

Witness name: Stuart Glassborow

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Dated: 11 October 2023

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF STUART GLASSBOROW

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I, Stuart Glassborow, will say as follows.

#### INTRODUCTION

1. I am a civil servant and currently a Director within HM Treasury ("HMT"). Between May 2019 and May 2022 – and therefore during the period with which the Inquiry is concerned – I was the Deputy Principal Private Secretary ("DPPS") to the Prime Minister, working in the No.10 Private Office within No.10 Downing Street ("No.10"), on secondment from HMT.
2. In this statement I seek to provide a factual account of some of the processes that underpinned Ministerial decision-making in the centre of Government during the pandemic. I have not sought in this statement to pay tribute to the work of colleagues within No.10 in this period. Nor do I seek to address the pain and tragedy to which I know these events relate for millions of people across the country.
3. I have been a civil servant for over 20 years, joining as a fast-streamer following graduation from university and initially working in DWP as an analyst on pensions and benefits. With the exception of my time at No.10 between 2019 and 2022, I have spent the last fifteen years of my career working at HMT. My roles at HMT have encompassed a broad span of its work, involving tax policy, public spending, and supporting the delivery of set-piece or fiscal events, such as Budgets, Spring or Autumn Statements and Spending Reviews. Between January 2017 and May 2019, I

was the Principal Private Secretary to Philip Hammond, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Following my return to HMT in 2022, I have most recently led the project to prepare the Atlantic Declaration, which was signed by the Prime Minister and the US President in June this year.

4. I have prepared this witness statement in response to the Inquiry's request for evidence and, as requested, I have attempted to assist the Inquiry in understanding my role in supporting core political and administrative decision-making relating to the UK's response to the Covid-19 pandemic between 1 January 2020 and 24 February 2022.
5. In the course of preparing this statement I have been assisted by lawyers instructed by the Cabinet Office.
6. In the limited time available, I have attempted to work through my email sent items to remind myself of the chronology of key events and identify relevant documents. However, I have not been able to do a comprehensive audit of this material. I have not had access to my No.10 email inbox, but have been provided with certain material I have requested, albeit some of which I only received towards the end of the period in which I have been preparing this statement. I am grateful for the work to extract that. Similarly, whilst I have been able to draw on some electronic documents and correspondence retrieved from the Cabinet Office's own systems and provided to me by the relevant Cabinet Office team, there remain gaps in this documentation.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the nature of my role within the No.10 Private Office also means that other members of the team, rather than me, would often have prepared the documents relating to particular meetings or events in which I played some role. It is naturally also the case that many of the conversations within No.10 relating to Covid-19 happened in person, and are not captured electronically.
7. As such, I have been reliant to a large extent on my own recollections of events to underpin the content of this statement. These recollections relate to events that took place some time ago, in what was for obvious reasons an immensely fast-paced and

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly for the substance of this statement, I would have been assisted by complete records of bilateral meetings between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer (I have been provided with only a selection of these), records of the "Economy Dashboard" meetings and underlying Dashboards (again, I have seen some), and a timeline of economic announcements; and I have only very belatedly been provided with copies of various pieces of advice from the Covid-19 Taskforce to the Prime Minister.

high-pressure context, and I am conscious that my memory of events may be imperfect and my ability to set out the detail is limited.

8. I have structured this statement as follows:

- a) Section 1: Overview of my role
- b) Section 2: Chronological account of key periods and challenges
- c) Section 3: Personal reflections

### **SECTION 1: OVERVIEW OF MY ROLE**

9. I have been made aware by the legal team supporting me that the Inquiry has received evidence from corporate witnesses and a number of my former colleagues setting out the role and operation of the Prime Minister's Private Office and how it sits within the broader framework of No.10 and the Cabinet Office. I do not seek to cover the same ground in any detail here, but would of course be happy to provide any clarification if necessary. The key points from my perspective are set out below.

10. The No.10 Private Office is the civil service team working most closely with the Prime Minister to ensure that he has the administrative support needed in the role. Its essential objective is to assist the Prime Minister to manage an exceptionally demanding workload in an efficient and effective manner on a day-to-day basis. As explained below in more detail, the Private Office does not hold any policy portfolio but rather fulfils an essentially administrative function. The precise operation of the No.10 Private Office naturally varies according to the needs of the Prime Minister of the day, but in general terms it has (and during my time as DPPS it had) the following principal roles:

a) *Managing the Prime Minister's time*

It is impossible to overstate how busy a Prime Minister is, with innumerable demands on his time, and it is therefore necessary to allocate his time according to priority. Private Office has a central role in deciding how the Prime Minister spends his time – for example, what meetings he takes and in what order, and what paperwork he reads and when. At a strategic level, i.e. in terms

of broad allocation of time over the week, these decisions are informed by advice from colleagues in Cabinet Office and other departments.

b) *Official record-keeping*

The Private Office provides the official account of the Prime Minister's decisions.

c) *Liaison*

Various officials across No.10 have day-to-day contact with departments as part of their jobs. However, the Private Office is the official channel for communications between No.10 and departments, communicating the Prime Minister's decisions and commissioning work he has requested. It is the only place from which the Prime Minister's commissions and decisions should issue. Private Office officials can also play a valuable role in communicating broader context and potential interlinkages between issues to colleagues in No.10, the Cabinet Office and other departments, in order to support their work.

d) *Facilitating joined-up decision-making*

The Private Office works collectively with the No.10 senior political team and the other core teams in No.10 (policy unit, delivery unit, communications team, and political advisors) to facilitate coordinated, joined-up decision-making processes and to synthesise, track and drive progress on the Prime Minister's priorities across central government.

11. Beyond this, the Private Office can on occasion act as a "back-stop", stepping in to support other elements of the system when that is needed. In practice, this meant that Private Office's main responsibilities are (and were):

a) *Managing the Prime Minister's diary*

The actual tool for allocating the Prime Minister's time, using Outlook.

b) *Managing the Day File*

Ensuring that the Prime Minister has all the relevant paperwork for each meeting he is attending that day.

c) *Managing the Box process*

This involves clearing papers with relevant colleagues, so as to ensure all relevant expertise and views are represented, and then submitting that briefing and advice to the Prime Minister, as appropriate, via the Box (literally a box of papers for the Prime Minister to read).

d) *Preparing and managing meetings*

Agreeing the cast list; agreeing or preparing the agenda; liaising with attendees in advance to support the development of a clear plan; organising or attending preparatory meetings to help ensure paperwork is suitable and ready; encouraging clear outcomes where possible, involving specific conclusions, decisions and actions.

e) *Providing readouts*

Communicating the Prime Minister's questions, steers or decisions; and providing the official account with decisions out of PM meetings or in response to advice.

12. Whilst the Private Office is ultimately responsible for these processes, some are undertaken in conjunction with the senior No.10 political team; for example, the senior political team will often feed into decisions about how to structure the Prime Minister's day, and who should be invited to attend particular meetings.
13. The processes described above flex to the demands of the real world. During the pandemic the day-to-day pressures and workload were huge and, whilst the archetype described above is a useful reference point, the reality did not and could not always fully accord with the system as described.
14. It is worth emphasising that the role of the Private Office is not to be the "policy brain" or provide advice. Rather, it is designed to enable efficient administrative processes within the heart of government so as to empower those who oversee, lead on and/or have accountability for managing their policy or delivery portfolios to do so effectively.
15. In fulfilling this role, I and the Private Office necessarily relied on the wider system – including the Cabinet Office more generally, line departments and political teams – to provide broad or strategic context to support us in deciding how to allocate the Prime Minister's time and deciding what paperwork he should be asked to focus on.



