary Jones re. the issue of single mothers and problems they faced e.g. not being able to take children into shops 16.4.20 [INQ000286052].

have been a better use of the Nightingale hospitals to put all maternity care outside the mainstream hospitals. Most strikingly in the early days, in terms of specific policy that only impacted on women, there was an attempt to tacitly restrict access to abortion by not making provision available outside of clinics that were closed.

104. There was also a failure to appreciate some of the longer-standing institutional biases against women e.g. in how data was collected. This was particularly significant given the value put on the data in understanding and decision making. In exasperation I bought multiple copies of Caroline Cariado Perez's book "Invisible Women" and started handing them out to people to read. I'm not sure how helpful this was (or how many people had time to read any of it) but it led to some interesting and useful discussions especially with Ben Warner about what we could do to improve the data⁷⁴. Partly because of that book but also the commentary on Twitter I raised issues about e.g. the inadequacies of PPE for women, and tried to make sure this was taken into account in any new supply⁷⁵. The Prime Minister raised this with Simon Stevens on April 30th and he reassured the Prime Minister and Ministers that the issues with PPE fitting women's bodies were mis-reported and there was not a problem⁷⁶.

105. I do not know if the culture was always more sexist than we had noticed and just more obvious under pressure, and/or if there was something in the nature of the crisis response (I'd hazard a guess at both) but there was clearly a problem with women working at every level being excluded and shut down. I cared about this in and of itself and I also cared about the consequences for decisions. Quieter male voices and perspectives were also being lost. I crystalised what I thought I had been told and made some suggestions about what needed to change, and given it was a pretty sensitive topic I took care to check back with some of the women who had raised concerns⁷⁷. Just raising the issue made people behave better but I do not think it changed the fundamentals.

106. I remember at the time feeling as if while there was undoubtedly sympathy for the differential impacts on women, poorer people and how Covid was disproportionately harming Black and Asian communities, when it was raised it was

⁷⁴ See e.g. email exchange with Ben Warner re Invisible Women 18.4.20 [INQ000286054].

⁷⁵ Emails with Simon Ridley and Mary Jones re PPE & Women 15.4.2020 [INQ000286049].

⁷⁶ Email from Cleo Watson 30.4.20 [INQ000286059].

⁷⁷ Email to women in No 10 and Cabinet Office – "Women at the Centre" 13.4.20 [INQ000286041].

treated as if these were naturally occurring phenomena rather than the consequences of deliberate choices (albeit often historic). I do not think the impacts on women and children were properly appreciated even much later in the process.

107. There was a systematic failure to think outside of the narrow perspective of the people involved in decision making. Government became uniquely, powerfully interventionist at the same time that it concentrated power more closely into a box. The group of people involved in making decisions were ironically probably the most homogenous group for some time and they were taking decisions that probably called for the broadest representation across society. I remember trying to make the point about the ethnic diversity of people involved in advising on and making decisions only to get a surprised response pointing out the involvement of the then Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary neither of whom were white. It was very difficult to bridge over that kind of gap in understanding. The lived experience of those involved in making decisions was miles away from most people in the UK; for example, in policy discussions when the restrictions were loosening, I found myself explaining that even people who were lucky enough to have a back garden might not have separate back gate or outside loo – so it would be important to be clear whether it was ok to go through the house. Whatever the personal experience of those in the room (and it was a pretty privileged set of people by any standard) there should have been a way of advising on implications for the whole population in the way that more normal Civil Service work would have allowed for⁷⁸. The full Cabinet were better at bringing this wider perspective – they were a bit more grounded in consequences that were not as obvious and the complexities of the world as it is. The Cabinet were not asked their opinion very often and not on decisions in flight that I can recall.

Things not people

108. There was a bias towards focussing on kit and things rather than people. For too long in those early weeks an app was going to be the saviour in terms of getting life back to normal as soon as possible even though it was pretty clear to anyone who knew about mobile phones or human behaviour that it wouldn't deliver as promised.

⁷⁸ See e.g. email exchange with Mark Sedwill and Cabinet Office DGs 23.4.20 [INQ000286055] “*Can I - to make an old but important point - say again that all of these proposals need to be tested against how actual people live - i.e. there should be model families and individuals that you can walk through and work out what it means. If this still doesn't exist I can find the ones we used to use to test Housing policy (because was whole population). And I am assuming there will be a proper equality impact assessment before this is all crystalised. Esp thinking about women, BAME, rural, northern and poor given demographic of people taking decisions.*”

There was a (justified) panic in the early days about running out of ventilator capacity and a drive to replicate the Spitfire effort in WW2 by building new ventilators. The instinct to help was awe inspiring and in those early weeks we were inundated with offers of help, and I remember finding the conversations about being able to do things really motivating. The new Nightingale hospitals were going to be part of the answer. We were haunted by the prospect of what we had seen in Northern Italy being replicated in the UK that the hospitals would become overwhelmed, people would suffer unnecessarily and the wider population would lose confidence in the NHS. But in retrospect the conversations were all about the buildings and the beds and not the people that would be needed to staff them. I do not think I saw this at the time.

109. Overall it was easier to think about building new things than try to make what there was work. This was part of the prevailing governing mindset in No 10 and the assumption that everything had to be built from scratch and controlled centrally. For example PHE was dismissed as unfit and various successor bodies were hurriedly created (UK Health Security Agency and Test Track and Trace). It was also indicative of the relatively narrow background in terms of government experience of those who worked in the Cabinet Office and No 10 and were involved in decision making at Ministerial and official level. There were very few people with social policy or local government background, so for example the fact that there was already an existing network of Public Health Directors across the country who had extensive powers (often greater than the Covid regulations) did not properly register until very late in the day. I remember trying to get people interested in the 1875 Public Health Act (which I had long been boring about – it is in many ways the foundation of the modern state and particularly interesting on the respective responsibility of local institutions and public/private).

110. I tried a number of times to make the conversation and the questions bigger, not just about responding to Covid but about the state and how we governed⁷⁹. We were well aware even in the moment of what the experience was showing us. I gathered a group together to discuss this a couple of times, not least because it was helpful to stretch our brains into thinking about the bigger questions in the hope that we might make better decisions in the day (see my point above about the impact of good contingency planning). My email to the group is explicit that “it is not surprising that we are not set up to respond to a pandemic of this scale and the impact it is

⁷⁹ Email to Simon Ridley, Simon Case and Mark Sweeney – “How we Govern” 26.4.20 [INQ000198067].

having across our economy, society and political system” and then suggests we work through the bigger questions and compare notes on what we were learning and what might come next. I encouraged Kris Murrin to submit some interesting ideas⁸⁰ on how to make more of the social capital that the response to the pandemic was generating. After an internal discussions one of the Cabinet Office teams produced a paper on the national psyche, considering in greater depth the social and psychological implications of Government Action, although this was responded to by No10 as not a priority at that time⁸¹. There was an interesting piece of work done by Philip Barton about possible longer-term impacts and strategies which is prescient for the time it was put together⁸². There just was not a customer for any of this wider thinking, and a failure to understand that there was a much bigger machine outside No 10 and the Cabinet Office that we could use and direct. We were perpetually trapped in the short term.

111. There was not sufficient anchoring in the world as it is and a lack of understanding of or interest in what the Government is in practice or how it might need to change (rather than saying everything was useless). There was both an assumed competence (one of the criticisms levelled at the Cabinet Office by members of the political team in No 10 was that from outside government they had thought there was a Rolls Royce machine for handling this sort of crisis and actually there was nothing) and an assumed incompetence (that no one in government would have expertise in large scale operational call centres).

Countable things

112. From the off the availability of useful data was a problem. It was a Herculean task to put together a data dashboard that could be used in the morning meetings to understand what was happening. The dashboard had gone from 6 slides in the CRIP⁸³ to 16 slides of dense, small typeface covering Covid cases and rates of infection – down to specific geographical areas and context like schools and universities – compliance rates, modelled forecasts, health and social care statistics, track and trace performance, and media monitoring and polling. In the meetings

⁸⁰ Email and note from Kris Murrin about National Legacy Projects 23.4.20 [INQ000308301] and [INQ000286056].

⁸¹ Draft note on Government role in understanding impacts of lockdown [INQ000308303] and Mark Sedwill reply 28.4.20 – 29.4.20 [INQ000286058].

⁸² See email from Philip Barton about long-term Covid work 18.5.20 [INQ000308319] with attachments [INQ000308320] and [INQ000308321].

⁸³ Commonly Recognised Information Picture.

Ministers were asking for more and more detailed data. By mid-May it was often over 100 slides. Only a few were looked at every day. An excessive focus on data permeated the response to Covid (see paragraph 45 above). It was perfectly reasonable to want to have more accurate data about what was happening than that available at the start of the pandemic. It was a perennial frustration of my time working in government that it was so difficult to get good data to inform decision making. But it was of relatively little value for decision makers to have a 100-page slide deck to stare at and keep refining. It became something of a comfort blanket and the sanctification of data drove a culture of decision making that prioritised immediately countable things and favoured the kind of thinking that (in my view) was too dominant throughout. The production of the data pack consumed a huge amount of energy and resource that might have been better directed on more productive efforts.

113. On top of that there were the usual problems in creating one version of the truth and reconciling data for both this morning meeting and for the afternoon press conference⁸⁴. The dashboard only included the countable things (see paragraph 44 - 45 above as to the pattern set by the standard CCS approach). I was concerned that this skewed decision making and what was counted as success, in particular with regard to valuing the freed-up capacity of empty beds thanks to discharging people into care homes⁸⁵.

114. Despite all this data, the dashboard did not help to identify problems in PPE supply and the dwindling confidence of No 10 in “the system” was in part because processes like this seemingly did not identify and solve issues before they reached crisis point: PPE looked fine until it really was not. In addition to the stark numbers, those of us in the core team all agreed that what was needed was an observatory approach so it would be possible to see and understand the impact of decision making, alongside a more sophisticated analytical function; partly to track the continued impact of the virus but also to hopefully see more positive impacts of behavioural change. This was advocated by Dominic Cummings and Ben Warner but supported by a number of us. Stuart Glassborow was very eloquent on what would

⁸⁴ See e.g. email exchange with Imran Shafi, Henry Cook, Ed Lidington etc regarding reliable data and press conferences 11.4.20 [INQ000308298].

⁸⁵ WhatsApp exchange with Mark Sedwill 18.4.20.

help. A version of this function was then built as part of the new taskforce and the reforms to CCS⁸⁶.

115. It was also true that despite best efforts the data often was not good enough. It was immensely frustrating to know that in theory it should be possible for the Government to use the data it itself held (for example from HMRC, DWP, HO) to really understand and potentially predict impacts of decisions. But in practice it was impossible because the data sets did not talk to each other and required unmanageable amounts of manual translation with little confidence that the work would be worth the effort. It would have been much better to have better data. The lack of it gets in the way of good governing today. At the same time it is not true to say that better data alone would have automatically led to better decision making.

Things that were fractured, broke

116. I remember in those first days back in the office finding it hard to see the shape of who was doing what and how it fitted together, even though there were clear looking diagrams⁸⁷. To start with I attributed this to so many people being off sick and my lack of understanding having not been part of decisions and discussions. I was wary of treading on toes or getting in the way of people working so hard. It felt like on both sides of the Link Door lots of new people had been brought in. A lot of them thought they were in charge – this was contributing to some of the organisational friction⁸⁸. It was hard to see the shape of who was doing what – e.g. the delineation between what Tom Shinner was doing and the DGs in the Cabinet Office or the multiple advisers⁸⁹. The MIGs had become an industry in themselves. I had not envisaged them running as almost individual fiefdoms but that is what it felt like⁹⁰ – every chair and DG was running their own committee and they were meeting at what felt like a frenetic pace. Everyone was extremely busy doing urgent work.

