

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].