16. At the head of the Prime Minister's Private Office is the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary ("PPS"). Martin Reynolds was appointed to this role in October 2019, and he remained in post throughout the relevant period. Martin had overall responsibility for the management of the processes described above and of the operation of the Private Office as a whole, through a line management structure in which the specific functions were taken forward by the lead Private Secretaries. Martin also had a role integrating the civil service and political teams within No.10. All civil servants within No.10 (including me) ultimately reported to Martin.<sup>2</sup> Martin was also responsible for the management of No.10 as an organisation, chairing the No.10 Board (on which I also sat). Martin was the link with the Royal Household and with the Leader of the Opposition's Office, and was the principal point of contact between No.10 and the Cabinet Secretary, who was his line manager.
17. I supported Martin in discharging his role, and on occasion deputised for him.
18. Martin took the lead on foreign policy issues (reflecting his background in the FCO / FCDO), overseeing the work of and line-managing the foreign policy team within the Private Office. Whilst remaining answerable to Martin, I led on overseeing the work of the domestic affairs team within Private Office, which was made up of the Private Secretaries with day-to-day Private Office responsibility for supporting the Prime Minister in the administrative tasks associated with decision-making on domestic policy or operational issues, and their teams within the Private Office. These were, specifically, the Private Secretaries leading on economic affairs, public services and (for the initial phase of the pandemic) justice and home affairs. Those Private Secretaries typically had a background in the policy area for which they were responsible.
19. Whilst oversight of the foreign and domestic portfolios was divided in this way, Martin and I recognised the inherently close interlinkages between the different portfolios and were careful to avoid a disconnected or siloed approach. Indeed, and as explained, part of the role of the No.10 Private Office was to facilitate joined-up, coherent decision-making, and this required Martin and me to have a reasonable overview of the work going on at any time across the Private Office.

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<sup>2</sup> The Communications team ultimately reported to Alex Aitken and Martin jointly.

20. There was a daily meeting of the Private Office senior team, where Martin and I would meet with the heads of each team (or senior representatives) to discuss key issues. We would take an overview of the core tasks of that day, and form a shared understanding of the key moving parts and challenges that day, including across the domestic and foreign policy portfolios. Martin or I would communicate back any specific decisions from the Prime Minister.
21. In addition to being part of the leadership team within No.10, there were three core parts to my job as DPPS:
- a) Leadership and line-management of the domestic affairs team
  - b) Liaison between No.10 Private Office and HMT
  - c) Managing senior relationships with the Cabinet Office
22. I set out below what each of these involved.

Leadership and line-management of the domestic affairs team

23. As explained above, as the lead Private Office official on domestic affairs generally, I was responsible for leading and managing the team – and individuals within that team – in No.10 who acted as Private Secretaries to the Prime Minister on economic affairs, public services and (for the initial phase of the pandemic) justice and home affairs, and their teams within the Private Office.
24. As part of discharging their role, the work of these Private Secretaries naturally came to incorporate Private Office support (of the type described above) relating to management of the pandemic and many of the related, or consequent, domestic policy issues. These issues included health, policing, prisons, local government and education, and then later the development of recovery plans for key sectors and public services.
25. It is worth mentioning at this stage that, in around March 2020, Martin and I decided that there should be a full-time Private Secretary focused exclusively on Covid-19. Imran Shafi, who had been Private Secretary for public services within No.10, took on that role. We brought in extra resource to lead on what had been the rest of his portfolio

on public services, for example schools, NHS and social care. As part of his new role, Imran took the lead in liaising on a day-to-day basis with colleagues in the Cabinet Office, and those bodies inputting into the work they were co-ordinating in understanding and managing the pandemic at various stages, for example SAGE, the Joint Biosecurity Centre ("JBC"), or DHSC.

26. The Private Secretaries had day-to-day responsibility for leading on their portfolios and my role was to provide leadership and management oversight to the team and the individuals within it. As one would expect of a role of this type in any organisation, this involved strategic, operational and personnel issues. I acted as a point of escalation wherever necessary, and was involved in work planning and horizon scanning, as well as supporting the Private Secretaries in coordinating their work with others across the Private Office team and in No.10. I acted as a sounding board, set objectives and managed performance, and provided support in managing senior relationships. I led discussions on the management of resources within the team, working to ensure adequate cover at all times and requesting further resources where appropriate. I was also responsible for pastoral and wellbeing support within the team.
27. It was part of my role generally to support the Private Secretaries (in the manner described above) in attempting to ensure that:
  - a) The right issues came to the attention of the Prime Minister in a sequence and package that enabled him to make informed decisions efficiently and effectively.
  - b) The advice the Prime Minister received on the issues he needed to resolve was balanced, clear and comprehensive of the key matters, and that the political team had been engaged such that their advice could be integrated or simultaneously presented to the Prime Minister.
  - c) The Prime Minister's engagement with issues was coherently structured, proportionately allocated and appropriately prioritised.
28. My role also involved joining up the work across the team, understanding the bigger picture and identifying cross-cutting issues, so that the Prime Minister's diary could be managed most efficiently. This was true in normal times, but especially so during the pandemic, where so much was interconnected.



29. On a roughly weekly basis, I would chair meetings of the domestic team within Private Office to discuss management and corporate issues. Typical examples of the sorts of issues that might be discussed include managing pressures (including resourcing pressures) across the team, including supplementing and reallocating resources and managing leave plans; ideas for working most effectively with the political team, Cabinet Office colleagues or other departments; and priorities for use of the Prime Minister's time most efficiently. The meetings were used to raise interlinkages and ensure a decent understanding of the overall picture, and as part of this was a forum for sharing the Prime Minister's strategic steers. The meetings also acted as a support network to help with wellbeing in stressful times.
30. For completeness, I was also line manager of the Head of Business Engagement and the lead civil servant in the Legislation Team, and – by the nature of my role - worked closely with the civil servant and political head of the Policy Unit within No.10 in order to manage effective information flows.

*Liaison between No.10 Private Office and HMT*

31. Together with the Cabinet Office, HMT plays a central role within Government. Its responsibility for management of the economy and public finances means it has an interest in the full range of policy across Whitehall. One aspect of this is considering the challenges and pressures across Government, and crystallising the options for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister "in the round", having regard to the choices, priorities and trade-offs inherent in economic and fiscal policy (including taxation and public spending decisions).
32. I led on No.10 Private Office's engagement with HMT. I was well placed to do so given my background working in HMT, and – given HMT's cross-cutting interests across the range of government work – it naturally dovetailed with my role in understanding the cross-cutting issues with which the Prime Minister was concerned.
33. I was the Private Office lead on managing the Prime Minister's relationship with the Chancellor and the relationship between No.10 (and to a lesser extent the Cabinet Office) and HMT. As explained above, this consisted of commissioning and communicating data, analysis and advice from HMT, and to a much more limited extent

the Bank of England, and preparing meetings for the Prime Minister and Chancellor to make decisions with economic and fiscal ramifications.