117. Having improved in the weeks from early-March it became obvious through April that the confidence No 10 had in the machinery in the Cabinet Office was in

⁸⁶ See: Email from Stuart Glassborow to Mark Sweeney and Jonathan Black re developing data capacity and an Observatory function [INQ000308296] and email chain about the new Observatory capability 10.4.2020 [INQ000174721].

⁸⁷ See email from Ed Lidington 12.4.20 [INQ000286037] and C-19 Taskforce Organogram [INQ000217033].

⁸⁸ See the email chain 'Our call / Concerns' of 4.4.20 [INQ000286021].

⁸⁹ See my note to Tom Shinner after meeting him on 15.4.20 attempting to clarify this [INQ000286046].

⁹⁰ See my email to Jess Glover of 14.4.20 [INQ000286043].

sharp decline. There were also increasing questions about the performance of DHSC and the Health Secretary where the issue was a lack of confidence that what he said was happening was actually happening. The two were related in that the perceived problems with DHSC and the assurances that had been given also contributed to a lack of confidence that any of the accountability or governance structures were picking this up. The usual systems of governance in Whitehall rely on people being truthful. There was chatter from the rest of Whitehall that was critical of the way the Cabinet Office was operating and criticism of the Cabinet Secretary, and I was getting other signs that there was not sufficient clarity⁹¹.

118. To some extent this was all natural and to be expected given the pace at which it was all happening and the lack of pre-existing structures and patterns of working to rely on. One of the things that had seemingly got lost in the dividing up of responsibilities was the job of coordinating⁹². The people who might normally have been doing this in the secretariat were consumed by doing the substance of the work because they had stepped in to fill a gap. The absence of someone doing the boring but important bit of air traffic control, triaging problems and managing who was doing what by when was not happening – each senior leader was managing their own lane. This meant in practice the work was not being prioritised properly and the system(s) were getting overloaded with a huge volume of commissions and on the day-to-day basis that the task of making sense of the whole picture was falling to the private offices in No 10 and the Cabinet Secretary's office⁹³. This is difficult for the normal operation of a private office. Very senior civil servants do not always respond well to being managed by people they see (and who are in practice) more junior. When the Cabinet Office team were trying to coordinate they were unable to grip the whole thing, as a separate machine (or separate machines) in No 10 were also doing their own thing. From where they sat it was impossible for the DGs in the Cabinet Office to control the work. The feedback from departments on the receiving end of all this

⁹¹ See e.g. email from Dame Louise Casey on homelessness and bereavement 15.4.20 in which she notes issues with clarity of responsibility and that she had been requested to do the same work by 3 different permanent secretaries "...Sir Mark texted saying "*Hi Louise. Great process on homes. My next big worry is social support to all those people who struggle in normal times and will find the social challenges of isolation forbidding*" and asked me to help Simon Case. [NR] also texted and we spoke re: preparing for a post COVID 19 era and helping vulnerable groups and [NR] texted saying they volunteering/support to vulnerable groups could do with some leadership. So look what happens when you're off fighting the actual virus we'll all taking action on.....it all goes to hell in a hand basket" [INQ000286047].

⁹² See e.g. exchange with John Owen re. coordinating activity Deep Dives and Forward 17.04.2020 [INQ000286053].

⁹³ See Martin Reynolds' email of 22.5.20 on 'Channelling messages through Private Office'

[INQ000320688]

was not good. I agreed with the Cabinet Secretary that we needed to get into a different and better shape for the next phase. I wanted to try to understand what was needed and separate the substance from the noise⁹⁴. The ratio of people commenting that it was terrible vs those actually trying to fix things by acting more collegiately with their own behaviour was not inspiring.

119. When the First Secretary assumed his responsibilities I helped the team to put some process and grip around his first meetings. We needed grip and the appearance of grip to create confidence. I had worked with the First Secretary previously so was able to help shape what they were going to present to suit him and had taken some time to try to understand the concerns being expressed by those in No 10 (political and official). I thought we first had to get everyone to agree with the principles before going into the substance of what we were trying to solve⁹⁵. In the course of supporting them in this work I realised that the team in the Cabinet Office working day and night on the response still did not have any allocated offices to work in – they were squashed up in a miserable space on the Ground Floor of 70 Whitehall. I re-located them up to the empty Ministerial offices on the 3rd floor so they had some light and space and were able to socially distance. The fact that we were scurrying around trying to beg and borrow office space is extraordinary in retrospect and indicative of the lack of support from the back-office of the Cabinet Office. This institutional blindness to the responsibilities of the department to its own staff working for the Prime Minister is one of the reasons I was sympathetic to the idea of creating a department for the Prime Minister.

Organisational Set up and Structures

120. Even for someone who was there at the time and advised on a lot of it, it is difficult to piece together what was happening when. As outlined above (see paragraphs 46-48), the task in early March had been to set up mechanisms for Ministers to take the hundreds of decisions that would be necessary given the pandemic was about to overwhelm us. A secretariat function had been established to support the overall decision making at the highest and most strategic level (PM/Cabinet) and to prepare matters for decision, and then there was also the job of coordinating the rest of Cabinet decision making including on public sector readiness

⁹⁴ Whatsapp exchange with Simon Case 3.4.20; [INQ000303253/1]

⁹⁵ Email and attachment for FSS on C-19 Taskforce following a strategy meeting 12.4.2020 [INQ000286037] and [INQ000286038].

and response. This would have been adequate for a short-term crisis response but by early April even though the team had achieved extraordinary and unprecedented impact in such a short time it was suffering under the strain and clearly was not going to be the right set up for the longer term, not least as it was not a good idea to make all decision making Covid-related. The rest of government business would have to kick back in at some point, especially given the domestic challenges for the Johnson government would now be far greater. Part of the plan was to get back into a more usual formation so that other considerations could be given appropriate weight and to create a proper unit to manage the policy and advise on decision making for Covid.

121. Some of the things that needed to adapt were clear as Mark Sweeney set out in his email to Tom Shinner on 5 April 2020⁹⁶. The key elements were to separate out the team who were going to provide analysis and strategy about managing the direct response to the virus; harder coordinate the work of the rest of Whitehall related to that (via Ministerial structures and programme management) and then put back in place some other decision-making structures to start to take decisions on the rest of government business – in the light of the changed environment created by the pandemic but not solely through the lens of managing the spread of Covid⁹⁷.

122. At the next level of detail it was not immediately obvious what the right set up was and I was wary of rushing to an answer only to have to undo it all⁹⁸. One of the urgent things to resolve was the step change in capacity for the analytical team. There was an abortive sprint to set up a joint analytical unit with HMT and this created a significant amount of friction between the No 10 team and the CDL who had asked for an analytical unit and expected it to be ready immediately. At the time – not least as we were conscious of the relative richness of the Treasury's own analytical capability – Jonathan Black and I wanted to cannibalise that into a joint unit. HMT resisted this – understandably – and much as it felt frustrating to have two parallel teams effectively trying to ask and answer some of the same questions (especially when the HMT team was better resourced and practiced) it was right in hindsight to keep them separate.

123. As far as what else was needed goes, responding to the pandemic could have been a moment for the greatest and most open and collective policy making process.

⁹⁶ Email exchange between Mark Sweeney and Tom Shinner 4-5.4.20 [INQ000286023].

⁹⁷ See e.g. email to Alex Chisholm about the purpose and shape of the Analysis Unit 10.5.20 [INQ000136759].

⁹⁸ See e.g. email exchange with **NR** about replacing the MIGs 11.5.20 [INQ000308309].

This was where I instinctively started from. For example in the early days I was making suggestions about creating a government of national unity and bringing different people into government in a parallel with the war-time model. In practice though this sort of approach was not going to work for the operating style of any of the key people in positions of power at the time so it was something of a non-starter.

124. One of the challenges for coming up with the answer for the right decision-making structure and the team in support was the sheer scale of decision making on Covid and how unusual that was. First, central government just is not equipped or used to having to ask and answer these huge questions. There may have been a time in the past when Whitehall was better at framing these sorts of tensions and choices, though it is hard to think of examples outside of wartime. In other worlds the experience of Brexit might have developed more of this kind of thinking but for a variety of reasons that had not happened. The preparations for EU Exit and for a “No Deal” exit in particular did significantly help the government and those working in the centre to have a better understanding of supply chains and the functioning of the economy. But the government was not practiced in – for example – debating fundamental questions of the role of the state and freedom of individuals and the basic asks and limits on people and businesses. To get into these questions would have been challenging enough were Parliament in session and able to thrash through the arguments, challenging enough if there was a full Cabinet government up and running but was impossible (and possibly constitutionally dangerous) to do in the small confines of No 10 and the Cabinet Office.

125. The second and related issue was that modern government is not really in charge of the country – there is not a great machinery that No 10 sits atop of with large levers to pull. The state is more of a constellation of institutions and different and sometimes conflicting centres of power. The NHS and local government perhaps more so than most in terms of their relationship with the centre of Whitehall. So even if there had been an appetite to actually run the country (and there was from some and at times) it was hard to see how that could be made to happen. And it definitely was not possible to run the country in a command-and-control way in any meaningful sense. That there was even an appetite for doing so I found surprising given my prior experience of working for Conservative administrations who had acted to disperse rather than centralise the power of the State.

126. Third, as I set out in paragraphs 10 - 14 above, the wiring that would have more normally connected the Cabinet Office secretariat function to departments and then back into No 10 to create collective decision making (and get the best value from the thousands of civil servants who were working to try to support the sectors they were responsible for) was, at best, frayed. It was striking at the time and is more so in retrospect how No 10 and the Cabinet Office operated as a separate island from the rest of Whitehall. The centre felt very much alone. Departments were not brought into the full thinking and time and again had to respond to late and partial information about what was about to happen. It is to their credit that so many departments were able to quickly turn around instructions into reality for their sectors but it was needlessly hard. I do not remember senior leaders in departments trying to force themselves into decision making, but the incentives were to keep away. Looking back it is striking that the parts of Whitehall that seemed to do best in this period and the months that followed were those with clearer operational accountability and subject to less meddling, namely DWP and HMRC. There is an argument that disempowered line departments had become over-reliant on direction from the centre. The political culture was not to jump unless No 10 had told you how high, and this only got worse the more the Cabinet Office/No 10 accrued to itself in terms of decision making.

127. Despite how it might appear now (and I cannot judge) for much of this period the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings and the Cabinet Secretary were mostly aligned on their frustration with the system and wanting to centralise and “make it so” rather than work through what they saw as (and what undoubtedly was) an imperfect system. They were frustrated with departments to varying degrees, annoyed by what they saw as a slow pace and wanted to work around perceived (and actual) bureaucratic slowness. There was significant tension created by this drive to centralise and control vs Ministerial and budgetary accountability. At the time and looking back at it now it is hard to disagree with the analysis of what was wrong and what would be better. But the ambition for what government should be and what it actually was were sometimes far apart. It was not possible to “make it so” and appoint people wholly outwith Ministerial accountability or existing governance. Or it was possible, but it muddied accountability and did not always deliver. It may well have been the right thing on vaccines, and by the same token was probably the wrong answer on the procurement of PPE. I found the appointment and description of SROs as particularly difficult to make sense of as is obvious in my emails from the time⁹⁹.

⁹⁹ Email exchange with Ed Lidington and John Owen regarding SROs 9.4.20 [INQ000286031].

Putting programme governance on top of Departmental accountabilities caused confusion. It was undoubtedly the case that there was a significant ambition to run government differently. But by April 2020 not enough of this different way of working had been explained or sufficient changes actually made to the wiring of the fundamentals to make it possible to govern effectively outside of the normal operating model. In many ways we were left with the worst of all worlds¹⁰⁰.

128. The traditional patterns of government responsibilities and decision-making that would have helped in a more normal situation – Cabinet government, Accounting Officers, Departmental leadership and responsibilities, central coordinating functions – did not and probably could not function because of the approach being taken to centralise everything in (multiple) teams in the centre. This was alongside a desire to create a NASA-style mission control system in No 10/Cabinet Office. I appreciate it would have come with its own problems but still believe that it would have been far preferable to have had Cabinet Ministers that the Prime Minister and his team trusted to get on with it, to operate through Cabinet government and to make the best of the unique and important qualities that the Civil Service can bring when it is allowed to be its best self.

129. At the time I was concerned about what I saw as a circumnavigating of Cabinet governance and became increasingly worried about the Cabinet themselves not being given the full scientific picture or able to properly be part of accountable decision making. I thought there was an asymmetry in that at one point the Shadow Cabinet were getting more opportunity to ask questions of the CMO and CSA than Cabinet Ministers who were actually in the Government. I could see the arguments about pressures on the time of the CMO and CSA but thought it was essential that the Cabinet were given the ability to scrutinise the advice that everyone was working off and to ask their own questions¹⁰¹. I thought this was important in principle and practice; the Secretary of State for DWP in particular asked excellent questions and was confident in challenging the science and this was helpful for developing policy.

¹⁰⁰ See email to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's Principal Private Secretary of 16.4.20 [IN000308299].

¹⁰¹ Emails with Mark Sedwill's private office, Proposal for Scientific Briefings for Cabinet 28.4.20 [INQ000286057].

130. The roadmap was published without any Cabinet collective agreement process¹⁰². Not just that but I would estimate that the full document was probably read by fewer than 30 people before it was published as the Government's plan. I was deeply uncomfortable about this. It might seem ridiculous to have been bothered by what seem like small process questions in the face of such an enormity of decision making, but the ends do not justify the means. And the governance of our country does not normally allow for operating without the agreement of Cabinet Ministers – albeit through norms and conventions rather than law. When it comes to it, we have surprisingly thin threads that connect what No 10 wants to do to the democratic mandate or accountability. And the point to hold onto them is probably precisely when it is difficult and/or seems pointless. This felt like a minority view.

131. The roadmap (published 11 May) was an extraordinary document in itself. On the one hand it was a great triumph in that it created the framework for all subsequent decision making. In its published form it was a critical document and provided some genuine anchoring to government policy and decision making from that point on. It probably was the most useful thing that was produced in those early months and involved some heroic and impressive work from many civil servants and advisers in No 10 and the Cabinet Office. However, the process of developing the roadmap illustrated lots of the things that were wrong about the ways of working¹⁰³. The policy was created twice – by Tom Shinner in No 10 and by the Cabinet Office team in 70 Whitehall. There was a horrifying degree of duplicated effort given what talented people we had and how much better it would have been to work as one team¹⁰⁴. The document itself was barely shared with anyone (ostensibly because of concerns about leaking¹⁰⁵) and the first draft – when we finally got to see it - was pretty wild¹⁰⁶. Even the published version included some strong claims about plans to re-structure government and institutions – there was no agreement at all about what any of this

¹⁰² See e.g. email exchange between PPS DHSC and PS No 10 re. the position set out in the UK Government's Covid-19 Recovery Strategy published on 11 May 2020 - 11.5.2020 [INQ000308308].

¹⁰³ See e.g. email exchange with No 10 Private Secretaries, Tom Shinner, Mary Jones and Mark Sweeney about commissioning responses from departments to questions for a potential document (the Roadmap) 1.1.20 [INQ000308304].

¹⁰⁴ See email to Tom Shinner 11.5.20 re piecing together the situation that had arisen [INQ000308307].

¹⁰⁵ See e.g. email from Dominic Cummings to Mark Sedwill, Martin Reynolds, Tom Shinner and others re 'Summary of PM's views yesterday' 18.4.20 [INQ000308300] (see para 4: "*He does not want this [escape plan paper] being sent around 30 people or any of the usual chains / process...to stress: the PM is very unhappy with various leaks and doesn't want to see any trace of this doc appearing anywhere. I want to control tightly the circulation list for the draft*").

¹⁰⁶ See email to Martin Reynolds, Stuart Glassborow and others with my thoughts on the document 7.5.20 [INQ000308305].

meant and yet it was published as government policy¹⁰⁷. I cannot think of anything else like it.

132. The neglect of Cabinet government was compounded by a culture of being dismissive of Cabinet Ministers that was set from the top and got much worse over this period¹⁰⁸. This matters not just in and of itself but because it also bled into a dismissal of the importance of accountability to the electorate in general. In practice accountability to Parliament is far more of a day-to-day reality in a normal department. Working in No 10 or the Cabinet Office it is possible to evade the normal levels of scrutiny or more normal ways of working that apply elsewhere by pushing the boundaries of the discretion of the Prime Minister.

133. In the context of Covid and the operation of government at this time it was also – probably uniquely – possible to make too much change happen from a seat in No 10. In the normal operation of government there are many layers to go through before something can actually happen: a bright idea from an adviser in a No 10 meeting has to become adopted as a department's policy – which involves engaging with elected Ministers and the specialist civil servants in that department in some way (however grudgingly).

134. In April and May 2020 there were people who had been appointed into No 10 with little experience of public service or knowledge or interest in government or longer-term consequences whose bright idea in the morning meeting could become government policy announced that afternoon at a press conference and then law. We benefitted hugely from some of the insight from people who were appointed – in particular on understanding the data – and there are obvious downsides in the slowness of the normal bureaucratic machinery and the dilution of good and bold ideas. But the combination of a lack of confidence in anyone in government apart from the core No 10 team plus a culture of “he who shouts loudest” meant that some days the ratio of time spent trying to stop the wrong things happening to time spent

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. emails from No 10 Private Secretary (general domestic policy) and Tom Shinner as to amendments to regulations after the roadmap. This email illustrates concerns that the guidelines and regulations being developed did not actually live true to the tests laid out in the Roadmap (just weeks earlier) to balance health, the economy and social impacts in the optimal way. It also is a good example of the Private Office having to grip very substantial policy issues, and trying to ensure decisions were taken with an understanding of how they affected people across society – operating as the last line of defence. [INQ000273912]

¹⁰⁸ See e.g. email from John Owen to Mark Sedwill noting a culture of hostility to Ministers 17.5.20 [INQ000308318] and email exchange about the decision making process as between Gold / Covid O in respect of local lockdowns and the concern noted that it shouldn't be a Gold Meeting followed by an announcement without any process 21 -23.8.20 [INQ000308327]

making the right things happen and inserting any kind of democratic decision making felt particularly punishing. For example I had to shut down a proposal to apply different conditions to school re-opening and not tell people why in order to experiment with the impact of different measures¹⁰⁹ – the idea of systematically trialling what worked was not as much of a problem as not being transparent about it.

135. The short circuiting of the process of making regulations so it was possible to go from idea to law in hours was one of the more dangerous aspects of the way the response to the pandemic played out in terms of the subversion of normal processes. Making law – even at breakneck speed – normally involves a whole range of checks and balances. This was not the case with Covid-19. It is understandable that things had to be done at speed, but there are real problems with this – and the answer may again be better crisis planning and better foundational legislation that creates structured ways of operating in a crisis.

136. There is a separate and important question that I hope the Inquiry can shine light on about whether using the public health regulations was the right vehicle to begin with – either whether regulations should have been made off the public health legislation or general emergency powers and whether regulations were over-used as a mechanism for trying to achieve certain behaviours in the population. Use of the Public Health Act certainly skewed the framing of the way the problem was looked at and concentrated a great deal of power in the person of the Secretary of State for Health. As early as May 2020 significant concerns were being raised about the way the regulations were being changed, and questions were being asked about whether there was the normal evidential base for a particular course of action and particularly whether Ministers should be able to keep changing the regulations.

137. In the emergency mindset of Spring 2020 it was almost impossible to mount a case for doing things differently, but I remember having a number of discussions about whether we thought the government had crossed a line into acting unlawfully and the risks of undermining the rule of law by making regulations with very little evidential basis that we knew could be successfully challenged (for example making distinctions unevenly between different groups of people and applying unequal treatment of different religious exemptions or setting arbitrary levels for fines). There were concerns raised about the over-use of police powers given how important it was

¹⁰⁹ See e.g. WhatsApp exchange with Simon Case 25.4.20 INQ000303253/6

to maintain public trust, confidence and buy-in. It was so unusual for the police to be regulating people's lives in this way and there was a clear difference amongst Ministers between those who thought that the police were over-reaching when chasing down people going for a walk in the countryside and others who thought that being more draconian was the answer, although the Prime Minister usually took a more tolerant stance. There was a misguided attempt by the Health Secretary to change the regulations in response to the furore created when Dominic Cummings was discovered to have travelled to Durham/Barnard Castle¹¹⁰.

138. It was perennially difficult to get the officials working on Covid to care about these longer term and greater constitutional ramifications of the way they were operating. In the heat of the moment, it was never considered to be important enough. I think this was also an issue in creating a dynamic and energetic team who felt they had to earn their spurs by going faster and further and keeping up with the madness. There was little regard for Civil Service norms at times. It felt as if once Ministers and civil servants had realised that they did not have to go through anything like the normal processes of government then they had no appetite to go back. That was perhaps understandable. But it's this short fuse between hurried policy discussion and regulation that gave us the somewhat surreal craze for serving scotch eggs in pubs in December 2020 along with a bewildering pace of regulatory changes (in London we were subject to four different sets of regulations in December 2020 to January 2021).

“Driving the system”

139. In my view at the time one of the examples of focusing on the wrong measures was the Health Secretary's early announcement that there should be 100K tests per day. As explained at the time the 100K target was not about providing accurate testing where it was needed most and where it would have the greatest clinical or social or economic impact, but about getting to an arbitrary number of tests provided per day (not even tests completed). In the end to “get to the number” this included counting thousands of tests that had been sent out in the post that day. The Health Secretary was explicit that he did this to “drive the system” and for the feel-good factor that would be created by hitting a target. My recollection is that at the time the DHSC team did not think this was a good way of prioritising resources. 100K a day was not going

¹¹⁰ See Mark Sedwill email about Matt Hancock's actions following Dominic Cummings' Durham trip 26.5.20 [INQ000286064].

to be anything like enough to get life back to normal, and the target was not related to building a scalable operation. In the event, the thing that probably drove the creation of the successful mass testing regime was setting an even more ambitious target, “the moon shot”. It is not that ambitious targets are unhelpful, but that it is important to pick the right things that have a chance of changing the outcome.

140. It’s also characteristic of the attitude to public servants and “the system” that came across strongly at times during this period. Civil servants needed “driving” and “pushing”. There was a them-and-us mindset that pervaded some working relationships between Ministers and political advisers and the Civil Service teams that served them. Probably to the cost of both in the end, and more importantly to the cost of the overall outcomes because of the productive hours lost to the friction that this created.

Cognitive dissonance

141. One of the things I found bewildering was the cognitive dissonance between what Ministers said they wanted to achieve and the time frames that were set. It felt as if every meeting increased the amount of work to do and shortened the timeline to deliver it. I think that Ministers and political advisers must have known that the people sitting in the meetings with them all day were also the same people who were being asked (alongside being in the same meetings being criticised for their slowness) to re-design their teams and jobs, coordinate all of the work of the state in response to Covid as well as understand the data and the analytics (and get better data and analytics) and provide Ministers with more worked-up prepared answers to what should be done in response to the pandemic when no one had done anything like this before. I do not know who else they thought was doing the work. But there was little to no awareness of this or any let up in the pressure. So it felt to the teams in the Cabinet Office who had stepped up to the plate that on top of everything else they were being set up to fail. These were not relationships of trust and joint working, it felt more like disdain for a concierge function that was not up to scratch and should be driven harder (for example the list of questions for the Cabinet Secretary)¹¹¹.