34. As the Private Secretary leading on managing this relationship for the Prime Minister, I therefore also had a role looking across policy challenges, mirroring the Treasury's role. Part of doing my role was to support colleagues across the Private Office team, and No.10 more widely, in considering the inter-relationships between specific challenges, and ensuring that the engagement of the Prime Minister was properly joined up. There was thus a natural fit between my management role (as described above) and leading on liaison with HMT. This was particularly true during the pandemic, given HMT's close interest and engagement in the pandemic, its management, and the short-, medium- and long-term implications of these decisions for the UK's economy, public finances and public spending, and more generally.
35. The centrality of Treasury engagement reflects not just the direct economic impact of the pandemic but its all-encompassing impact on the UK and the need to manage and budget for a multi-faceted, cross-departmental and whole-society response. Together with No.10 and the Cabinet Office, HMT holds an interest in and influence over the whole of government (as explained above), and was closely involved in budgeting for and financing the costs of the pandemic and the Government response. Given the enormous and long-term economic and fiscal consequences of many of the various policy options open to the Government, and the various trade-offs implicit in these, it was recognised as essential that HMT and its Ministers should have a seat at the table.
36. During the course of the pandemic, I sought to ensure that the Prime Minister was:
- a) appraised of the latest economic and financial information received from HMT and/or the Bank of England, thereby providing relevant broad context for decisions on the management of the pandemic;
  - b) appraised of relevant economic analysis pertaining to specific options for managing the pandemic; and
  - c) able to engage the Chancellor on decision-making on economic and fiscal policy, either at formal fiscal events such as Budgets and Spending Reviews or on a more ad hoc basis.

On the last point, there were frequent policy statements from HMT / the Chancellor of the Exchequer during this period on measures to support households, businesses and public services impacted by the pandemic and the Government's response to it. Given the frequency and scale of the announcements, this aspect of my role took up a considerable proportion of my time.

37. Whilst it is normal for Prime Ministers and Chancellors to meet frequently, this engagement appeared to me particularly intensive at certain stages of the pandemic, as one would expect given the enormous economic cost of the pandemic and the Government's policy options in response to it, and the speed with which decisions often needed to be taken.
38. It is important to emphasise that the purpose of these meetings, from the No.10 Private Office perspective, was – consistent with the Private Office's role more generally – to put the Prime Minister in a position to make fully informed collective policy decisions based on a rounded view, to the maximum extent possible in the context of a fast-moving and uncertain picture.
39. In addition to the other forums in which they met – for example Cabinet, Covid-S or Covid-O meetings and (as explained below) the "Economy Dashboard" meetings – the Prime Minister and Chancellor had regular bilateral meetings in this period, which I usually attended. During these meetings, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor would variously discuss the economic situation, which linked to the overall strategy in managing the pandemic; the latest data relating to the pandemic; update on latest thinking on policy; and, predominantly, discuss economic support measures to support households, businesses and public services, and economic and fiscal measures to support the recovery.<sup>3</sup>
40. As indicated above, in this period there were multiple such announcements of economic and fiscal support packages to support households, businesses and public services. The Chancellor and Prime Minister discussed the complex policy packages associated with fiscal events at Spring Budget 2020, the 2020 Spending Review, Spring Budget 2021 and the 2021 Spending Review. The Chancellor also informed

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<sup>3</sup> It is to be noted that, though the pandemic and related issues were a crucially important and regular topic of discussion, many of the meetings throughout this period also involved a discussion of other economic or fiscal issues not to do with Covid.

the Prime Minister of his intentions for more specific interventions following each of the Lockdown decisions in March 2020, October 2020 and January 2021, at the Summer Economic Plan (July 2020), and at the Winter Economic Plan / Plan for Jobs (September 2020), and the various other moments when he sought to announce other specific new measures, or revisions to pre-existing measures.

41. Separately and in parallel, I (together with Emily Beynon, a Deputy Director within the No.10 Private Office, who I line-managed) sought to systematise the economic briefing for the Prime Minister, establishing a series of “Economy Dashboard” meetings. These ran from June 2020. My broad recollection is that these meetings occurred every three to four weeks, reflecting the reporting frequency of the underlying economic data – though as indicated above, I have not been provided with a full record.
42. These were attended by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and, in the early stages (when other departmental interests were particularly engaged), by other relevant Ministers such as Alok Sharma (Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) and Robert Jenrick (Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government). The Cabinet Secretary and senior political advisers to the Prime Minister typically attended. I was responsible for the agenda and timetabling of these meetings.
43. During the meetings, the dashboard was presented to the Prime Minister and Chancellor by the Chief Economic Adviser and senior officials within HMT and Economic and Domestic Secretariat (“EDS”),<sup>4</sup> and was then discussed. The broad purpose of the Economy Dashboard meetings was to provide the Prime Minister and Chancellor with the latest picture on the UK economy, reflecting the impact of the pandemic itself and the measures taken to manage its impact, plus – on occasion – deep dives into specific issues as relevant.
44. The dashboards themselves tended to consist of the latest out-turn and forecast data across the labour market, GDP, inflation, and public finances, including in relation to the differential impact on some of this across sectors and regions, with some comparative analysis with other countries. As such, and in common with the Covid Dashboard, the Economy Dashboard provided broad context in order to frame specific

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<sup>4</sup> A Cabinet Office secretariat.

policy discussions relating to the management of the pandemic or specific ideas for economic support, held in other forums.

45. HMT and Cabinet Office officials typically produced the analysis forming the backbone of the dashboards. They will therefore be best placed to explain the substance of these dashboards and the process by which they were prepared, though I understand that the material was collated either by the EDS or by the Economics Group within HMT. My understanding is (and was at the time) that the underlying data and analysis was consistent with the Covid Dashboard presented to Ministers.

*Managing senior relationships with the Cabinet Office*

46. As part of my leadership role, and also reflecting my responsibility for working with HMT, I also worked closely with the senior team in the Cabinet Office, supporting the day-to-day engagement between other Private Office officials with their opposite numbers in specific units of the Cabinet Office. This was true in “normal times”. In parallel with similar discussions within the No.10 Private Office team, I would engage Cabinet Office colleagues to discuss the interlinkages between various work programmes, in terms of supporting coherence across strategy or policy design; having a “joined up” plan for engaging HMT across portfolios; and choreographing how work was presented to the Prime Minister (that is to say, ensuring that the sequencing of meetings and paperwork was likely to be helpful to him, for example).
47. The Cabinet Office teams – under the guise of the Covid-19 Taskforce from May 2020 – coordinated advice on the management of the pandemic for the Prime Minister and his Ministerial colleagues, working with other government departments including HMT. Once the Covid-19 Taskforce was established, Imran Shafi led on day-to-day engagement with the relevant Cabinet Office team, including (after its formation) the Covid-19 Taskforce, whilst I worked closely with its senior team to try to ensure there was effective communication and coordination between the Taskforce and No.10. In broad terms this involved regular contact with the head and senior leadership team of the Taskforce; undertaking medium-term work-planning, and reviewing processes for developing and preparing advice; preparing for set-piece meetings; and promoting an integrated approach between the wider Covid-19 Taskforce and the No.10 political and communications teams.



48. There was a direct working relationship between the Cabinet Office and HMT teams, with the Covid-19 Taskforce typically commissioning economic or fiscal analysis relating to the pandemic which would be provided by the HMT teams. I joined some meetings between senior Cabinet Office and HMT officials to discuss planning of this work, given it was one part (often a large part) of the wider pattern of engagement between the Prime Minister and Chancellor. I also acted as a direct conduit for communicating this analysis to the Prime Minister, e.g. as relating to measures being considered for managing the pandemic. In these ways I supported efforts to incorporate economic analysis into the advice received by the Prime Minister.
49. The intensity of the engagement between the Covid-19 Taskforce and HMT analytical and policy teams increased from the Summer of 2020 onwards, i.e. after the initial phase of the pandemic associated with the first Lockdown and the subsequent weeks, where much of the PM's focus was on operational matters. In these periods there were frequent senior level official meetings.
50. I also supported officials in the Cabinet Office leading on other workstreams that were – at certain points – interconnected with Covid. For example, I attended meetings of the “Winter Cell” in late 2020 / early 2021 and on supply chain issues around summer 2021, and on the impact of Omicron on public service delivery around December 2021 to January 2022. The Winter Cell was established as a forum for managing the overlapping challenges associated with Covid, Brexit and other issues at that time. My role in these workstreams typically involved helping join up analysis and advice, and providing steers on the most effective way to engage the Prime Minister on specific issues, as part of the Prime Minister's overall diary.
51. Throughout this process, and generally as DPPS, I saw my role as being to ensure input from across government was synthesised in order to help the Prime Minister to bring together the range of views – sometimes opposing – so that he could make decisions effectively and on an informed basis. This was a two-way process, in the sense that my role also involved communicating the Prime Minister's steers, and decisions, to colleagues across government.