¹¹¹ Email from Michael Gove to Mark Sedwill 2.4.2020 [INQ000217031]

142. The note of the meeting sent on Saturday 11 April (sent at 23:07) is a good example of this mindset and the problems it caused¹¹². Ministers asked for an already stretching timetable to do further work on how to get out of the lockdown to be accelerated – every option needed clear worked up analysis and hypotheses (although they also agreed that the analytical function required to do this did not yet exist) by the Thursday. Alongside this there had to be one (new) person appointed wholly accountable for the strategy. Ministers agreed there should be fewer commissions for work because of the strain that was putting on the system while also commissioning further work, faster. In practice the people who were leading on the bulk of the response to this commission (Mark Sweeney and Jonathan Black) had in any case to spend Easter Sunday (1/4 of the time available) providing further work detailing how they were going to do the work (rather than doing the work) by 10pm that night¹¹³. Then in the end that piece of work did not go to the First Secretary because the CDL was not happy it was sufficiently detailed on the organisational structure with names against posts¹¹⁴, which in itself was an impossible ask given there was not time to discuss and agree with individuals. These were people with lives and choices and not pieces on a chess board. In any case there is an inbuilt diversity problem with these kind of hurriedly created teams - the sort of people who are happy to drop everything and run towards a crisis are fantastic but a whole unit made up of this sort of person does not work well. And it tends to favour people of a certain demographic who are able to be more flexible (e.g. people without caring responsibilities).

143. While I accept and agree that there was not the right structure in the centre for some time (we all knew that – we were all there together when we realised we were not set up to cope with what was coming) it was frustrating to have so many overlapping conversations about organisational structures. It felt – at the time and in hindsight – as if the focus on structures and governance had an element of fiddling while Rome burned. It was much easier to think that the problem was the set-up of the Cabinet Office and request another organogram than face into the huge political and ethical questions that the pandemic was presenting. And it was frustrating to have such short deadlines repeatedly set so there was never time to do the work properly. I do not know how it was thought possible to create plans for a brand new

¹¹² Readout C-19 Strategy meeting 11.4.20 [INQ000232172].

¹¹³ Emails with Mark Sweeney and Jonathan Black 12.4.20 [INQ000286036], [INQ000286040] draft work plan prepared by Mark Sweeney 12.4.20 [INQ000286039].

¹¹⁴ See CDL PPS email 16.4.20 [INQ000286051].

fully functional unit in a matter of hours that would be good enough to take on the most important role in government staffed by brilliant and yet spare people who were able to start immediately. Or, much as I agreed that it would be better to appoint a single Permanent Secretary leader¹¹⁵, why a single SRO would somehow change the answer, particularly as the Cabinet Secretary had been clear that any Permanent Secretary appointments would have to wait for the Prime Minister's return.

144. The debates about structures compounded the tensions between Ministers and the Civil Service and especially with the Cabinet Secretary. It felt unfair that in the end it was those who were trying to make sense of it (but who were not responsible for the inadequate preparation) who had then borne the brunt of criticism from Ministers and others over the next period. However, even though I thought it was not the right way of going about it, I felt that we had to go as far as possible to meet the Ministers' requests on structures as it had become symbolic of whether we were delivering on the wider work and it was proving impossible to have conversations on the substance of the response as we kept having to go round the same loop.

Separating substance from noise

145. There was substance to the noises off. The team in No 10 were becoming increasingly vocal in their criticisms. I knew that the best way of responding to this kind of chorus of complaints was to lean into it, so created the space to conduct a light-touch review and agree collective recommendations about what next. The advantages of creating a formal review process were to provide a pressure valve, create some space to work out what was really going on, and to (hopefully) avoid disquiet suddenly tipping over into something more problematic. I thought if people were confident that they would be heard and that there was something happening to try to fix the problems, then they might be better able to focus their energies on the day job. Even if it was fairly obvious what was wrong and what needed to happen (this was the case – pretty much everyone had the same problem diagnosis and suggested solutions) it was better to ground any changes in a review that people had participated in so they were bought into the outcomes.

146. It would have been impossible for the First Secretary to commission such work without it looking as if he was somehow criticising the period before he assumed

¹¹⁵ See e.g. Note to FSS on C-19 Taskforce 12.4.20 [INQ000286038] and proposed C-19 Taskforce organogram [INQ000217033].

control. Given the obvious and increasing tensions between No 10 and the Cabinet Office teams I thought it was important that the review was owned by both the Prime Minister and Cabinet Secretary and so as soon as he got back I suggested that Martin Reynolds and I conducted a review together. Martin's office set up the meetings so I assume that it would be possible to get more detailed records of the process from No 10. I am replicating the key points in the extract from the report below but the report is not very long¹¹⁶. I may have been too kind in the final text. The exchange between John Owen and Martin and I on the drafting reveals a bit more about the strength of feeling¹¹⁷. I cannot improve on John's description of the culture as a "superhero bunfight". It absolutely was the case that a lot of personal behaviour was unacceptable – but it was also the case that people were operating under extreme psychological pressure with very little support or pre-existing strategies or experience to cope. It was equally the case that many people were being superhumanly patient and kind and managing to deliver extraordinary work while showing real leadership. In my experience of working in the centre of government there are almost two totally distinct cultures in Civil Service leadership, i) the highly visible, high ego personal leadership of the kind of person who is attracted to and thrives near power and ii) the "invisible" hands of those who operate in a different register and get great satisfaction from keeping the wheels of government turning in a way no one really notices. Both serve their purpose but during this time there was far too much of the first and not enough of the second. I was confident that if we sorted some of the underlying structural issues and got everyone re-motivated around working together then it would improve. This was broadly right.

147. The main conclusions of the review were as follows:

The consensus about what to fix was deafening; as was the collective desire to make it work better. Those interviewed thought that we weren't using PM meetings well: too many without sufficient time to properly prepare; decisions don't stick; and there were too many people in the room and not enough discipline about who is contributing on what. The current Cabinet Office team is too big to be effective; roles and responsibilities in the CO and No 10 and between the two are not clear. There hasn't been enough grip in the CO; e.g. the failure to set up the analytical function; the various plans not being drawn together and not enough scrutiny or refereeing to create a factual position or following up of actions. And these problems were not surfaced sufficiently. No 10 is strong but not pulling in the same direction and sometimes the system has got flooded with un-prioritised demands. The culture isn't getting the best from people: lots of

¹¹⁶ Phase 1 Review Conclusions Report May 2020 [INQ000136763]

¹¹⁷ Email exchange with Martin Reynolds and John Owen 8.5.20 [INQ000286060].

people think they have been parachuted in to save the day and there have been some poor leadership behaviours. There is a particular issue with junior women being talked over or ignored. There is not enough trust and teamwork.

There was agreement that people had worked very hard in extremely challenging circumstances; especially given how many people were off sick at various times. The general view that the substantial position on lockdown wouldn't have been much different given where we started from; but that we should organise ourselves to do better from now on. The most serious issues raised were around decisions taken by Ministers being undone between meetings (e.g. on schools when the CX and SoS DfE had ruled out an option that was presented back) and it being too difficult to call out when an incorrect factual position was presented at the 9:15. The most difficult of these had been discovering that DHSC weren't on top of something as described.

148. Alongside talking to people within No 10 and the Cabinet Office¹¹⁸ I also spoke to a number of Permanent Secretaries and other colleagues in Whitehall including Tom Scholar and Chris Wormald to get their perspective of what was and was not working and what to do next¹¹⁹. It was essential to get their input and very helpful to check that what we were building in the Cabinet Office would work for them. This was also a very useful part of the process of designing a structure that had a better chance of success and helped the Taskforce to be positively received at the beginning. On the back of the review I commissioned a piece of professional Organisational Design work from the team at the MOD to design the taskforce; over the course of a number of weeks they ran a parallel process creating consensus about the detail of the design¹²⁰. Rupert McNeil was very helpful and responsive in providing people and input throughout this process. I arranged for [NR] to come to the Cabinet Office and he started to build the taskforce. This was the organisational design was the foundation of the Covid Taskforce that then ran until 2022. It felt like a lifetime but having no plan at all to the bones of the new taskforce being in place took 9 weeks.

149. In terms of Cabinet decision making, we dismantled the MIGs and returned to the concept of a Covid S and a Covid O. This was the best way of balancing a desire for centralised control and some semblance of Cabinet government system. The "O" format with a more relaxed approach to Ministers, officials and experts sitting at the table together had been a Mark Sedwill innovation and had worked well on EU Exit. The downside of going smaller (both in the taskforce and the smaller make up of

¹¹⁸ See follow up email to Cabinet Office Colleagues summarising their feedback 12.5.20 [INQ000252830] and to No 10 colleagues [INQ000286061].

¹¹⁹ See e.g. email to Tom Scholar 14.5.20 [INQ000308312], email to Chris Wormald re a C19 Governance Project Discussion 14.5.20 [INQ000308313] and email on 22.5.20 to Simon Case, Simon Ridley, Rupert McNeil and [NR] [INQ000286063].

¹²⁰ See email from Polly Scully about taskforce design 13.5.20 [INQ000308311].

Covid S or O) was the loss of the richness of the balancing arguments that would come from civil servants and ministers from wider departments. One of the challenges of responding to Covid was that it is highly unusual in Whitehall to have one group of people advising on decisions that affect every aspect of government policy or of people's lives. HMT is perhaps the only department set up to do this around the Budget – which is partly why it was a parallel that so many of us reached for in talking about needing a team that could think about and advise on the R “budget”.

150. The Cabinet Secretary had by this point agreed that the new Taskforce should be run by a Permanent Secretary, putting to bed a long-running argument about the “controlling mind”. Although it was obviously impossible (and not at all advisable) for one civil servant to be the controlling mind of how the country should navigate through the pandemic, it was a good idea to put the leadership at Permanent Secretary level given the weight of the role. Martin Reynolds thought that I should take on this role given I had provided the team as it was with air-cover with No 10 and helped to build the relationship with those that would stay in the taskforce. I did not want to run it. I would have done if I had been asked but I did not think that was the right answer. By this stage although I had been promoted to Permanent Secretary level and had perfectly fine working relationships with the Prime Minister and his senior advisors we had done battle over a lot – from prorogation and the Benn letter, to various conduct issues and we were disagreeing about a number of things including how to handle the allegations against the Home Secretary. I felt that for everyone's sake it would be better to have someone with less history to run the taskforce and that I was better service to the Civil Service continuing to support the Cabinet Secretary. I was told that Dominic Cummings wanted someone more compliant in the role and I had that in my mind too. I thought that Simon Case was a good choice, especially given his ability to manage the politics and that he had seemingly already won the confidence of the key people. It was a relief to think it was going to get better and to hand on the preparatory work to him and Simon Ridley¹²¹.

151. A clear finding of the review Martin and I had done was that it was urgent and essential to break out of what had become hostile ways of working within and between No 10 and the Cabinet Office and to create more of a sense of team. One

¹²¹ Email to Simon Ridley, Simon Case and others with handover ahead of meeting covering status of existing organisational design work for the Taskforce, purpose and function of Taskforce and design principles 22.5.20 [INQ000049308]

of the recommendations was to try to find some space for people to spend time together and build functional relationships. Doing so was critical if we were going to have any chance of creating better outcomes. It had been very depressing to understand how much wasted energy had gone into territorial disputes or marking the homework of people working 100m away rather than splitting up the tasks. I believe it was this need to bring the team together that motivated Martin Reynolds to move the Private Office meeting on 20 May to the garden. Much has been written about this event in the context of revelations about parties in No 10 and the Cabinet Office. I did not know Martin was planning that particular event and as he himself has acknowledged the phrasing of the invitation was very unhelpful. But in general my judgement at the time – in the knowledge of the dire working relationships and the pressure that the No 10 Private Office were under in particular – was that getting people together was a good idea provided it could be done within regulations and without increasing the risk of spreading Covid¹²².

152. As Dominic Cummings has pointed out the general impression was that the guidance was different for No 10. There were many more people who were in the office and in rooms than a strict following of the regulations would have allowed. It would have been impossible to work otherwise. To provide an insight into what this was like in practice – it was commonplace for people (Ministers and senior officials) to move away from the Cabinet table to give the impression that the 2m rule was being observed while the official photographer took pictures that might be released and then move back again. The PPS and the Deputy PPS were in a constant battle to try to reduce the numbers of people in the room. It was made harder to manage because of the working culture of decision making in small groups and through conversation. You had to physically be in the conversation to input. After the initial period when everyone had got ill the approach was to take all possible steps to limit the disruption that absence from Covid would create, and so conversations were about Covid security and not regulatory compliance. I think a lot of people were under the impression that No 10 was somehow a “bubble”.

153. During that whole period in 2020-21 to my knowledge the only meeting that was consistently and wholly within the guidance was the Cabinet meeting itself, where the Director of the Secretariat would not compromise on the arrangements,

¹²² See email with Martin Reynolds about next steps following our review and including our agreement that we would look to find ways for the senior team to get together on a social basis within the guidance 11.5.20 [INQ000136760].

not least in order to protect the health of his team who had not been infected. This meant when the Cabinet met in person they were in the Locarno room in the FCDO, with Ministers sitting 2m from each other, having to use microphones and sitting in the cold draft from the open windows. It was made clear to the secretariat team in the Autumn of 2020 how irritating this precise compliance with the regulations was and that pretty much everyone involved did not want to go to the FCDO building and have to deal with the awkward logistics of meeting in the Locarno Room instead of the convenience of Downing Street. The Director was put under a lot of pressure to soften his stance (that he rightly resisted).

154. The actual risk of spreading Covid amongst ourselves became much less of a consideration over time as we all had been exposed and ill. No one was interacting with people beyond those we lived with, not least as we were only working. We were not seeing our families either. I understand the public anger about both the revelations about the reported parties and the particularly the subsequent denials and lies. I did not attend any party in No 10 so I cannot comment on what I do not know. But the impression that has been created that everyone working in No 10 and the Cabinet Office were partiers determinedly breaking the rules in secret, is far from the reality. I am not asking for or expecting understanding, but it has been particularly unfair that so many junior civil servants were collateral damage in that whole process given that most of them had no reason to doubt that what they were doing was within the guidelines and reasonable for work. The Metropolitan Police came to a different view, although how they came to a judgement on reasonableness for work still confounds me.

155. To explain my own decision making at the time I was profoundly worried about individuals and systems in No 10 collapsing under the strain. I have apologised for my error of judgement in setting up a karaoke machine in an empty room for people to use (not together – we were all aware of the increased dangers of transmission from singing). At that time I had also tried to create a break room in another of the empty offices with space for individuals to take some time out and brought in food and activities from home to try to create some space for people to relax, although it too was barely used and so I turned it back into a video conferencing room. While I was often in the office for long days I was not always at my desk and always focussing only on work: I remember on one particularly bad day walking round the whole of No 10 and the Ministerial offices in 70 Whitehall to try and find some art to sit in front of to find 10 minutes of peace so I could reset before getting back to work. I was really

worried about the strain that people were under, especially after the night of 18th June when - although a public narrative has been created that gives a very different impression¹²³ - I was mainly in my office counselling a succession of distressed individuals. The following day I asked – again – for the Cabinet Office to reconsider providing counselling services¹²⁴ and in frustration at the lack of provision did what I could to arrange welfare care outside the system.

156. In future it would be better if there is more deliberate provision for the reality of working in the centre of government in these circumstances. There was a healthy debate about whether it really was essential for so many people to be in No 10 and it is undoubtedly the case too that presenteeism did not help the culture¹²⁵. Having said that I do not know how e.g. the press team could have functioned remotely given the pace at which they had to react to events or news. Even for a Prime Minister with a more orderly way of working it would have been impossible to keep up with the pace of decision making and tackle and responds to incoming issues. The Private Office had to be with him. The Cabinet Secretary was rightly scathing in his view that being there and moaning all the time was not grip¹²⁶. But on the other hand it was impossible to only work remotely. So much orchestration of the business at the heart of government happens in the corridor conversations. It just was not possible to get a sense of what was really going on or be able to appropriately influence at a distance or to set up meetings properly to take decisions. In terms of efficiency there was just too much to do – in the office it was possible to have conversations with 10 different people inside 15 minutes and to catch them on points in the margins of meetings, and to be in the room was to see the dynamics that were impossible to catch on Zoom. I felt I had to be in the office as much as possible because it was the only way of me reliably catching when things were going off the rails. I was conscious that there were so few women and it was much easier to intervene if I was physically in the room than waiting with my yellow virtual hand up to be (not) called upon. Although in practice Mark Sedwill and I tried to alternate. The national security teams also had to be in the building.

¹²³ The Cabinet Office report has been found subsequently to be inaccurate in some details in relation to this event e.g. no one vomited, however there were a number of people who were visibly upset. The Parliamentary Standards Committee were aware of potential inaccuracies during their Investigation into whether Mr Johnson had misled the House including when the notes of interviews were shared back with some people for the first time and found to be inaccurate in parts.

¹²⁴ See email to Cabinet Office asking for counselling services 19.6.20 [INQ000308323].

¹²⁵ Email exchange with John Owen and Martin Reynolds 8.5.20 [INQ000136754].

¹²⁶ WhatsApp exchange with Mark Sedwill 8.5.20.

Psychological pressure

157. One of my abiding memories of April and May 2020 was how impossible it was for any of us to find any respite or escape from work. I had previous experience of working in government during an extremely stressful or pressured time, where the thing you are working on and preoccupied with is the lead story on every news bulletin and sometimes feels like the background soundtrack to life and hard to escape from. But even then, during those crisis points it had been possible (and I had learned essential) to get perspective from the rest of life and family and friends and the comfort that there is a wider world and so much more and different going on.
158. Covid was very different: the impact of the pandemic was every waking and sleeping thought; whether that was work or family or the reality of a changed existence. There was no escape: nowhere in the world that was different; no bit of life that was unaffected. So those of us who were part of managing the national-level response we were worrying about our families and also directly or indirectly felt responsible for what might happen to them. The sustained pressure and psychological impact was unlike anything I had experienced previously – even before the further strain that was then caused by the way people were treated. And because this was a whole-system crisis there was only one place in government where there was no boundary to what we were responsible for: even in the Department of Health they could think that worrying about the economy or schools was someone else's problem. This is not a point about who had the worst crisis: so many thousands of people were working in much worse circumstances and dealing with far harder things. None of us were dealing with the reality of people dying or struggling in a way so many others did at that time. But the absence of any delineation or boundaries for those at the centre was debilitating on top of the chaotic environment.
159. There is a peculiarity to working in the centre of government. Even at the best of times one of the privileges and problems is the illusion that it is possible to have a go at “fixing” everything. At any one time if you are one of 20-30 people you either can potentially influence and change something on any area of life. In practice this is more of an illusionary power than it first appears – and it is common to see people who come into No 10 go through this evolution in their thinking (*I can fix everything/ I can fix nothing/ I am going to try to do these three things*). It is a heady working environment, which in itself can create a hero mentality but also induces great stress – on good days this gives some agency and control – at least it is possible to try to

solve a problem. On bad days it is even more dispiriting because all you are faced with is how hard it is to make change happen fast enough – not least because actually making change happen in government is mostly a slow and laborious endeavour, (particularly as opposed to the illusion of change).

160. While the Prime Minister had returned to work it felt as if his relationship with the Cabinet Secretary was never restored to its previous standing. From my perspective at the time it felt as if friction with and criticism of the Cabinet Secretary in person was to a large degree a proxy for more general frustrations. I have not covered anything on this matter here. It is not my story and (in my view) tangential to the Inquiry. However, in terms of the response to Covid the breakdown in relationships had a real and damaging impact. It made those in the Civil Service in the centre less confident about challenging: no one was safe if the Cabinet Secretary was not, and dealing with the unravelling preoccupied a number of us for critical weeks. I spent part of the summer trying to persuade other Whitehall Permanent Secretaries to apply but was not surprised that they did not want to.

Exams

161. The Cabinet Secretary went on leave at the end of July so for most of August he was out of the office. The Private Office and I were in touch with him as we needed. In early August 2020 the Scottish Highers results came out and triggered a furore in Scotland as there were some clear anomalies in the grading. A week later we had exactly the same experience in the rest of the UK. I could not quite believe this had happened – not least as we had a week's warning to check that exactly the same thing was not about to happen in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. As it turned out that the department had known since the end of July that some of the grading would be unfair and had made the decision it should be remedied via appeals. This had not been made public.

162. On 18th August I commissioned some work to establish the facts in the Cabinet Secretary's name and then submitted advice to the Prime Minister summarising what we had learned based on some excellent desk analysis from Joanna Key¹²⁷. I was

¹²⁷ See email from Cabinet Secretary's PS to Education Private Office asking for a timeline and sequencing of decisions taken on exams [INQ000308325], email chain with No 10 Private Office on DfE lessons learned [INQ000308328] and Exam Results 2020: What Happened? note to the Prime Minister, 24.8.20 [INQ000137292]

distressed by what felt like a very avoidable failure, and the fact that everyone seemed to be blaming the algorithm as if it had human agency. The Prime Minister did not want to commission a lessons learned exercise, and I think Martin Reynolds was trying to keep me out of the Prime Minister's eyeline and protect me from being the person delivering another round of uncomfortable messages. It was a shame not to do a full lessons learned exercise as I think it might have been helpful to the DfE in thinking about what was to come the following winter. I think they did do their own lessons learned – that was certainly Susan Acland-Hood's intention, but there was a missed opportunity to identify what the centre should have been doing and missed.

163. In terms of what happened in the centre it seemed that looking at exams as an issue had fallen between the gaps – it had been discussed at a MIG and was supposed to come back for further discussion at Covid-O but for whatever reason this then did not happen. Quite apart from what was happening in the department, no one in the centre (in No 10 or the Cabinet Office) was really enough all over this as an issue. This was particularly surprising given so many people had worked in DfE and it was an obvious moment that would affect large numbers of the population. Exams and the impact on schools had been being tracked through one of the MIGs up until May and when the Taskforce was established the assumption (as far as it was subsequently explained to me in August) was that it was the Covid Taskforce would continue to own this as an issue in terms of No 10 and the Cabinet Office. However, for whatever reason it had not featured on the issues that the taskforce was tracking. It was in part understandable if people kept their head down rather than volunteering to spot problems given the culture did not encourage that and the sort of methodological following up and staying on top of an issue was not culturally rewarded at the time. It is also true to say that it was the Department's responsibility. However, the Cabinet Office/No 10 set up in more normal operating mode would have – in my view – prevented the most egregious aspects of the problems arising.

164. It was clear from the conversations with people in DfE that they were struggling and needed help, so I arranged for Susan Acland-Hood to go in and try to sort out what was happening and lead on re-building trust and relationships between the various organisations.¹²⁸ This was on the basis that she would only be doing this and Jonathan Slater would remain in post. The Prime Minister then subsequently decided

¹²⁸ Email from Ed Lidington on 21.8.20 regarding Susan Acland-Hood's temporary move to DfE as Second Permanent Secretary [INQ000308326].

he had lost confidence in Jonathan Slater and he was encouraged to resign. There was no process around this, and the Cabinet Secretary did warn that it would lend further heat to the argument that civil servants were carrying the can when Ministers should be accountable for their decisions. I thought that in the circumstances it was untenable for the Secretary of State to continue in post but could understand the argument for leaving him there until the schools had returned and then dealing with the issue at that point. This is what Simon Case relayed about what the Prime Minister intended to do¹²⁹.