#### The range of meetings

52. A huge number of different meetings were convened to respond to the developing situation over the course of the pandemic. By way of overview, I was involved (within

the bounds of my role as described above) in the range of meetings set out below. With the exception of meetings related to HMT or the economy, I was not the lead Private Secretary in these meetings, but my attendance enabled me to play a role in tracking developments and steers, and joining up activity across work-strands.

- a) The Prime Minister's morning meetings (known as the "09:15s").
- b) The Prime Minister-chaired Covid-O and Covid-S meetings.<sup>5</sup>
- c) The Prime Minister's or First Secretary of State's Quad meetings.
- d) Bilateral meetings between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and official level preparation meetings for these meetings, on a weekly or fortnightly cycle.
- e) "Data dashboard" meetings.
- f) "Economy dashboard" meetings.
- g) Regular meetings between senior HMT, No.10 and Cabinet Office officials and advisers.
- h) Regular meetings organised by the Cabinet Secretary including the Cabinet Secretary's Monday morning meeting with Cabinet Office Director Generals, and meetings on key issues such as economic and public service recovery. (I myself was not a regular attendee at these meetings but attended on occasion.)
- i) Numerous preparatory meetings as part of preparing to engage the Prime Minister on Covid. These were usually chaired by the Head of the Covid-19 Taskforce or a member of the senior political team within No.10 and convened ahead of engagement with the Prime Minister to help ensure that the content and pitch cohered with other meetings the Prime Minister would be having at this time and any steers he had given, and that the format was conducive to efficient decision-making.

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<sup>5</sup> I was not involved in these meetings where not chaired by the Prime Minister, nor was I involved in any COBR meetings or Ministerial Implementation Group ("MIG") meetings.

- j) Meetings in relation to specific reviews, for example into non-pharmaceutical interventions (“NPIs”) (for example, a review into reducing the space required for social distancing from 2 metres to 1 metre).
  - k) Briefings from the CMO, CSA and JBC to the Prime Minister.
53. Where helpful I set out further detail in Section 2 of this statement.
54. In addition to formal meetings, I would naturally have numerous informal conversations with colleagues throughout the day. For most of the period I worked from No.10, and certainly in 2020 I worked over 12 hours a day, and most weekends. During the pandemic, most of the No.10 staff worked from home in line with official guidance so as to avoid spreading the virus in the relatively tightly packed and confined Georgian townhouse in which we were based. However, along with several colleagues in Private Office and other teams working closely with the Prime Minister, I mostly worked from the office. Given our role in providing the Prime Minister with direct, practical and essential administrative support of the type described above, our physical presence in the same place as him was clearly and unavoidably necessary.

## **SECTION 2: CHRONOLOGY**

55. Building on the overall description of my role set out above, I set out below in more detail an account of my experience in some of the key periods of the pandemic.
56. I focus on the early period, from 1 January 2020 to the Prime Minister’s decision on 23 March 2020 to issue the “Stay at Home Order”, reflecting the Inquiry’s interest in decision-making processes at this time, although I was not primarily working on the pandemic for most of this time.
57. In the period from 13 March 2020 (when it became clear that we were further along the pandemic trajectory than previously believed), responding to the pandemic took up nearly 100% of the Prime Minister’s time, and this was therefore a virtually all-consuming challenge for the Private Office team supporting him. The nature of the challenge – and its impact on Government and the country – meant the Prime Minister (and, during the period when the Prime Minister was incapacitated, the First Secretary of State, Dominic Raab) became directly engaged in detailed operational issues, e.g.

PPE and testing, in a way that would not normally be the case during ordinary times. I therefore elaborate on this period in some detail.

58. I also set out some detail on the decision-making processes in the period from the summer of 2020 to the end of that year, when the nature of government had returned somewhat closer to normal, including with the Prime Minister and Chancellor working together on the big strategic questions relating to the pandemic.
59. I am very conscious that the Inquiry has received evidence from a number of other officials within No.10 and the Cabinet Office, and I therefore have attempted to assist the Inquiry by focusing in this section on the more major events as relevant to my own particular role relating, specifically, to the relationship between No.10 and HMT.
60. My role in managing the Private Office team, joining up with senior Cabinet Office officials and helping to run No.10 – as described in Section 1 of this statement – remained reasonably consistent throughout. A detailed chronological account of that aspect of the role is therefore unlikely to be of any substantial value.
61. As explained in paragraph 6 above, I have not had sight of a number of documents which would have assisted me in preparing this statement, and therefore the chronological account which follows is less complete than I would have liked.

#### **January to March 2020**

62. During the initial phase from January to March 2020, from my perspective there were essentially three distinct phases:
  - a) During the first phase, which lasted until late February, everyone was broadly carrying on with business as usual, with Covid-19 being one of many issues. To the best of my knowledge, we in Private Office – and the No.10 machine more generally – were not advised of the likely scale of the pandemic and its impacts.
  - b) The second phase started in late February, when the scale of the problems in northern Italy became clear. From this point, the overall intensity of work in No.10 stepped up. Covid became a bigger feature in the PM's diary, and Dominic Cummings repurposed the morning meetings for example.

- c) The third phase began on around 13 March when it became clear that we were much further along the epidemic trajectory than was previously understood and for me – and for many or most in the Private Office – pandemic related work became virtually all-encompassing.
63. I first became aware of Covid-19 in January 2020 through sight of updates my colleagues in the No.10 Private Office provided to the Prime Minister on the subject, as well as through the first news reports in the media covering developments in China.
64. In this initial period, until late February 2020, we were unaware of the likely scale and impact of the pandemic and it was therefore treated as one of many issues crossing the Prime Minister's desk. It is fair to say that Covid-19 was not a principal area of focus for me at this stage. My recollection is that in this early phase the challenges were presented by Cabinet Office officials as much in the context of foreign policy as in domestic policy.<sup>6</sup> The lead Private Office officials in No.10 for Covid-19 were Imran Shafi (Private Secretary for Public Services) and NR (Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs), who liaised with colleagues in the Cabinet Office, DHSC and FCDO as relevant. I personally did not attend the COBR meetings concerning Covid-19 in February 2020, and I did not read the SAGE papers, but I believe that Imran Shafi did and would have reported back on these to the Prime Minister both orally and via briefing notes and box notes, and also updated the Private Office team in our regular meetings. I was present at several formal briefings of the Prime Minister, for example on 10 February and 28 February, but was not particularly “read into” the subject at that stage. Thus, whilst I had a reasonable understanding of how the situation was evolving in China, what measures were being imposed there, and the extent to which the virus was spreading into other countries, a far greater part of my time was spent supporting colleagues on other policy areas – in particular decisions concerning High Speed 2 rail, and working with Rishi Sunak, who had recently been appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer, and his team on the early preparations for the March Budget and planning for the fiscal year ahead.
65. Looking back, I do not believe I or others in Private Office were advised that Covid-19 would soon become the all-consuming public health and wider policy challenge that it

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<sup>6</sup> See for example email from PPS Foreign Affairs 21.1.20 'Update on Coronavirus' [SG/1 – INQ000281270].



did. It follows that I do not believe the Prime Minister was advised at this early stage as to the likely scale of the impending challenge.