165. My reflection on this initial period is that education and consequences for children did not matter enough. They did not feature enough in discussion or debate of what to do on the way out of lockdown. Policy discussions did not recognise the reality of home life for people who did not have money to spare or recognise the impact of trying to manage multiple children and only very basic remote schooling while working from home. The people who were living like that were not working in Downing Street or 70 Whitehall. I do not think there was any consideration of the long-term impacts of even shutting schools for weeks or a plan for how to get those children back into school, or enough ambition about making the most of the opportunities that might be presented¹³⁰. I do not think there was enough of an appreciation of how the trust between schools and parents and children had broken down or changed and shifted as children were out of school. In terms of a functioning state, it should not be possible to have just avoided thinking about these things because they were too difficult. Even if not out of compassion, the long-term consequences for the economy and society of disrupting education and socialisation (especially of babies and infants) to that degree should have been given more regard.

SECTION THREE: WINTER

Winter planning

166. I remember standing in the No 10 garden with the CMO at some time in the late Spring and him saying that it looked like UV rays were very helpful to minimise the spread of Covid. Although this was undoubtedly good news, Chris did not want to overstate the impact and the potential benefit at a point when we still needed people

¹²⁹ Whatsapp exchange with Simon Case 21.8.2020 09:34:48 – 09:37:37 [INQ000303253/40]

¹³⁰ Email re educational dividend for children of the pandemic sent to Mark Sweeney and onto Meg Powell Chandler 27-29.1.20 [INQ000308390]

to follow the guidance and not to socialise. He was worried that if the Prime Minister was told he would be too enthusiastic about reducing restrictions too quickly. We discussed how hard the winter 2020/21 might be; especially given that people would not have been exposed to the usual flu bugs circulating so we could be in for both a hard winter if Covid continued to circulate plus a hard flu winter with an NHS that had not had a break.

167. I had some experience of NHS winter crises. In the winter of 2014/15, the NHS had a difficult winter and my team in EDS supported the Health Secretary, CDL and Cabinet Secretary in running a cross-government intensive process to try to support the NHS. This had also involved two or three other Cabinet Ministers, and three to four Permanent Secretaries alongside the Chief Executives of all the NHS bodies spending every Monday morning poring over that weekend's data and doing a deep dive into a particular issue or area. That same winter there had been some significant flooding and taken together it had been occasionally challenging to manage concurrent problems even at that scale, even without Covid. I was aware that the NHS had intensely disliked this process of Cabinet Office oversight¹³¹.

168. Most significantly I knew that winter 2020/21 would also bring us the potential disruption from the practical implications of leaving the EU, especially at the border. Even before Covid the view was that the implementation of the actual point of Brexit could be bumpy if not well managed, and so there was a large team preparing for it within the Cabinet Office. I knew we were on rocky ground in terms of the Cabinet Office's performance (and the perception of the performance) in the first phase of the response and that we would need to be in better shape the following winter. In the context of all of this I started to think about and discuss with other Permanent Secretaries and colleagues across Whitehall and in the Cabinet Office how we would get ready to manage whatever we had to deal with December-March 2020/21 (the NHS winter usually peaks in the period after Christmas when people have got ill and remain in hospital and can't be discharged for one reason or another). Once the new Cabinet Secretary was appointed, I got agreement to set up a winter coordination cell that would bring these things together and we met to agree how this was going to work and who would do what on 29 September¹³². In the event it was enough time to

¹³¹ Whatsapp exchange with Kathy Hall who had been in the Implementation Unit in 2015, and then gone to work in DHSC to run their Implementation Unit and then in an NHS Trust. She was deeply expert and it was a godsend having her in the taskforce on this issue. **INQ000273892**

¹³² Email from **NR** 29.9.20 with Cab Sec winter structures readout [INQ000308331].

plan properly. I presented the approach to Wednesday Morning Colleagues on 30 September¹³³.

169. The plan for the Winter Coordination and Control Cell (WCCC) was to provide a very small team whose sole focus would be coordinating the work led in practice by three teams within the Cabinet Office i) on Brexit implementation, ii) on whatever the Covid taskforce was dealing with and iii) on the “normal” winter crisis machine in CCS. The winter cell was temporary by design, and only to be activated at crisis point to manage the peak of concurrent risks and issues. It was in effect a sticking plaster rather than the right structural answer, but we were clear about this at the time. In theory CCS should have been able to manage this sort of coordination. In practice though, both on EU Exit and Covid, the teams had very senior leadership who were not going to accept direction from CCS at that stage, and the reputation of CCS was not strong. There had been a plan for significant organisational change in the Cabinet Secretariat (including a necessary reduction in headcount) prepared and agreed in the Autumn of 2020 but the Cabinet Secretary had not yet implemented any of the changes. This also formed part of the organisational backdrop, as was the hangover of a lack of confidence in the Cabinet Office from the No 10 team and also to some extent the Cabinet Secretary who was still fairly new in post.

170. The winter cell was staffed up in November and started to prepare through December in terms of getting into what was going on in each area and getting secondees from each team. It was led and managed by two highly experienced civil servants, Alastair Whitehead and [REDACTED] (both in crisis response and operating in a political and contested environment). We had great support from the CDL who in his capacity as Chair of both XO and Covid-O could see the risks from not running these two giant enterprises as one coherent whole. Following advice from Alastair the CDL minuted the Prime Minister in November to illuminate what we might be facing¹³⁴. The cell was activated on Wednesday 23rd December 2020. In retrospect it should probably have been up and running as a matter of course from

¹³³ See email for WMC meeting 29.9.20 [INQ000308332] with the winter preparedness presentation [INQ000308333].

¹³⁴ See Alastair Whitehead email on Winter Coordination and Control Cell 24.11.20 [INQ000308335] with attached note [INQ000308336] and draft minute for CDL to send to PM [INQ000308337]. See final minute from CDL to PM [INQ000308338].

mid-December. I would have advocated for this had I been in the office¹³⁵ (I was off work as our family had Covid again from 7th to 21st December).

171. In the event the cell was only activated after there had been a somewhat chaotic situation created at the border in Kent on Friday 18th December. The short version of what happened was that the Covid taskforce had got the Prime Minister to take a decision about imposing checks at the border without sufficient coordination with either the EU Exit team or those that dealt with the relationship with France (i.e. by not linking in with the International Secretariat in the Cabinet Office who would have ensured the Ambassador was aware), and then lines of communication had not been clear and there was some confusion between DfT and the Cabinet Office about who was doing what and then a lot of criticism directed at the Cabinet Office for not demonstrating grip¹³⁶. Some of this criticism was reasonable and would probably have been averted had the winter cell been up and running. Once it was active, although there were some tricky days we did not have a repeat of this kind of situation, although there was a near miss again on pre-departure testing (i.e. testing before travelling) and the process of agreeing pre-arrival testing was also complicated¹³⁷.

172. On 23rd December I conducted a quick lessons learned exercise to make sure we really understood what had not worked around the 18th, did what I could to repair relationships as necessary and then activated the winter cell¹³⁸. During the first phase of the winter cell operation the main activity was repairing the damage done by the Dover incident. From 23rd December we set off on a period of much more tightly coordinating what was happening each day and making sure that the decisions were as joined up as they could be and the relevant people had visibility¹³⁹. The winter cell ran every day over the Christmas break and meetings were either chaired by me or

¹³⁵ See email exchange with Alastair Whitehead and John Owen on 29.12.20 discussing the new operating model for the WCCC and need for a renewed mandate from the Cabinet Secretary for the WCCC [INQ000308344].

¹³⁶ See Whatsapp exchange with Simon Case 22.12.20 [INQ000303253/62]

¹³⁷ See e.g. email from Alastair Whitehead querying collective agreement for pre-departure testing decision [INQ000308370], email from Alastair Whitehead on 12.1.21 regarding pre-departure testing [INQ000308375], and further email from Alastair Whitehead setting out overall view on the pre-departure issue [INQ000308376].

¹³⁸ Email exchange re immediate lessons learned from the border crisis 23.12.20 [INQ000308340].

¹³⁹ See e.g. email to James Bowler 29.12.20 regarding the winter cell operating model going forward [INQ000308343]; and email to Covid Taskforce, WCCC, CCS and Cabinet Secretary re contingency planning for NHS crisis [INQ000308355]. As the email reflects the high level plan was for the Covid Taskforce to lead on NHS pressures in meeting the demand spike caused by the new variant, and would cover the whole NHS problem not just treatment of Covid patients, and for a plan to be worked up for a full crisis response if the NHS became overwhelmed 1.1.21.

David Quarrey (the excellent Deputy National Security Adviser who had stepped in to be “gold”¹⁴⁰). We closed that first crisis down and transferred responsibility for managing the situation at the border back to DfT and FCDO on 30 December.¹⁴¹ I asked for even more detailed lessons learned work to be done and was trying to bolster and build up CCS¹⁴², especially as there remained serious problems with people questioning whether they were up to gripping a crisis. I felt for the CCS team and wanted to give them the best chance to succeed not least so they felt more confident about their ability to handle the inevitable crisis situations that would arise. Confidence really matters and it is not a team you want to be second guessing itself.

173. Looking at the data in late December it was clear that despite the pre-Christmas restrictions the Covid situation was worsening. On 30 December I set out where the cell should focus on; we were concerned about coordinating the Covid decisions and putting some more structure around them insofar as possible and getting ahead on contingency preparations, including overlaying impacts of weather¹⁴³. We moved into a more grippy way of working from this point with a clear daily rhythm having worked this through with the Private Offices¹⁴⁴.

174. It was a hard and mostly thankless task for the winter cell – the points of friction will be clear in the record. Their job was more difficult than it should have been because of the institutional resistance to working together. The Covid Taskforce in particular were often reluctant to accept that advice had to be given in the round or that it would be better if documents and thinking were shared in advance¹⁴⁵. People

¹⁴⁰ See emails between myself and David Quarrey about his work 28.12.20 [INQ000308341].

¹⁴¹ See note to the Prime Minister 30.12.20 [INQ000308351]; Note to DfT, FCDO and CO re Kent Border Disruption: Next Steps 30.12.20 [INQ000308350] and email to Mark Sweeney about providing continued support to DfT as responsibility passed back to them [INQ000308345]

¹⁴² See email to David Quarrey and Beth Sizeland about tightening the CCS operation 03.01.21 [INQ000308359].

¹⁴³ See: email re WCCC operating model setting out heightened operating rhythm for WCCC over next 10 days [INQ000308354] 30.12.20 and my email to Alastair Whitehead and [NR] 29.12.20 regarding winter cell operating model in next 10 days [INQ000308347]

¹⁴⁴ See e.g. email chain with Taskforce, No 10 and WCCC re Covid Plan for next week 3.1.21 [INQ000308363] and WCCC evening update email sent to CO, No 10, WCCC and CDL team 3.1.21 [INQ000308360]

¹⁴⁵ Re: **collaborative working** see e.g. email from [NR] re issues with WCCC engagement with Covid Taskforce 3.12.20 [INQ000308339]; email from Alastair Whitehead re Covid Taskforce keeping WCCC out of loop until well after the key decisions were made that led to border disruption 29.12.20 [INQ000308346]; email from [NR] re coordination issues on 25.1.21 [INQ000308387] (this was one of three emails sent to me on 25.1.21 about internal coordination issues between WCCC and Taskforce).