66. I tracked the developments concerning Covid-19 more closely from late February, as the scale of the challenge became clearer – and in particular when the virus came closer to home when Lombardy started closing schools and businesses, and the catastrophic impact on its health system became evident. This increased focus is reflected in its prominence in briefing and advice for the Prime Minister towards the end of February, much of which came directly from the CMO and DHSC, including on the potential need for similar measures in the UK.
67. With respect to economic impacts, on 26 February I requested that HMT colleagues provide regular economic updates to the Prime Minister; and on 27 February the Prime Minister and the Chancellor had a bilateral meeting in which the Chancellor outlined the targeted economic response package to Covid-19 that was being worked up.
68. I had sight of CCS / DHSC advice on 28 February setting out the proposed plan,<sup>7</sup> which informed the strategy the Government published on 3 March,<sup>8</sup> and of the Business Unit Weekly Note which summarised the impact the virus was having on the economy and labour market.<sup>9</sup> The CCS advice set out the various stages in the proposed strategy: containment, delay and mitigation.
69. As stated above, from 1 March Dominic Cummings repurposed the Prime Minister's morning meetings to focus on Covid, with the CMO and GCSA in attendance. I invariably attended the morning meetings and I also made a point of providing an open invitation to the Chancellor.<sup>10</sup> As explained above, this was not just because of HMT's central role in economic policy, but also because of the recognition that this involved a cross-government challenge necessitating close co-operation and coordination between No.10 and HMT. Imran and Tara continued to lead on all the agendas for and readouts / actions from relating to Covid-19 arising from the morning meetings.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'Covid-19: the UK's Preparedness' paper from Katharine Hammond of CCS, the CMO, the GCSA and the Health Secretary 28.2.20 which refers to 'Containment', 'Delay' and 'Mitigation': **[SG/2 - INQ000146569]**.

<sup>8</sup> Coronavirus: Action Plan 3.3.2020 **[SG/3 - INQ000056154]** which refers to the four stages of the plan 'Contain' 'Delay' 'Research' and 'Mitigate'.

<sup>9</sup> Business Unit paper 28.2.20 **[SG/4 - INQ000281271]**.

<sup>10</sup> Email to HMT colleagues 'Next week' 29.2.20 **[SG/5 - INQ000281272]**.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. emails Imran Shafi to No.10, CO and HMT colleagues 1 – 4 March **[SG/6 - INQ000281273]**.

70. I did not play a particular role in the development of the Covid Action Plan published on 3 March. As I recall my focus over the preceding week was on the wider economic and markets impacts of the virus. However, reflecting now on the 3 March Covid Action Plan and the advice that underpinned it, what strikes me is that it was premised on what was, I believe, the understanding at the time that the UK was well prepared to respond to a pandemic. The advice was sobering: it stated that up to 520,000 people could die as a direct result of Covid-19. However, it also argued for striking a balance “between taking precautionary measures and over-reacting”.<sup>12</sup> I am not well-placed to describe the work and thinking that underpinned the initial Action Plan. However, my understanding – based on re-reading this advice and recalling the briefings I heard – was that the aim was to delay and flatten a single peak such that the point of greatest impact on the NHS would not be in the winter months.<sup>13</sup>
71. I also understood there to be concerns about the extent of and timing of lockdowns, namely: if a lockdown was too hard too early the virus might re-emerge with equal severity at a later stage, and, on advice from behavioural scientists, that there would be a limit to public tolerance for measures beyond a certain length, such that the timing of the intervention had to be calibrated carefully.
72. On 5 March I organised a trilateral meeting between the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Governor of the Bank of England to convene and discuss views on the likely economic and financial impacts of Covid-19 and the possible responses, and to discuss the Budget and how Covid needed to be factored into that.<sup>14</sup>
73. Looking back at the slides prepared for that meeting, it is worth noting how significantly the potential economic impacts of Covid were underestimated in these early assessments. The assessment at that time was there could be 2-4% fall in GDP in 2020 when the reality was an order of magnitude greater. I do not highlight this to criticise HMT or the Bank of England (and would make it clear that as far as I am aware this was their best understanding of the projections at the time)<sup>15</sup> but to demonstrate

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, [SG/2 - INQ000146569].

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, [SG/2 - INQ000146569].

<sup>14</sup> See Covid-19: Budget package slides 5.3.20 [SG/7 - INQ000281274].

<sup>15</sup> These forecasts were also inherently dependent on uncertain assumptions, including as to the measures the Government would take in response to the pandemic.

that at this time the whole of Government (and not just No.10) failed to appreciate the damage that Covid-19 would cause to the whole of society and the economy.

74. Ahead of the Budget (which was delivered on 11 March), there was a further bilateral meeting between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor on 10 March. At this meeting HMT provided slides updating the Prime Minister as to the 3-point economic response plan for Covid-19, the primary objectives of which were to support public services, individuals and businesses.<sup>16</sup> This package of measures was incorporated relatively late in the process (preparatory work for the Budget and discussions between the Chancellor, and the former Chancellor, and the Prime Minister having been taking place since January). As the nature and scale of the challenge became clearer over the coming days and week, so did the need to build on this package soon afterwards.
75. As far as I am aware, the strategy for managing the pandemic – at least at the centre – evolved substantially on Friday 13 March, following the evolving scientific advice that week. I recall that I joined Dominic Cummings, Ben Warner and Imran Shafi in the Prime Minister's study that evening to discuss SAGE's analysis from earlier that day, in which it had been indicated that the UK may "be further ahead on the epidemic curve" than previously believed.<sup>17</sup> Helen MacNamara also joined. The whiteboard showing some of what was discussed is in the public domain and others are better placed to explain the detail of it and the data underpinning it. However, the general feeling in the room that evening was that it would be necessary to impose stricter measures, and much sooner than had hitherto been envisaged, or else the NHS would be overwhelmed, which would be catastrophic.
76. From around this point, Covid became effectively all-encompassing for the Prime Minister and, in turn, for me and most of the Private Office.
77. Over the weekend of 14-15 March, the Prime Minister met officials and scientific advisers, and Ministers, several times and in several configurations (the details of which are recorded in the Prime Minister's diary<sup>18</sup>). I joined those meetings. On the morning of 14 March, the CMO and CSA advised the Prime Minister that the latest analysis indicated that the time to implement stricter delay measures was sooner than

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<sup>16</sup> [SG/8 - INQ000281275].

<sup>17</sup> [SG/9 - INQ000061523].

<sup>18</sup> PM's diary 14-15 March 2020 [SG/10 - INQ000226185/61-62].

previously envisaged.<sup>19</sup> The Prime Minister emphasised that the core objective was to protect the NHS. I ensured HMT were kept apprised of the updated situation to support joined-up analysis of the impacts of the decisions that were taken, and development of the economic support measures, and invited a senior HMT official, to the Prime Minister-chaired Covid-19 update on the evening of 15 March (including the Health Secretary, CDL, CMO, CSA and the Cabinet Secretary).

78. At the meeting on the evening of 15 March, Ministers agreed a package of measures to be put to COBR the following day, namely a household isolation policy, social distancing advice, shielding advice and advice that mass gatherings should not go ahead.<sup>20</sup>
79. I recall clearly how challenging the following week was. There was a huge volume of urgent preparatory work that needed to be progressed or mobilised. There was a recognition over the course of that week that we needed to improve our understanding of the underlying data and respond to it; improve our understanding of the potential impact on public service delivery and develop and implement plans in response; support the NHS and its staff, e.g. with regard to PPE and ventilators; improve our testing programme; set out economic support measures; and engage international partners.
80. It was around this time that the Prime Minister agreed to the establishment of the four Ministerial Implementation Groups ("MIGs"). This followed advice from Helen MacNamara and Mark Sweeney, dated 13 March 2020.<sup>21</sup>
81. From this time, as the Prime Minister spent nearly 100% of his time on the pandemic. It was therefore also the major focus of work for many of the Private Office team, who were required to do the usual work of Private Office to assist the Prime Minister in relation to measures taken to manage the pandemic as described in para 79. My focus in this period was on the economic support packages as covered below.