Re: **looking at issues in the round** see e.g. emails with [NR] 28.12.20 re importance of transparent working (in the context of WCCC not being informed about the requirements for military

respond to incentives and they were incentivised to pursue the single objective of reducing the Covid numbers and to get decisions taken quickly, and they were regularly instructed not to share information .

175. It is difficult to over-state the impact that the leaking of information had on the ability of the government to function properly over this whole period. The officials working on Covid were perpetually hamstrung by the fear of being blamed for having shared information because so often anything that was shared beyond a tiny group of people ended up in the press. This was damaging because it means that space for debate and working through ideas was even further restricted. Cabinet government cannot operate unless there is a general agreement that differences of view are private while the policy is being worked through. I can see the need for transparency and believe strongly in the importance of journalists being able to report in an open way, but those that leaked details of policies before they were decided have a lot to answer for. They caused harm. As the record will show (including the damage statements for various leak inquiries) in practice the impact of what they did often meant having to make really rushed decisions on something that would affect millions of people because a version of the policy had already been briefed out.

176. Over time the Covid Taskforce did come to see the benefits of a more open way of working with the winter cell, and I was sympathetic to the pressure on the key individuals. The work of the winter cell to pull all the threads together was particularly appreciated by the Private Offices in No 10, the CDL's private office in the Cabinet Office and the Cabinet Secretary's office. As the records show the Private Offices were again at the sharp end of seeing where things were not being sufficiently coordinated and they all used the structure of the cell to try to manage the different equities and tensions. All of this was a workaround for a system that was not functioning properly and partly a consequence of people not being given clear direction about respective priorities or being incentivised to work together, including in support of this coordination mechanism¹⁴⁶. In an ideal world the operation of the centre of government is the top of a pyramid where the senior officials have done much of the synthesising of advice and argument before decisions are made. In this period the form of the Cabinet Office was more of a box with distinct stovepipes – the

assistance in London) and need for a step change and to ensure decisions take over coming weeks were not taking through a covid only silo [INQ000308342]; email to John Owen 29.12.20 discussing importance of CO teams being joined up [INQ000308348]; email from: [REDACTED] NR [REDACTED] e 15.1.20 as to issues WCCC experiencing in discussing longer term plans with Taskforce [INQ000308381].

¹⁴⁶ See e.g. email to John Owen noting issues with licence to operate winter cell 4.1.21 [INQ000308368].

winter cell operated underneath the senior people leading in each area to join it all up. It was partly this that made it hard. That said there was also some great joint working and some people took a generous and collegiate approach. I really appreciated this and tried to say so as much as possible at the time¹⁴⁷.

177. From 30th December onward the winter cell produced daily summaries of the situation and tried to help the relevant teams to get ahead of decision making¹⁴⁸. This worked well alongside the daily summary notes on Brexit transition that Jess Glover provided on top of the more detailed work¹⁴⁹. They also managed concurrent and compound risks through the period¹⁵⁰. They worked incredibly hard to ensure nothing bad happened, or that if and when bad things happened they would have a lesser impact. This is classic old fashioned Cabinet Office work.

“The NHS is elastic”

178. I had been concerned about NHS capacity in the winter of 2020/21 since the early summer when we understood that Covid would continue to run through the population well into the autumn and winter. Pre-Covid the general Whitehall view about the NHS and winter was that it was always a challenging time for the NHS, some winters were worse than others depending on the efficacy of the flu vaccine and that what usually happened was the NHS stepped up and performed heroically and then recovered in the summer to be ready for the next time. It was part of the seasonal pattern. We knew that 2020/21 would be different, not least because the NHS had not had time to recover. Part of the anxiety in February/March 2020 was whether the winter would be over before the first Covid wave hit. This was part of the objective in pushing it off for as long as possible. It might sound odd to say this but had the pandemic happened at a different time of the year it may have been logical in terms of NHS management to want more of the population to be exposed to and get over Covid before the winter months so the strategy may have been different: I remember discussing with Chris Whitty that we were fortunate that the pandemic was

¹⁴⁷ See e.g. email demonstrating [NR] leadership and collegiate working 24.12.20 [INQ000320689] email to Alex Chisholm 30.12.20 [INQ000308352].

¹⁴⁸ See e.g. Daily Winter Summary Report 3.1.21 [INQ000308362] and covering email [INQ000308361], and a readout/actions note 16.01.21 [INQ000308382], an example of a winter check in evening email 18.01.21 [INQ000308383] and a morning summary email 19.01.21 [INQ000308384] and note [INQ000308385].

¹⁴⁹ See e.g. emails from Jess Glover 14.01.21 (morning) [INQ000308378], (evening) [INQ000308380] with daily winter summary report [INQ000308379].

¹⁵⁰ See [NR] email 11.01.21 regarding refreshed assessment on winter risks [INQ000308372] and the supporting draft presentation [INQ000308373].

not rolling towards us in a November. Buying time to get to the summer had been a cause for hope in the early part of the response, just as the shortening days and the colder weather were then a cause for concern in the autumn.

179. The Covid taskforce was in dialogue with the DHSC and NHS over the autumn of 2020 to establish a better way of tracking NHS capacity and seeing early indicators in order to help them to advise on managing the response (when to act and what to do). Separate but related to that and through the winter cell I was trying to establish a plan for what we would do if the NHS went into severe crisis – particularly if there was compound demand because of e.g. a major incident or a particularly harsh winter¹⁵¹. There was not a plan ready for either what to do if the NHS itself got overwhelmed and/or if that happened when other things were also going wrong. I thought we needed to be ready for an emergency response either system wide or (more likely) in a particular place. The impact of the weather was important so CCS did keep close to what the pattern might be both in the long and short term. Thankfully the UK was relatively fortunate that year and the winter was relatively mild but we did not know it would be.

180. What I was trying to do with the emergency response was have a well-understood set of protocols and ways of operating in the centre, so we did not have a repeat of what had happened in March. I needed to know how we would know that we were getting close to a point where help would be needed and have a plan for what that help would be¹⁵². Essentially this could only be by relying on the military for mutual aid of some sort but that would need to be properly planned and prepared for and it would be essential to make sure when it came to the operational management of a situation (if for example a whole series of hospitals in a particular geography could no longer accept emergency admissions) there was a plan for what to do that involved all the relevant local authorities¹⁵³. This in itself is pretty normal contingency planning (see above).

181. It was difficult to get the right kind of engagement from DHSC or the NHS. There was an inbuilt reluctance to accept that it was possible to get to a point where the

¹⁵¹ See email exchange with Kathy Hall and Alastair Whitehead regarding a NHS crisis 11.01.21 [INQ000308371].

¹⁵² See e.g. email exchange with Kathy Hall and Sapana Agrawal about NHS capacity 12.01.21 [INQ000308374].

¹⁵³ See email to Simon Case NHS Capacity Contingency Plan 2.1.21 [INQ000308358].

NHS was overwhelmed and/or to acknowledge that this would be something that No 10 and the Prime Minister would need to be across and content with the handling of. There was also perfectly reasonable concern that help from the Cabinet Office or No 10 might in practice not be that helpful. We kept being told that NHS capacity was elastic. My concern was that even if it was elastic that was not the same as it being infinite, and in any case we needed a plan for the worse case. It was only much later that I realised that what was meant by NHS capacity being elastic was the capacity of people working in the NHS to work themselves into the ground to keep people alive. So yes they would cope, but the knock on impact of that would be the consequences for the people involved. We had thought we would see the consequences of a broken NHS in the winter 2020/21. I fear that it took longer for the break to show and we are living with the consequences of stretching it too far in terms of what is happening now.

182. Stephen Lovegrove was very helpful in offering to help develop a plan B and work through what the MOD could offer and his team was supportive in getting us to a place where we at least had a plan for a plan¹⁵⁴. There was some good and sensible thinking done to dovetail with normal planning once I had been able to reassure the DHSC Permanent Secretary that we were trying to do something sensible¹⁵⁵. The CDL was very helpful in galvanising the Health Secretary and we started to get to the right place in early January 2021¹⁵⁶. In the event when we finally got a meeting with Simon Stevens and the Prime Minister to talk about how the NHS was coping under the strain and what would happen next we found out in the meeting that the situation was worse than had been reported. The v-bed (ventilator bed) capacity was breached 11 January 2021. It cannot be right that it was only by forcing a meeting that the Prime Minister was told of something so serious. Whatever the independence of the NHS (which they guarded heavily as suited during this time) it was the Prime Minister that was ultimately going to be in the frame for the collapse of the NHS. As it happened in 2020/21 we were lucky with the winter, and immensely fortunate in the people who work in the NHS, but that is not good enough for a country of our size and scale. A crisis contingency plan was developed and agreed but in the end not deployed¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁴ See email exchange with Dan Rosenfield about NHS contingency planning 1.1.21 [INQ000308356].

¹⁵⁵ See email exchange with Stephen Lovegrove and Chris Wormald regarding NHS scenarios commission 4.1.21 [INQ000308369].

¹⁵⁶ See email from Alastair Whitehead regarding CDL and SoS Health meeting 4.1.21 [INQ000308367]; See email 4.1.21 [INQ000308364] and papers for the CDL NHS capacity meeting [INQ000308365] and [INQ000308366].

¹⁵⁷ See email from PS to Director of CCS re NHS Capacity Coordination plan 3.2.2021 [INQ000308391].

Making the same mistake twice

183. What became clear through the autumn of 2020 was that the same patterns were there. Decisions to lock down were taken very late and there remained a failure to appreciate the world as it was (including some initial confusion about who to negotiate with in local lock-downs¹⁵⁸). It had not really got as better as I hoped it might. I could not really understand why this was the case as I had thought that the establishment of the taskforce would have created a more normal and rational policy making environment. I think I underestimated how difficult it would be to change the way of operating when decision making would remain so centralised and political, and so much a product of the imprint of the Prime Minister's approach to decision making. If anything the latter got a lot worse once Dominic Cummings had left. The Prime Minister rarely accepted that to govern is to choose. He really did want it all and changed his mind often. The decision making swung between two extremes; the Prime Minister's undoubted liberal instincts and then the extremes of shutting everything down, when in reality all of the discussion and debate and choices were in the middle. Both of the Permanent Secretaries of the Taskforce were highly experienced civil servants accustomed to working in the centre of power in either No 10 or HMT. They were able to "ride the tiger" of decision making in Johnson's No 10 and so could turn around new regulations and respond to any number of handbrake turns in policy. It was almost an organisational point of pride. It proved impossible to get away from highly politicised decision making. In the Autumn, when there were many reasonable calls for a "fire-break" to try to contain the increasing spread of the disease, it was clear that, however rational a lockdown might be given that it was the only tool that we had, the politics wouldn't allow for it.

184. It was dispiriting to re-engage with the decision making on Covid over that winter and discover it did not feel that different to March-May. Everything was still unnecessarily at the last minute. The situation on schools in December was particularly confusing – on the one hand there were people advocating that legal action should be taken against a council that had closed its schools before Christmas in response to a particularly virulent outbreak of the new variant¹⁵⁹ - and then it was very obvious to those who had been round the course before that schools would be

¹⁵⁸ I.e. talking to the Mayors instead of the Councils, who had the authority to act.

¹⁵⁹ Because schools should stay open and also because there was a sense that it was not ok for local areas to actually take their own decisions and potentially embarrass the government.

kept closed after the Christmas break given how the numbers were going¹⁶⁰. Stuart Glassborow and [NR] and I tried to push hard for a decision to be taken in a timely way rather than keep parents hanging on. Ben Gascoigne, the Political Secretary, kept making the point that it was the hope that was killing people (he had argued for more clarity about Christmas much earlier). I could not understand why we were not turning to a pre-existing methodical plan for what to do and in what order as the virus re-surfed. I had thought this was what the time we had bought, and the summer would have been spent on. There still was not a “break glass” plan.

185. In terms of the way the Taskforce had to operate they were pushing decisions through without going through Cabinet collective decision-making processes. Quite apart from the democratic consequences of this the process of having to agree a policy usually improves it: the officials advocating a course of action have to persuade others rather than just instruct. There was barely any joint working within and as between No 10 and the CO, never mind with the rest of Whitehall in keeping with the tone set by the Prime Minister. Part of the problem was that by this point (December) the skill of the leadership in adapting got in the way: the Covid Taskforce were capable of rising to whatever challenge was presented. On the one hand it is astonishing what they were able to do and they worked incredibly hard under relentless pressure. But in retrospect, not being able to re-design the system(s) in a day might have been a good thing (see paragraph 135 above about the regulations). The short-termism in particular was debilitating and known and discussed at the time¹⁶¹. It was not that the problems and issues were unknown, and there was no shortage of good and thoughtful work both by the civil servants in the taskforce who I know made a number of attempts to frame a strategy and from some of the external appointments in No 10¹⁶², but it somehow did not translate into better decision making. There was a significant gap in understanding about the difference between a plan on paper and operational impacts as illustrated in this exchange, but that is not that unusual in the centre. It was a cause for concern though (and something that the previous Cabinet

¹⁶⁰ See e.g. WhatsApp exchange with Kathy Hall 29.12.20; emails from Kathy Hall and Private Secretary (DfE & DCMS) re Schools in light of escalating situation 2.2.21 [INQ000308357] in which PS notes it felt “*like we are heading for a March style situation where schools were closing themselves...people were at least patient then... there is no patience left now*”.

¹⁶¹ Email from [NR] to Covid Taskforce re Covid Winter Plan noting concern about how community testing, vaccination and enforcement of tiered NPIs would be resourced and absence of this information in the Winter Plan 23.11.20 [INQ000308377].

¹⁶² See e.g. email from Alastair Whitehead forwarding thread on 13.01.21 [INQ000320690].

Secretary had been very hot on)¹⁶³. In general there was an impatience and lack of understanding about how long it takes to actually do things: for example Dido Harding was given almost no time at all to create a hugely complex and new operational system. People within No 10 (unfairly) started writing off Test Track and Trace before it had even begun and did not appreciate that there was a world of difference between the time it would take to create a large organisation vs seeing the more immediate rewards from the vaccine taskforce.

186. I was still trying to improve the culture of collaboration up until I left¹⁶⁴; and in the close down of the winter cell many of the things that needed to be implemented were set out in the slides that the winter steering group agreed¹⁶⁵. The team did a thorough job of closing down and distributing the functions and advised the Cabinet Secretary about some next steps including making a change that I hoped would benefit Covid decision making by moving the secretariat of the Covid committees from the Taskforce to the Central Secretariat. This was put in place. It was an explicit attempt to put more discipline around Cabinet governance, partly as a reaction to some of the things that had gone wrong in this time period¹⁶⁶. There was also a gap that needed to be picked up in building better links with departments¹⁶⁷. Much of this was handed onto EDS where the plan was to get back into a more classic way of operating the Cabinet Office (in line with the plans at that time to re-form the Cabinet Secretariat). I do not know what was eventually implemented. Alastair and Serena also did some thoughtful wider lessons learned and reflections to share with the Cabinet Secretary¹⁶⁸.

¹⁶³ See email chain with Mark Sedwill and Martin Reynolds about lines of operation and C-19 programmes 14.5.20 [INQ000308314]; See also email about plan for Prime Minister strategy meeting from myself 15.5.20 [INQ000308315] and attachments [INQ000252833]; [INQ000252834].

¹⁶⁴ See emails about improving culture for Winter Steering Group 21.01.21 [INQ000308386] and culture as an agenda item on 4.02.21 [INQ000308392].

¹⁶⁵ See email about WCCC close down 25.02.21 [INQ000308393].

¹⁶⁶ See email with Ed Lidington 25.1.21 regarding what comes next after closing WCCC [INQ000308388].

¹⁶⁷ See email from Beth Sizeland about FCDO grip 31.12.21 [INQ000308353]. See also email exchange with Bernadette Kelly regarding accountabilities 29.12.20 [INQ000308349].

¹⁶⁸ See email [INQ000308389] and note for Cabinet Secretary on Close down of WCCC [INQ000303286].

SECTION FOUR: FINAL REFLECTIONS

Learning Lessons

187. Over this period I conducted numerous lessons learned exercises¹⁶⁹. This is how I was trained to work and should be an integral part of being a civil servant. In DCMS the normal way of working was to get together after a significant piece of work or when something had happened and to talk about what had gone on and what we should learn. It was one of the clear points of difference between being a Minister and a civil servant: we had the luxury of being able to admit we had got things wrong, so it was even more important to use that to be better. Our political system makes it very difficult for serving politicians to say that they got something wrong (and mean it as opposed to in practice be nobly describing someone else's mistake).
188. At DCMS when I worked for both [NR] and Jonathan Stephens lessons learned were shared amongst the senior leadership and more widely in regular open sessions as an efficient way of benefitting from the whole experience of the department. In EDS we regularly conducted post-mortems of our own work and with departments to identify how to do better and what had helped make something work or fail. This only works in an open and trusting culture where people are prepared to own and admit mistakes and where the shared objective of the team or the organisation is for everyone to get better at delivering what Ministers have asked for. When something terrible happens the right thing to do is to face into the mistakes¹⁷⁰. Melanie Dawes set this clear leadership tone in DCLG after the Grenfell fire in 2017. It requires some bravery.
189. The kind of learning culture I am describing relies on integrity in the leadership and a trusted environment where the incentives are not about taking credit or apportioning blame but about the satisfaction of doing good work and knowing you are making a difference and getting better. Things will go wrong sometimes although every effort should be made to avoid that happening because the work is so important (and if it is not important, you shouldn't be wasting taxpayers' money doing it).

¹⁶⁹ See examples referred to in this statement and email to Alex Chisholm and others 7.9.20 regarding inquiry lessons learned and best practice [INQ000308330]. See also my email to [NR] on next steps on inquiry 18.8.20 [INQ000308324].

¹⁷⁰ See e.g. my email to Melanie Dawes of 20.6.17 (provided to the Grenfell Inquiry) [INQ000303287]

190. What matters is to be honest about the problems and the mistakes, and to try to fix them and learn from them. This is so important to the culture of the Civil Service because they are involved in work that will affect millions of people's lives. And having an open and honest approach to small mistakes gives a better chance of avoiding bigger mistakes where real and immediate harm can be done. The most unforgivable thing as a public servant is to make the same mistake twice.

The narrative of success

191. If mistakes are not acknowledged what happens instead is a race to the bottom in terms of justifying what happened. It has sometimes seemed more important to defend what the Cabinet Office had previously done (however wrong or damaging) to preserve a "narrative of success"¹⁷¹. A good illustration of this kind of retrospective justification is the legal cases brought by the Good Law Project in relation to the procurement of Public First and Hanbury in the early days of the pandemic. The accusation made was that proper procurement process had not been followed in contracting with these two companies in the rush to find good and reliable opinion research that the political team in No 10 trusted. The court eventually found for the Good Law Project and that proper procurement processes had not been followed.¹⁷² Despite it being clear that the proper process had indeed not been followed my own view is, and was, that entering into these contracts was defensible in the very particular circumstances of that time. I felt that the right thing to do was to acknowledge what had happened, own the failure in process and apologise but not to try to bend the system out of shape in mounting a defence.

192. It's problematic for the Civil Service overall if there is a culture of not acknowledging mistakes, even internally. It puts tremendous strain on individuals and is antithetical to core Civil Service values. I saw this more in my latter days in the Civil Service, not just in the Cabinet Office but in other departments where senior leadership would re-draw a boundary to try to make something acceptable in retrospect, not least because they could see the alternative might be to be blamed and fired. They were not wrong to think that. Trust goes both ways and Ministers also suffer the consequences of this kind of culture, in terms of the quality of the service

¹⁷² *R(on the Application of the Good Law Project & Ors) v Secretary of State for Health and Social Care* [2021] EWHC 346.

that they get and in benefitting from the kind of trusting relationships where they can rely on their civil servants to keep their confidences and be loyal.

Looking after people

193. The Cabinet Office did not look after the people who worked there properly during this period. As one of the senior leaders I have to take my share of the responsibility for that. I found it frustrating at the time to not be able to fix the things I could see needed fixing, the most serious of which was the failure to provide counselling or psychological support. I lost count of the number of times I was told that there was a helpline available to call if people wanted to and I tried repeatedly to explain that the civil servants in question were highly unlikely to be able to get the right kind of support from that sort of generic service, not least because of their professional approach to confidentiality. The absence of this support not only damaged the people involved but I am sure that it impacted on the quality of the work. Both matter.

194. As an organisation the Cabinet Office excels in creating the kind of faceless bureaucracy that is maddening even to those who are theoretically in positions of power. From the outset there was a failure to recognise that there was a duty of care for the people who worked in No 10 or the secretariat or the Taskforce. Even the basics were neglected – as a small but demonstrative example it took seven months after the beginning of the pandemic to get a hand sanitiser station by the link door between No 10 and the CO (a door with a pin pad that anyone who worked for the Prime Minister was constantly having to touch on their way through). Many of the people working in the Taskforce were on temporary or short-term contracts and there was no proactive attempt to recognise and create the kind of HR support that a team like this needs.¹⁷³ We were still asking well into the Autumn. As another small example there was no provision in the Cabinet Office to feed people who were working long hours and over weekends and holidays (the senior leadership in the Cabinet Office regularly paid for takeaway food for the teams ourselves). The whole set up was cobbled together and operating on a shoe-string. It is almost a point of pride that the Civil Service will just work in these conditions. It's hard to understand in retrospect.

195. The Cabinet Office is a department with many bosses and many masters. The difference in accountability between the CDL and the Prime Minister did not help but

¹⁷³ See email to Sarah Harrison in the Cabinet Office about HR support for the C-19 team 23.10.20 [INQ000308334].

from what I recall his Private Office also struggled to get what they needed (having asked for more help to make the building more secure to work so people did not get ill we came in one day to find hazard tape over every second chair). It is undoubtedly true that lines of accountability and reporting were blurred but there is no reason why there could not have been better support for the people who were running the national response. This all added to the stress and pressure.

196. There is a wider issue with the culture in the Cabinet Office and No 10 as it was at that time. I cannot comment on the present day but some of the points I am making would also have applied to the Cabinet Office before Mr Johnson became Prime Minister. Bureaucracies are inhuman, and it takes daily and sustained effort to insert humanity and – importantly – the necessarily humility to make the right decisions. Humility is rarely imposed on the upper echelons of the Civil Service in the centre – the day-to-day experience of working in those corridors drives people in the opposite direction. I do not exclude myself from this. If I was able at all – at this time – to keep on injecting humanity and humility it was as much because my previous experience in the Cabinet Office made me better inured to the thrill of the power and I had spent time in departments on the receiving end (as well as having the immense good fortune of having learned to be a civil servant working for Tessa Jowell in DCMS).

197. I would be worried if the answer to an absence of humanity and humility was to create a bureaucratic or system answer. It is as much about the people and how they are incentivised to behave. It is not necessarily a comment about individuals themselves but whether they are able to bring these essential qualities into their work in the service of others. I was reminded repeatedly during this time (and since when I think about it) of Bishop James' conclusions on the treatment of the Hillsborough families about "the patronising disposition of unaccountable power".

198. Preparing this statement has taken significant effort, not least because some of the time in question was traumatic. But I am glad to have had the opportunity to go back and try to understand better what happened and what might be learned from it in the hope that lessons can be learned and changes made. We can govern our country better.

Statement of Truth

I believe 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 in its truth.

Signed: **Personal Data**

Dated: 1/11/2023