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<sup>19</sup> Email from Imran Shafi: 'Readout: PM meeting' 14.3.20 [SG/11 - INQ000136751].

<sup>20</sup> Email Emma Payne 'Covid-19 policy measures: Actions from PM meeting' 15.3.20 [SG/12 - INQ000146579].

<sup>21</sup> [SG/13 - INQ000174675].



82. On 16 March COBR met and agreed the initial set of NPIs, including 14-day household isolation for those who had symptoms of Covid, or who were in the same household as someone who had symptoms.<sup>22</sup> The new measures were announced after COBR.
83. On that day I convened a further trilateral meeting for the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Governor of the Bank of England to discuss international comparisons of Covid support packages, and the update on delivery of Covid support.<sup>23</sup>
84. On 17 March the Prime Minister and the Chancellor met to agree further economic support measures, in particular a £330 billion package of guarantees and lending facilities and tax and grant support for businesses, which were announced that afternoon. I was closely involved in this announcement, discussing the details with the Treasury team ahead of announcement, and organising a series of bilateral meetings for the Chancellor to take the Prime Minister through his plans.
85. The decision that schools would close for children other than vulnerable children and children of key workers was announced on Wednesday 18 March to take effect from Friday 20 March,<sup>24</sup> following a COBR meeting that day. No.10 relied on DfE to have undertaken contingency planning; and once the Prime Minister had made a decision (which coincided, in this instance, with the behavioural response taking place on the ground with many parents and teachers concerned at the risks school settings entailed), No.10 relied on DfE to execute that plan. It was clear DfE needed help in expediting some of the associated policy work, working through issues such as which children would be able to stay in school, how exams would work, how free school meals would work and what advice should be given to schools to manage the risk of infection.<sup>25</sup> The relevant official in No.10 Private Office, Alex Burns, facilitated intensive communications between the No10 and the DfE.
86. On 19 March it was determined, amongst other issues, that the shielding policy would be announced the following day and that closures to non-essential retail in London

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<sup>22</sup> Chairs Brief for COBR 16.3.20 at 15:15 [SG/14 - INQ000056183].

<sup>23</sup> See: slides 'Covid-19' 16.3.20 [SG/15 - INQ000281276]; Email to HMT, Bank Of England and Cabinet Office colleagues 16.3.20 [SG/16 - INQ000281277].

<sup>24</sup> Actions from PM Strategy Meeting 18.3.20 [SG/17 - INQ000056123].

<sup>25</sup> See email exchange re School Paper for 7:30am Wednesday 18.3.20 [SG/18 - INQ000281278].



would be announced that day.<sup>26</sup> Similarly to the example of closing schools, the development of this programme by departments was supported by the No.10 Private Office and, in this case, a member of the political team.

87. On the same day the decision was also taken to launch a Job Retention Scheme (“JRS”, known as furlough) (announced on 20 March, alongside further tax and welfare measures). HMT were also working on a package for self-employed people to complement the JRS, culminating in the announcement of the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme on 26 March 2020. Given the nature of my specific role, I was closely involved in these announcements, in the same way as with the announcement of the £330bn financial package described in paragraph 84 above. Indeed, it was in supporting the preparation of these various packages that I spent the bulk of my time in this period.
88. On Friday 20 March there was discussion of further shutting of businesses where they brought people together socially<sup>27</sup> and on Saturday 21 March there was discussion of the communications around food supply issues and messaging to farmers.<sup>28</sup> Whilst food supply concerns did not materialise, throughout this period a number of issues appeared to be of potentially grave significance – of which this was one – which did not eventuate, either because in practice the underlying challenge was not as great as initially feared, or because the mitigating action taken by households, businesses or government proved effective.
89. By the end of the following weekend, the Prime Minister had concluded that the measures announced on 16 March were not sufficient to contain the virus and protect the NHS. Following further advice, on 23 March the Prime Minister decided with the agreement of Cabinet to issue the Stay at Home order, i.e. the first lockdown.
90. Throughout this period, I supported Private Office colleagues on specific challenges, for example where it was necessary to support parts of Government to develop public plans at pace (in some cases where the plans simply didn’t exist, and in others where they were deficient). In terms of my specific role as the Private Secretary leading on HMT matters, I sought in this March period to ensure that the Prime Minister was (a)

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<sup>26</sup> Actions and decisions from PM Strategy Meeting 19.3.20 [SG/19 - INQ000056056].

<sup>27</sup> Actions and decisions from PM Strategy Meeting 20.3.20 [SG/20 - INQ000056066].

<sup>28</sup> Actions and decisions from PM Strategy Meeting 21.3.20 [SG/21 - INQ000056073].

appraised of the latest economic developments and potential impacts, and (b) was able to take decisions with the Chancellor on economic support measures.

#### **April to May 2020**

91. From the point of the first lockdown, it was clear that the centre of Government (Cabinet Office and No.10) needed to take on a more active role than usual. This was for a number of reasons: the response to the pandemic involved difficult strategic and detailed operational issues which were of central national importance; many of these issues were inter-connected and therefore needed central co-ordination; there was a clear sense we were not in a good place on all of them, and therefore there was a perceived need for No.10 and other central engagement to bring focus; and there was a natural expectation the Prime Minister would be engaged and lead on the Government's response.
92. In this stage, the Prime Minister's focus – and that of the First Secretary of State ("FSS"), Dominic Raab, for the period in which he covered for the Prime Minister – was principally on the key, immediate "delivery challenges". These included the procurement and deployment of PPE to hospitals and care homes; responding to high prevalence of the virus within care homes and hospital settings; and in the development of a testing programme. Both the Prime Minister and, subsequently, the FSS held multiple meetings with Ministers and senior departmental officials to assess and challenge their plans, and make specific decisions. This was unusual: in normal times Prime Ministers do not involve themselves in intensive, sometimes daily meetings on detailed operational matters – but it was considered necessary given the state of play on testing, care homes and PPE, for example. Tom Shinner, a senior adviser on Covid working in No.10 at this time, led on much of this work, with various colleagues in the Private Office team acting as private secretaries for the specific issues.
93. In late March, the Prime Minister contracted Covid. During the initial stages of his illness he continued to work, with the No.10 Private Office making arrangements for him to manage paperwork and take meetings while in isolation. Later, when he was convalescing, we made the necessary logistical arrangements to support him in working from Chequers.

94. While the Prime Minister was incapacitated, the Private Office team supported the FSS in undertaking his new role covering for the Prime Minister, including in chairing meetings of Cabinet. We worked closely with his pre-existing Private Office team at the FCO. This involved adapting to his personal preferences relating to managing meetings, taking briefing, engaging with paperwork, managing the Box process; and communicating those preferences to officials in the wider system, i.e. in the Cabinet Office and other departments.
95. On the strategic response to the pandemic (for example, decisions at the three-week review points for assessing whether to lift the restrictions imposed on 23 March) and the early-stage work that informed the Roadmap published in May, the FSOS typically took meetings as part of a "Quad", i.e. with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Michael Gove), the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I attended many of these meetings. This all worked well in difficult circumstances.
96. *Our Plan to Rebuild: the UK Government's COVID-19 Strategy* was published on 11 May,<sup>29</sup> the day after the Prime Minister presented the plan in a broadcast to the nation. It set out a phased plan for lifting restrictions in different settings, and proposals to introduce a new Joint Biosecurity Centre ("JBC"). The key elements of the Plan were worked up over several meetings of the Quad, and were agreed by the Quad on 2 May.<sup>30</sup> The principal debate was around the overarching objective: whether the Government was seeking to suppress the virus or looking to keep R below 1.
97. The work on this plan was led by the Cabinet Office, co-ordinating across other departments to bring together the scientific, economic analysis and develop specific policies for the phased re-opening of different settings. HMT provided economic analysis to help underpin the choices on the phasing. I liaised with HMT to act as conduit for incorporating this analysis into decision making and the publication itself.
98. In this period the Prime Minister and Chancellor worked closely together. I sought to ensure the Prime Minister was aware of the economic and fiscal implications of the pandemic and the measures taken to manage it, e.g. in their regular bilateral meetings.

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<sup>29</sup> [SG/22 - INQ000137210] This was followed up by a further publication ("*The next chapter in our plan to rebuild*") in July 2020: [SG/23 - INQ000137239].

<sup>30</sup> [SG/24 - INQ000146600]

99. More generally, in the period I sought to support colleagues across Private Office in managing their portfolios – bringing in extra resource, using meetings to share information across the team and agree priorities for use of the Prime Minister's time and the like, working in conjunction with the Cabinet Office team.

**May to end October 2020**

100. By the summer of 2020, the decision-making and operational apparatus for responding to the Covid pandemic in the centre of Government had developed. Following advice from Helen MacNamara and Simon Case dated 22 May 2020,<sup>31</sup> the four MIGs had been replaced by a Covid-S / Covid-O committee structure.
101. This followed Simon Case's appointment to the role of Permanent Secretary at No.10, leading on Covid, and as head of the Covid-19 Taskforce, also in May 2020. He remained in that role until 9 September 2020 when he took on the position of Cabinet Secretary, from which position he continued to take a close interest in the management of the pandemic.
102. The Covid-19 Taskforce itself had been bolstered, including through secondments from other departments, such that it was the principal conduit of briefing and advice to the Prime Minister on all aspects of the pandemic, brought together from across Whitehall and beyond.
103. The Taskforce had also developed a data dashboard for collating relevant data on the virus, hospitals, other public services etc, with regional and local breakdowns and international comparisons. The regular presentation of this "Data Dashboard" to the Prime Minister and other Ministers ensured there was a common Ministerial understanding of the latest picture, and that core underlying data was not in dispute or confused. The meetings themselves also provided a convening mechanism for planning wider strategic work across departments and other bodies. As such, the Dashboard provided a stronger foundation for decision-making, which typically took place in other forums.

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<sup>31</sup> [SG/25 - INQ000182375].

104. These Covid Dashboard meetings – typically held several times a week – were supplemented from June by a parallel series of Ministerial meetings to consider the Economy Dashboard. I commissioned the first of these on 31 May, setting out the plan for officials to present the macro-economic picture plus regional and sectoral breakdowns to the Prime Minister and other relevant Ministers. The purpose was again to try to ensure a shared understanding of the latest picture, thereby providing broad context for decision-making in other, more bespoke, forums.
105. To further support Ministerial decision-making, be it in Committee or other meetings, a group of senior officials from the Covid-19 Taskforce, No.10 and HMT met frequently from June until around October / November to prepare papers for Ministerial decision-making. The purpose was to ensure that relevant preparatory work was done to support decisions, and that Ministers had a common understanding of options and analysis. I attended these meetings.
106. These meetings covered issues including:
- a) ensuring a common understanding of the scientific and health analysis on the path of the virus – discussions of interpretations of SAGE papers, for example;
  - b) contingency planning the development of policy packages to be presented to Ministers;
  - c) development of policy ideas to inform Ministerial advice, and preparation for those decisions, including segmentation, tiers, design of a possible circuit breaker, and local restrictions;
  - d) ensuring a common understanding of the assessment of the economic and public spending implications of both the virus itself and any interventions; and
  - e) joining up on the development of Government's wider economic plan.
107. From this period onwards, the Government returned somewhat closer to normal with the Prime Minister and Chancellor regularly discussing the overall strategy in their bilateral meetings.



108. Contingency planning for managing an increase in cases began in July 2020. I was aware, from my Private Office role, that on 1 July, Simon Case established a panel of senior officials from across Government to consider “smarter NPIs”, its objective being to develop a “hierarchy of smart Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions, which could be applied to reduce the transmission of Covid-19, seeking to provide maximum transmission benefit at the least economic cost”
109. Through July there was a series of Prime Minister-chaired Covid-S meetings to consider contingency options, e.g. on 2 July and 22 July. These meetings sought to agree scenarios for how the pandemic might evolve during the Winter, including the possibility of a second wave, around which detailed planning work could be undertaken
110. On 29 July I attended a strategy workshop prepared by the Covid-19 Taskforce, working with HMT officials, for the Prime Minister and Chancellor to consider the policy response to three possible scenarios for the increase in cases.<sup>32</sup>
111. The debate on how to respond to the second wave of the pandemic moved up a gear at the start of September. Following a Covid-S meeting on 8 September 2020, the Prime Minister announced on 9 September a package of measures to address the increase in cases. This included (most notably) the introduction of the “Rule of Six”, reduced business opening hours (initially at the local tier), the requirement for certain businesses (for example those operating in the hospitality industry) to collect data to support NHS Test and Trace, and a scaling back of plans to pilot larger audiences in venues, amongst other measures.<sup>33</sup>
112. The Prime Minister again met the CMO and CSA on 16 September. The read out from this meeting records the CMO’s conclusion that:<sup>34</sup> “With no action, we could see 200-500 deaths a day in 7 weeks”. The read out also notes that CSA referred to the idea of a circuit breaker.
113. On 17 September the Prime Minister asked that HMT “work hand-in-glove with the taskforce” in pulling together advice on “further measures to address the increase in

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<sup>32</sup> [SG/26 - INQ000281278]; [SG/27 - INQ000281280].

<sup>33</sup> [SG/28 - INQ000086845].

<sup>34</sup> [SG/29 - INQ000146640].

cases” such that the Prime Minister would receive “one integrated piece of advice that covers the various trade-offs across the options”.<sup>35</sup>

114. The Covid-19 Taskforce provided advice on 19 and 20 September. It set out the latest modelling suggested we could surpass 50,000 daily infections, the first wave peak, by mid-October on the current trajectory; and absent further measures such a high-level of hospital admissions could overwhelm the NHS in around six weeks. It also set out various packages of possible policy interventions including a three-week policy package of harder, temporary measures, i.e. a “circuit breaker”.<sup>36</sup>
115. On 21 September the Prime Minister and the Chancellor met a range of external scientific experts (i.e. scientists not part of SAGE), who set out the range of arguments for and against taking significant further action. The Prime Minister concluded this series of meetings by deciding to take forward local interventions rather than the mooted circuit breaker at that point.<sup>37</sup> This approach was agreed in Covid-S and Covid-M.<sup>38</sup>
116. On 22 September 2020, the Prime Minister announced these measures, which included a hospitality “curfew” (10pm-5am), stricter “Covid Secure” rules for businesses, tighter exemptions to the “Rule of Six”, and reduced attendance limits at wedding and civil partnership ceremonies and receptions, amongst other measures.<sup>39</sup>
117. On 8 October 2020 the Prime Minister met the Chancellor of the Exchequer, CMO, CSA and Simon Stevens (Chief Executive of the NHS in England).<sup>40</sup> The paper provided to them proposed a range of potential further measures.<sup>41</sup> The decision was taken to create the three-tiered local Covid Alert levels (“Medium”, “High” and Very High”) in England, with the goal of engaging with local authorities with high numbers of positive cases in an effort to seek agreement to the implementation of tougher NPIs in those areas; and extending the Job Support Scheme. The Prime Minister

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<sup>35</sup> [SG/30 - INQ000281283].

<sup>36</sup> [SG/31 - INQ000137293]; [SG/32 - INQ000146611].

<sup>37</sup> [SG/33 - INQ000146610].

<sup>38</sup> [SG/34 - INQ000088271]; [SG/35 - INQ000083849].

<sup>39</sup> [SG/36 - INQ000053832].

<sup>40</sup> [SG/37 - INQ000146616].

<sup>41</sup> [SG/38 - INQ000325152].

announced this system of tiering on 12 October.<sup>42</sup> This in turn prompted calls for greater financial support for the Local Authorities in those areas. I liaised with the Chancellor's Private Office in the following days to agree the parameters of that financial package.

118. However, neither the local interventions nor the series of national measures proved sufficient to arrest the rise in cases and hospitalisations. The Prime Minister received further advice on 28 October from the Covid-19 Taskforce, and on 29 October from the CMO.<sup>43</sup> The former noted that "Using the SPI-M six week projections, the NHS have indicated that the number of hospitalised patients in several regions of England is likely to exceed current available capacity in November (before cancelling electives or relying on reductions in non-Covid admissions)". The latter set out arguments for why Spring 2021 was "likely to look at lot better" than October 2020, i.e. responding to concerns that significant new interventions might become permanent. The Prime Minister met colleagues in Covid-S on 30 October, and at that meeting the approach proposed by the Covid-19 Taskforce was agreed. The press conference to announce the second national lockdown took place on 31 October following a leak of the decision on the 30th. This second national lockdown came into force on 5 November and ended 4 weeks later (on 2 December), when England returned to the three-tier system of restrictions.
119. Throughout this period, I continued to support the Prime Minister and Chancellor in sharing a common understanding of the latest economic and fiscal situation, as part of the broader context for considering the path of the pandemic, measures to respond to the increase in cases, and wider recovery planning. Officials presented this picture to them in a series of Economy Dashboards from June.<sup>44</sup> Key issues at this stage included consumer and business confidence.
120. The Prime Minister and Chancellor discussed economic support measures linked to the pandemic through this period. For example:

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<sup>42</sup> [SG/39 - INQ000086824].

<sup>43</sup> [SG/40 - INQ000146619]; [SG/41 - INQ000146620].

<sup>44</sup> See, eg, [SG/42 - INQ000281281], [SG/43 - INQ000281288].

- a) On 15 September they agreed to extend self-isolation support in effect in response to the introduction of further restrictions on 9 September.<sup>45</sup>
- b) On 22 September, they agreed a small package of measures to complement the further pandemic measures the preceding day.<sup>46</sup>
- c) On 24 September, the Chancellor set out the "Winter Economy Plan"<sup>47</sup>, which comprised the proposed shift from Job Retention Scheme ("furlough") with a more targeted Job Support Scheme.
- d) Following the decision to seek agreement with relevant local authorities to move through tiers in those areas, announced on 12 October, I worked with the Chancellor's office to agree a package of financial support to accompany the escalation of restrictions / respond to calls for more financial support from those LAs.<sup>48</sup>
- e) On 31 October, the Chancellor and Prime Minister decided to extend the JRS in light of the decision to impose the Second Lockdown

#### **December 2020 to January 2021**

- 121. The second lockdown in England ended on 26 November 2020. On 23 November the Government had published its "COVID-19 Winter Plan" which, amongst other things, referred to the move to a tiered system of restrictions following the lockdown.<sup>49</sup>
- 122. However, the rate of infection then rose through December, possibly as a result of a new variant. The Prime Minister was reliant on the JBC to advise on this, which they provided on 18 December. Following meetings that day, the Prime Minister agreed to introduce a new Tier 4, which he announced on 19 December. This possibility had been planned for, and was underpinned by previous contingency advice and exercises on variants of concern.

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<sup>45</sup> [SG/44 - INQ000281282].

<sup>46</sup> [SG/45 - INQ000281284].

<sup>47</sup> [SG/46 - INQ000088028].

<sup>48</sup> [SG/47 - INQ000281285], [SG/48 - INQ000281286]

<sup>49</sup> [SG/49 - INQ000086807].

123. At subsequent meetings of Covid-O on 23 December and 29 December, Ministers agreed to move more of the country into Tier 4. The 30 December decision to re-open schools on 4 January was ultimately overtaken due to further evidence of increased transmissibility and increases in cases: Ministers decided on a third national lockdown on 4 January 2021, which the Prime Minister announced the same day and which came into force on 6 January.<sup>50</sup>
124. All of this was against the backdrop of the administration of the first vaccine on 8 December. As such, there was a common understanding that any restrictions in the near-term would likely be a short-term, or certainly time-limited, measure to buy time until the point was reached where deployment of the vaccine had built sufficient immunity.
125. In the period from the Summer of 2020 onwards it was my sense that the bilateral working relationship between the Prime Minister and Chancellor was one central part of the overall decision-making on the management of the pandemic, underpinned by very close working between the Covid-19 Taskforce and HMT teams. This continued through 2021, including in the development of the second Roadmap in February.
126. Throughout this time the Prime Minister and Chancellor were kept abreast of the latest economic and fiscal position in their bilateral and Dashboard meetings.
127. Dan Rosenfield, who had started his role as Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister on 1 January 2021, following the departure of Dominic Cummings on 13 November 2020 and subsequent interim appointment of Lord Lister, attended the later meetings.

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<sup>50</sup> [SG/50 - INQ000086867].



### **SECTION 3: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

128. Managing the pandemic was an unprecedented experience for the centre of Government, and – as others will be far better placed to describe – in the early stages much remained unknown about the virus itself. As such it is natural that lessons were learnt through 2020, and indeed were applied in 2021.
129. Throughout that second year, the Data Dashboard continued to play a central role in ensuring Ministers had a consistent understanding of the latest developments. The meetings themselves provided an invaluable forum for convening decision-makers, with the discussions used to shape wider work-plans.
130. A powerful central Taskforce in the Cabinet Office bringing together analysis and advice for Ministers was also an essential element of informing decision-making.
131. The Covid-S / Covid-O committee structure continued to work well, enabling the Prime Minister to focus on the strategic questions, with others engaged in managing much of the detailed work.
132. Much of the most effective decision-making was the result of strong and open relationships across the centre of Government. For example, the second roadmap (February 2021) was the product of close working relationship between both the analytical and policy teams in HMT and the Taskforce.
133. In terms of some specific points we learnt the importance:
- a) of publishing full policy details at the same time as making headline announcements. The one-day delay in May 2020 between the PM's statement and the publication of the Roadmap caused some unnecessary confusion;
  - b) of keeping a close alignment between decisions on the management of the pandemic, e.g., the imposition of new restrictions and the announcement of associated economic measures to support households or businesses. Typically, after March 2020, the chancellor set out new or adapted economic measures the day after new measures on the pandemic itself.

134. The Second roadmap in 2021 reflected some lessons from the First roadmap in 2020. These included that each stage in a phased opening would be triggered the underlying data relating to the pandemic not fixed dates; and having five-week rather than three-week review points which afforded sufficient time to assess the impact of previous decisions (given the lags associated with the virus);

#### **STATEMENT OF TRUTH**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Personal Data

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_

11 October 2023